

# CANAL DIGGERS TRAIL



**Okefenokee**

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

## 1. Introduction

Toward the end of the 19th century, "progress" nearly led to the extinction of the Okefenokee Swamp. This part of the Okefenokee was then owned by the State of Georgia. In 1891 the State granted these lands to the Suwannee Canal Company, a corporation formed to effect the drainage of the swamp. Captain Harry Jackson, a prominent lawyer in Atlanta, was the main force behind the newly formed company. Jackson and his associates expected to make millions of dollars from the sale of timber and from fertile crop lands that would be exposed once the swamp was drained. Construction of the canal began in September, 1891. A few years later the entire project was abandoned.

This Canal Diggers Trail winds into the upland portions of the Suwannee Canal where the works of man have left unusual niches and which provides habitat for a variety of wildlife. The walk takes about 30 minutes.

## 2. The Plan

The plan called for the swamp to be drained through Trail Ridge to the Atlantic Ocean by way of the Saint Mary's River. Although the ditch was cut through the ridge, it was never cut down to the water level of the swamp. The diggings exposed many small springs which created a flow of water running back into the swamp instead of away from the swamp. This gave rise to stories that when the canal was finished, the water from the Saint Mary's would flow back into the swamp. On this assumption, the project was abandoned and almost immediately became known as "Jackson's Folly."

The water still flows from the springs into the swamp just as it did during the early days of construction. Through the years nature has covered many of the scars while providing wildlife a place of refuge. In fall and winter, migrating warblers, white-throated sparrows, and other birds find protection here. They seek out berries and scratch for insects under the fallen leaves and in the decaying fallen trunks of trees.

In a moment you will leave the canal by one of the routes used by the canal diggers as they and their mules dragged scoop after scoop of sand from the ditch.



## 3. Spoil Bank Succession

To your right are the dunes left by the canal diggers. To your left are the pines which were planted after the virgin forest was cut to help pay the digging expenses.

As you walk along, notice how the digging of the canal has changed the appearance and plant life of the pine forest through which the ditch was dug. The change is evident in the contrast between the dense growth of mosses and ferns of the wet ditch bottoms, the pine forest, and the oaks of the open and drier dune uplands. This is a good place to look for signs of deer during autumn while acorns are falling to the ground.

## 4. Animal Diggers

Men were digging the canal to eliminate a swamp. Some forms of wildlife also dig but their objective is to seek food or shelter. This digging was caused by a gopher tortoise, a land dwelling turtle better known locally as a gopher. Dens such as this may extend into the spoil dune for as much as 35 feet.

The gopher tortoise often shares his den with other animals—snakes, raccoons, opossums, and insects to name a few. One tenant, the gopher frog, seems to depend entirely on tortoise dens for its protection.

Other animals in this area that live in underground dens include foxes, skunks, and armadillos.

## 5. Magnitude of Digging

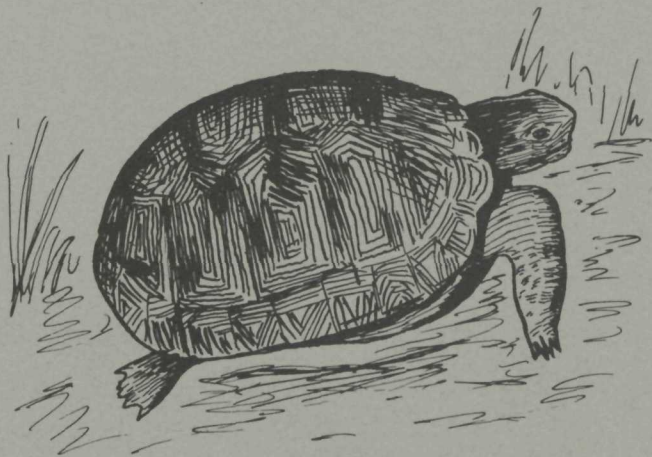
From here the Suwannee Canal extends westward through the swamp for twelve miles and in the opposite direction for about two miles. It was near here on Trail Ridge where the attempt to drain the swamp began to fail. Diggers, using mule-powered shovel skids, had to go deeper and deeper to reach below swamp level. The soaring banks of sand continually broke loose and fell at their feet, filling in their progress. There seemed to be no end to the digging. Money to pay their wages began running low.

Deep in the swamp steam shovels mounted on barges discovered an increasing flow of water coming in from the wrong direction. At this point the feasibility of the project was re-examined. Captain Jackson concluded that not only was this particular ditch a menacing problem, but that even if it were completed below swamp level, it probably would not drain the swamp dry. More ditches and canals would be needed. This was more than the promoters could handle, so the project was ended.

## 6. Canal Diggers

The canal diggers were among the first men to become familiar with the swamp. They did not have books in which to look up the names of the animals they saw, and many could not read anyway. Many uncommon creatures were thus given local names. The wood ibis was called a bald-headed gannet. The pied-billed grebe was, and still is, called a didapper duck. The wood duck is still locally called a summer duck, and a dragonfly is a mosquito hawk.

During the rest of your visit, look for these and other animals and insects. Perhaps you can tell why their were given these local names.



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