

# Hells Gate Hokey Pokey—Spring on the Satilla 2016

April 3—Satilla River

**Distance:** 8 miles

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

**Ending Elevation: 5 feet** Lat: 30.9044°N Lon: -81.8594°W

**Restroom Facilities:**

**Mile 0**

Burnt Fort Boat Ramp

**Mile 8.7**

Long Bluff/Satilla Lodge

**Points of Interest:**

**Mile 0.1—Resurrection Fern**—Growing on an oak on river right here is an impressive collection of resurrection fern (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*). This native fern's name comes from its rather remarkable ability to withstand severe droughts. During extreme drought it can lose up to 97 percent of its water content. By comparison, other plants will begin to perish with just 10 percent water loss. When droughts occur the fern shrivels up to a grayish brown clump. When the rains return, these ferns unfurl graceful bright green fronds. Though they grow on oaks like this, they do not steal nutrients or water from their hosts. The resurrection fern's unique characteristics earned it a ride on the Space Shuttle Discovery in 1997 so that scientists could study it in zero gravity. The experiment showed that even in space, the fern "arose" when watered.

**Mile 0.8—Palmetto**—On river right here is a dense stand of palmetto. Most stands in far south Georgia are either dwarf palm (*Sabal minor*), needle palm (*Rhapidophyllum hystrix*) or saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*). All are low growing understory plants with the iconic fan-shaped leaves. The saw palmetto, however, is the only native palm with spiny leaf stems and it is this plant that is famous for its medicinal uses. Its berries are harvested for use as an herbal remedy for prostate health and sexual vitality. In 2013, saw palmetto was among the country's top three selling herbal supplements, bringing in \$200 million in retail sales.

**Mile 4.1—Bloody Branch**—About four miles up this stream entering on river right, in 1794 Native Americans attacked and killed James Keene and one of his children as his wife and three other children watched in horror. The natives made off with the family's possessions, including some 25 head of cattle, five horses and a wagon. The murders earned the creek the name "Bloody Branch." Today, maps identify this creek as Bailey's Branch and provide no name for the arm of the creek where historian John Goff, in Placenames of Georgia, reports that the murders took place—a spot about two miles west of Burnt Fort on a path that is today known as Ga. 252. During the Colonial era and in the years following the American Revolution, the land between the Altamaha River and the St. Mary's River was a kind of no man's land, controlled neither by Spain nor Britain—nor the U.S. following the Revolution. Thus, in the land surrounding the Satilla there was a definitive element of lawlessness.

**Mile 4.4—Trout Lake**—Hidden in the woods on river left here is this oxbow lake.

**Mile 4.8—Folkston Milk Riots**—Some 8 miles southwest of this spot is the town of Folkston, best known as one of the gateways to the Okefenokee Swamp, but in 1950, the town made headlines because of local milk "riots." When a local dairy ceased operation in the late 1940s, local communities began receiving their milk from Florida dairies. In 1950, the Georgia Department of Agriculture attempted to stop delivery of milk across the state line, claiming that it could not insure the safety of the Florida milk. The controversy boiled over into near riot when two Georgia agents poured "bluing" into 240 quarts of Florida milk meant for Folkston residents. Mayor R. Ward Harrison had the men arrested to protect them from an angry crowd that had gathered at the scene of the milk spoiling. In newspaper accounts, Mayor Ward was quoted: "Georgia's Agriculture Commissioner may have a little state law which says he can pour bluing in milk, but he's not going to do that in this town." The Commissioner ultimately relented and allowed delivery of the Florida milk. Your average milk cow needs about 30 gallons of water to produce eight gallons of milk each day. Factor in the water needed to produce hay and other feed, and some studies suggest as much as 144 gallons of water are needed to produce just one gallon of milk. As world populations grow so does the need for clean and abundant drinking water, putting pressure on all food producers to use this finite resource at peak efficiency.

**Mile 5—Gorman's Bluff and the Camden-Charlton County Line**—In 1854, the Georgia General Assembly commissioned Camden County citizens Stephen McCall, C.J. Patterson and J.E. Mizell to establish and mark the county line between Charlton and Camden counties, running it from the St. Mary's River north to "Gorman's Bluff on the Satilla River." Patterson lived at Gorman's Bluff, raising cattle and farming the land. McCall and Mizell hailed from the southern end of the line along the St. Mary's and according to Alex McQueen, author of a 1932 History of Charlton County, none of the men wished to reside in Charlton. McCall reportedly said that "he wanted to run the line so that he would remain in Camden as he did not want to be a citizen of such a poor county as Charlton, in his opinion, would be." In retrospect, McCall's assessment of Charlton's prospects for prosperity were prophetic. Today, Charlton's nearly 13,000 residents enjoy a medium household income of \$40,111 while Camden claims more than 52,000 residents and a medium household income of more than \$52,000. The poverty rate in Charlton hovers at nearly 30 percent. In Charlton's defense, nearly half the county's land mass lies within the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. In fact, the estimated population of alligators in Okefenokee Swamp (13,000) surpasses Charlton's human population.

**Mile 5.8—May Bluff**—Also known as Gorman's Bluff, this low bluff on the south bank of the river was settled in the mid 1800s by L.M. Bedell who told Alex McQueen, author of a History of Charlton County in the early 1900s, that he came up the Satilla in a steamboat and ultimately established a trading post/store at the site. In the late 1800s, the bluff was the home of a turpentine operation and to this day the property is owned under the name Varn Turpentine & Cattle Co.

**Mile 7—Hells Gate**—In 1897, the Satilla River Transport Company ran their steamer, Passport, up river to Burnt Fort four times weekly. The boat left Brunswick at 8:30 and arrived at Burnt Fort in the late afternoon. Undoubtedly, "Hells Gate" was one of the shallow spots with which the steamer's captains dealt. In 1910, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers surveyed the Satilla from its mouth to Burnt Fort evaluating it for commercial navigation. After finding several "shoals," the Corps' recommended to Congress appropriations to rid the river of these obstacles. The report was accompanied by numerous letters from business interests along the river vouching for this need. One letter, in fact, sounded like it was pulled from the pages of Georgia's recent plea with the federal government to appropriate hundreds of millions to dredge the Savannah harbor to make way for new "megaships." Wrote a representative of the Hilton & Dodge Lumber Co. in 1910: "If we could get a depth of 15 feet at mean low water it would enable us to charter larger vessels at a saving from 25 to 50 cents per 1,000 in freight and frequently even more than that. Nearly all sailing craft that are now being built or have been built recently are large size with the result that small vessels are hard to get and command higher rates." By 1921, Congress had doled out more than \$17,000 for Satilla river improvement projects and the Corps boasted that its work made possible the rafting of timber at "almost all stages" of the river. In 1920, the Corps estimated more than 64,000 tons of goods (almost half of it logs) valued at \$1.4 million was shipped on the Satilla.

**Mile 7.8—John Bailey's Sawmill**—Among the places where Satilla logs were floated and shipped was a sawmill at this location on river left. John Bailey, and brother, James, established two sawmills along the Satilla in the 1870s.

**Mile 8.2—Satilla Lodge/Rice Plantations**—Portions of the Gowen property at Long Bluff were once cultivated for rice production. From the early 1700s until just after 1900, rice—not cotton—was king in coastal Georgia, but growing it in the tidal country was arduous work. Lowland swamps and forests had to be cleared and then extensive levee and canal systems had to be constructed to permit the periodic flooding of the fields. If not for slave labor, the crop may have never taken hold. In fact, after the Civil War and Emancipation, property owners found it difficult to find a willing work force. That complication as well as competition from global markets and a series of damaging hurricanes hastened the end of rice production along the Satilla and other Georgia rivers. Prior to the Civil War, Georgia produced as much as 51.7 million pounds of rice annually; by 1919 production had dwindled to 2 million pounds.