

Middle Oconee Merengue – Paddle Georgia 2011

June 18—Oconee River

Distance: 12 miles

Starting Elevation: 603 feet

Ending Elevation: 518 feet

GPS Coordinates: Lat: 33 57 36.6798 Lon: -83 27 30.0242

Obstacles/Rapids: **Mile 1.5** Ben Burton Shoals—A thicket of rocks and shoals. The line through these shoals starts on river right, but you'll need to work your way to river left to find the deepest channels.

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0	Big Dog Outfitters Launch Site
Mile 3.5	Big Dog Outfitters Take Out
Mile 12	Whitehall Forest

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Big Dog Outfitters—Our official launch site serves as Big Dogs on the River's regular launch site for its 3.5 mile kayak trips. Established in 2010, Big Dogs caters to Athens college-aged clientele offering paddle trips right in the heart of the city. The business stems from a tire and auto business near the banks of the river on Atlanta Hwy. Looking to utilize its unique access to the river there, the Stephens family sought out upstream property and ultimately landed this spot. The success of Big Dogs speaks to the growing interest in paddlesports and Georgia River Network's efforts to establish canoe and kayak trails across the state.

Mile 1.5—Ben Burton Park—Now a 32-acre wildlife preserve with walking trails, picnic tables and even a river bank restoration project, this land once played a pivotal role in Athens history. The city's first electricity produced from something other than coal was generated here when the Athens Street Railway Co. established a hydro-electric plant. The account from *A History of Athens*: "On Dec. 12, 1896, Brumby's Drug Store was lighted by current generated from the white coal of the Middle Oconee River." In 1900, Tallassee Dam and hydro-plant came on line just upstream on the Middle Oconee and in 1911 Barnett Shoals, some 14 miles downstream, was constructed. By 1923, Athens and the surrounding area had 9800 horsepower at its disposal from these facilities, but the history books are quick to note: the horsepower dried up during droughts. The hydro-plant here was operated by Georgia Power Co. until 1964, and in 1967, the utility donated the land to Clarke County. The Park honors GP Vice President Ben W. Burton.

Mile 1.75—Athens-Clarke Clarke County Water Intake—Athens Clarke County, which also has an intake on the North Oconee River, is permitted by Georgia's Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to take up to 16 million gallons per day (MGD) from the Middle Oconee at this location—that amounts to about eight percent of the average flows during June (199 MGD). Some two miles upstream from our launch site for the day, Jackson County is permitted to take an additional 60 MGD to fill the nearby Bear Creek Reservoir—a water supply lake serving the water needs of Jackson, Clarke, Oconee and Barrow counties. Thus, within a four-mile section of the Middle Oconee, EPD has deemed it safe to take 33 percent of the river's flow. Thankfully, the operators of the reservoir are not currently using their full permitted withdrawal—although during the drought of 2007, EPD allowed withdrawals that took the river below the level dictated in the reservoir permit. In October of that year the Middle Oconee ran dry, recording a point-in-time record low flow of 1.4 cubic feet per second. In 2010, the reservoir supplied an average of about 8 MGD to the four counties.

Mile 2.5—Old Mill Dam—Water levels permitting, you'll be able to see steel posts driven into the rock shoals here for the purposes of damming the river and diverting it to a mill race. This is yet another example of Clarke County's earliest settlers using the river's power. In the 27 miles from our launch site to Scull Shoals, (Day 2) there are at least six sites where the river was harnessed. Mind the steel posts at this site. They damage boats and humans.

Mile 6.5—Princeton Mill—Just upstream of the Macon Highway Bridge, you will find the ruins of Princeton Mill. Human utilization of the water power at this site dates back to the late 1700s when Noah Prince, a revolutionary war veteran, operated a mill here. In 1833, a textile mill which came to be known as Princeton Factory was established here with the water of the Middle Oconee powering the operation. It and the establishment of other mills nearby marked the dawn of the industrial revolution in the South. This "revolution" was far from embraced by the populace. A *Southern Banner* editorial published at the time of the mill's opening derided the facility as a "Palace of the Poor," noting the squalid working conditions at such facilities. The British author James Silk Buckingham traveled to the area during the time and reported: "I do not wonder that the most humane members of the community deplore the introduction of factories to the South and wish that the labors of their people should be confined to agriculture, leaving manufactures to Europe and the states of the North." He described conditions at Princeton Mill thusly: "White families live in log huts clustered about the establishment on the river's banks and the negroes repair to the huts allowed them by their owners... The whites looked miserably pale and unhealthy... said very short-lived... fevers and dysenteries sweeping numbers of them off to death." Nevertheless, the Industrial Revolution took hold in Athens, and the industrialists used the power from the river to spin their yarn and make their cloth. Other mills were established on the North Fork of the Oconee and further downstream at Whitehall. Princeton Mill operated for more than a century; the mill building burned to the ground in 1973.

Mile 7.5—Middle Oconee Water Reclamation Facility—We once called them sewer plants, then they became wastewater treatment plants; today we refer to them as water reclamation plants. They treat what we now call "biosolids," historically referred to as "sewage," but you know it as... well, you know it. You will have arrived at the water reclamation facility when you see a large pipe crossing the river. Yes, this pipe is carrying biosolids and water that need to be "reclaimed," and you'll need to duck below it. The MOWRF is in the midst of a massive upgrade that will increase its treatment capacity to 10 million gallons a day; the upgrade will also replace the cross-river pipe with a new one that will be bored and placed beneath the river bed.

Mile 9—State Botanical Garden of Georgia—Founded in 1968, the State Botanical Garden now encompasses more than 300 acres, much of it bordering the Middle Oconee River. A sandbar provides a parking spot so that you can take a walk along the facility's river trail and to the formal gardens. The facility is a public garden, but is used by University of Georgia faculty and students as a "living laboratory." The Botanical Garden boasts seven different gardens. The Garden is also home to some of our state symbols—Cherokee Rose, our state flower, and the azalea, the official state wildflower. Georgia has 47 officially designated "symbols." Among the more unusual... Prepared Food: Grits; Pork Cook Off: The Slosheye Big Pig Jig; and Peanut Monument: Turner County Peanut Monument—a 20-foot tall crowned peanut. State symbols are designated by the state legislature, which brings us back to the Botanical Garden which serves as headquarters of the Garden Club of Georgia. The Garden Club of Georgia includes among its members many influential women and has long been a lobbying force that legislators must reckon with at the State Capitol. Historically, their influence has been derived from being the wives of legislators, but nowadays many of their members have been elected to the legislature.

Mile 12—Whitehall Forest & Dam—Our take out for the day is at Whitehall Dam—the site of the last remaining water-powered textile plant in Clarke County—Thomas Textiles—which utilized the river until the 1940s. Textile manufacturing has been part of the fabric of this site since the 1830s. At that time, John White, one of Athens' early industrialists, operated the Georgia Factory near here. White's son, John Richards, who dropped out of the University of Georgia to fight in the Civil War, survived the war and returned home to take over his father's extensive business operations. He built "Whitehall," the classic 1892 Victorian home that sits on the ridge above the river. In 1936, the Georgia Rural Rehabilitation Corporation acquired the home and property and subsequently deeded it to the University of Georgia Board of Regents. Today the home and surrounding 840 acres is home to the University's Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources.