

Madison County Contra – Paddle Georgia 2010

June 20—Broad & Savannah Rivers

Distance: 9 miles

Starting Elevation: 480

Ending Elevation: 460

Obstacles/Rapids: Mile 0.5 Sandbar Rapid—Less than a half mile below the launch site, the river spills over a pair of small Class I ledges. Intermittent shoals and riffles continue for the next quarter mile.

Restroom Facilities: Mile 0 Broad River Outpost Take Out
Mile 0.5 The Sandbar Outfitters
Mile 9 Hwy 72 Broad River Sand Co.

Points of Interest:

Mile 0.5—The Sandbar—At the base of Sandbar Rapid sits The Sandbar, a canoe/kayak outfitter, with a restaurant and bar included. This is one of three outfitters servicing the Broad and putting “taters on the table” by putting people on the water. The Sandbar doesn’t normally open until 10 a.m. but we’ve told them 350 people will be paddling by Sunday morning so stop by and pay them a visit. They may well be open. The restaurant sells drinks and snacks, including ice cream. Hiking/horse trails wind through the Sandbar property so if you’d like to stretch your legs, this is a place to do it.

Mile 1—Mill Shoal Creek-King Hall Mill—Just upstream on this tributary once sat King Hall Mill, one of the many mills that once dotted the South—particularly in the mountains and piedmont. In fact, the word “mill” may be one of the most common names in the Georgia landscape. Today, few of the old grist mills survive, but explore just about any piedmont stream and you will find the remains of these early economic engines that harnessed the power of water to grind corn into meal. Today, these small scale hydro-power facilities are obsolete; millers grind train loads of grain using power generated at coal and nuclear power plants.

Mile 3--Sandbars—Tucked in two bends of the river here are two inviting sandbars. These gritty spots are ubiquitous on the Broad, in part because the Broad remains undammed and its flows remain naturally cyclical—prone to drought and nourished by flood. In river systems that flow unfettered, sediment is not trapped behind dams. Instead it flows with the river, dropping out where the river slows—generally on the inside of bends where eddies form. These natural flows and the sandbars they create are more important than one might think. Flows determine the amount and type of habitat that exists in and around the river—important for food sources, spawning and rearing grounds, and migration routes for wildlife, fish, and other aquatic species. Native streamside vegetation also must have natural flows in order to survive and reproduce. You might see evidence of the sandbar’s part in the circle of life in the turtle tracks that criss-cross these bars. This is where turtles like to lay their eggs.

Mile 3—The Bridges (and Ferries) of Madison County—Between Vineyard Creek and modern-day Ga. 72, there were once at least three ferries across the Broad connecting Madison and Elbert counties. Charles Moon’s Ferry operated near the mouth of Vineyard Creek while further downstream Peyton’s Ferry operated near Holly Creek and Harper’s Ferry carried passengers just downstream. A total of eight ferries operated across the Broad in Madison County during the 1800s. The first bridges across the Broad were not constructed until 1890, and today four bridges do the work of those eight ferries. But from the time of the area’s settlement in the 1700s into the early 1900s, ferries served as the gateway to commerce between communities to the north and south of the Broad.

Not surprisingly, when movements surfaced to bridge the Broad, the placement of the bridges became highly politicized. Take this account from an article published in the Elberton Star in 1889 under the headline, “A Project Not Favorable to Elberton:”
“We learn that the citizens living in the southern portion of Madison county are now trying to induce their Ordinary, Dr. Daniel, to construct a bridge across Broad River at Moon’s or Harper’s ferry and take steps to enforce Elbert county to pay her pro rata part of the cost. These parties say they are anxious to trade in Elberton, but are prevented from doing so by the ferries. Besides, this bridge would be of great convenience to many people living in both counties, and near Broad River. The business men of Elberton do not look with much favor on this scheme and will use their utmost influence to defeat it. The building of this bridge; they very wisely contend, will take more business from our town than it can bring to it. It is quite natural that the trading public will seek the largest city within reach, even if there is no difference in prices. Broad River has assured to us a great deal of business and cotton that would in all probability would go to Athens if it was not for the trouble, danger and expense of crossing that stream. Throw a bridge over it and we would break a link in the chain that binds this trade to us. Again we do not believe that the project will meet with favor from a large majority of the people of Madison county, as it would greatly increase their taxes to benefit a small section. Elberton, however, is decidedly favorable to a bridge lower down the river, at or below Jones ferry, as it would bring to us a large portion of the trade in lower Oglethorpe and a part of Wilkes. An effort will probably be made to get our county officers to co-operate with Oglethorpe and build this bridge. Elberton will give a liberal private subscription to it. While our city highly appreciates the patronage she receives from Madison county, at the same time she realizes the fact that the security and preservation of her present business is her first and most important duty.”

Elbert and Madison County fought each other in court until 1915 to determine where the bridges would be built. Ultimately, bridges were built at present day Ga. 172 (where we started today’s paddle) and at Ga. 17 downstream.

Mile 5—ATVs in Streams—On river left here is a series of off-road vehicle trails, and during scouting trips at the height of the drought, all-terrain vehicle tracks criss-crossed the river here. The operation of ATVs in streams creates problems for the river and its natural inhabitants as well as riverfront property owners. Such joyriding can destroy important habitat and opens up private property along the river to potential trespass. After several years of efforts, concerned legislators, members of the Georgia Water Coalition, ATV safety advocates and citizens concerned about protecting their property, successfully pushed legislation through the General Assembly this spring that bans the operation of ATVs in our rivers and streams. Gov. Perdue signed the bill in May. The minimum fine for those caught joyriding in our rivers is \$25. The law exempts crossings of waterways as well as agricultural and law enforcement vehicles.

Mile 6.5—Harpers Ferry—One of the eight ferries that carried passengers and products across the Broad in the 1800s. In those days, individuals established and operated the ferries, but the state authorized them and set the prices for crossing. In 1845, it cost 75 cents to cross the river with a loaded six-horse wagon, 50 cents for the same--unloaded, 50 cents for a four-horse wagon loaded or unloaded, 37.5 cents for a four-wheel pleasure carriage, 25 cents for a two-wheel pleasure carriage, 18.75 cents for a horse and cart, 12.5 cents for a man and horse, 6.25 cents for a man on foot and 1.5 cents for every head of sheep, goats or hogs.

Mile 8.5—Broad River Sand Company—At the Ga. 72 bridge and our take out site, you will run headlong into the Broad River Sand Company’s dredge barge. The barge sucks sand and other debris from the river bottom and transfers it via pipelines to a series of devices that separate it according to grain size. The fine sand is used to make concrete—a building material so common we often lose sight of its raw ingredients. Our homes and businesses rose from the ground thanks to sand from our rivers. Turner Concrete in Elberton operates this sand dredge and specializes in decorative, stamped concrete for driveways, patios and walkways.