

Big Hammock Hoedown—Paddle Georgia 2024

June 18—Altamaha River

Distance: 14.6 miles Tattnall County Landing (mile 92.9) to Upper Wayne County Landing (mile 78.3)

Starting Elevation: 52 feet 31.897280, -82.109204 Ending Elevation: 48 feet 31.785049, -81.984421

Pit Stops: Mile +0.5—Tattnall County Landing Mile 90.3—Carter’s Bight Landing Mile 78.3—Upper Wayne County Landing
Points of Interest:

Mile 90.3—Carter’s Bight Landing—This curve, or bight, in the Altamaha, with public boat ramp, parking area, picnic area and restrooms on river right is also home to a small riverfront neighborhood. Carter’s Bight likely draws its name from the Carter family who settled in Appling County near Tenmile Creek before 1820. George Carter, Sr., a Revolutionary War veteran from South Carolina, served as Appling County’s first sheriff. For riverfront communities like this, flooding is a routine part of life, so much so that many of the stilt-elevated homes include drain holes in their floors. And, when the floodwaters come, like us, the critters of the bottomlands seek out high ground...often in these riverfront dwellings. As recounted in the *Florida Times-Union* newspaper, in an April 2009 flood, one resident, James Williamson, found an unwanted guest. After boating up to his front steps amidst the floodwater, he stepped into his screened porch and was immediately attacked by a wild hog. He dispensed of the hog with his rifle but wound up in the local emergency room for four stitches and a tetanus shot.

Mile 89.7—Cypress Nursery and Deadhead Logging—Maps from the late 1800s refer to this crook in the river as Cypress Nursery, perhaps a nod to young cypress trees that once grew here, or perhaps a nod to sunken cypress logs that might have lodged here. During the heyday of the Altamaha’s log rafting days in the late 1800s and early 1900s, as much as of 116 million board feet of timber left the port of Darien annually. An untold number of cypress and pine logs felled and floated in that era never reached the coast and some have remained preserved in the silt of the river bottom for a century. Today, that wood is highly prized for its fine grain and color. A handful of businesses recover and mill these logs—a task known as deadhead logging.

Mile 89.4—Stafford’s Ferry—In 1854, the Georgia General Assembly gave to Elijah E. Stafford the rights to operate a ferry on his property at the Altamaha here. Stafford was the son of Ezekiel and Mary Easterwood Stafford who, as early settlers of Tattnall County, were instrumental in establishing nearby Hopewell United Methodist Church in 1817. Stafford’s Ferry would operate until the 1920s when the construction of Lane’s Bridge, less than a mile downstream rendered it obsolete. Elijah’s descendants now operate Watermelon Creek Vineyards where you can find vintages like Stafford’s Ferry White.

Mile 88.8—John C. Beasley Memorial Bridge—Now named for a long-time Tattnall County politician of statewide note, when the original bridge was built in 1920 it bore the name of one of Georgia’s best known business leaders—Mills Lane, Sr., founder of Citizens and Southern Bank in 1906. That bank would grow to become the South’s largest by the 1970s. In 1920, Lane was interested in connecting Savannah with farm products and markets in southwest Georgia. Bridging the Altamaha was essential. He and his bank put up \$2,000 toward construction of the privately-funded bridge and his leadership proved critical in its timely completion, though he was far from the only investor. The 2500 residents of Glennville pledged a total of \$100,000 for the bridge. Lane’s Bridge was completed in 1920 at a cost of \$165,000, and the toll bridge proved a wise investment. Within two years, it was raking in \$1000 per week in tolls (\$1 per vehicle, plus 25 cents per person); it’s known success in 1926 precipitated a brutal attack and robbery of the bridge’s toll taker. The original investors sold the bridge to the state in 1932 for \$35,000, ending its run as a toll bridge.

Mile 87.6—Lower Sister Bluff—Lower Sister Bluff is typical of the Altamaha’s numerous bluffs, sporting the evergreen leaves and (in the spring and early summer) the showy, fragrant blooms of the Southern Magnolia—a tree native to the southern Coastal Plain from Virginia to Texas. The magnolia is one of the lasting symbols of the romanticized South and one closely associated with southern women (i.e. the movie *Steel Magnolias*). The *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* opines that the trees have come to symbolize southerners’ “unrealistic attitude toward life, of a people blinded by beauty.”

Mile 87.2—Burns Timber Landing—An 1890 survey of the river notes the low bluff on river right as the site of this landing. From here, log rafts might have begun their journey to Darien. Of course, those rafts depended on adequate river levels (usually during winter and spring). A November 19, 1925 news item in the *Baxley News-Banner* reported on a freshet that freed the log rafts yet also made note of the looming end to the river’s log rafting era: “Millions of feet of logs and sawn timber, accumulated along the banks of the upper Altamaha river during the prolonged drought which was recently broken, are coming down stream in an almost endless procession...The decrease in river transportation by boats is becoming particularly noticeable...The inevitable march of progress is seen in this fact as shippers in increasing numbers now haul by trucks to railroads instead of relying on...water.”

Mile 85.4—Fivemile Creek—On river right is this tributary so named because it was approximately 5 miles northwest of Fort James, a frontier fort built along the river in the late 1790s that continued operation for some 20 years. The fort protected settlers from hostile Native Americans and served as a diplomatic outpost for Georgia in dealings with local Native Americans. This creek marks the boundary between Appling and Wayne counties. Established on a vast expanse of former Creek Indian lands stretching from the Altamaha south to the St. Marys River, Appling County ultimately gave birth to 12 other counties in southeast Georgia. Notably, it is the one-time home of Georgia’s first Pulitzer Prize winner, Caroline Miller, who received the award in 1934 for her novel *Lamb in His Bosom*. The book tells the fictionalized story of a family of early settlers of South Georgia’s wiregrass region. To gather material for her writing, Miller travelled the backroads of Appling County talking with the descendants of early settlers to understand the hardships they endured and to document their culture and colloquialisms.

Mile 83.5—Wild Cow Round—On river left here—at normal-to-low water—is a large sandbar that fronts this curiously-named bend in the river. From Colonial times through the 1800s, property owners in Georgia bore the responsibility of fencing their crops to prevent damage from livestock. It wasn’t until the late 1800s that state laws flipped to require livestock be contained within fences. Thus, in early Georgia, cattle ranged freely and massive stands of river cane found along river bottoms were preferred forage. In 1776, as many as 10,000 cattle roamed freely in the land between the Savannah and Ogeechee rivers, just north of the Altamaha.

Mile 82.5—Watermelon Creek—In the 1800s, this creek on river left was known as Matlock Water Road, bearing the name of Stephen Matlock, Sr., who prior to the Civil War, operated a plantation of some 3,000 acres worked by 50 enslaved persons. The creek provided an avenue to float logs and farm products from the plantation’s uplands to the Altamaha. Matlock improved this natural course by digging canals. In 1898, the intrepid self-made archaeologist Clarence Bloomfield Moore ventured up the creek to excavate two Native American burial mounds. He described the waterway as a “sort of canal joining Bluff Lake with the river...The length of the road is about 1 mile...At the end of the lake, not far from its union with the canal is a lumber tramway.”

Mile 81.2—Stooping Gum Island—On river left is this “island,” or rather a remnant island that existed here in the 1800s and early 1900s.

Mile 79.9—Shoulder-Blade Round—On river right at normal-to-low flows is a large sandbar associated with this bend.

Mile 78.3—Upper Wayne County Landing—This landing on river right sits atop Fort James Bluff. Though the exact location is unknown, Fort James was established one mile upstream of Beard’s Bluff in the mid 1790s. For the next 20 years, the fort was a hub of activity on the then-American frontier. In the early 1800s, it proved pivotal in the successful pole boat journey of Philip Cook and his crew who traveled from mid-January through April on a course from near Milledgeville on the Oconee to St. Simons Island and back. Cook’s journal, reprinted in an 1887 edition of the *Atlanta Constitution*, paints a vivid picture of the hardships of these early river journeys: Jan. 15: Got as far as about seven miles, after getting on logs and sand five times. Jan. 19: We discovered a raft of old logs and canoes entirely across the river where we employed ourselves that evening and till 10 o’clock the next day...before we could get by...Jan. 23: Got fast on a tree, where I fell overboard”...and that was just the first eight days of the adventure. To feed themselves the crew purchased provisions where they could (including a barrel of beef and flour at Fort James and venison from Native Americans) and lived off the land, feasting on turkey and goose shot during the voyage.