

Three Rivers Ramble

June 30

Distance: 14 miles

Starting Elevation/Coordinates: 600 feet/N34 13.900 W85 06.141

Ending Elevation/Coordinates: 580 feet/N34 12.018 W85 15.346

Obstacles/Rapids:

Mile 14

Lock and Dam Rapid—Created by the “dam” at the Lock, this rapid is easy to maneuver but produces large waves that can put a lot of water in your open boat. There are many courses through this river-wide rapid, but the most suitable route is on river left through a “V” 30 to 50 feet from the lock wall. Be careful of fishing lines, however. The Lock is a very popular fishing spot and often lines extend far out into the river channel. This obstacle can be avoided by taking out at the elevated dock upstream from the lock, but this requires a climb up a steep, sometimes muddy bank. The advantage to running the rapid is that below the lock there is a dock and boat ramp that makes for a much easier take out.

Restroom Facilities:

Mile 0 Freeman Ferry Road

Mile 7 Heritage Park

Mile 14 Lock and Dam Park

Points of Interest:

Mile 1—Spring—Located on river left just downstream from the Rome Bypass Bridge, at the right water levels you can see this unusual sight. Along the left bank, you’ll see a round “hole” carved into the bank. Within this hole is a large spring from which clear, cold water bubbles forth and feeds the river.

Mile 5—City of Rome Water Intake—The City of Rome has two water intakes to ensure adequate water supplies. Usually, the city withdraws water from the Oostanaula River because of its closer proximity to the water treatment facility, but at times during the past several years, pollution problems on the Oostanaula have forced the city to use its alternative pumps on the Etowah.

Mile 7—Myrtle Hill Cemetery—The hill that rises above the South Broad Bridge in downtown is home to this cemetery which is the final resting place of 20,000 people, including Ellen Axson Wilson, the wife of President Woodrow Wilson. Early Romans chose this spot for a cemetery because of the river’s frequent floods.

Mile 7—Downtown Rome—Where the Etowah and Oostanaula meet to form the Coosa, you will find the heart of Rome, founded in 1834. Once the “head of navigation” on the Coosa River system, Rome was a thriving river town during the 1800s and early 1900s. The 100-block of Broad Street is referred to as the Cotton Block because this is where cotton was loaded on to steamboats bound down river. As you near the confluence of the Etowah and Oostanaula, you will be paddling past former steamboat landings. In 1873, six steamboats operated out of Rome. Between Rome and Gadsden, Alabama, there were some 140 landings.

Rome, is, of course the reason for the construction of Allatoona Dam, for the dam (and the levy system which you’ll see at Heritage Park on the Coosa) prevents the downtown area from flooding.

But in the early days, Romans became accustomed to the river’s periodic “freshets.” Perhaps the most famous flood occurred in 1886 when downtown was covered in more than 10 feet of water in places. This flood led the city to raise the level of Broad Street by eight feet, and what you recognize as the first floor of many historic downtown buildings is actually the former second floor. When the thoroughfare was raised, merchants simply abandoned their first floors. During the flood of 1886, the paddlewheeler “Mitchell” steamed up Broad Street, took a left on Fourth Avenue and crossed the Oostanaula in an effort to save a horse. In this same flood, some 30 homes were washed downstream along with three bridges. If you venture into downtown and walk to the 300 block and stand in Opera Alley, where you’re standing would have been 10 feet under water on March 31, 1886!

It was not long after this flood that Romans began petitioning Congress for flood relief. The levy system, completed in the 1930s, was the first, followed by Allatoona Dam in 1950. Interestingly, in Robert Battey’s History of Rome and Floyd County published in 1930s, the author reports that city leaders of the time “suggested that some 100 acres at the forks (confluence) be left clear of buildings...and converted into a park.” In fact, today large portions of the land surrounding the confluence has been set aside as parks and greenspace. With Allatoona Dam coming online at a price of \$31.5 million, one has to wonder if it might have been more cost effective to abandon Rome’s low-lying developed areas and convert the whole of the original floodplain into a park.

You can get out at Heritage Park (just downstream from the confluence) and cross the footbridge over the Oostanaula to visit downtown Rome, including the Rome History Museum. Shuttles will also take you to the city’s famous Clocktower which holds a museum and a chance to get a bird’s eye view of the city from atop the tower. Once you get back on the water, as you paddle the final six miles of your journey, you can ponder the possibilities of continuing down river, some 600 miles to Mobile Bay.

Mile 8—Horseleg Creek—This creek, which drains much of West Rome, has been impacted by PCB contamination from General Electric’s Medium Transformer Plant. A known carcinogen, PCBs left the GE facility in stormwater that emptied into Horseleg and Little Dry Creek (a tributary of the Oostanaula River). GE, under order from Georgia’s Environmental Protection Division, recently completed an extensive excavation of PCB contaminated soils near the mouth of Horseleg Creek. Landfills at the GE site containing PCBs and other hazardous waste have also contaminated groundwater. During the years PCBs were used at the plant, an unknown number of GE employees used PCBs at their homes as a termite deterrent, dust suppressant and wood treatment. And, an undetermined number of residents used PCB-contaminated sludge from Rome’s wastewater treatment plant as fertilizer for gardens and farms. Today, the extent of PCB contamination in the area is still not fully known, and PCBs continue to be found in fishes of the Coosa River Basin, resulting in fish consumption advisories for most rivers and streams in the area. GE is working with EPD to clean up various contaminated property at the GE facility and at off site locations. The clean up is expected to take decades.

Mile 9—Rome Wastewater Treatment Plant—The Rome wastewater treatment plant is in the midst of a \$35 million upgrade and expansion to correct chronic sewage overflow and treatment bypass problems during periods of heavy rain. The plant treats an estimated 16 million gallons of sewage each day.

Mile 10—Blacks Bluff Preserve—You’ll see the “bluffs”—500-million year-old Conasauga limestone on river left rising above Black’s Bluff Road which runs directly parallel to the Coosa. The Nature Conservancy has protected 132 acres along the river here because of its botanical diversity. A massive natural rock garden, the north-facing slope of the bluffs keeps things cool and moist and the alkalinity of the lime-rich soil provide habitat for endangered large-flowered skullcap and the state-endangered limerock arrowwood. The site includes limestone caves that are home to cave salamanders.

Mile 14—Lock and Dam Park—Back in the 1800s, this was the site of a troublesome shoals known as Horseleg Shoals that made navigation of the river difficult for the paddlewheelers that plied its waters. The solution was to build a small dam and a lock to move the ships and the cotton they carried up and down river. The project was completed in 1913, and operated until 1941. It’s most lasting contribution to the Coosa Valley and the world is that it is the birthplace of the cartoon character, Popeye. Popeye’s creator, Tom Sims, was the son of a boat captain who operated ships on the Coosa River for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers including one called the “Leota”. The stories of Popeye are drawn from Sims’ childhood on the Coosa. Sims said, “Fantastic as Popeye is, the whole story is based on facts. As a boy I was raised on the Coosa River. When I began writing the script for Popeye I put my characters back on the old “Leota” that I knew as a boy, transformed it into a ship and made the Coosa River a salty sea.” As you pull up to shore, toot your best Popeye, and yell, “I’m strong to the finish!”...even without spinach. Congratulations! You made it!!!