Graysville Gallop–Paddle Georgia 2025

June 17—South Chickamauga Creek

Distance: 16 miles **Starting Elevation: 670 feet** **Ending Elevation: 645 feet**

Pit Stops: **Mile 7—**Camp Jordan **Mile 16—**Sterchi Farm

Points of Interest:

Mile 1.3—Island & Shoals—Shallow and exposed shoals on river right force you left around this island.

Mile 1.9—Powerlines & Georgia-Tennessee State Line--Here, you'll pass beneath powerlines and then enter a sharp, highly-eroded bend in the creek that is cutting off an older and wider bend. About 0.2 mile downstream as you pass by a transmission tower on the right, you will cross into Tennessee, but you will not cross the 35th parallel north, what was intended to be the southern boundary of Tennessee when it became a state in 1796. Instead, when a team of surveyors from the two states met in 1818 to delineate the 35th parallel, they mistakenly marked it too far south. Georgia's original western boundary was described as extending north to the village of "Nickajack, on the Tennessee River…running up the said Tennessee River, and along the western bank thereof, to the southern boundary line of the state of Tennessee [the 35th parallel]." Indeed, the true 35th parallel includes a sliver of a south-reaching bend of the Tennessee River west of Chattanooga. For years, Georgia legislators have attempted to correct this 200-year-old surveying error, primarily to access the abundant water of the big river. The Tennessee's average flow at Nickajack Dam of 24 billion gallons a day is 15 times that of the Chattahoochee at Buford Dam. Thus far, Georgia's leaders' visions of massive pipelines from the Tennessee to Atlanta have all fallen flat. While Metro Atlanta is using its limited water supplies more efficiently in recent years, it will take only the next severe drought to revive the idea of retaking the land south of the 35th parallel and gaining access to the Tennessee.

Mile 3.1—Western and Atlantic Railroad & Audubon Acres—On creek right is a rock wall that dates to the 1840s when the Western and Atlantic Railroad was constructed. Audubon Acres, a 130-acre nature preserve owned by the Chattanooga Audubon Society, encompasses both sides of the creek for most of the next mile. Stop just downstream of this wall and access the property on creek right to visit Spring Frog Cabin, a Cherokee dwelling that dates to the mid-1700s. The cabin is believed to have been the home of Drowning Bear, who was removed from the home and set on the Trail of Tears. The property also has restrooms, snacks, a gift shop and museum, all located within a quarter mile of the creek. On land opposite the rock wall is Little Owl Village. Archeological evidence unearthed in the1990s suggests that this was the site of a native village known as Napochie which may have had contact with Tristan de Luna y Arellano during the Spanish conquistador's travels in the southeast from 1559-61.

Mile 3.6—Swinging Bridge—This bridge is part of Audubon Acres' trail system. On creek right it leads about a quarter mile to the Spring Frog Cabin and other amenities noted above.

Mile 4.3—Western and Atlantic Railroad—Immediately downstream of this railroad bridge is Audubon Acres boating access. A trail leads from here about a quarter mile to the Spring Frog Cabin and other amenities. This is the third of seven W & A bridges spanning the creek between Ringgold and Chattanooga. During the Civil War, seven miles south of here, the famed "Great Locomotive Chase" ended with the capture of Andrew's Raiders. In April 1862, the band of undercover Union soldiers stole the General locomotive at Big Shanty (Kennesaw) in an attempt to sabotage and destroy the railroad. The ensuing chase, immortalized in a Buster Keaton silent movie in 1927 and a 1956 Walt Disney production, was a daring venture, but ultimately had little impact on the outcome of the war. Pursued by Confederates in the locomotive, Texas, the Union raiders were unable to take on wood and water, and eventually ran out of steam. Eight of the 20 raiders were executed in Atlanta. Soldiers who escaped or who were exchanged for Confederate prisoners were among the first to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor, a decoration that was created in July 1862

Mile 4.9—Concord Golf Course—On creek right is this 18-hole public golf course, one of three situated along the banks of South Chickamauga Creek. Council Fire, a private golf/residential community, sits about three miles upstream; Brown Acres, another public course, is located less than a mile downstream. Additionally, Sir Goony's miniature golf course lies adjacent to the creek just upstream of Brainerd Road. Thus, there are lots of golf balls in the creek. Prizes for those who collect the most on today's voyage!

Mile 6.2—Camp Jordan Shoal—A gravel bar at midstream pushes the creek to the right and over small shoals. Just beyond the shoal, West Chickamauga Creek joins the flow. A public access at the mouth of the creek leads to Camp Jordan, our campsite, and today's pit stop. Now a multi-use, 275-acre city park, the facility's name comes from a Tennessee National Guard training facility once located on the land. Members of a local National Guard cavalry unit contributed to purchase the land in 1930, naming it in honor of their commander, Paul H. Jordan. After World War II, the Guard auctioned off the land and reimbursed those members who contributed to its original purchase. Formerly a dairy farm, East Ridge purchased the land in 1975 for development into a city park.

Mile 6.7—Old Pilings—The concrete pilings here once supported water infrastructure that spanned the creek.

Mile 7.2—Brainerd Road—Now bordered on both sides by commercial development, the land surrounding South Chickamauga Creek here has a rich history. In the early 1800s, Presbyterians established a mission to Native Americans on the west side of the creek, and then in the 1850s, Philemon Bird dammed the creek to power a grist and sawmill that operated into the early 1900s. Bird, a wealthy man with properties in three states, never married. Instead he purchased female slaves as his "concubines" with whom he sired several daughters and two sons. Upon his death in 1871, settlement of his estate involved multiple lawsuits, but ultimately, his two sons obtained the Brainerd Road (then known as Birds Mill Road) property.

Mile 8—Sewer Line Portage—Here a large sewer main, part of the City of Chattanooga's system, spans and blocks the creek. A portage structure will carry you and your boat over the obstacle. Paddle up to the gravel bar on the upstream side of the pipe, follow instructions of volunteers and be ready to move when it's your turn! This needs to be a efficient process!

Mile 8.2—Creek Re-route, Heron Rookery & Chattanooga Airport—Just beyond the sewer line bear to the right on the creek's original channel. After the "St. Patricks Day Flood" of 1973 that inundated 200 streets and closed the Chattanooga airport for four days, the Tennessee Valley Authority constructed a 4-mile-long levee here. The project included the channelization of the creek, eliminating more than a mile of meanders. But, a portion of the original channel remains. It parallels the airport's runways, but nevertheless supports two heron rookerie—one at each end of the original channel. Look for the birds in two large sycamore trees.

Mile 10.7—Shallowford Road & Old Bridge Pilings—A bridge has spanned the creek here since the 1800s. In the closing moments of the Battle of Chattanooga during the Civil War (Nov. 26, 1863), Confederate troops set the bridge ablaze to cover their retreat south toward Ringgold. The Confederate loss ended the siege of Union occupied Chattanooga and led to the decisive Atlanta Campaign in 1864. Remains of former bridge pilings can be seen beneath the existing bridge. The 27-acres of land surrounded by the oxbow just downstream of the bridge is protected by the City of Chattanooga as an Urban Ecology Preserve.

Mile 13.5—Western and Atlantic Railroad Bridge—Here the creek passes, yet again, beneath this railroad. On creek right, the boardwalk portion of the South Chickamauga Greenway, a 13-mile recreational trail connecting Chattanooga to Camp Jordan in East Ridge can be seen. In Nov. 1861, Union sympathizers set blaze to and destroyed this bridge (as well as the Southern Railroad) just downstream. The arsonists were intent on isolating East Tennessee whose residents wished to break away from the newly formed Confederacy and stay in the Union, much as West Virginia did.

Mile 13.6—Three Bridges & A Pipe—Here, the creek is spanned four times in about 400 feet. First, by a high railroad bridge utilized by the Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum; the second carries water infrastructure; the third, a truss railroad bridge carries what was originally the Chattanooga, Harrison, Georgetown & Charleston Railroad dating to the 1850s (now a CSX line); the fourth carries motorized traffic on Lightfoot Mill Road. Below the final one is a series of rolling waves over a series of shoals. In the 1800s, William Lightfoot harnessed the power of the creek here to operate a grist mill. This site was one location where the controversial fish, snail darters, were discovered. Despite its path through an urban area, the creek is rich in biodiversity. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources lists 94 rare plant and animal species in the South Chickamauga Creek watershed, including the federally threatened yellowfin madtom (a fish) and state threatened Chickamauga crayfish, known to occur only in this creek basin.