

Burnt Fort Boogie—Spring on the Satilla 2016

April 2—Satilla River

Distance: 9 miles

Starting Elevation: 10 feet Lat: 31.0212°N Lon: -81.9040°W

Ending Elevation: 7 feet Lat: 30.9460°N Lon: -81.8994°W

Restroom Facilities:	Mile 0	Douglas Fish Camp
	Mile	3R Fish Camp
	Mile 5.2	Shirley Bluff (<i>Rest stop, but no restroom facilities</i>)
	Mile 8.7	Burnt Fort Boat Ramp

Points of Interest:

Mile 0—Satilla—At first blush, the word “Satilla” appears to be one of the many lyrical Native American names for Georgia’s rivers. In reality, the Satilla is one of three major Georgia river basins whose name we believe is not derived from the native language. The first recorded name for the river is attributed to the French explorer, Jean Ribault, who sailed along the Georgia coast in 1562 and called the river “Somme.” Later when Spanish explored the area they reportedly named it “Saint Illa” in honor of a captain in the Spanish army. Saint Illa was the widely used name for the river into the 1800s. An 1874 report of the U.S. Department of Agriculture noted 6,200 acres of rice being cultivated along the Saint Illa River, and to this day, the name St. Illa is found on churches, roads, cemeteries and even healthcare facilities in southeast Georgia. In the late 1800s, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names officially settled on “Satilla.” As for Ribault, he not only lost naming rights to the Spaniards, he also met an untimely death at their hands. After his ships were marooned in a hurricane along the Florida coast, he and his men were captured and executed. But, perhaps Ribault got the last laugh in modern-day America. When the Six Flag Over Georgia amusement park opened in Atlanta in 1967, one of the original rides was Jean Ribault’s Adventure, a ersatz riverboat ride depicting the dangers facing early Georgia settlers.

Mile 0.7—River Birch—on river left here is a small sandbar sporting young river birches (*Betula nigra*). River birches do not tolerate shade but love having their feet wet, making them the ideal dweller along river banks that provide both ample sunlight and moist soils. It is best recognized by its bark which flakes off to reveal lighter inner bark. Like many trees, it is a food source for numerous animals. Birds and rodents feed on its seeds, deer eat its leaves, beaver its bark and rabbits munch on its seedlings. The land upon which these trees grow is known as “Blues Island.” Though not an island now, it may have at one time been surrounded by the shifting Satilla.

Mile 2.2—Cut through & Oxbow—One of many cut-throughs and oxbow sloughs along our route, these off-shoots are created when the river erodes an outside bend and captures the downstream bend. This cut through eliminates quarter-mile of the river’s “original” length. The name “oxbow” comes from the u-shaped collar placed around an ox’s neck to which a plow is attached.

Mile 2.5—3R Fish Camp—Where there is high ground, people build, such is the draw of the river. Historically known as Rains Landing, the bluff on river left is now known as 3R Fish Camp, portions of which are owned by the family of Karl Davis of Kingsland, an accomplished musician who has said he will spin some stories and songs for us. Look for Karl at the first dock at 3R.

Mile 4.3—Allens Ferry—George W. “Dick” Allen lends his name to this historic river crossing and quite a number of descendants. Born in 1837, Allen would ultimately sire 11 children by three wives (a fourth wife died in childbirth along with the infant). A Civil War veteran, he was in a Union prison at the close of the war, but returned to Charlton County where he married in 1868 Mary Ellen Grooms, the daughter of Josiah Grooms. It is perhaps this marriage that introduced Allen to the ferrying business as his wife’s father, Josiah Grooms, operated a ferry downstream at Burnt Fort. Allen died in 1904 and is buried, along with his final three wives, in a family cemetery to the west of this location. The Charlton Archives recounts a story that Allen told of his imprisonment during the war: “He and a comrade had managed to secure some flour and were preparing to have hot cakes and syrup for breakfast, but just before the hot cakes were cooked a Federal officer discovered them and promptly confiscated their hot cakes and syrup and placed them back on the regular diet of bean soup, corn-bread with a small piece of fat bacon once a week. He was also punished by being forced to wear an old pork barrel an hour a day during the noon meal; a hole was cut in the bottom of the barrel for his head to project through and he was forced to walk around in a circle for an hour a day for seven days.”

Mile 7.6—Godley Landing & Magnolia Bluff—The dock on river left here marks the location of Godley Landing, a river landing dating to the 1800s. Beyond the dock is Magnolia Bluff that rises about 50 feet above the river here and runs downstream almost a mile. Magnolia Bluff, like our campsite at Long Bluff, is characterized by a diverse deciduous and evergreen forest dominated by southern magnolia (shiny, dark green leaves and showy, fragrant white blooms) and beech (there the trees that hold on to their brown leaves through the winter). In Georgia, these bluff or steephead forests are home to at least 25 species of concern, including plumleaf azalea, Florida anise, bottlebrush buckeye and relict trillium. Opposite Magnolia Bluff, accessible from a slough on river right is Camp Lake. Turn of the century maps show the river splitting here to form an extensive island opposite Magnolia Bluff, but over the course of the 20th century, the western arm of the river sealed forming Camp and Billys lakes.

Mile 8.6—Billys Lake & Red-breast perch—In the 1932 History of Charlton County, author Alex McQueen boldly asserts that “more fish...have been caught in Burntfort (now known as Billys) lake than any other one spot in the South, and it is still a favorite bedding place of bream and red-breast perch.” Indeed, the Satilla is nationally renowned for its redbreast sunfish fishery. This beautifully-colored fish know locally as “red bellies” accounts for more than half the fishing on the Satilla, according to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Redbreast and other panfish spawn during the spring so you may be lucky enough to see their circular-shaped nests fanned out of sand in shallow water along the river’s edge. In recent years, the redbreast fishery has been decimated by the illegal introduction of non-native flathead catfish. This voracious predator first arrived in the 1990s and, feeding on the redbreast, quickly reduced the population of the river’s premiere sport fish. Beginning in 2007, DNR began a flathead catfish eradication program. Between 2007 and 2013, state fisheries biologists removed some 42,800 flatheads totaling 102,000 pounds. Following this program, the redbreast fishery improved, but fully eradicating flatheads is virtually impossible and without a sustained effort, redbreast populations will continue to struggle. Billys Lake is the large slough on river right just upstream of Ga. 252.

Mile 8.7—Burnt Fort—Our take out site is believed to be one of the possible sites of a circa 1750s settlement called New Hanover on the Satilla River established by an Indian trader and Quaker from Virginia named Edmund Gray. Gray, who was elected a representative and later expelled from Georgia’s colonial assembly, was undoubtedly one of the “characters” of his day. Historic accounts provide conflicting reports of the man describing him as collectively as a teetotaling Quaker, a “political adventurer,” a “radical dreamer” and a renegade that proved a “thorn in the side” of Georgia’s colonial government. After dismissal from the colonial assembly in 1755, he led a group of mostly landless families into the frontier along the Satilla River in the “no man’s land” between British-controlled Georgia and Spanish-controlled Florida. There he and others set up trade with Spain and local Indians. Though lucrative for what became known as “Gray’s Gang,” the Spanish trade in neighboring Florida was frowned upon by Georgia’s colonial government. Eventually, most in New Hanover withdrew to a settlement on Cumberland Island and then scattered to land around the St. Mary’s River. It is believed that Gray’s Gang built a fort on this site that was used as refuge by settlers during Indian uprisings and ultimately set ablaze by Indians in the early 1800s, giving rise to the name “Burnt Fort.” By the 1840s new migrants settled here, setting up a sawmill that processed logs harvested far upstream and then floated down the Satilla to this point. Locals interviewed for Alex McQueen’s 1932 book *History of Charlton County* recalled times when the river was so full of logs that it was possible to walk two miles up river from Burnt Fort on “raft after raft of some the largest yellow pine logs ever grown in Georgia.” A ferry also operated at this location until 1928. The circa-1956 bridge that still spans the river here was named to honor Alva J. Hopkins, a long-time legislator from Charlton County who was instrumental in the construction of Ga. 252 and died in 1961.

