Travels in Florida
Bartram spent late summer, fall, and winter of 1773 and 1774 in southern South Carolina, Savannah, and the area of Darien. He shipped a trunk and box to Spalding and Kelsall's Lower Store, a few miles south of Palatka, Florida, in August.

In March 1774 he began his trip to Florida, exploring St. Simons and Cumberland Islands along the way. At Cow Ford (modern Jacksonville) in mid-April, he bought a small boat and began his fruitful—and sometimes frightening—journeys into the heart of Florida. Between April and early November, his base of operations was the Lower Store. From here, he made two excursions up the St. Johns River, reaching as far south as the area of DeLand. He also recorded trips to the Alachua Savannah (on the outskirts of modern Gainesville) and Manatee Spring, at the mouth of the Suwannee River near the Gulf of Mexico. After a leisurely trip through Darien and Sunbury, he returned to Charleston in late March 1775.

Revolutionary sentiments in the colonies were building toward open hostility during this period. On December 16, 1773, patriots protesting the Tea Act dumped tea into Boston Harbor. The Crown imposed “the Intolerable Acts” upon the colonists and built up the numbers of Redcoat troops in America. Colonists boycotted British goods. In September and October 1774, as Bartram explored Florida, the First Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. The British parliament declared the American colonies to be in a state of rebellion on February 9, 1775, and on March 23, Patrick Henry gave his “liberty or death” speech in Richmond.
Figure 4. Map of Bartram's Travels in Florida (1773-1775)
Winter took one good shot at the Southeast in 2002. My stepson Tyler and I tried to escape it by following William Bartram to Florida. But it found us.

Anyone who wants to understand Bartram’s journeys will wander the St. Johns River from Jacksonville to Orange City and from Palatka to Gainesville and Suwannee. It was in this northern half of Florida that Bartram had his famous adventures with alligators, marveled over a vast prairie, and wrote the lyrical description of a spring that became Coleridge’s “Xanadu.”

Bartram, in his *Travels*, seems to merge two trips into the St. Johns River basin into a single exploration. Both journeys came in 1774, one from April to June, the other in August and September. In addition, he twice traveled west with trading parties: once to the area of modern Gainesville and later to the Gulf Coast, at the mouth of the Suwannee River.

To get from Georgia to Florida, Bartram hitched a ride on a packet boat heading to the Spalding and Kelsall trading post near present-day Palatka. At “Cow Ford,” just a few blocks from what is now Jacksonville’s Alltell Stadium, he bought a small sailboat to explore the forests, meadows, and bogs of northeastern Florida.

Bartram knew the St. Johns well, though his memories of it must have been mixed when he sailed in 1774. His journey with his father nine years before had acquainted him with the terrain and plant life, and his attempt to start a plantation gave him an appreciation for the difficulties of living in the subtropical environment.

I know that covering his itinerary will take me to Florida several times and that I will explore his route in the steamy, insect-swarming seasons, as he did. Still I might make a first run at understanding Bartram’s Florida—and the Florida that has replaced it—in cool, pleasant weather. Based on my promise
that we’ll fish while on the trip, 11-year-old Tyler agrees to accompany me during his winter vacation.

A cold rain falls on Marietta on the second day of 2002. At six in the morning, Tyler settles into the passenger seat to finish his night’s sleep, and I ease down the driveway. The Weather Channel says a storm will hit Atlanta later, but we plan to get out of town before the roads become slick and Atlanta drivers press their panic buttons. If we can make it to South Georgia, we will be safe. In Florida, we will be comfortable. Maybe.

By 7:15, near the Griffin exit, we see flurries. Five miles later, snow covers the pines. By the time we reach Macon, we are passing snowy fields. When we stop for coffee and conversation with Maria’s parents on their farm in Dodge County, a once-in-a-decade snow blankets the stand of pines behind the barn.

We drive east and south in the rain, happy that we can find a warm welcome with Maria’s sister Janet and her family in Brunswick. We’ll be in the Sunshine State tomorrow.

In the morning, the clouds are breaking up, but the air is polar. Gusts of wind shake our truck, and I remain unconvinced that Florida can be bitterly cold. Years of hype by the state’s boosters have won the day; I have no idea that tonight will bring a rare camping experience.

South of Jacksonville, we rise above the St. Johns River on the six-lane Buckman Bridge. The river is three miles wide here, whipped into whitecaps by the northerly winds. I chill at Billy Bartram’s words: “My little vessel being furnished with a good sail, and having fishing tackle, a neat light fusee, powder and ball, I found myself well equipped, for my voyage, about one hundred miles to the trading house” (Travels 74). This broad river dwarfed him in a craft so small he could paddle it into shallow lagoons.

We turn off the interstate and head up the St. Johns to Picolata, where Bartram failed to earn his fortune as a planter. He found his place in the world slowly and rather late in life. His shopkeeping business in North Carolina failed. At Picolata, in his mid-twenties, he tried his hand at planting indigo. But his land was not suitable, his slaves were unskilled or lazy, and his house was unsuitable for the weather. Within a year, this venture failed and he returned, despondent, to Philadelphia.

Bartram nearly starved to death here. Prosperity has found recent settlers, however. Affluence shines from large, Greek Revival houses that overlook the broad river in this suburb, heralding the wealth of St. Johns County where the U.S. Census Bureau found that the median household income of the residents was $42,857 in the year 2000, 53% higher than the national median. Spreading live oaks, their branches draped with Spanish moss, surround houses in gated
subdivisions along the “William Bartram Scenic and Historic Highway” near the Bartram Trail High School.

Dark clouds scud through patches of blue above the oaks and pines that front the river at Piccolata. Tyler pulls on his green parka and wraps against the wind as we step over tangled roots that drink from the black mud in the palmetto glade along the river bank. A historic-site marker in the front yard of a large white plantation-style house says that a Spanish fort, built in 1700, once guarded the river crossing along the trail that led to the Gulf Coast. Bartram knew this fort, but when he returned in 1774, he found “To [his] disappointment . . ., the fort dismantled and deserted” (Travels 80). Enough remained for him to describe its walls and thirty-foot tower, built of coquina stone. By 1939, when Francis Harper searched for Bartram’s trail, time and the river had removed its vestiges.

We drive east to the coast, where arctic air is pouring across the dunes at better than twenty miles an hour. The wind pushes away the clouds but leaves a chill. Perhaps we should drive inland, I think, and avoid the rawness of the open coast. But the romantic idea of staying on the beach and fishing the salt water overrides judgment.

“The wind will lay tonight,” I say with less conviction than hope as we unroll the little dome tent onto a sandy campsite at Gamble Rogers Memorial State Recreation Area. Tyler tosses enough gear on it to keep it from blowing into the surrounding shrubs while we rig the fiberglass poles and drive stakes into the sand. We pile sleeping bags and air mattresses inside to ensure that our shelter will not blow away.

Tyler bolts down a sandwich, grabs his fishing rod and a lure, and crosses the wooden walkway that leads to the beach. Wind that carries his lure well into the foaming surf wears out his persistence. He returns, dismantles his tackle, and says, “It’s rough over there. I got one bite, but I don’t think I’ll catch anything.” Tyler always gets at least “one bite.”

“Must be really rough,” I answer, thinking of how few times I had seen him defer fishing for any reason.

We drive into nearby Flagler Beach, a small and wonderfully underdeveloped town slipped between the Intercoastal Waterway and the Atlantic dunes. Tyler spots the public fishing pier and asks, “Can we fish tomorrow? After the wind lays?”

“Yes, we’ll fish tomorrow morning. This afternoon, let’s drive inland a bit, to where Bartram saw bass swimming alongside salt water fish.” Perhaps, I hope, away from the ocean the weather will be a bit more hospitable. And we may find a nice campsite in the Ocala National Forest for the coming two nights.

West of Ormond Beach we drive past strip malls and unpretentious subdivisions, inhabited largely by retirees. The Calvary Assembly of God stands
Footprints across the South

near the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue. Where vast forests of longleaf pines stood in Bartram’s day, slender, blackened trunks rise twenty feet above the sparse growth of palmetto and young pines.

“The fires of 1998,” I tell Tyler. “Do you remember seeing them on television?”

“Yes,” he replies. “So this is what it looks like.” His face is grim.

During May, June, and July of 1998, in the midst of a drought, forest fires scorched almost a half-million acres in Florida. Lightning strikes started some of the fires; arsonists set others. Flagler and Volusia Counties were hit hardest.

The fires began in the first week of June. By July 2, they had forced the evacuation of 40,000 people. Winds at speeds of 20 miles per hour were blowing embers half a mile in front of the main fire line as over 1,300 firefighters faced the raging flames. All of Flagler County was under a mandatory evacuation order, about 190 miles of I-95 were closed, and NASCAR officials postponed the Pepsi 400 race.

By mid-July, when rains quelled the fires, 170,000 acres had burned, 97 homes had been destroyed and 354 damaged in two counties. Volusia County officials estimated losses at $1.9 million to commercial and residential structures and $60 to $70 million in timber.

The wildfires of Florida in 1998 are a nasty tribute to environmental negligence. And to the hunger for quick profits. The conflagrations swept across miles of slash pine plantations. Slash pines, also called “slough pines,” grow naturally in lowlands where water is plentiful, but are not as adapted to fires as are the longleafs that naturally inhabited the area. Moreover, in the absence of regular burns, the bed of the plantation is thick with flammable needles. But slash pines grow faster than native longleafs, and are, therefore, more attractive to farmers. Plant slash pines and harvest in twenty years; plant longleafs and bequeath them to your grandchildren.

We cross the St. Johns River at Astor, looking for the spot where Bartram “took up [his] quarters for several weeks” at the Upper Store, and are soon in the scrub of the Ocala National Forest on the uplands of Central Florida. Looking for a place to camp the following nights, we drive to recreation areas operated by contractors of the Forest Service. At their visitor centers we ask if we may drive through the tent sites.

“Lay this pass on your dashboard,” says the clerk at Salt Springs. “And be back in ten minutes.”

“May we get out to go to the bathroom?” asks Tyler.

“Just be back in ten minutes,” she says with a humorless, scolding face.

“She’s a retired fifth grade teacher,” I quip.

Despite the unfriendly welcome, we pick Salt Springs. With its boat rental beside the clear Salt Springs Run, it’s a perfect location for a boy whose T-shirt

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says: “Chicks Dig Me; Fish Fear Me.” It is also ideal for an old guy looking for the footprints of William Bartram.

“We'll be back tomorrow,” I tell the attendant as we check out, exactly ten minutes later. She looks over her glasses and retrieves the pass without a smile. At a shop across the road, beside an RV park, I buy Tyler a Coke, get myself a cup of coffee that tastes as if it had steeped in the carafe since daybreak, and drive back to the coast.

We hope to find conditions more pleasant at Gamble Rogers in the twilight, but wind sweeps the campground, pounding the sides of our little tent and sending up a roar from the Atlantic.

Supper is red beans and rice with chunks of turkey sausage, cooked behind the windscreen of our propane stove. We scoop generous helpings onto our plates and jump in the truck to eat them away from the cold blasts still rolling in from somewhere north of Toledo. After a few adolescent jokes about the effects of beans within a small tent, Tyler digs through his bag and finds his portable TV. Failing to tune in some cartoons, he settles for a weather report from a Jacksonville station. A pretty, bright-eyed weathercaster tells us we will have near-record cold tonight but that tomorrow will warm into the 50s.

“You can't trust a weather girl who fits on a three-inch screen,” I tell him.

He grins and searches for another channel.

There is not much to do in a near-vacant campground. We could go to the Crabtrap Bar, but I suggest we crawl into the tent and try to sleep. We rig for cold: tent flaps zipped, air pads covered by a space blanket, watch caps pulled over our ears, sleeping bags zipped to our noses. Throughout the night, gusts knock the sides of the tent into our heads. When we crawl out at dawn, the air is frigid and the wind no weaker than the night before.

“The little weather girl was right,” says Tyler.

“I want some coffee, and I don't want to try to brew it in this wind,” I grunt.

“I want a donut and I don't want to camp another night like this.”

We drive to the locked gate. Tyler’s numb fingers fumble with the combination and eventually open the lock. I turn the truck south, taking the road along the dunes to the town of Ormond Beach. There, on the street fronting the ocean, we find our donut shop.

It is a law of nature that the time needed to consume a couple of donuts and drink coffee and hot chocolate in a warm room increases four and a half minutes for every degree the thermometer falls below forty degrees. We dare not break this law. From our little table, we watch customers blow through the glass door. With the exception of a tall woman with short red hair and the only smile that has come through the door, everyone has something to say about the
cold. The cheery woman—a real estate agent, it turns out—holds that it really isn't *that* cold and that by noon it will be a wonderfully pleasant day. Everyone else shares thoughts along the line of “I thought I'd get away from weather like this when I moved to Florida.” The realtor maintains her professional sophistry, however, and convinces us that we'll be standing in the sun catching fish by lunchtime.

We find a tackle store, buy some bait, and drive to a tidewater creek where we dangle dead shrimp under Styrofoam bobbers for about an hour, then spend another hour on the pier. By noon, having felt no tugs on our lines except those made by the surf and seeing more experienced local fisher-people leave their posts to take refuge from the cold, we climb into the truck, buy coffee and hot chocolate, and begin the drive to Salt Springs. Perhaps tomorrow the red-haired realtor will be right. But we won't be here to find out.

Two hundred yards from our tent is a jammed-tight cluster of scores of other travel trailers and motor homes. Tents are less in vogue than the aluminum and plastic land yachts. Only four other campers inhabit the twenty-site tenting area. But our tent rests on a soft bed of pine straw and the winds are gentler, the air clear and cool. Tall pines tower above us and the tenting area is quiet. For the first time in three days, we relax.

A short distance down a tree-lined pathway from our campsite is a narrow canal. Its dark, clear waters lead to the lake that forms the upper end of the six mile run to Lake George. Tyler, sullen after our night of wind and cold and day of bad fishing, is restored to his usual liveliness by the nearness of clear, calm water. He rigs his rod and scurries down the path.

In a half-hour, he is back, muttering that the changing weather has driven the fish away. “I only got two bites.”

“Two bites! That's one more than you got in the surf.”

He grins.

I convince him to walk with me to the spring head, reminding him that Bartram saw “innumerable bands of fish... some cloathed in the most brilliant colours” (*Travels* 165). As we follow a winding path that leads through marshy wetlands to the edge of the springs, I wonder what is left of the scene that Bartram described after his visit in May 1774. Would we recognize the “bason” and the “swelling green knoll”? Would we see schools of fish?

The place matches his description: a hill rises to the west; water boils up through rock vents into a “bason” of clear water where bass, bluegill, and catfish gracefully cruise. Mullet plumb the depths of the springs and, as Bartram had observed, rise lazily to continue their browsing around the pool. We stroll the sidewalk that encircles the old concrete walls around the spring head, fascinated
by the colors of the water and the slow, ceaseless, ever-changing patterns of schools of fish. For the young angler, it is a field school.

Back at the campsite, we open the bundles of wood and light a fire. Bean and cheese burritos warm our bellies. We slide into our sleeping bags; by nine o'clock, we are asleep.

Dawn has not penetrated the longleaf canopies when Tyler stirs, ready to fish. We light a lantern, crack ice off the water in the bucket, eat breakfast, and drive around Salt Springs Run to the marina. Dense fog carpets the broad, shallow lake that gathers the waters of the spring before they flow down a narrow stream and into Lake George. In our fiberglass skiff, we slalom at idle speed through a maze of bass boats spaced about fifty feet apart in the open water.

"Is there a fishing tournament?" Tyler asks. But it is just an ordinary Saturday morning on a popular fishing hole.

We find an open area and let the boat drift on the calm waters while we cast our plastic worms through the wide-bladed eel grass that waves in the gentle currents three feet beneath the surface. Occasionally a fish bumps a lure, but none strike or run with the bait.

When the sun has burned away the fog, we watch the other anglers. None is catching fish. Under the shadows of a flotilla, no bass is so foolish as to strike a lure. Leaving the crowd, we motor the six miles to Lake George, casting into the grasses that line the banks. Bartram entered this "pellucid stream, sailing over the heads of innumerable squadrons of fish, which, although many feet deep in the water, were distinctly to be seen" (Travels 160). We find the stream "pellucid," but see no fish.

Away from the bustle of the marina, wilderness surrounds us. Grasses and cattails grow along the shore, swaying in the wake of an occasional boat. Beyond them, pines, palms, black gums, and live oaks draped with Spanish moss have overtaken the "green meadows" that Bartram saw. The numerous alligators he described are gone or in hiding; we see only one in our slow journey up and down the run. A sole otter, some five feet long, arches his slick brown body, diving and resurfacing along the bank searching for food. He scatters a pair of moor hens. Egrets and herons preside over the banks; an osprey keeps watch from a branch of a dead tree.

When we weary of our fruitless efforts at fishing, we return the boat to its slip, talk with other fishermen who tell of great catches "last week" and "this time last year," and drive to our camp.

We take another stroll to the springs. The day is warm. A gray-haired man accompanies a frail woman wrapped in a dark-brown suede jacket. He supports her on the side opposite her quad cane. Tyler and two children from Orlando are the only kids.
Footprints across the South

Two couples—they look to be in their seventies—sit at a picnic table beside the outlet of the basin. As I study the signboard that tells the history of Salt Springs, I overhear their conversation. One couple is from Michigan, the other from Washington State. Florida in the winter is a meeting place where Yankees and Midwesterners congregate around campgrounds, RV parks, and marinas. They cook their favorite dishes and share them, along with tales of grandchildren and lifelong jobs on the assembly lines or in offices of corporations. Worries about the future of retirement plans dot their conversations. If service in World War II is mentioned, the details and the battles are missing, and conversation quickly turns to life on the road, the next park, or highway construction delays.

The interpretive sign along a path beside the springhead says Indians lived at Salt Springs as early as 10,000 years ago. It tells of Spaniards and the Seminoles and of the Civil War but holds no word of Bartram's visit. Nor does any brochure at the campground office describe his journeys or quote from his description. Do visitors to Salt Springs know that a botanist from Philadelphia traveled here at the time of our nation's birth and wrote vivid descriptions of the trees, flowers, and fish? Only the few who have read about Bartram could know of his deep attraction to the place or the contribution his word pictures made to literature around the world. When I had asked the marina operator if he had heard of Bartram's writing on the springs, he responded with a question: "What did he say?" I quoted Bartram's description of the fish. He mumbled something about how remarkable the explorer's maps were. I gathered that he would probably not be impressed that his boat dock sat along the banks of "Alph, the sacred river" that "ran through caverns measureless to man" (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan").

While looking through the brochures in the park office, I asked the clerk, "Do you have anything about William Bartram's exploration of Salt Springs?"

"Who was he?" she answered.
I explained his significance and told her what he said about the springs.
"I don't make the brochures," she said.
I cringed when Tyler asked her, "Are you really a retired teacher?"

The park's silence about Bartram is more remarkable when one considers that he loved this place, spent the best part of a day here, and described its flora and fauna lavishly, drawing morals on war and peace from the behavior of the schools of fish.

After supper, wrapped in warm jackets, we share the light of our lantern to read. Tyler sits on a stool near the fire. I'm on the bench of the picnic table, reading Tony Grooms's Bombingham, a novel of a black teen and his family in
Birmingham during the civil rights strife. Tyler's finishing a book about a black boy growing up in North Carolina in the sixties. We have selected our books independently; I doubt that Tyler knows the subject of my book.

He sits beside me and says, "Listen to this," then reads a paragraph telling of a family and a community in conflict, finding ways to deal with a cauldron of hatred. Then I tell him the story of Bombingham. Two states, differing communities, matching experiences. We look into the fire and talk of Indian wars, slavery, and Jim Crow laws. I pull my copy of Bartram's Travels from my bag, open it to the Salt Springs pages, and say, "I think what Bartram says about this place has something to do with race relations":

innumerable bands of fish are seen, some cloathed in the most brilliant colours; the voracious crocodile stretched along at full length, as the great trunk of a tree in size, the devouring garfish, inimical trout, and all the varieties of gilded painted bream, the barbed catfish, dreaded sting-ray, skate and flounder, spotted bass, sheeps head and ominous drum; all in their separate bands and communities, with free and unsuspicious intercourse performing their evolutions: there are no signs of enmity, no attempt to devour each other; the different bands seem peaceably and complaisantly to move a little aside, as it were to make room for others to pass by. (Travels 166-67)

A man of peace, a Quaker, living in a country whose peoples knew violence and political strife, Bartram watched this show through the lenses of his experience. While he was a young man, French and Indian forces had fought Colonial and British forces. He knew of scalping. His own grandfather had been killed by Indians on the frontier. Weeks before he left Georgia to travel to Florida, settlers on the Georgia frontier murdered Indians a few miles from his camp. Indians and whites each sought revenge for ongoing killing across the Southeast. Bartram himself had escaped death at the hands of a renegade Creek who, the day before meeting the botanist in a Georgia forest, had stolen a gun and vowed to kill the next white man he saw. In this murky world the explorer sat on the soft grass above the "bason" and mused that this "paradise" of silver, black, and red fish reflected nature "before the fall."

We fold our books, bank the fire, turn out the lantern, and crawl into our sleeping bags.

Whooshes of a south wind in the pines awaken us early on Sunday morning. The air is balmy. No ice crusts the water in the bucket. Heavy clouds lie above the tops of the trees. I nudge Tyler. "Rain is on its way. Let's pack before we have wet gear."
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We strike our tent, roll our sleeping bags, and quickly load the truck. A drop splatters on the windshield as we pull out of the campground. We drive north on State Road 19 in pounding rain. An empty log truck sends a spray of water across the road. A bridge rises before us. Beside the road, a sign says: “Cross Florida Barge Canal.” I slow the truck and peer over the rail. Below, black water lies in a wide, arrow-straight ditch between scrub growth that clings to raw banks.

A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ website describes the canal project as “a high-level lock barge canal from the St. Johns River to the Gulf of Mexico with a ‘project depth’ of 12 feet and minimum bottom width of 150 feet, with five locks 84 feet wide and 600 feet long, two earth dams, and necessary canal crossings. Length of project is about 107 miles.” It is a dead enterprise with an uncertain afterlife.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt opened the project ceremonially when he detonated a charge of explosives in 1935. Designed as a Depression-era effort, the venture brought men from across the Southeast to dig with shovels. Within ten months the government had spent $5.5 million, the budget was drained, and digging stopped with only three percent of the canal finished.

Commercial interests, led by power companies wanting to bring coal from Tennessee and Kentucky across the Gulf of Mexico and Florida, pressed for completion. They argued that the cost of providing the energy for Florida’s future would be cut if they could avoid shipping coal around the southern end of the peninsula. A canal through the wilderness was a small price to pay for lights and air conditioning, they argued. Congress responded. In 1964 the Corps began construction in earnest. Within four years, the Rodman Dam had inundated 9,000 acres of wild, productive floodplain forest along sixteen miles of the Ocklawaha River. Fish searched for nesting grounds where panthers once made their dens.

Bartram did not travel the Ocklawaha. He sailed past its mouth and rode across its upper reaches. It deserves attention, however, because its less-spoiled sections provide a rare glimpse of the land the explorer knew and because its story demonstrates the way America has treated the earth Bartram knew at the beginning of the nation’s history. It also shows a victory of environmental advocacy.

The idea of a canal across Florida is not a twentieth-century dream, and the Corps was not the first to push aside the earth and trees of Florida to create a shortcut to the Gulf. According to the Archaeological and Historical Conservancy of Florida, about 1,700 years ago Native Americans used handmade tools of wood and shell to dig out millions of yards of sand and soil and build a seven-mile long canal with complicated lock systems near Lake Okeechobee.
(the "Ortona Canal"). Centuries later, King Philip II of Spain and Presidents John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson proposed a cross-Florida waterway.

The Cross Florida Barge Canal ran into the unyielding bedrock of awakening environmental concern in the 1960s, however. Environmentalists, led by Marjorie Carr Harris of Micanopy, pressed the federal government to shut down the project. They were unable to stop the Rodman Dam but succeeded before the Eureka Dam, which would have destroyed twenty miles of river and floodplain, was complete. Congress and President George H. W. Bush "deauthorized" the project in 1990. By then, $62 million in state and federal funds had been used.

The former canal lands are now the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway, which allows wildlife to reclaim some of its territory and provides the public an opportunity for a 110-mile long, 75,000-acre stretch of outdoor pleasure.

Lake Ocklawaha is now the center of the environmental storm. Its 9,000 acres of water, impounded by the Rodman Dam, holds largemouth bass that attract hundreds of fishermen to plunk lures over the drowned stumps and roots that once supported giant cypresses and black gum trees. And, although the free-flowing Ocklawaha River was also renowned for good fishing, the anglers and fishing-related businesses think lake fishing is better for their sport.

Rodman Dam is low, the lake shallow. Set alongside the great dams of the Rocky Mountains or the Tennessee Valley, you’d hardly notice it. Four steel gates, about fifteen feet high, and a mile-long mound of earth stand between a lake and a river. Stumps, water hyacinth, and hydrilla (the latest exotic plant to assault the waterways of Florida) cover the surface like a green and brown patchwork quilt.

At a boat ramp not far from the dam, a sport fisherman has backed his glittering blue bass boat off its trailer. He cranks the engine of his matching blue truck and drives the trailer out from under the boat, leaving it bobbing in the dark lake and spreading a wake of water and plant stems along the concrete ramp. On this sportsman’s boat is a seventy-five-horsepower outboard, fish-finding sonar, and a trolling motor. A tall, blue tackle box holds his lures; three rods jiggle in brackets attached to the blue console holding a steering wheel above a blue padded seat.

I look over the water and observe, "This lake looks tough. Lots of plants and stumps."

"There’s prettier lakes," he says. "But this one’s got great bass. If you can find them. Record’s seventeen pounds." I hold off on telling him that Bartram watched his companions use cane poles, twenty inches of stout line, and handmade lures to catch bass that ranged up to thirty pounds (Travels 108).

"I’ve heard they’re talking about taking out the dam."
Footprints across the South

“Jeb Bush and the tree huggers want the dam removed, but a lot of legislators listen to us,” he says, explaining that he is a member of a national fishing club that has lobbied to keep the lake.

Except for the lake, the Ocklawaha is a land of refuge and fascination. A subtropical jungle, a “magic kingdom” built by natural forces over thousands of years, is suitable for Tarzan. In fact, some of the Tarzan episodes were filmed in the upper reaches of the river, near Silver Springs. It winds more than a hundred miles from Lake Griffin, in the center of the state, and drains the sand ridges and pine stands that Bartram called “the forests of Cuscowilla,” getting an extra push from the waters of Silver Springs.

Early one autumn morning, not far downstream from the dam, I follow Forest Service roads to the dark, rich banks of the river. Dark green trees reflect on the water. Two marsh hens dive beneath the surface, escaping my camera. A pileated woodpecker hops up a tree on the opposite bank and the water, browned by tannin from tree roots, moves slowly toward the St. Johns. This is a remnant of the river that Sidney Lanier called the “sweetest water-lane in the world, a lane which runs more than a hundred and fifty miles of pure delight betwixt hedgerows of oaks and cypresses and palms and bays and magnolias” (39).

Sitting on the back porch of his century-old, two-story cypress house on the banks of the St. Johns River, Norman Moody describes the river he knew as a child and young man. A man of the river, his family has lived on the St. Johns since his great-grandfather’s migration from Georgia after the Civil War. He has called islands and bridge tenders’ houses home, and he fished the river until an illness that struck him in his seventies caused him to think twice before going out on a boat.

He spins stories of the river he calls “Ahkwaha,” memories of days fishing its cypress swamps before the dam. Tales of getting lost among the cypress knees in a side channel. Visions of heavy stringers of bass, bream, and catfish. Drawing upon the images his father and grandfather passed along, he recalls not only productive fishing holes but steamboats that plied the stream.

“Tourists came to see the wilderness,” he said. “They’d ride the sidewheelers up from Jacksonville. In Palatka, they boarded sternwheelers. Rich Yankees, politicians. General Lee came here. He was an old man. And Grant, too. At night, the crew would build a fire of fat wood in a big pan on the front of the boat. That was to light the river. It winds a lot, you know. And there are lots of snags. Sometimes the passengers would help the crew push the boat away from the banks, around the bends.”

Norman’s take on the value of the lake differs from the bass-boat sportsman I met at the boat ramp. He deplores the Cross Florida Barge Canal and the dam.
“Every year the legislature votes on taking out the dam. Each year they get closer to giving the money to take it out. But they never do it.”

“If they do, will the river be the same?” I ask.

“I don’t think so,” he says, echoing the thoughts of others I’ve talked with. “Too much damage has been done. It can never be the same. But it would be better than that dam.”

Some environmental activists claim that many trees will grow back naturally and that others can be planted. Still, how long will it be before an oak can spread its crown to shade the stream and the eagle can find a high perch?

An argument against removing the dam has to do with the pollution of the sediment behind the dam. “You have to go way upstream to understand,” says Thad Hart of the Corps of Engineers. “Study the reports on Silver Springs. The water running out of Silver Springs looks sparkling clear and clean, but it is loaded with nitrogen.”

“And this is not a natural occurrence?” I asked.

“Springs carry far less nitrogen, normally. An average load of nitrate is .02 milligrams per liter of water. At 1.0 milligrams, the ecological value of the water goes into a decline. Silver Springs is above 1.0. Over eight hundred tons of nitrate every year flow out of the springs.”

“Why? How did this happen?”

“Usually excess nitrogen comes from overfertilizing. Maybe orange groves, farms. Scientists are studying it.”

“And what does this have to do with the health of the Ocklawaha?”

“Nitrogen promotes plant growth, such as algae blooms. When the plants die, the water is depleted of oxygen as the algae rot and are consumed by bacteria. Fish suffocate. The sediment at the bottom of Lake Ocklawaha is filled with nitrogen and other chemicals. If they open the dam and it rushes out of the lake, the nitrogen build-up will damage the river all the way to Jacksonville in a few weeks.”

Indeed, proponents of the lake say that it spares the St. Johns by removing seventy-five percent of the nitrogen from the river. Opponents say, “Hey! Wait a minute! You had major fish kills several times in the last few years because of low oxygen levels in the lake. About two million fish died in September and October 2000.”

Dam or no dam, the canal is an eyesore in one of the nation’s most alluring settings. But the assault on the beauty of the river and its surroundings pales before the ecological disturbance it has caused. The floodplain now covered with the water of the lake could again provide a cypress forest and habitat for declining species. Swallow-tailed kites, Cooper’s hawks, and indigo snakes could find refuge along the free-flowing banks of the Ocklawaha. Manatees, now
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stopped by the locks and dam, could make their way to the warm waters of the springs, as they did for millennia before the building of the structures.

The environmental history of the ancient Ortona Canal provides a ray of hope. There, over centuries, the trees, fish, and reptiles returned. So well did the earth do her work that archaeologists could find the marks left by the canal only with the help of aerial photography and remote sensing devices. Perhaps, given better policies and many decades, the earth can likewise hide the Cross Florida Barge Canal’s scars upon its face.

Until this happens, the project will remain one of the more obvious examples of W. B. Clapham’s observation: “Never before in human history have the linkages between the environmental and social domains been less constant. Automation, new chemicals, population growth and a kaleidoscope of technological innovations bring change at a rate faster than ever before” (7).

Tyler has been asleep for two hours when we pull into our driveway in Marietta on Sunday afternoon. The sky is clear and the air warm. All that is left of the Great Winter Storm of 2002 are some snapshots Maria had taken before the two inches of snow melted.

My excursions into Bartram’s Florida had only begun. On other trips, in other seasons, I would explore the Alachua Savannah and the valley of the St. Johns River, searching for Bartram’s monumental mounds, roaring gators, and thirty-pound bass.
Traders had a ramshackle post and Indians and soldiers camped beside the muddy ferry slip where William Bartram had arrived in April 1774. He had sailed on a “handsome pleasure boat” from Cumberland Island, landing near Amelia Island and making his way to this place, where he found “a neat little sailboat . . . for which [he] paid three guineas” (Travels 73). But that was 228 years before I got there and found iron lamp posts and a historical marker standing above a sea wall that protects the parking lot of the Duval County Courthouse. The marker reads:

SITE OF COW FORD: This narrow part of the St. Johns River, near a clear freshwater spring was a crossing point for Indians and early travelers. The Indian name Wacca Pilatka, meaning ‘Cow’s Crossing,’ was shortened by the English to Cow Ford, and Jacksonville was known by this name for many years. This crossing was used by the English when they made an old Timucuan Indian Trail into King’s Road.

Jacksonville sprawls around Cow Ford. Mountainous structures, the Alltel Stadium and the Veterans Memorial Arena, rise behind the courthouse. Their history embodies the dynamics and economics of American cities. In 1994 and 1995, the city demolished the fifty-year-old Gator Bowl and built the Jacksonville Municipal Stadium. Less than twenty months passed between the first swing of the wrecking ball and the opening kickoff of the Jacksonville Jaguars’ initial game. Within two years, Alltel had bought the naming rights to the stadium.

The arena has a shorter history. In 1960, the city built the Jacksonville Coliseum. Forty-three years later, the mayor and his son pushed a button,
igniting 275 pounds of explosives that turned the “old” structure to rubble and dust. In its place rose the arena.

In the glare of reflections on glass and steel, letters and logos on massive towers surrounding the old fort notify the modern traveler that Adam’s Mark, SunTrust, Modis, Wachovia, and CSX now live at the port where Bartram pushed his little boat into the current and nosed its bow upstream into the depths of Florida. Travelers to this city—at least those whose portfolios or expense accounts can stand it—may now dwell in luxury high above the roar of traffic, their accommodations a far stretch from Bartram’s shelter of a sail attached to a fallen giant tree beside the river. Not many blocks from the city’s glittering heart, factories, vacant lots, housing projects, and modest neighborhoods fan out toward affluent suburbs.

Bartram had planned to travel with a young man to the Spalding and Kelsall stores up the river, but he says that his companion deserted him before they set out. His thoughts on the departure of “the young man [his] fellow traveller,” reveal Bartram’s motives for his journey:

His leaving me, however, I did not greatly regret. . . . Our views were probably totally opposite; he, a young mechanic on his adventures, seemed to be actuated by no other motives, than either to establish himself, in some well inhabited part of the country, where, by following his occupation, he might be enabled to procure without much toil and danger, the necessaries and conveniences of life; or by industry and frugality, perhaps establish his fortune. Whilst I, continually impelled by a restless spirit of curiosity, in pursuit of new productions of nature, my chief happiness consisted in tracing and admiring the infinite power, majesty and perfection of the great Almighty Creator, and in the contemplation, that through divine aid and permission, I might be instrumental in discovering, and introducing into my native country, some original productions of nature, which might become useful to society. (Travels 73)

We don’t know what happened to the young man, but modern Jacksonville would have suited him well. A city of industry and commerce, until the 1920s it was the largest city in the state. It remains a center of finance, housing major insurance, investment, and computer technology firms. More than a million people live in Jacksonville’s metropolitan area, said to be the geographically largest urban area in America.

The backbone of this population is South Georgians, attracted to the city by its industries. Years of hard farming had leached the nutrients from the Georgia
soil, and rampant cutting in the early decades of the twentieth century had left forests good for nothing but collecting turpentine. Weary farm folk, following the Crackers who moved into Florida in the 1800s, came to Jacksonville seeking relief from deep poverty.

Novelist Harry Crews was one of these refugees. Crews lived his childhood on a hardscrabble farm in Bacon County, Georgia until, in the late 1940s, his stepfather discharged a shotgun over his mother’s head. She packed a few belongings and moved Harry and his brother to Jacksonville where she rented a row house and got a job at the King Edward tobacco factory. In his autobiography, A Childhood: The Biography of A Place, Crews describes his Jacksonville neighborhood:

I knew absolutely, without knowing how I knew it, that something called the Springfield Section of Jacksonville was where all of us from Bacon County went, when we had to go, when our people and our place could no longer sustain us….I had spent a lifetime hearing about the city. Jacksonville came up in conversations like the weather…Everybody had to do it. Sooner or later everybody ended up in the Springfield Section, and once they were there, they loved it and hated it at the same time, loved it because it was hope, hated it because it was not home. (128)

Crews recalls the comments of displaced farmers who had exchanged the agricultural frustrations of Georgia for labor in the city: “walk out the front door every morning of your life and see right across the road that it’s five or six other front doors looking dead at you” (129).

People in South Georgia continue to look to the Florida city. Jacksonville International Airport provides them contact with the world beyond, and, when they need medical attention for cancer or advanced vascular disease, they often find it in the hospitals on the St. Johns River.

Georgia and Florida have been connected in Jacksonville in other ways, but none is as spectacular as the annual meeting of the football teams of the University of Georgia and the University of Florida. The game has been held in Jacksonville every year since 1933, save 1994 and ’95, while Alltel Stadium was under construction.

But it is not athletics that make the event remarkable; it’s the weekend’s reputation as “The World’s Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party.” Throughout the last Friday in October, red flags with black “G”s flutter from several thousand cars, SUVs, and pickups heading south down Interstate 95. By evening, motor homes, many of them painted red and black, cram the parking lots around the stadium. Nearby, enterprising concessionaires hawk food, beer, and entertainment under tents and from the windows of trucks and trailers.
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Buses unload the Redcoat Marching Band into the lobby of a hotel. The musicians drop their luggage into their rooms and scurry to The Jacksonville Landing, just a few blocks upstream from ancient Cow Ford, to join the revelers in screams of “Hunker Down, Hairry Dawg” while blue-and-orange-clad Gator fans jostle for space in the crowded streets and plazas.

By game time on Saturday, most of the fans are bleary-eyed and hoarse, lining the streets around the stadium for a glimpse of the arriving teams and screaming encouragement to their champions and obscenities to the rivals. Then 80,000 of them will file past turnstiles and ticket-takers and cover the teal seats with orange and blue or red and black and continue their bacchanalia until the last whistle has blown.

Loosing the rope of his boat from the wharf, Bartram hoists his sail and glides out into water that has flowed 310 miles from Lake Hell ‘n Blazes. He would cover all but the upper seventy-five of those miles.

A greener, more placid world reflects on the water of the St. Johns upstream of Jacksonville. Yet, for its beauty, it is hardly the land Bartram knew. Forests of “majestic Live Oaks, glorious Magnolias and the fragrant Orange” remain only in scattered trees shading luxury houses. “The rustling clouds of Ephemera” (mayflies) dodge speeding wave runners (Travels 81).

Some thirty-five miles up the river, Green Cove Springs spreads along a low bluff in a bend of the western shore. U.S. Highway 17 follows Palmetto Avenue past banks, shops, and fast-food restaurants in this town of 5,300 people.

I first heard of Green Cove Springs when my father decided to take a leisurely drive home from a vacation in Tampa in the ’50s. “Let’s go to St. Augustine,” he said. “And we can go through Green Cove Springs. That’s where my ship is in mothballs.”

We drove to the port where the Navy had constructed thirteen piers. There, behind tall, chain-link fences lay a rusting flotilla of gray warriors, some 600 ships awaiting the acetylene torches of scrap cutters. Most of these ships had been built between 1942 and 1945. They had ferried armies and war planes across two oceans. Men in blue denim had made their homes on these floating hulks and dodged bombs, torpedoes, and Kamikaze raids. Some of the ships had carried warriors to the beaches of Normandy. Others had steamed daringly close to Leyte and Iwo Jima. Then, in an instant, under the mushroom plume, they had become obsolete. Tug boats had guided them past Jacksonville and shoved them into their final berths.
“Do you see number 66?” asked my mother. Her fly-paper memory retained the number of Dad’s ship.

“The Enright was a small one. A destroyer escort. It’ll be hard to see her,” said my father.

The little ship was hidden somewhere in the jungle of bobbing antennae. We never saw her, perhaps Ecuador had already bought the Enright and named her “Veinticinco De Julio.”

The home of the “mothball fleet” has become Clay County Port and Reynolds Industrial Park, a 1,500-acre manufacturing mecca sprawled around the Navy piers and airstrip.

Ghosts of two renowned, creative men may haunt the shore across the river from the naval graveyard. Though they lived in different centuries, they share characters and histories. Both spent their youths in agonizing quests for their vocations. Their fathers set them up in businesses for which they had no heart. And they disappointed the old men. Neither succeeded in agriculture along the St. Johns, but the voices and views of Florida stirred them. In their individual, romantic ways, they drew power from the river and the trees, flowers, and people who inhabit it. Both are remembered for their portraits of its beauty and mystery. William Bartram described the river and its life in lyric prose, Frederick “Fritz” Delius in orchestral music.

William and John Bartram were wrapping up their exploration of the wild country upriver in 1765. Over the previous decade, William had listened to the counsel of his father. He had tried to establish himself in a suitable trade but had only succeeded in leaving a stack of debts in North Carolina. Then, dejected and dazed, he joined his father for an expedition into Florida. What would he do now that the expedition was coming to an end? He liked to draw animals and plants. He had learned a great deal about both from his father. But how could he make a living by drawing sparrows, turtles, and lantana? And was drawing a “vocation”?

Maybe farming was for him. The British Crown had just acquired Florida from the Spanish. Land grants would be easy to get for a man whose family was well-connected. Farming would be hard work, but he had worked in his father’s gardens and fields at Kingsessing. And planting would put him near the land, in touch with the leaves and the flowers he loved.

“I’ll come back here,” William had told his father as they passed the old fort at Picolata. “I’ll plant on some acres beside the river. Indigo. There’s a market for the dye. And I can ship down the river and send my indigo to England.”

The elder Bartram made the arrangements. With the help of Henry Laurens of Charleston, they obtained the land and bought slaves, seed, and tools. Then, in the summer of 1766, less than a year later, excessive rain ruined his garden.
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and his health and crops failed. Laurens helped him pack out and return to his despairing father in Philadelphia. An experienced coastal planter, Laurens said Bartram's land was bad. "The house, or rather hovel, that he lives in, is extremely confined, not proof against the weather," he said (Slaughter 159). Laurens also judged the swamp and marsh too narrow, the environment unhealthy, and the slaves unskilled and lazy.

More than a century later, Fritz Delius followed a similar path. While his experience was not as disastrous as Bartram's, he hardly succeeded in agriculture. Born in Yorkshire, England, the son of a wealthy wool merchant, he neglected his wool business. His father, frustrated with Frederick's ineptitude in merchandising, sent him to manage his orange plantation at Solano Grove. The young man arrived on the banks of the St. Johns, about five miles south of Bartram's plantation, in 1884 and moved into a little Cracker cottage. But his heart was not in orange production. He dreamed of music. The natural beauty of Florida engrossed him. So did the rich, harmonic vocal improvisations of the local blacks. He bought a piano, studied with an organist in Jacksonville, and absorbed himself in music, neglecting his father's business.

In 1885, he wrote the first draft of "Appalachia," a musical reflection of his experiences in Florida. The tone paintings, named for the old Native American word for North America, wrap variations on an old African American song in the natural subtropical splendor of the Deep South. "Dixie," "Yankee Doodle," and society waltzes find their places in his composition, alongside a twilight song of former slaves on the plantation. He left Florida that same year, but the St. Johns was embedded in his soul as he studied with Edvard Grieg in Leipzig and drafted the "Florida Suite" in 1887. The suite paints a musical day at Solano Grove: bird calls, flowing water, songs of men born in slavery and emancipated a bit more than two decades earlier.

Delius went on to compose in Europe. His works cover not only the placid, romantic scenes of Florida but also the turmoil of a continent at war. He died in 1934. His cottage has been moved to the campus of Jacksonville University. Oaks, palmettos, and the remnants of a few orange trees shade a bronze plaque on a coquina stone monument at the site of Solano Grove.

County Road 13 runs south out of Jacksonville about a mile east of Delius's grove. Now known as "The Bartram Scenic Highway," it begins in the suburbs as a four-lane boulevard. At Switzerland, near the site of a plantation where Bartram overnighted, it becomes a two-lane road shaded by gigantic oaks and black gums. Looking through the trees and palmettos, a driver catches an occasional glimpse of reflections on the river. Large houses, many under construction, intrude upon the view. Boats hang suspended from hoists at the end of long piers that point
into the river from manicured lawns. Farther south, beyond Picolata, prestigious houses are fewer. Boats on trailers rest on St. Augustine grass lawns beside one-story homes and RVs jam the grounds of fishing camps.

Seminole Electric’s power plant dominates the skyline. Smoke from coal fires sends clouds from a 675-foot stack. Two cone-shaped cooling towers, rising 450 feet above the flat plain along the river, throw steam into the air. Cables transmit electricity to homes, businesses, and factories. This is the heart of the grid for about ten percent of Florida’s power consumers.

Potatoes rule a five mile strip stretching along the east bank of the river from Federal Point to Hastings. By January, men on tractors have plowed, disked, and planted 18,000 acres of gray-beige loamy soil with russet potatoes. Most of the crop will become potato chips, some of them processed and bagged in a factory beside Highway 207 and called “Bull Chips.” An additional 17,000 acres of the loose ground is planted for onions and cabbage.

East of Hastings, a yellow crop duster soars over high-tension power lines and dips low, laying out a chartreuse cloud of poison, then roars back over trees, circles, drops again toward the field, and ejects another short burst of pesticide.

Hastings is the remnant of an old Florida town, the kind that fared better and looked sharper in the 1950s. Many of its faded flat-roofed buildings, paint peeling from their stucco walls, are abandoned, their windows boarded. The potato salad days of the village are decades past. What remains is a hardware store, a deli, a Dollar General, and a Tractor Supply store, along with the First Baptist Church and a couple of convenience stores.

Palatka, across the river, has fared better, but not much. Florida’s tourism and industrial booms have passed it by. Its days of wealth, when steamboats from upriver met seagoing schooners at its docks, have drifted into a lazy, comfortable life that is just beginning to give way to modern development. Shells of large hotels and other stately buildings stand along the streets near the waterfront.

Colorfully painted two-story houses look out across a public boat launch and the mile-wide sparkling river. The Presbyterian church, organized in 1856, provides a graceful air of permanence. A brick street runs between it and a well-maintained riverside park. Near this spot, Bartram sailed up to “an Indian settlement, or village” of “eight or ten habitations, in a row, or street, fronting the water.” He watched naked youngsters, “up to their hips in the water, fishing with rods and lines, whilst others, younger, were diverting themselves in shooting frogs with bows and arrows.” Women hoed corn and “elderly people reclined on skins spread on the ground, under the cool shade of spreading Oaks and Palms.” The Indians grew corn, sweet potatoes, peas, squash, melons, and tobacco on several hundred acres of cleared land near a well-husband orange grove. (Travels 92)
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On a hill overlooking a broad cove, like the site of the Indians' groves, the Florida Furniture plant has gone out of business. Its forlorn brick building sits on the spot where the Wilson Cypress Company once milled millions of board feet of cypress for export to the North. When the cypress forest had been decimated, Wilson, like Florida Furniture, folded its tents.

Such fickle winds of fortune have turned downtown Palatka into a relic of finer days, a zone to be passed through on the way to the suburban commercial strip. Two men and a woman, dressed in thrift-shop clothes, wait for a bus on a bench in front of deserted stores, a tattoo gallery, and a loan office. Grass grows through cracks in the sidewalk outside a boarded-up red brick building, the quintessential Coca-Cola bottling plant of the 1950s.

Downtown is a candidate for redevelopment, for antique shops and other tourist-beckoning businesses, like those found along the restored main street of nearby DeLand. And local leaders are pushing to establish a riverboat, a floating entertainment center. But Palatka's second coming has yet to happen.

Still, there is Angel's, Florida's oldest diner, set in a refurbished railroad dining car on the main thoroughfare in 1932. Don and Carla Aycock, my students in their college days who live on the outskirts of Palatka, take me there one morning during a visit. The décor is 1950s. Forty-five-RPM records hang on the walls below the ceiling, recalling those sacred moments of the Eisenhower era "when things were good, before the hippies and Rock n' Roll turned America upside down." Families eat here alongside couples who arrive on motorcycles and wear black Harley-Davidson T-shirts.

The pancakes I order are light and fluffy, but Carla says that the sausage gravy that soaks her biscuits is from a can.

"At least we know they're not made with the same grease they used in 1932," says Don, reflecting a local joke.

Angel's is one of those places where campaigning politicians stop to meet the locals and solicit votes and where news reporters come to interview folks about their takes on the politicians. Fortunately, neither the politicians nor the reporters are here during our breakfast.

Across the street stands the Larimer Arts Center, formerly a library. The quotations engraved in the cornices above the second-story windows ("Ignorance Breeds Crime" and "Knowledge is Power") lead me to wonder what was going on in Palatka in the days when the city's leaders chose those slogans.

Palatka's past includes two American legends. Around 1940, in his waning years, Babe Ruth instructed baseball players here. More recently, in the early '50s, a young preacher stood in the pulpit of the Peniel Baptist Church, on the southern end of town, near the place where Bartram had made his base at
Spalding and Kelsall's Lower Store. While a devout Christian, Billy Graham, his hosts learned, had never been baptized. Peniel's members took care of that. They baptized and ordained Graham and, thus, found their place in the history of American religion.

Out on State Highway 19, Palatka follows the trend of urban sprawl and the demise of locally owned businesses. Chains and franchises line the four-lane road: a Wal-Mart Supercenter, a Pizza Hut, and a Rex Video stand just around the corner from the K-Mart, Publix, and Chili's.

While the cypress cutters and many manufacturers have folded, Georgia-Pacific, which makes paper and plywood in massive plants near Palatka, is the economic engine of Putnam County. Almost two out of ten of the county's workers draw their paychecks from these operations. The industries, particularly the paper mill, are not without their issues, however. Paper manufacturing uses abundant quantities of water and, if the process is not carefully controlled, dumps toxic stuff into the streams. Under environmental scrutiny, Georgia-Pacific has introduced technology to reduce both its use of ground water and its emissions.

After a couple of weeks in and around Palatka, I've come to think of this region as "the last of old Florida." Other Floridas have developed and taken the spotlight: the retirement meccas of Miami, St. Petersburg, and West Palm Beach; the fun-and-sun destinations like Orlando, Fort Lauderdale, or Key West; and the commercial powerhouses Tampa and Jacksonville. Palatka, on the other hand, is a twenty-first-century version of the Florida first populated and developed by Europeans. Surrounded by forests, farms, groves, and swamps, its people are largely blue-collar and its businesses, until a few years ago, small and hometown owned.

Palatka balances on the edge of change, about to be wrapped in the expanding culture of Jacksonville and the McWorld of international corporations and franchises. Rumors of more large chains—Home Depot, Lowe's, and others—coming to Palatka have stirred hope, fear, and resentment. Those who have dominated the commerce of the town see a threat. So do those who value local ownership and the service it brings. Others think that the newcomers will buoy the economy and open the way for improvements of the town's life. In late 2002, the Palatka Daily News ran a series of editorials urging "balance" and "planning for growth." Cooperation of city and county governments in infrastructure planning headed the editor's agenda, followed by the need for improved and expanded water and sewer systems, highways, and schools.

Bartram came to Spalding and Kelsall's when the European cash and credit economy was beginning to touch the peninsula. From these beginnings grew
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the industries of citrus, timber, and tourism. The town’s fortunes rose and fell like waves from the wake of a passing barge. Railroads replaced steamboats; frosts killed the groves; forests had no more to give. Now, almost inevitably and despite local opposition, an old, locally controlled economy is about to end in the multinationalizing of yet another community.

Bartram’s journey into Florida was only beginning when he left the Lower Store a few miles south of downtown Palatka. Ahead were battles with alligators, fierce storms, and a wolf that raided his breakfast. He would make camp in a graveyard, marvel over a monumental Indian mound, and spend days in an “Elysian field.”
rise early, pour a cup of coffee and stand by the glass doors that look across Don and Carla’s back lawn. Wind whips the beards of Spanish moss on the oaks out by the lake. Carla has set out a variety of cereals and some juices and is walking on her treadmill. Don looks up from his computer in the sun porch beside the kitchen, sees my long-handle shirt and grins. “Polypro underwear? This is Florida, man.”

“Hey,” I reply, “have you looked at the thermometer this morning? It says thirty degrees. Want to come along?”

“I think I’ll leave the shivering on the river to you,” he answers as he steps from his study, pours a cup of coffee, and sits at the dining table. “I’m finishing a book. Hardest part, finishing. Except for starting.”

Don and Carla are among the few old friends I have kept up with along my wandering career path. They were among the best students I taught at Louisiana College. When Don launched his Ph.D. trek and I moved to Tennessee, we had to work to stay in touch. Don is a theologian, writer, and pastor, Carla a teacher of math. Fortunately for me, they now live four miles from Stokes Landing (Bartram’s base at Spalding and Kelsall’s Lower Store) and generously opened their home to me for a couple of long periods of research.

I gather my lunch, thermos, and jacket, pull on a black watch cap, and leave Don to his book. I still have time to swing into Palatka’s new Wal-Mart Supercenter and pick up some gloves before I meet David Girardin.

By the time I arrive at the boat ramp, the motor vessel Welaka, tied to a dock, bobs on the wind-driven waves. Black lettering on her aluminum hull declares: “St. Johns River Water Management District.”
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A slender man dressed in jeans and a jacket and wearing a baseball cap steps over the gunwale and walks up the pier.

"David Girardin," he says, grasping my hand. "It's good finally to meet you."

"The face behind the e-mails," I say. "Thanks for taking me along."

He carries my dry bag down the pier while I pull on insulated boots and gather the rest of my gear. The sun is already warming the enclosed cabin of the boat as David spreads aerial photographs and maps on the table that he and his colleagues normally use for bottling and treating samples of water, plants, and mollusks from the river on their regular surveillance trips. He points out the sites I'd told him I wanted to see, places Bartram described that are hard to reach by land.

"Where is Wilson's Cove?" I ask, recalling what I'd read about the Wilson Cypress Company. He turns the boat south and points to a vine-covered jetty that runs into the river from the west bank.

"Under that water are the ruins of barges and work boats. Snags everywhere. We stay out of that area."

"Hold on," he says, turning the wheel toward the river channel, "I'm going to kick it into high."

We speed across a mile of water, into the river that flows westward toward Palatka in a sweeping curve. I look toward the bank at the wooden steps that lead to the Burger King. Bartram coasted his boat past this place. About a mile upstream, across from Devil's Elbow, he furled his sail, anchored, and climbed the bluff to visit the rotted Utopia of Charlottia.

Charlottia, or Rollestown, was the 1767 venture of Denys Rolle, a wealthy member of parliament. His dream: load a ship with hookers, pickpockets, and paupers from the streets of London, give them plows, sacks of seeds, and tracts to clear on his 80,000 palmetto-choked land grant on the St. John's bluffs, and they will become model citizens. Productive. Responsible. Paying back their debts. By August of 1768, his indigo and cotton "farmers" had instead run off to St. Augustine. In Bartram's words,

from an ill-concealed plan, in its infant establishment, negligence, or extreme parsimony, in sending proper recruits, and other necessaries, together with a bad choice of citizens, the settlement by degrees grew weaker, and at length totally fell to the ground. Those of them who escaped the constant contagious fevers, fled the dreaded place, betaking themselves for subsistence, to the more fruitful and populous regions of Georgia and Carolina.

He found most of the buildings in ruins. "The remaining old habitations," he wrote, "are mouldering to earth except the mansion house, which is a large frame
building, of Cypress wood, yet in tolerable repair, and inhabited by an overseer and his family” (*Travels* 94).

Rollestown survived a while longer, powered by slaves. Rolle was selling chickens, goats, and cattle and sending indigo, cotton, and turpentine to England. Then, when England gave Florida over to the Spanish in 1783, Rolle left for the Bahamas.

Today a small power plant dominates the bleak, colorless area with its overgrown roadside park and a historical marker that mentions Rollestown. I wonder how long it has been since this spot showed any natural beauty.

Down the highway, the Burger King thrives. It boasts of being the only fast food restaurant on the water. Only its location is unique; a Whopper in Rollestown is identical to a Whopper in Atlanta or Baltimore.

Farther south, the wake of our boat washes the bulkheads of large houses on the bluffs. Then, just as I become accustomed to the ride, David cuts the engine and turns left toward a small new pier beside a wooded bank. The site is remarkably undeveloped.

“This is Murphy’s Island,” he tells me.

“And there are no houses?”

“The Water Management District bought the island several years ago.” I recall that Bill Belleville in his book *River of Lakes* says that the St. Johns may be one of the most protected rivers in Florida. About fifty thousand acres of state parks, forests and reserves surround it.

We walk along mowed pathways past a large, rusting steel boom lying in the brush beside the river. The shells from an ancient midden crunch beneath my boots. Here the Water Management District maintains a small campground. It is a quiet, hospitable place with no trash on the ground.

“Why was it you wanted to come here?” asks David.

“Before he left for Florida, Bartram had shipped a chest of his belongings to Spalding’s Lower Store, over at Stokes Landing. The traders were keeping it for him, waiting for his arrival. But just before he left Georgia, the government did something to aggravate the Indians,” I said as we walked past the fire pit in the campground. “The traders brought all their valuables, including Bartram’s box, to Murphy’s Island and buried them. When he arrived in Florida, the turmoil had subsided and Bartram came over here to retrieve his goods.”

“It’s still a refuge,” David says as we return to the pier.

A bald eagle, his head still brown with juvenile plumage, soars over the bow as we continue upstream toward the low drawbridge that spans the river at Buffalo Bluff. David twists the dial on his radio, picks up his microphone, and speaks a few words to the bridge tender. The tender has already seen us; by the
time David puts down the microphone, the span is beginning to rise. We pass beneath the Southern Coast Line rails and head toward Stokes Landing.

Located on a rare strip of dry ground on the west bank of the river, Spalding and Kelsall's Lower Store was an outpost of Colonial entrepreneurs in the 1770s. The company ran packet boats to and from Savannah and Sunbury to this post where Seminoles traded skins for guns, whisky, and cloth.

It was here that Bartram watched a war party of Seminoles take a little R and R from their attacks on the Choctaws. The Indians camped outside the “pallisadoes” of the trading post. Over several days, they and the traders consumed most of twenty kegs—about a hundred gallons—of rum while a bevy of mischievous Indian women “without distinction” tricked them into repurchasing their own booze. Bartram calls the event “one of the most ludicrous bacchanalian scenes that is possible to be conceived” (Travels 255-63).

The landing is quieter today. Groves of oaks shade a small house with a rusting metal roof. Grass and weeds grow among the buildings of a deserted shipyard. In the glassy green water of the harbor, the unfinished superstructure of a sixty-foot boat is rusting, its waterline covered with barnacles. Close to the bank, a small trawler rests on the mud of the river bottom, well on its way to joining the sunken debris of Spalding’s docks.

David turns the wheel, guns the engine, and we reenter the channel. The next stop on my map is Beecher Point, the “Mount Hope” of John and William Bartram. But first my pilot has other things to show me. He slows the boat to idle near the east bank and spreads plastic sacks of nuts and cut vegetables on the broad dashboard. “I snack all day. Used to eat whatever I wanted to, but now it’s these. Do you see all that growth jutting out into the water?” he asks, pointing to the edge of a shallow cove where steel rods rise a foot above the surface of the water. “Those vines are covering sunken barges from the cypress works.”

This is where the cypress lumber industry got its start late in the 1800s, says local historian Brian Michaels. The lumber companies used “pullobarts” to yank the timber out of the swamps. Cables on “donkeys,” steam engine–powered winches, pulled the timber to the river. Some of the cables were a mile long. Crews lived on houseboats—one for the superintendent and his family, one for white crewmen, and another for black workers.

They floated rafts of logs down the river, connected them, and towed them to the mill in Palatka. The rafts reaching the mill were more than 150 feet long. At their peak in 1913, the operations brought in over a billion board feet of lumber.

Some of those trees had been growing a thousand years when Bartram saw them. Norman Moody told me of seeing cypress stumps in the swamps that measured over twelve feet across.
“They girdled the trees,” he said. “Then they’d come back in about a year, after the trees died and dried out, and cut them. If they didn’t do that,” he said, “the trees wouldn’t float.”

And when they had cut all the big trees, they left their equipment and barges to rot on the river banks. The cypress trees are slowly growing back, spreading their feathery crowns above the wetlands of the St. Johns basin.

Somewhere beneath us, in the channel, the ruins of the USS Columbine lie buried in the mud. On the night of May 23, 1864, Captain J. J. Dickison’s Confederate cavalry landed a shot squarely on the helm of the Columbine, a Union tugboat, then burned it to the water line.

We make another unscheduled stop. David slows the engine and turns into an inlet along the east bank. “This is Welaka Springs,” he says as we move at idle speed until our bow rests among the roots of palmettos and vines that cling to the sandy banks. Eight gallons of water push up every second from an opening four feet beneath the surface. That’s enough to flush a toilet and have enough left over to wash your hands. Although Silver Springs runs eight hundred times faster, Welaka Springs is a reminder that five dozen major springs and countless other smaller ones pour water from the depths of the earth into the St. Johns.

When I drive to the town of Welaka the next day, I find a village resting quietly under shady oaks on a bluff about ten feet above the river’s surface. A convenience store is the busiest of the handful of shops spaced lazily along a score of streets. A cafe, pharmacy, and small pizzeria share the town with a boat dealer, hair salon, and funeral home. Baptists have two churches here; Methodists have one.

Since 1900, Welaka Landing Boat Shop has worked on wooden boats along the street that tops the river bluff. The twelve-foot wood and glass doors of the shop are open. Looking through them I can see the blue and silver surface of the river beyond the glass wall on the other end of the building. A breeze off the river carries the aroma of glue, shellac, and paint into the street.

Inside the work area jammed with boats in various states of repair, a shipwright brushes white paint on the hull of a 1950-model Chris-Craft. Keel-up on sawhorses stands a launch built in the 1920s, its firm, dark-brown wooden ribs exposed as a craftsman fits planks on its hull. Despite the sawdust covering of the floor and the crowding of several boats into the work room, the whole operation has an air of class and careful workmanship. Bartram found no such professional help when storms pummeled his boat along the St. Johns. Plantation workers repaired it for him.

From Welaka, David turns the boat to cross the river under the watchful eyes of soaring ospreys. These hawks build their nests not only in the bare limbs of tall trees but also on almost every channel marker along this stretch of the river.
“Do you want to go up the Ocklawaha?” David asked.

“Wouldn’t miss it!”

At the mouth of the river, we idle into a world of green, brown, and blue. Moss-draped oaks, black gums, and a few small cypresses reflect on water the color of dark German beer. Two anhingas, “snake birds,” perched on bare, low branches guard the mouth of the river that Bartram called “Ockli-Waha Great River” (Travels 182). A bald eagle soars, and a juvenile little blue heron, white with a small blue patch, stands on a raft of water lilies beside the bank, ignoring us as we glide past.

We cross to Beecher Point, “Mount Hope” to John and William Bartram. When the father and son traveled up the river in 1765, an orange grove covered the point. Nine years later, when William returned, the grove was cleared, the land planted in indigo.

Leisure living has usurped agriculture. A large sign on a pier reads, “River Bend Villas.” Two- and three-story beige stucco buildings surround a lawn with palm trees and a swimming pool.

I returned to Beecher Point on a Tuesday in April and found a handful of cars in the parking lots. A silver-haired woman lies on a lounge chair beside the pool. On the pier, a retired couple loads an ice chest and fishing rods onto their pontoon boat.

“Do you live here year round?” I ask.

“Oh, no. We’re from Ohio,” answers the lady, a smile on her tanned face.

“We come here in January. Next week, we’re going home.”

They tell me that they own one of the sixty-two units in the complex and that a boat slip comes with each unit.

“Most of the people are snowbirds,” says the man as he loosens a yellow nylon rope from the cleat on the dock. “It’s pretty busy on weekends and between Thanksgiving and March. Most of us are from Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio,” he says. “We rent out the condo in the summer. They do a good job of keeping the place up. We get lots of renters in the summer.”

On the road to the point, a block from the resort, a realtor is selling five lots, unimproved, with waterfront access to Mud Creek Cove. The smallest of the lots is 100 feet by 930 feet. That’s one-fifth of an acre. And it costs $140,000. The largest, a bit more than a quarter-acre, is listed at $200,000. Orange growers and indigo farmers need not apply.

We cruise through Little Lake George and slow at a point by Fruitland Cove. John and William Bartram, who knew this place as Mount Royal, dodged a large rattlesnake sunning itself and walked to a mound here. Judging by the large live oaks rooted in it, John concluded that the mound was “very ancient.” Bones were scattered on its surface.
What the Bartrams could not have seen without shoveling away layers of yellow and red sand were the exquisite square sheets of copper, one of them eleven inches square and decorated with geometric designs, buried in the mound. As scientists, they would have wondered where they came from. Were they beaten and decorated here at Mount Royal or carried from Ohio or North Georgia? Nor did they know of the abundance of polished stone chisels, axes, and celts that lay in red ochre-colored layers throughout the mound, remnants of the powerful Timucuan people who once controlled most of Florida. Clarence B. Moore, also a Philadelphian, discovered these artifacts during the winter and spring of 1893.

Moore’s published report, quoted by Jerald T. Milanich (Famous Florida Sites: Mount Royal and Crystal River), brings shudders to modern archaeologists: “Where these mounds [across Florida] have not been leveled to the base, the fault has not been ours” (2). A twenty-first-century archaeologist would dig sparingly, sampling the site by digging small square pits and trenches and leaving large portions of it for future excavators with better techniques and would publish a record that would allow a virtual reconstruction of the mound.

Moore steamed away on his rented boat, carrying with him museum-quality artifacts and leaving a shredded mound. When he and later archaeologists pieced together their findings, they concluded that Mount Royal thrived as a major capital and ritual site of the Timucuans from around AD 1050 to 1300. Kings or lords ruled the Timucuans. Ruling families buried deceased family members in the mound, layering it ever upward.

In 1973, the mound was placed on the National Register of Historic Places, and the State of Florida bought the acre of land where it rests. Eight years later, the U.S. Department of the Interior gave $10,000 to fence off the tract and the owner restored its height and contours.

Beside the mound, a pale blue, mildew-covered, plywood lean-to shades a display. Glass panes, smeared with the droppings of insects, shield faded photographs and yellowed typewritten sheets that describe the mound and the ancients who built it.

Northward from the mound, the Bartrams saw a “fine straight avenue,” sixty yards broad, leading to a pond about a mile away. William describes a great orange grove: “The glittering water pond, plays on the sight, through the dark grove, like a brilliant diamond.” When he returned in 1774, the grove was gone. A planter had cleared it for indigo, corn, and cotton, then left. “It appeared like a desert, to a great extent, and terminated, on the land side, by frightful thickets, and open Pine forests” (Travels 100).

Across America, over generations, the practice of exploiting land has persisted. Even after we have filled most corners of our continent, many
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Americans continue to think of the land as expendable and their abuse of it as inconsequential. Why else dump our dung and insecticides into the streams, throw trash along our streets, and scalp mountain tops?

On his night at Mount Royal, Bartram fell asleep thinking of the custom of using land without regard for its long-term well-being. And, as the sun rose and the animal world awoke, he prayed an eloquent expression of spiritual sensitivity to man’s role in the earth:

My heart and voice unite with yours, in sincere homage to the great Creator, the universal sovereign . . . O universal Father! Look down upon us we beseech thee, with an eye of pity and compassion, and grant that universal peace and love, may prevail in the earth, even that divine harmony, which fills the heavens, thy glorious habitation.

And O sovereign Lord! Since it has pleased thee to endue man with power, and pre-eminence, here on earth, and establish his dominion over all creatures, may we look up to thee, that our understanding may be so illuminated with wisdom and our hearts warmed and animated, with a due sense of charity, that we may be enabled to do thy will and perform our duty towards those submitted to our service, and protection, and be merciful to them even as we hope for mercy. (Travels 101)

Daybreak had worked its magic on Bartram. “Dawn and sunset,” writes Father Thomas Berry, “are the mystical moments of the diurnal cycle, the moments with the numinous dimension of the universe reveals itself with special intimacy” (18). To Bartram, however, the revelation brought more than a sense of the holy. Environmental morality, the interaction of man and Earth, under the watchful eye of the Creator, became clear to him.

Mount Royal did not remain a “desart.” Today manicured lawns surround houses that sell for as much as a million dollars in the Mount Royal Air Park subdivision. A grass air strip runs directly across the Timucuan “fine straight avenue.” A resident piloting his light plane may glide over the oaks and palms, activate runway lights, land, and taxi down William Bartram Drive to the driveway of his home. Signs on Indian Mound Road at the entrance of the subdivision notify newcomers: “Airplanes have the right-of-way from this point.”

America has treated the temples of Timucuans, Creeks, and Cherokees as shelves of a supercenter. If you can afford it, buy it, use it, and dispose of it. An example, from another ceremonial site visited by Bartram, is the struggle at the Ocmulgee National Monument. Over the past decade, a debate over land sacred
to the Creeks has raged in Macon, Georgia. At issue is a set of eight mounds on a plateau beside the Ocmulgee River and in a wetland below it.

Bartram writes of the mounds as “the famous Oakmulge fields, where are yet conspicuous very wonderful remains of the power and grandeur of the ancients of this part of America, in the ruins of a capital town and settlement, as vast artificial hills, terraces” (Travels 381).

In 1936, Congress authorized two thousand acres to be set aside to create Ocmulgee National Monument. Local citizens raised funds to purchase several hundred acres. Today, the park consists of 702 acres surrounding seven earthen ceremonial mounds. Beneath its soil lie artifacts of several cultures ranging from nomadic tribes to agrarian Mississippian. A wide variety of plant and wildlife species, including black bears, alligators, bobcats, and wood storks, make their homes here. Migrating birds find refuge within its trees and swamps.

Excavations on the area known as The Macon Plateau, conducted in the 1930s as a public works project, uncovered plowed fields, house remains, and burials in some of the mounds. Following the dig, the mounds were restored, along with an earth lodge that the archaeologists had discovered. In 1999, the federal government declared the area a “Traditional Cultural Property.”

To the Muscogees (Creeks), the land was more than property. So important to them was this place that, when they ceded all their lands east of the Ocmulgee in the Treaty of 1805, they negotiated with the government that they could keep a fifteen-square-mile pocket that included the mounds on the Macon Plateau and the nearby Lamar sites. Their intention was to preserve their sacred land so that they might return to it for ceremonies.

Events and politics over the following decades prevented their return, however. In the years following their cession, the Indians, who had sided with the British during the Revolution, found themselves unwelcome in a land now filled with farmers and planters. Still, the Muscogees hold spiritual ties to this tract that they consider their spiritual birthplace, a kind of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, or Mecca of the Creeks.

Most religions hold to sacred spaces—a hill in Jerusalem, a mountain in Tibet, Sipapu holes in kivas in New Mexico. Mainstream American traditions, however, tend to ignore sacred space. Moving about has been our history and way of life. We leave behind the turf that meant something to us and establish—reinvent—ourselves all over again. Plymouth Rock may be the nearest place Americans hold as sacred, and, perhaps, the site of the World Trade Center will assume this role for a generation of Americans. Generally, however, the concept of sacred space is lost on us.
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It certainly was lost on a civic leader of Macon when he told me, concerning the Ocmulgee Mounds, "There are mounds on every creek in Georgia. We can't hold up progress because somebody thinks a mound is important."

He was talking about the plan to build a highway across the wetlands between the Macon Plateau mounds and the Lamar Mounds, a couple of miles east. The road would gouge the land the government promised the Creeks in the treaty. At issue is the Fall Line Freeway, designed to connect Augusta, Macon and Columbus—cities built at the rocky shoals of the Savannah, Ocmulgee, and Chattahoochee rivers, roughly Bartram's route along the Creek trading path.

The freeway is not the first threat to the site. In the 1840s, a railroad line sliced through a burial mound. Out of sight behind the trees on the southwestern edge of the park, truck engines roar down Interstate 16, the freeway cut through the park in 1960. Now, the State Department of Transportation is examining the impacts of the proposed route and several alternatives, but Macon's business community holds tight to the desire to bring the road into the city at a location that, it says, will best serve its financial interests. So intense has been their push for the highway that the National Parks Conservation Association named Ocmulgee among "America's Ten Most Endangered National Parks in 2003."

Bandelier, Mesa Verde, Montezuma's Well, and scores of other places holy to the peoples of the Southwest benefit from federal protection, largely due to the continuous presence of tribes who are heirs to the people who built them. But most sacred spaces of the displaced eastern tribes have suffered under the onslaught of development.

David noses the Wealaka south, into the current. About a mile up river, Lake George opens before us, six miles wide, fourteen miles long, covering 46,000 acres. Bartram called it a "little ocean," so large and awesome when beaten by a wind that he says that his boat was "at once diminished to a nut-shell, on the swelling seas . . ." (Travels 101). From Georgetown, at the northeastern edge of the lake, David and I can see only a shadowy blue mirage of the trees, Bartram's "misty fringed horizon," on the southern shoreline.

Georgetown displays a contrast to the affluence of the Mount Royal Air Park. Neat, small houses nestle beneath oak trees along short roads leading from the highway to the edge of the river. Rusting mobile homes sit on cluttered lots around the Drayton Island Ferry slip. Small boats nuzzle a muddy, overgrown bank lined with old, wooden boathouses and wharves near Porky's Marina and Restaurant. Along the roads that lead in and out of the town, billboards and signs advertise marinas: Lunker Lodge, Bass World, Anglers' Paradise. The names are more reminiscent than descriptive; the St. Johns has lost much of its glory as the
bass capital of the world due to lower water quality. Still, it’s a pleasant place to launch a boat and angle for the fish that remain.

A ferry runs between Georgetown and Drayton Island, but Herb Hiller, one of the handful who live on the island, usually visits the mainland in his own boat. On an April morning months after my trip with David, when storm clouds threaten, Herb meets me at Stillwater Basin, a serene little community where small boats berth in slips covered by a galvanized steel roof. Skillfully, he pilots his broad-beamed fiberglass Carolina Skiff, capable of carrying large loads of vegetables, cheese, and staples, through dark swells and whitecaps and guides us to his pier that extends more than a hundred yards into the lake.

Herb is a writer and editor, publishing regularly in travel magazines. A few years ago, he wrote, “Cruising [the St. Johns] river you’re back beyond brochure-slick Florida. You’re in Florida 125 years ago, before the coastal railroads, before the resorts, before the theme parks and billboards.”

A decade or more ago, Herb was researching bed and breakfast inns in Florida and booked a room in an antebellum inn on Drayton. “The woman who ran the inn was about to put it on the market. So I bought it and moved here from Miami.” We are walking through a small orange grove, toward a tree-shaded lane that leads from the house to the single road that winds along the spine of the island. “I like it here because it is quiet. So quiet.” His voice, soft and mellow, reflects the feeling he has for the place. The chirping of tree frogs and distant rolls of thunder are the only sounds beyond his words. Rain begins before we can return to his house. Large, scattered drops dampen our T-shirts. A thunder clap shakes the steps to the back porch as we climb them, and the rain begins in earnest.

At lunch, before our walk, we had sat around a low table on the screened veranda eating the rich whole wheat sourdough bread that Herb had baked that morning, slicing cheese and enjoying the salad that Herb’s wife Mary Lee had made from greens grown in the garden. As the wind churned the lake and bent the limbs of the sturdy oaks along the waterfront, Herb, Mary Lee, and neighbor Lisa Grant spun stories of life on the island.

Water. A boater, marooned overnight in the lake, clung to a channel marker, watching the eyes of a dozen curious alligators.

Wind and fire. On the morning of my visit, the wind had blown a limb from a tree. It fell across a power line. Sparks ignited the dry forest. “Did the fire department come over on the ferry?” I asked. “We are the fire department,” says Lisa. We have a pumper truck. My husband, a few neighbors, and I put out the fire.”

Serpents. No one can write of Bartram, who devotes more than a dozen pages to stories of the serpents he saw on his journeys, without a snake story.
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Lisa supplies one. “Last week,” she says, “we found a six-foot rattlesnake in the pump house. It was threatening Butch, our dog. We hated to kill it, but Butch is more important.”

The tales are told casually, with interest but no great excitement, as anecdotes of the routines of the life that a few folks have accepted on a remote island that Bartram called “Isle Edelano.” Then again, they could have been yarns to discourage invasion of the privacy the residents cherish.

Even with the careful guarding of Drayton, it is no longer the Edelano Bartram knew. When he camped here on his trip south with the traders, he found great trees and the mounds of ancient villages alongside the fields left vacant by the departing Indians years before his arrival. Lantana such as he saw still grows there, as do the yellow hibiscus he knew. And stately oaks still shade much of the island. But in the centuries between Bartram and Herb Hiller, citrus growers cut the forest and planted groves. Along the fringe of the island, black wooden posts rise above the waves of Lake George, remnants of long piers that once supported loads of fruit on their way to steamboats.

Nature has recycled the island twice: first, after the departure of the Indians, when Bartram saw it, and now, after the fall of the citrus industry.

On my cruise with David Girardin, we had skirted Drayton, passing along its southern tip heading for Rocky Point, across the river west of the island. David is a bit surprised at Bartram’s description: slabs of rock, “an aggregate composition or concrete of sand, shells and calcareous cement; of a dark grey or dusky colour . . . hard and firm enough for buildings . . ., ” that rose two to three feet above the surface (Travels 169).

“Very few rocks are found along the lower St. Johns,” he says. “And those are usually associated with springs.”

He nuzzles the bow close to what appears to be dark brown rock on the point and idles the engine. I grab a steel pipe and poke the hard surface. It crumbles.

“Peat,” says David.

Nowhere on Rocky Point did we find the “horizontal slabs or flat masses of rocks, rising out of the lake two or three feet above its surface.” Oral tradition along the lake says that the rock was mined for buildings. When, and by whom, the locals couldn’t say.

Lake George is fishing country. Though no longer in its glory, the Saint Johns continues to draw throngs of anglers. From the southern end of the lake comes one of Bartram’s big-fish stories.

On his southward trip, he and the traders he accompanied camped at Cedar Point, where the St. Johns flows into the big lake. Bartram had wandered into the forests to botanize. “On my return,” he writes, “I found some of my
companions fishing for trout [largemouth bass], round about the edges of the floating nymphaea."

"As the method of taking these fish is curious and singular, I shall just mention it," he continues. "Two people are in a little canoe, one sitting in the stern to steer, and the other near the bow, having a rod ten or twelve feet in length." Stout line tied to the end of the rod holds three hooks covered with deer hair and some feathers. The whole of the artificial bait was "nearly as large as one's fist." While the paddler keeps the boat near the shore, the angler in the bow shakes the bob near the floating weeds, dipping it to the surface now and then, "when the unfortunate cheated trout instantly springs from under the weeds, and seizes the supposed prey." These bass, says our explorer, "frequently weigh fifteen, twenty and thirty pounds, and are delicious food" (Travels 108-09).

In the annals of record keeping in Florida, no one has logged a bass larger than 17.27 pounds, although Frederick Friebel, fishing in Big Fish Lake in Pasco County in 1923 claimed to have landed one that weighed over 20 pounds. On the other hand, Bartram may have guessed high; he wasn't carrying scales when he saw the gigantic Florida bass.

What interests me more than the size of Bartram's fish, however, is the method he describes. On a hot July day in 1958, in the days before the Army Corps of Engineers cut a channel and drained the biodiverse wetland, Jack Martin took me fishing in one of the many streams of the Kissimmee River not far from Orlando. We slid his little aluminum boat from its trailer, attached a nine-and-one-half horsepower motor on its transom, and putted out to a narrow stream.

"Have you ever dibbled for bass?" asked Jack.

"Never heard of it," I replied.

"Well, watch me. Then I'll let you do it."

I sat in the stern, maneuvering a paddle, while Jack leaned over the bow of the boat, extending a twelve-foot-long fiberglass pole over the water. On the end of his short line dangled a fuzzy fly of deer hair and feathers, with a strip of pork rind hooked on for good measure. As I paddled, he shook the bait at the edge of the swamp grass. The water exploded. Jack lifted a one-pounder into the boat, grinned, then turned to repeat the action.

By noon, we had a stringer of bass. We stood on a rare high spot on the shore, opened a camp stove, and fried the fish, along with a mess of hush puppies.

"How'd you learn to dibble?" I asked.

"Been doin' it all my life," he answered.

Bartram doesn't say who invented dibbling, but the traders probably learned the method from the Indians and passed it along to the Crackers.
Footprints across the South

David and I don't cross the vastness of Lake George to visit the place of Bartram's fishermen. Instead, he turns the boat north, skirting Drayton Island along its western shore, and I sit back and enjoy the green landscapes and stately houses. By mid-afternoon, we are back at the Palatka boat ramp.

I had traveled key territory in the Bartram itinerary and had witnessed it from his point of view or at least from his physical angle, a boat on the river. The riverside suburbia, largely on the river's east bank, was hardly the Florida he described. Life within the river and in the skies above it struggles against the pressures of lower water quantity and quality and invasive species. Fortunately, on most of the west bank and south of Drayton, forests, preserved by the Ocala National Forest and the Water District, are in the process of restoring themselves to the diversity and tree mass of the 1770s.

“South of Lake George,” David tells me, “the river is different. Narrower, with less development.”

“And better fishing?” I ask.

“No guarantees.”

“I'll give it a try.”
great horned owl shares the campground with Don and me. It is only the owl and us. We're sitting on the screened porch of the one-room cabin we have rented in the Hontoon Island State Park, eating red beans and rice after a day of exploring and fishing along the St. Johns River; the owl is somewhere in a tree, calling to the full moon rising over Lake Beresford. His booming, throaty hoots resonate through the live oaks.

Don spikes a chunk of sausage and stops midway to his mouth. “Wasn't that totem an owl?” he asks, thinking of the two carved replicas we had seen at the ferry landing.

“The big one was. The smaller one was an otter,” I reply. We sit in silence and listen to the echo of the owl clan of the Timucua who once lived here and across the river on the mainland. At the river's edge of their main village, where we parked our cars, they set a wood-carved owl, a sacred billboard that told all who passed along the St. Johns, “We are the Owl People. This is our place.” The Timucua set up the totem more than five hundred years ago, before the Spanish and the French battered them with disease, war, and economic change. Before their remaining fragile families slipped into the mists of Florida's wetlands and forests.

By the time John and William Bartram passed this way, Timucuan palisades, huts, and hearths lay under the roots of saw palmettos. The bulging eyes of their totem peered up at the keel of the Philadelphia naturalists' boat from the mud of the river bottom and remained hidden until a dredge, making way for a marina, pulled up the carving in 1955.

Don and I have come to Hontoon to retreat into the solitude of forests of palms and oaks with twisted trunks and hanging moss. And to be on the river.
Footprints across the South

Early that morning we had driven from Palatka to Lake Beresford, Bartram’s “beautiful Long Lake” (*Travels* 144), just a river-bend away from Hontoon. We loaded food, cameras, and fishing tackle into a rented boat at a marina on the northern tip of the lake, a half-mile from the ruins of Lord Beresford’s plantation where Bartram rested.

Beresford owned a “vast body of land,” (*Travels* 144) says Bartram. It extended along the lake and into the hills near the present-day city of DeLand. Its “high ridges fit for the culture of Corn, Indigo, cotton, Batatas, &c.” were under cultivation, with the low marshland, which Bartram thought would do well for rice, sugar cane, and indigo, left undeveloped.

Bill Belleville, on the voyage down the entire length of the St. Johns that he documents in *River of Lakes*, poked his kayak into “the thick subtropical jungle” (*Travels* 144) along the eastern bank of Lake Beresford and found indigo growing wild. Under the canopy of a massive live oak, he uncovered a brick, likely an artifact of the plantation house Bartram visited.

A light wind ruffles the lake under a brilliant blue sky. It’s a good day to be on the water with an old friend. We ride down the shoreline, toward the opening of the lake into the river, passing houses and piers where military tugboats and barges were built during World War II. *The Beresford Lady*, a restaurant on a concrete-hulled sidewheel paddleboat, ties up here. The boat is ninety feet long, double decked, diesel powered, and air conditioned, with a Victorian interior, reminiscent of the late nineteenth century, when steam-driven paddleboats carried tourists to and from Jacksonville and packed oranges and other produce from the plantations along the lake and river.

Richard Knuebel and his family built her on the site. On evening cruises down the St. Johns, her passengers dine “country-style” on turkey, beef and noodles, and a spread of Southern-cooked vegetables while viewing the moon rising over swamps, streams, and birds along the river.

“Somewhere here,” I tell Don, pointing in the direction of *The Lady*, “Bartram took refuge from a ferocious storm that flattened all but the main house of the plantation. He was on Hontoon Island when the storm hit. The ‘high forests’ on the island [bent] to the blast, and the sturdy limbs of the trees [cracked] (*Travels* 142). He says he couldn’t keep the boat in the river. Blew in here, beached his boat in the reeds, watched it fill with water. His box floated but stayed in the boat.”

“He hadn’t kept up with the forecasts from NOAA,” Don quips.

“We take a lot for granted, don’t we? After the storm, Bartram sailed across the lake to the plantation and salvaged and dried his books and most of his collection of plant specimens.”
In the Land of the Owl

At the mouth of Lake Beresford, where its waters marry with those of the river, a sign advises, "Manatee Zone—Idle Speed." I cut the throttle. Immediately ahead, a manatee rolls, its fluke rising slowly out of the water, then disappears into the river. On the high ground to our right, opposite Hontoon Island, pleasant houses and two marinas border the water. An eagle on its perch above them watches us glide down the river.

At the Florida Highway 44 bridge, fishermen and women sit on folding chairs atop the bulkhead of a small recreation area beside the bridge, their long cane and fiberglass poles extending out over the river. Red and white corks bob on the surface. Two men in a Corps of Engineers airboat spray an herbicide on the water hyacinth around the bridge and park. The hyacinth is a pretty little plant. It floats on green pods the size of duck eggs and puts out a lavender flower.

Bartram didn’t see water hyacinths. Not one. The aquatic botanical rascals showed up a century after his visit. Actually, they didn’t just show up. They came invited. In 1884, Mrs. W. E. Fuller visited New Orleans for the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. When she fell in love with a plant from the Amazon that floated in a pond and displayed colorful flowers, she brought back a few for the water garden of her extravagantly landscaped home six miles upstream of Palatka.

Somehow, the water hyacinth escaped. Now everyone in Florida could enjoy its beauty. Within a decade, the plants covered an estimated 78,000 square miles up and down the St. Johns and its tributaries. Ship owners screamed. The tough-skinned plants were clogging their paddlewheels.

Hyacinth spreads relentlessly, choking waterways, clogging water system intakes, and limiting boat traffic. By shading and crowding out native aquatic plants, it reduces biological diversity in the river and ponds. Large rafts of water hyacinth can reduce fish populations. The spiral of death works like this: when a plant dies, it drops to the bottom (one acre of hyacinth can deposit about 500 tons of decaying plant material each year), and the nutrients that the plant had absorbed are released back into the water. Certain species of fish cannot tolerate the higher levels of nutrients. They die or swim away to more favorable waters.

Governments tried poisoning the hyacinths, but the herbicides killed every plant they touched. They launched a small fleet of boats to scoop the weeds from the water. The boats brought in piles of herbage and dumped them in fields where they rotted and sent out a repulsive stench.

Next they introduced hyacinth-eating weevils and fungus. Still, the hyacinth spread. It can double its area of coverage in six to eighteen days. By 1960, 188 square miles of Florida’s waterways were clogged. That’s over five billion of the little plants covering an area the size of Columbus, Ohio.
Footprints across the South

Since then, the Corps, by using more specific and effective herbicides, has reduced the hyacinth's coverage to approximately thirty-one square miles. The 1994 discovery in the upper Amazon of an insect, Thrypticus, a natural enemy of the plant, may lead to a new method of control. But before they turn it loose, the scientists will have to figure out whether Thrypticus might become an uncontrolled invader all on its own, like Mrs. Fuller's pretty water plant, a gift that keeps on giving whether we want it or not.

What would the Bartrams think of the unforeseen, destructive force of imported plants? They were leaders in the earliest days of the intercontinental plant trade who made their livings and their reputations from the discovery and shipping of new species. Although none of the plants they exported to Europe appear to have made it to the most-hated invasives lists, would such sensitive, foresighted naturalists have been pleased that they promoted a business that has brought kudzu, hydriilla, and water hyacinth into the American landscape?

Below the park, another marina sits on the bank to our right, its slips filled with shiny sports boats and party barges. Houseboats and small pontoon craft are vessels of choice along this stretch of river. Beyond the “No Wake” zone, we rev the engine and head for St. Francis, a Bartram campsite. Well marked on our fishing map on the west bank of the river, this site was briefly a thriving port. After the Civil War, Dr. L. H. Harris moved from New England to this place, then known as “Old Town.” His town supported a post office, general store, and The Florida Facts, a weekly newspaper. Wharves and a spacious warehouse stood on a long, ten-foot-high shell midden along the river. Behind them, sand roads led to residences, a sanitarium, and a health resort. Citrus trees grew on the higher western ground.

Residents of the area brought logs and citrus by ox-drawn wagons to St. Francis for shipping on the river. Steamboats brought goods and supplies for settlements throughout north Lake County until the development of railroads caused travel and shipping on the St. Johns to fade. With the passing of ship commerce and the devastating freeze of 1894, St. Francis slipped away. In 1909, the post office closed and the hotel burned. No traces of Dr. Harris's entrepreneurial dream remain, save rutted, slough-pocked sand roads that wind through palmetto, cypress, and live oaks where bobcats, bears, and deer prowl.

On a dark, steamy evening 120 years before St. Francis's fleeting flirtation with civilization, Bartram pulled his boat onto a midden. He climbed the bank, which he calls “a high perpendicular bluff.” As he gathered firewood, he noticed that the surface was “very uneven, by means of little mounts and ridges.” In the morning, he looked around and “found [he] had taken up [his] lodging on the
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border of an ancient burial ground; sepulchres or tumuli of the Yamasees, who were here slain by the Creeks in the last decisive battle" (Travels 138).

We see no high ground along the river, only wetlands where the trees appear to be less than fifty years old. Then, about a half-mile up the dead river, Don says, "There's the bluff." Ahead of us, a gray stump of land, about five feet high, juts into the narrow stream like an aborted causeway. This rise, the only high ground in this section of the river, is no more than thirty feet long and twenty feet wide. Its surface is hard-beaten, with pathways leading from a jeep track to the edge of the water. A blue-and-white beer carton lies on its surface, near a wine glass half full of blush.

As we glide past the "bluff," we spot a large soft-shelled tortoise lying on the hardpan. She looks at us but doesn't move. I fumble in my dry bag and pull out my camera, then turn the boat and idle slowly back toward her. She stirs, waddles to the edge, and slides into the water. A dozen eggs that look like undersized ping pong balls roll in after her.

Soft-shelled tortoises normally lay eggs on dry land, where they are supposed to stay until they hatch. The eggs on the St. Francis "bluff" were destined for failure. Even if we had not disturbed her attempt at propagation, her eggs would certainly have met an early fate at the hands of a fisherman or connoisseur of fine Cracklin' Rosie. Perhaps it's a Darwinian experiment. "They're not noted for their intelligence," a biologist later tells me. "We found one last week laying her eggs on the state highway."

Don and I examine the little high ground more closely. A foot beneath the hard-packed soil lies a layer of shells. Bill Deggors, a local historian, says that Lake County crews dredged the midden to pave roads. Time and Dr. Harris have also eradicated the Indian graves. A twenty-first-century traveler would awaken to say, "I found I had taken up my lodging in a heap of beer cans emptied by four-wheeler drivers who had come to hunt or carouse." Cans, bottles, and a few empty pizza boxes litter the palmetto and oak hammock of St. Francis. In a small clearing lies a recliner, decomposing in a fully reclined position. Once gray, mildew is turning it green. Wendell Berry's "ubiquitous man Friday of all our woods" has been here. "He is the true American pioneer, perfectly at rest in his assumption that he is the first and last whose inheritance and fate this place will ever be" ("A Native Hill" 19-20).

Some eight miles down the river, we come to Idlewilde Point at the entrance to Stagger Mud Lake. Of all the places Bartram described, this one has attracted the most attention, hands down. Somewhere on this "little lagoon" he saw what may be the world's record number of alligators per acre. They attacked his boat and tried to rob him of his food. Two large bull gators fought to a muddy finish (Travels 118-30).
It was springtime. Alligator testosterone was raging. Hundreds of alligators were trying to assure that their own personal DNA made it into the gene pool for one more round. At the same time, fish were migrating down the river. At the narrows of the river, just outside Stagger Mud Lake, Bartram saw pods of alligators lined up, plated elbow to elbow, to gather fish into their waiting jaws.

The river here is about 130 yards across. Envisioning the raft of alligators gobbling the passing fish in this tranquil spot taxes the imagination. Besides the purring of our motor, the only activity is two sport fishermen anchored along Idlewilde Point fishing for bream, their rods resting on the gunwales of their boat. The scene is not different when we return in the spring, searching in earnest for active alligators.

Where is Bartram's "promontory?" We see flat palmetto wetland, no higher than a foot above the river's surface. The map shows a place called "Bower's Bluff" a short distance north of the inlet to the lagoon. But there is no bluff, only more wetland.

Did Bartram see shell mounds that had been cut away for road material? Or has a changing river course washed them out? My bet is on the dredging and scraping of the shells. We pause alongside the channel marker, our boat rocking on gentle swells off Lake Dexter, and imagine a steam-powered dredge plundering the banks. They dredged paradise to pave a parking lot.

The deflowering of America, the sacking of the environment, has extended over centuries. Early Indians burned fields for crops and hunting. After a season or two, however, they moved on and life returned, almost to its pristine, primitive state. Then came Europeans, deep-plowing where forests had stood and draining wetlands for rice fields. Mechanized timber operations increased the rate of destruction. And when earth-gobbling machinery moved in, the resource-hungry nation took, at first, a few shell banks and middens, then cut deep, wide canals and fenced the rivers with bulkheads. Next came the grading and paving of pastures and forests for malls and parking lots, the dumping of pollutants, and the over-fertilizing. It has been all so gradual, so step-by-step. What started as a spark has risen to a firestorm, with the population pressure on attractive areas such as Florida and the technological ability to move not only banks of shell but rocks of mountains. Forests and savannas have withdrawn into a few reserves held in trust by government authorities that arrived, in many cases, too late and must fight daily the encroachment of developers and agribusiness.

Wetlands protection and clean water legislation has slowed the degrading of lowlands, but the destruction of natural features continues as developers find ways to elude regulations. More recently, a Supreme Court decision has loosened the reins of federal enforcement, permitting more mistreatment of wetlands.
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We ride past the fishermen and enter the lagoon slowly, careful not to ground the engine in shallow water. The western shoreline is flat. Small cypresses with young, slender stalks—mere ghosts of the mighty, ten-to-twelve-foot giants girdled and cut in the late nineteenth century—spread their feathery crowns into the blue sky and reach their roots into the peat. Black gums flank them. Beyond, on a rise, taller trees dominate the horizon. Our minds drift in the primeval world of greens and blues that surrounds us. Pistia (water lettuce) and Nymphaea (water chinquapin), descendants of the plants Bartram describes here, frame the shoreline of the inlet.

"Bartram fished the water lettuce and caught more than he needed for supper," I say.

"That was in the spring," says Don. "And two hundred years ago. Before the nitrogen and the hyacinth."


We look for fishing spots on the far end of the lagoon. We also watch for alligators sunning themselves on a cool day. None appear. The tone of the engine changes and the stench of sulfur, released from our engine's churning of the boggy mud on the lagoon's floor, assaults our nostrils. Behind the boat, a cloud of dark brown mud rises to the surface. I push the trim button, tilting the engine until the propeller runs just beneath the surface, and put the engine in reverse. We've come this far to find Bartram's haunts, but we have no desire to join him for a night on the flats of Stagger Mud Lake, even if no alligators appear.

Retracing our morning's journey, we pass party barges and houseboats coming down the river. In a shady spot, beneath spreading oaks, we cast for bass. An electronic buzz breaks the stillness. Don gropes for his cell phone in his tackle box.

"Hello." Long pause. "I'm not interested. Thank you."

Don pushes a button and returns the phone to his tackle box.

"Telemarketer. You won't believe what they were offering," he says, smiling wanly. "Three days and two nights, free, in Orlando."

"Why fish when you can see Mickey Mouse?"

We eat a snack and continue searching for bass in mouths of the side streams, called "dead rivers," and deep holes beneath spreading oaks. Still, no fish.

"We can catch some bream," says Don, confidently.

He grew up in the low country of southern Louisiana and has fished around the St. Johns for several years. I trust his judgment. We tie the boat to a marina's wharf, buy some crickets and minnows, and head out into the river around Hontoon Island. Don pulls a couple of lightweight rigs out of his tackle box while the boat glides slowly through the manatee zone.
“Over there. Let’s start there,” Don advises, pointing toward a little cove fringed by water lilies. I kill the engine. Don drops a hook with a minnow into the water, up against the lily pads. His bobber sinks and he responds by pulling a fat bluegill into the boat. Then another. My cricket still has attracted nothing.

We move. Up the river, under a spreading live oak, another fish takes Don’s bait. I change to a minnow and begin to get bites. My bobber swirls and dips, but I miss the fish.

“Gotta be quick,” says Don. “They hit and run.”

By four o’clock, we’ve traveled along ten miles of river where we have seen no buildings and few signs of human intrusion. We have caught and released a dozen nice bream. In the evening, we might find some bass to rival the monstrous fish that Bartram saw here. But the last shuttle to Hontoon leaves the pier at five, so we cross back over Lake Beresford, passing a few die-hard anglers in the middle of the lake, and return the boat.

At Hontoon Landing, a pontoon boat powered by an electric motor shuttles campers, hikers, and other visitors across 130 yards of river to the island park. We load our sleeping bags, food, and cooking gear on the ferry, then cart it on wheelbarrows to a waiting van that takes us to the cabin. In a palm and oak hammock are six one-room rustic cabins, each furnished with bunk beds, a ceiling fan, a light, and electrical outlets. Outside each are a picnic table and fire ring. Nearby is a twelve-site campground and a bathhouse with hot showers and toilets.

“It’s like camping with a roof over your head,” says Jim Murphy, the park employee who drives us.

“Looks like we have it all to ourselves,” says Don.

“Next week it’ll be full. Every cabin and campsite is reserved.”

“For Thanksgiving?”

“Our busiest weekend,” says Jim. “Folks bring turkey fryers. Some of them wrap the turkey in foil and bury it in a bed of coals and cook it all day. It’s a big family weekend. All the sites are reserved eleven months ahead.”

We sleep well. The owl keeps us company. In the morning we eat our breakfast, pack our gear, and walk the nature trail. Soft morning light lingers. Massive oaks, their crooked, gnarled trunks covered with ferns, cast long shadows across the palmettos and forest floor, giving the place a primeval aura. A mere dollop of imagination sees saber-toothed tigers lurking in the low shrubs and, out in the thickets, giant armadillos and mastodons.

At the end of the trail rises a twelve-foot-high shell midden. A mile back on the island, this dumping ground of hundreds of generations of Indians looks like middens Bartram saw. Snail shells, barely the size of a thumbnail, crunch
beneath our tread, telling us that a great village once existed on this high ground beside the Hontoon Dead River.

We hike back along the trail, through a hammock where the Timucua once hunted and planted corn. Squirrels, downy woodpeckers, and sparrows scatter ahead of us. We call the park office on Don’s cell phone, drag our gear from the cabin, and load our baggage into the white van. At the ferry slip, the owl totem stares at us blankly. He has watched so many come and go.

On the drive back to Palatka, we stop at Astor, where the St. Johns narrows and passes under the drawbridge and where Bartram took refuge at Spalding and Kelsall’s Upper Store. His observations of a “genteel, well-bred,” but forlorn trader and his beautiful, crafty “Seminole” wife led him to write intriguing paragraphs on the charming guise of the native women (Travels 112). It’s easy to imagine a made-for-TV movie about this couple.

A hundred years later, William Astor, grandson of John Jacob Astor I, built a hotel here. It drew tourists until it burned in 1928, but it is the trading post tradition that remains. Modern enterprises, most of them catering to the fishing and vacation crowd, have replaced Spalding’s emporium in the village that calls itself “The Jewel of the St. Johns River.” Signs advertise the trade goods of the twenty-first century: gasoline, groceries, pizza. Marinas charge five dollars per foot per month to berth. A boat shop occupies a large metal building at the water’s edge. Pleasure boats and fishing craft, most made of fiberglass, are tied to a wharf near a bait and tackle shop where fishing guides hang out. Beside a barber shop, used refrigerators sit on the shell-paved lot of a ramshackle TV repair shop and a furniture store. At a gas station I can buy ice, a cold drink, or candy and stock up on cash at an ATM in the corner. The Blackwater Inn and Blair’s Jungle Den offer lodging. The Seminoles that Bartram knew have vanished, replaced by Crackers, transient snowbirds, and recently-settled Yankee retirees.

Bartram’s export business has taken two twists here, one botanical, the other aquatic. East of Astor and along U.S. 17, eight-foot-tall frames hold black tents of saran shade cloth. Beneath these shelters, crews of Latino workers cultivate acres of leatherleaf fern for the floral markets.

After heavy freezes hit their citrus groves in the mid-1970s, landowners looked for new agricultural products that would thrive on their flat, fertile soil. Ferns caught their imagination. At first, they planted under the shade of the oaks, then sheltered their plants with lathe screens before turning to plastic. More than 200 growers, most of them clustered around Pierson, east of Lake George, plant and harvest the foliage. About eighty percent of all cut greens produced in the United States come from this area. Annual gross sales are estimated at $110 million.
Footprints across the South

Ferntrust Cooperative has over 350 acres in production. In a large, white building beside a rail spur, once used as a citrus shed, ferns are processed for distribution to florists across the nation. They'll join blossoms of roses, gladiolus, or chrysanthemums, be displayed for a few days in a funeral parlor or living room, then find their way to dumps and compost piles.

Had Bartram seen leatherleaf fern, he would have told his readers that "Rumohra adiantiformis grows here in abundance." But he could not have seen them in his travels along the St. Johns. Bill Keebler, an owner of the co-op, tells me they are from Central America. "But they grow well here. We're far enough north that we don't have extreme humidity, and far enough south that we have few freezes."

Bill Keebler. A latter day Fothergill, I muse as I drive north to Palatka. Importing plants, cultivating them for pleasure and profit.

Not far away, a new venture came to life in the summer of 2003 with the importation of beluga sturgeons from fish farms near the Caspian Sea. Miami businessman Mark Zaslavsky and others established Sturgeon AquaFarms near Pierson. They are investing $5.4 million in indoor and outdoor tanks for breeding, nurturing, and growing sturgeons, along with technology for raising the fish for meat and caviar. Zaslavsky anticipates producing 160 tons of sturgeon meat and thirty-five thousand pounds of caviar per year.

By suppertime, we are back at Don's home, telling stories as only fishermen and saunterers can. We muse over the two-century shift from subsistence farming, hunting, and fishing to plantations and now to agriculture and aquaculture operations that use technology to supply luxury items for decoration and gourmet palates.

"What's on your agenda for tomorrow?" asks Carla as we finish our pot roast, potatoes, and salad.

"Amazing crystal fountains’ and ‘ebullitions.'"
My fascination with clear water bubbling up from the depths of the earth began when two cousins led me from the porch of Uncle Sam and Aunt Bessie’s old log home down a rutted path toward the dusty road. Roy carried in a can on his shoulder the precious produce of the cow he had milked. Clarence pushed open the timber door of a small, unpainted house. Rusty hinges creaked and let a shaft of light fall across a sparkling little pool of clear water.

Roy walked down a rough-hewn plank and set his burden in the water. A salamander scurried under a smooth rock below the surface. Clarence reached for a dipper, dark blue with white specks, which hung from a nail beside the door. He dipped it in the pool, sloshed out the water, then refilled it and offered me a drink. I sipped gently, unsure what this was, then gulped the clean, cold liquid and let it run down my chin.

To a boy from Washington, D.C., visiting his kinfolk deep in the mountains of Virginia, water bubbling from sand was a wonder. This, to me, was a spring until I encountered the springs of Florida—No trickling, bubbling brooks here. Many of Florida’s springs push thousands of gallons of water each minute into deep, clear, broad basins larger than the neighborhood swimming pool. When Ponce de Leon sought “the fountain of youth” in Florida, he had a lot of candidates. The state has over 600 springs. More than a third of the nation’s largest springs (geologists call them first- and second-magnitude) boil out of the limestone beneath Florida’s heartland.

I saw them first as a teenager in my quests for entertainment and recreation. At Silver Springs, near Ocala, my family rode with other tourists in glass-bottom
boats and watched great schools of dark blue catfish lounge beneath us. Bream and bass seemed close enough to touch.

At Weeki Wachee Springs, lithe young women wearing shiny "fish tails" that transformed them into mermaids put on shows for audiences seated in an underwater, glass-fronted theater. Long hair billowed around their heads. They drew air from hoses that frothed white bubbles into the blue water, then dived gracefully into the depths. One of them swam close to the glass. I was sure she was also fifteen and that she wanted to meet me. But I never saw her again.

Later, a group of kids from my grandfather’s church took me to a spring near Plant City. We swam with other teens in the cool water, surrounded by small fish that nibbled at our legs.

Even as a youngster, however, the enchantment of the springs seemed greater than glass-bottom boats and mermaids. Ancient waters flowed up from pits in the thick shelves of rock, carrying glittering particles of shell and sand. At seventy-two degrees year round, they felt cold in the heat of a Florida summer afternoon and warm in the winter.

Years later, I read Bartram’s Travels. To him, the springs of Florida were sources of fascination and awe. Holy places. Salt Springs (Six-Mile Springs, to Bartram) was an “inchanting and amazing crystal fountain,” an “Elisian spring.” Silver Glen Springs—Bartram calls it “Johnson Springs” in his report to his sponsor, Dr. John Fothergill—was a “vast Fountain.” And Blue Spring, south of DeLand, was a “vast . . . admirable fountain of warm or rather hot mineral water . . . perfectly diaphanous” whose taste and smell Bartram found offensive (Travels 92–3).

Salt Springs

When William Bartram sailed his little boat up the “Six-Mile Run” in May 1774, he was returning to a place he had visited some ten years before with his father, drawn back by biodiversity. This spring, which “incessantly threw up, from dark, rocky caverns below, tons of water every minute, forming a basin [basin],” was an “amazing ebullition, where the waters are thrown up in such abundance and amazing force, as to jet and swell up two or three feet above the common surface” (Travels 105–107). Samuel Taylor Coleridge seems to have drawn imagery for “Kubla Khan” from Bartram’s poetic description of this spring. Salt Springs becomes Xanadu where, under Coleridge’s pen,

\[
\begin{align*}
\ldots & \text{ did Kubla Khan} \\
& \text{A stately pleasure-dome decree:} \\
& \text{Where Alph, the sacred river, ran} \\
& \text{Through caverns measureless to man} \\
& \text{Down to a sunless sea.}
\end{align*}
\]
Seated on a green knoll above "the head of the crystal basin," partially surrounded by an orange grove "with Palms and Magnolias interspersed," he caught the aroma of *Illixium floridanum*, a species that he was the first to identify (*Travels* 105, 362). He describes waters from under the earth, pushing sand and shells into the basin, then surging through a bed of rocks and into the run.

But the aromatic, floral setting and the force and pleasant colors of the spring were not all that intrigued him. He drifted from scientific observer to social commentator, noting that fish and alligators, natural enemies, live in the basin of the springs in harmony. Somewhere else, in a river or Lake George, they would be predator and prey. Here, in the flow of the springs, they move about "peaceably and complaisantly," moving aside, "as it were to make room for others to pass" (*Travels* 107). An enviable contrast to his world of rage and conflict.

Salt Springs, now in the heart of the Ocala National Forest, is about six miles west of Lake George, a thirty-minute drive south of Palatka. The springs remain, as do colonies of various fish, but the cycles of the earth and human intervention have left their marks.

For decades, the springs have not been as forceful as those Bartram described. In 1939, Francis Harper found "half a dozen 'boils' arising in a basin about 40 yards in width." He reported that "after nearly two centuries of disintegration, the limestone rocks no longer project above the water, as reported by both Bartrams" and that "the ebullition of the waters no longer has its pristine force, gushing out 'two or three feet above the common surface'" (*Travels* 166). Visiting Salt Springs during the drought of 2002, Tyler and I saw only gentle ripples of water rising to the surface from the limestone caverns.

I asked Larry Battoe, a scientist with the St. Johns River Water Management District, about the reduced water flow. I had read speculation that the pumping of water for irrigation had decreased the force of the water. Larry pulled a stack of books from the shelves and we thumbed through them. On the page of one study a graph showed the flow that scientists had measured. The line on the graph rose and fell. The flow of the spring, measured over seven decades, has fluctuated from 54 to 134 cubic feet per second. The peak flow during those years came in December 1985.

"I don't see any trend there, do you?" he asked. "Maybe Bartram was here at a time of heavy rains that replenished the aquifer."

"Looks random to me," I replied, recalling that Bartram was pounded by heavy storms he called hurricanes.

Where Bartram sat in an orange grove and watched the spring and its fish, the Forest Service has built a large concrete block shower room and tourist shop.
Footprints across the South

Picnic tables sit beneath the oaks and pines. Pathways wind down to the stone and concrete walls that enclose the springs in a square.

Silver Glen Springs

Bartram thought the “vast Fountain” at Johnson Spring (now Silver Glen Springs) “in every respect like the other great Spring that [he] visited before [Salt Springs]” (Report to Dr. John Fothergill 502). It wasn’t. And it isn’t. But the eighteenth-century naturalist can be excused for not knowing what later scientists have found. Three or four openings pump out about sixty-five million gallons a day in an average year, while the nine vents at Salt Springs pour out fifty-two million. And only a keen clairvoyant would have known in 1774 that Silver Glen would become a sort of floating tailgate party every warm weekend.

On a November morning a man whose midsection fills a “Recreation Resource Management” T-shirt rakes the small live oak leaves and acorns from the sand path to the welcome station. His radio, sitting on a golf cart, plays country music. We walk up a wooden ramp to a little office where he sells me an entrance pass for three dollars.

“Not many folks here,” I observe.

“Just a few houseboaters,” he says. “The crowds come in the summer.”

I had mixed feelings about the timing of my visit. Was I seeing the “real” Silver Glen, or should I have come on a summer holiday? An aerial photograph of the place on the Fourth of July 2002 shows the spring run looking like the parking lot of a shopping mall at Christmas, except the pavement is blue and green and the vehicles are boats. Bill Belleville describes the recreational attraction: “weekends and holidays transform the spring into a floating, gunnel-to-gunnel bacchanalia where the raison d’etre seems to be showing off one’s boat, playing music at impressively high decibel levels, getting half naked, and entering a state where you can’t much tell a bullhead from a Budweiser—and don’t much care, anyway” (111-12).

Five-hundred boats, ranging from rubber rafts to 50-foot houseboats, once crammed into the waterway, announces a website that touts the “Comaraudary” of the fiesta at Silver Glen. The same page, featuring hard-driving party music, protests that “Lake County just placed a new ordinance in affect [sic] not allowing anyone to possess alcohol in the Silver Glen run.” Another website, sponsored by the “Silver Glen Boating Preservation Society,” claims that law enforcement officials “have even been known to hide in the trees with binoculars and/or night vision glasses to peer into your cabins/homes/bedrooms under the premise of ‘good police work’ looking for someone drinking a glass of wine in their cabins.” It says that the American Civil Liberties Union is interested in their cause.
On this much quieter day, the attendant, employed by a company that contracts to operate recreation sites for the Ocala National Forest, hands me a receipt and I walk the winding path down to the spring. An earth and shell mound, some twelve feet high, rises on my left, covered by small trees. White signs on wooden posts advise that, if I take any archaeological materials from the mound, I’ll be in big trouble with the law. I look in vain for something that will tell me if the mound has been excavated and what has been found. Later I learn from Florida’s Bureau of Archaeological Research that this is one of three mounds that circle the spring. Native Americans built the mound, but, since it has not been excavated, its significance and the story it contains remain hidden under sand and shells.

I return to the parking lot and follow a trail across shell middens, refuse heaps from hundreds of years ago, and wind through a hammock of palmetto, oaks, and small cypress trees—an easy two-mile walk to Lake George. The Forest Service has cleared a small area on the bank of the lake. I sit on a bench under deep shade and watch the clear, dark water lap against logs while gray beards of Spanish moss swing in the gentle breeze. Bartram, camping near this spot, seasoned fish heads with the juice of oranges. During the night, a wolf stole his leftovers and the traveler thanked God that the thieving canine left him unscathed.

From here, Lake George appeared to Bartram as a “little ocean” (Travels 157f). In fact, it measures about seventy-two square miles, larger than Washington, D.C. All this water. A state full of water, surrounded on three sides by an ocean and a gulf, permeated by streams and springs. Almost twelve thousand square miles of Florida are covered by water. Only Alaska and Michigan have more water surface. Yet I keep hearing that water is an issue here. Both the quality and quantity of the state’s water is deteriorating. How many people can live on the peninsula? Where will they get their water if they continue to move into the state at the rate seen over the past five decades? Water experts and politicians speak of “sustainability.” I recall the 1950s, when my grandfather asked me to wash my car under the grapefruit tree in his backyard in Lakeland. “We have a water shortage,” he said. “Give the tree the water from your car washing.”

Bartram commented on the trees, flowers, fish, fowl, and reptiles of the region. He analyzed the agricultural value of land. And he sighed eloquently over the environmental damage that European settlement had caused, even in the wee hours of America’s morning. But he never mentioned water as an issue. Why should he? How could he predict that water would be used for more than a habitat for fish and alligators and for the irrigation of fields of rice or indigo? Cities, lawns, swimming pools, groves, ferneries, and cel farms all suck water from the aquifers. Georgia-Pacific uses about five million gallons of ground water a year to produce paper.
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He foresaw a thousand or so farmers, along with slaves, coming to plant indigo, rice, sugar, and some corn and sweet potatoes. The state's population grew by only a few hundred thousand in the first century after he visited. Since 1950, however, it has erupted from 2.7 million to 16 million. More than three-fourths of the increase has come from migration into the state. In addition, 37 million visit Central Florida each year, bathing, drinking, and washing their cars.

I return through the oaks and palms, skirt the mound, and visit the spring one more time. The vents push pillows of water, sending ripples across the surface of the basin. The pool shimmers in greens and blues, surrounded by grassy slopes and park land.

Blue Spring

The prospect of seeing manatees swimming in a clear spring in a subtropical jungle has intrigued Maria enough to get her into the shower before sunrise. Last evening, in the quiet ocean-side town of Flagler Beach, we had enjoyed strolling the boardwalk, watching surfers ride crested waves, and eating a dinner of fried seafood. We would gladly linger a few more hours there, but the forecast says storms will bombard Central Florida today and we want to get to Blue Spring before they hit.

A light drizzle dampens us as we pack the car. We go to the donut shop in Ormond Beach, drive down Interstate 4 across the state to Orange City, and follow the state park signs through residential areas and past a city park. Just across the Seaboard Coast Line tracks is the entrance to Blue Spring State Park. John and William Bartram rowed their boat into the spring. William later rode a horse four miles from the Beresford plantation to Blue Spring.

It is early November, the time when manatees begin their migration into the spring run where they will spend the winter, sheltered from the chilled water of the St. Johns. Lettering on a wooden plank hanging on the park's fee booth says "No Manatees Today," but we pay our $4 entrance fee and hope the big aquatic mammals haven't read the sign. Scuba divers in the parking lot struggle into their tight-fitting wet suits and hoist their gear to their shoulders. We follow them down the boardwalk trail, past a sign pointing to the "Head Spring."

I sniff the air. "A hint of sulfur," I comment, thinking of Bartram's vivid description of the pungent smell: "This tepid water," he says, "has a most disagreeable taste, brassy and vitriolic, and very offensive to the smell, much like bilge water or the washings of a gun-barrel, and is smelt at a great distance" (Travels 145).

We smell nothing to match that.

Four women climb the steps out of the water, towel their white hair and wrap themselves in terry robes. A lean elderly man, his head sheathed in a white latex cap, glides smoothly through the water, swimming laps.
“Any manatees in there with you?” Maria asks.
He stops swimming and treads water.
“Not today,” he says. “There’s one who stays here year-round. But I haven’t seen her today.” Graceful scissors kicks bring him to the steps. “She’s a large female. She was injured several years ago. They took her to Sea World. They nursed her back to health, then brought her here. She had gotten to like people, so she decided to stay here. They named her ‘Georgia.’”
“So, she’s prettier than most manatees,” says Maria.
“Let me guess,” he says. “You are from Georgia.”
“Right in the heart of it,” she says, smiling.
The swimmer laughs and tells us that Georgia has borne two calves since she got here. “They named one of them ‘Peaches.’”
We thank the swimmer and walk up the boardwalk to the head of the spring. The boardwalk stands on the steep, palm- and palmetto-covered banks that rise ten feet above the surface of the basin. Blue sky and green trees reflect on the clear water. An otter rolls near a log on the far bank of the pool, a hundred feet away from us. Broad-bellied, dark blue catfish rise occasionally to break the surface, then sink to their resting places on the bottom.
Divers with yellow tanks strapped to their backs swim to the boil. They place their breathing tubes into their mouths, plunge nine feet to the edge of the limestone hole, then disappear into the depths of the spring. Bubbles from their lungs highlight the spring’s flow. To a pair of onlookers standing with their dry feet on a boardwalk, the flow looks unimpressively gentle. Just a slight rise in the surface of the pool, waters spreading gracefully toward the banks. But seventy-one thousand gallons of water push out of a single opening every minute. I imagine that it takes powerful swimming to get into the cave where these guys are going.
We stroll the half-mile wooden pathway that parallels the spring run to its junction with the St. Johns River, past a two-story white house built on a great shell midden near the mouth of the spring run. We learn from a sign that the Thursby family, original owners of the house, were orange growers and operated a pier here in the 1880s and 1890s.
A father, mother, and three children stand on a platform over the water, their attention focused on a swirling wave across the waterway. We walk down the ramp and stand behind them.
“Manatees?” I ask.
“Two of them,” says the man in a bright red jacket.
A broad, gray tail breaks the surface at the edge of the lilies and water hyacinths. We know that Jacques Cousteau came here in 1971 to film the aquatic mammals who struggle to survive against the assaults of boat propellers and
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deteriorating water quality. His film *The Forgotten Mermaids* alerted the nation to the threats to manatees’ survival. Now we are seeing them for the first time.

“Do you live around here?” asks Maria.

“Wisconsin,” the mother answers. “We came to Disney World and heard about this place.”

“Glad to know someone who visits Disney gets up here to see the ‘Real Florida,’” I say, quoting the Florida State Parks tag line. “What’s the weather like in Wisconsin today?”

“It’s snowing,” says the man, chuckling.

We watch the manatees prowl for food along the far bank. They disappear as the skies grow darker and the rain turns from mist to heavy drizzle.

“Do you want to go on the ecotour?” I ask Maria.

“Yes, if the boat is covered.”

“Beats standing in the rain or staying in the car or shops all day. And we’ll learn something.”

We walk toward the wooden pier, built over the stumps of the wharves where paddlewheel steamboats loaded Thursby’s oranges and passengers. At a rustic, wooden kiosk we pay our passage and descend the aluminum gangway to the pontoon boat where a handful of fellow travelers are seated around plastic tables under the canvas shelter.

“We’re waiting on a group,” tour guide Rebecca Keith tells us as she walks toward the helm. “As soon as they get here, we’re leaving. A big storm is coming. Maybe we’ll beat it.”

We look at the canvas covering and wonder how much rain will blow under it. The temperature is mild, around seventy degrees, but wind and rain could make us a bit uncomfortable.

Sixteen people walk from the parking lot and down the ramp. Most are over sixty. They carry an ice chest and large white plastic sacks filled with Styrofoam boxes. Cameras and binoculars swing from their necks; all wear a badge identifying them as participants in a birding conference.

Rebecca pushes the throttle and steers the boat across the St. Johns and upstream. The journey has scarcely begun when she sets the engine to idle and glides slowly toward a waterfowl dipping its head into a shallow bed of lilies. As the passengers crowd the rail on the port side, snapping pictures through the rain, she tells us this white bird with a pale blue spot is an immature little blue heron and that the blue patch will expand until its plumage becomes the cerulean blue of an adult.

Conversations grow louder, their buzz drowning Rebecca’s voice. She turns up the volume on her speakers and returns the boat to mainstream. Anhingas,
“snake-birds,” males with black, velvety plumes and females with brown necks and breasts, perch on tree branches, their spear-like beaks poised to skewer a passing fish or frog. The rumble of voices grows to a roar when our guide spots an osprey gripping a branch above the river, a small fish clutched in his claws. Rebecca increases the volume of her speakers until a piercing electronic squawls sends an alarm to the osprey. The osprey maintains its grip on both limb and fish, but ducks his head and twitches, clearly perturbed by the lunchtime intrusion.

Great blue herons, egrets, and moor hens watch us pass. Alligators and turtles are conspicuous by their absence.

“We’ll be lucky to see a gator,” says Rebecca. “Too cold, overcast.”

For a time, the wind drives a cold rain under the shelter of the canvas and the crowd clusters in the center of the boat, pulling jackets and plastic rain coats around their necks. But the weather cannot dampen the birders’ enthusiasm when one of their keen-eyed colleagues spots a downy woodpecker. Rebecca cuts the engine; the birders listen, identifying calls of three small birds somewhere in the groves along the river before their hubbub drowns the chirping.

We enter a peaceful cove where red maples, their roots spread wide into the wet humus, garnish the wetland with their autumn foliage. Unfortunately, someone has found a way to blemish this piece of wilderness. On a forested bank, barely a foot above the shoreline, stands a tribute to ugliness. An enterprising fellow, exhibiting more evidence of hard work than taste, skill, or care, has towed a barge, mounted on pontoons, to this serene backwater.

“Last year, during the high water, this guy floated that thing into that clearing,” says Rebecca. It sits on the soft earth, surrounded by black gums and cypress. Rising from the bed of the barge is the frame of a two-story house. Black insulating boards shroud it, interrupted by windows, set cattawampus. State and county agencies are mobilizing to force the clueless builder to remove the outrage. Fortunately, most of the land in this area is owned by the state and is protected from such distortions.

Shortly before we reenter the river, Rebecca slows the boat and points out a vine that drapes from a tree like a tangle of green cables twisted around a power pole after a hurricane. Yellowish-green melons, shaped like softballs deformed by a power hitter’s bat, hang from bare vines a dozen feet above the swamp floor.

“I want you to see an Okeechobee gourd vine. It’s an endangered species. This is one of the four remaining habitats for this gourd,” she tells us. “Its other habitats have been turned into farmland.” She says the Okeechobee gourd was the “wild squash . . . curious to behold . . . climbing over the lofty limbs of the trees,” that Bartram saw near Lake Dexter, some twenty miles downstream (Travels 137).
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"Thank you. You gave us a good trip in the middle of some sorry weather," I tell Rebecca after the boat is tied to the dock. "Are you a biologist or naturalist by training?"

"Most of what I know I learned after I got here. I wanted a job outdoors, in a place like this, with the water and the birds. So, I moved here from Charleston, South Carolina, a few years ago and learned all I could on the river."

The rain has slackened to a drizzle when we return to Blue Spring. We walk along the boardwalk to a platform where an old man leans on his cane beside a slender woman whose curly, black-and-gray hair reaches her shoulders. They fix their eyes on five manatees lounging just beneath the surface. One is a massive cow with two calves, each about five feet long. A large white scar near her great crescent flap of a tail betrays the injury that she suffered when the propeller of a boat struck her.

"Georgia, Peaches, and the new calf," guesses Maria.

The manatees glide calmly, their noses on the bottom of the run, brushing each other gently, occasionally emerging to sniff air, then cruising up the stream. Sensing the cold front that will blow in behind the rain, they have moved into their winter home, where the water is warm enough throughout the season to make them comfortable. More than a hundred will return here over the next few weeks and will linger until the river warms in March.

The old man turns, leaning on his cane. "We've been coming here all week," he says. "Haven't seen a manatee until today."

"This is 'opening day' of manatee season at Blue Spring," I whisper to Maria. "And we are lucky enough to have tickets."

I watch a pair of the mammals frolic midstream, rolling their bulky bodies in the clear water. "God's recreation," I say.

"What?" Maria puzzles.

"Psalm 104, I think. Where the psalmist talks of creation and of the sea. 'There is leviathan, whom thou hast made to play therein.' The ancient Hebrew poet thought that God made a sea beast just to play in the sea."

"No other use? Just God's sport? No niche in the environment, no place in the food chain?"

"Just for His enjoyment."

"Or Hers."

The rain resumes and the wind turns to blow from the north. Maria pulls up the hood of her poncho while she continues to track a mother manatee and her calf.

"Cold?" I ask.

"Uh-huh."

"Ready to go get some soup?"
“Wait! Look how they nuzzle. That calf sort of glides over his mother’s back and they swim along together.” Her face is bright; her eyes see more than mine. “Yes. I am ready for some soup.”

But as we walk along the run toward the car, she stops again, takes a long look back at the spring run, squeezes my hand, then says, “OK. Let’s go.”
Figure 5. William Bartram. Great Alachua-Savanna, East Florida. n.d. Pen and ink sketch.
ALACHUA SAVANNA

Herds of sprightly deer, squadrons of the beautiful, fleet Seminole horse, flocks of turkeys, civilized communities of the sonorous, watchful crane, mix together, appearing happy and contented in the enjoyment of peace, 'till disturbed and affrighted by the warrior man. Behold yonder, coming upon them through the darkened groves, sneakingly and unawares, the naked red warrior, invading the Elysian fields and green plains of Alachua. (Travels 188)

So, what will we do with well-used “Elysian fields”? The “fields,” known by Bartram as the “great Alachua Savanna,” now appear on maps and websites as Paynes Prairie. The flat bowl of grass, shrubs, and herbs, spread over eighteen thousand acres, more than twenty-eight square miles, bounds the southern edge of Gainesville, Florida.

Mammoths and bison have munched lush grass here, as have Spanish cattle and horses. Humans have enjoyed and exploited the prairie for about twelve thousand years. Highways cross it, and drainage ditches cut it. Giant alligators lounge on dark, mud banks between tall grass and deep sinkholes. And the State of Florida, through several agencies, works to restore it to the condition that led Bartram to exclaim, “how the mind is agitated and bewildered, at being thus, as it were, placed on the borders of a new world! On the first view of such an amazing display of the wisdom and power of the supreme author
of nature, the mind for a moment seems suspended, and impressed with awe” (Travels 189).

He spared no eloquence in writing of the plants and animals: “unlimited, varied, and truly astonishing native wild scenes of landscape and perspective.” No other single landscape on his journeys, from North Carolina mountain views to the swirling “grand sire of waters” in Louisiana, brought as much poetic ink from his pen. Two dozen pages of Travels give us his take on this place. He even gives us a map, the only one in his book (Travels 184–208).

Considering that he found it a natural wonder, it is surprising that Bartram had the idea that the broad, fertile basin could be “peopled and cultivated after the manner of the civilized countries of Europe” and support a population of “one hundred thousand human inhabitants, besides millions of domestic animals . . . at some future day one of the most populous and delightful seats on earth” (Travels 251).

Did Bartram actually want to see planters and gardeners turn this “new world” into a township? Or was he caught up in the spirit of his age, seeing Florida, a warm and fertile land recently brought into the British Empire, as a prime parcel? His countrymen, seeking prosperity and freedom, could expand their holdings and thrive in a place like this.

Americans now struggle with the dilemma of balancing the competing goals of environmental preservation and economic development. Clear streams or abundant coal? Forest habitats or fine-grained lumber? Clean air or cheap power? Perhaps we can allow Bartram to share the uncertainty that we harbor. Men of his age had not yet witnessed the irreversibility of environmental damage. A huge, largely uncharted land lay before them—a land that many thought God had given them for a better life.

Bartram traveled to Alachua from Spalding and Kelsall’s Lower Store on the St. Johns River, tagging along with a group of traders, emissaries of entrepreneurs eager to establish trading posts, including one at Cuscowilla. They were the leading edge of British exploitation of Florida. Industry would follow. And tourism.

Each day’s travel brought him to a different ecosystem. Along this stretch of the trading path he saw diverse trees and shrubs along with lizards, snakes, and birds, including the scrub jay. And at his first campsite, beside Halfway Pond, he observed “armies of fish pursuing their pilgrimage to the grand pellucid fountain,” gar, trout (bass), catfish, bream (Travels 175).

Halfway Pond now goes by the name Cowpen Lake. It nestles, along with dozens of other lakes and ponds, in rolling hills of grass west of Interlachen, surrounded by modest retirement and vacation homes. In late 2002, the lakes
around Interlachen are below their normal pools. By contrast, lakes ten miles to the south are brimming. “That shows that the aquifers still have water,” Thad Hart of the Corps of Engineers tells me. “Those lakes with the bare banks depend largely on rainwater. Even with the heavy rains of the fall of 2002, we are in a drought. But the lakes drain into the aquifers and the aquifers fill the lower lakes.”

Bartram spoke more poetically of the connection between Halfway Pond and the lower lakes. “Armies of fish,” he said, pursue their pilgrimage to the grand pellucid fountain, and when here arrived, all quiet and peaceable, encircle the little cerulean hemisphere, descend into the dark caverns of the earth; where probably they are separated from each other, by innumerable paths, or secret rocky avenues . . . and . . . after many days absence from the surface of the world, emerge again from the dreary vaults, and appear exulting in gladness and sporting in the transparent waters of some far distant lake. (Travels 175)

As Bartram and his colleagues broke camp at Halfway Pond, choruses of “musical savanna cranes” filled the morning air. “Shrill tuneful songs of the wood thrush, and the soothing love lays of the amorous cuckoo” delighted him as the little caravan moved westward (Travels 179, 181). After passing through forests and sand ridges and skirting ponds, they came to a “fine fruitful Orange grove; which magnificently adorns the banks of [a vast and beautiful] lake.” Here, he thought, “is a fine situation for a capital town” (Travels 180). Bartram’s descriptions are better than his predictions. Hawthorne, a village where an east-west highway, U.S. 301, and two railroads intersect, is the town nearest his “fine situation.”

On the afternoon of their second day of travel, the group arrived at Cuscowilla, located on a sandy ridge south of the Alachua Savanna, far enough from a little lake to avoid the summer stench of dead fish and reptiles. The chief of the village, known as The Cowkeeper, received them. Sitting around a low table with the tribe’s leaders, they drank a ceremonial beverage, “the Thin drink.” When The Cowkeeper learned of Bartram’s business, he gave him “unlimited permission to travel over the country for the purpose of collecting flowers, medicinal plants, &c.” and named him “Puc Puggy or the flower hunter” (Travels 185).

The trading group made its camp a few miles northwest of Cuscowilla, on the edge of the savanna. On the following evening, they sealed their trade agreement with the Indians, who regaled them with a feast of barbecued beef, freshly butchered from the Cowkeeper’s herd out on the savanna.

Puc Puggy says nothing of the flowers he collected but much of what he saw in his “travel over the country.” Over the next three days, he and the traders
explored the perimeter of the savanna and examined the opening of the Great Sink before returning to the Lower Store on the St. Johns River. It was during this ride that he identified the “black wolf,” now known as the red wolf.

As with the orange groves farther east, Bartram envisioned development into “one of the most populous and delightful seats on earth,” a center of agribusiness (Travels 251). The last census found over 200,000 residents in Alachua County, but these folks had not come to cultivate or herd. They were, quite largely, participants in the economy of the University of Florida.

Had Puc Puggy known the strange natural history of the prairie, he may not have proposed the influx of Europeans. He thought that the rising and falling of the lakes were seasonal: they filled in the winter, dried up in the summer. According to Lars Anderson, who pieced together the story of the basin in Paynes Prairie: A History of the Great Savanna, the savanna has a habit of filling with water, and then, after a few years, draining itself. In 1867, the prairie flooded, killing cattle and sheep grazing there. Four years later, it began to flood again. By 1873, water covered pastures, roads, and homesteads.

The flooding occurred when the Great Sink somehow became plugged. Located on the north edge of the prairie, this large, natural drainage hole has survived the various uses of the area. Except for a pipe and the remnants of a dock, a modern observer sees what Bartram describes:

a group of rocky hills almost surround a large basin, which is the general receptacle of the water, draining from every part of the vast savanna, by lateral conduits winding about, and one after another joining the main creek or general conductor, which at length delivers them into this sink; where they descend by slow degrees, through rock caverns, into the bowels of the earth, whence they are carried by secret subterraneous channels into other receptacles and basons.

Bartram’s description continues:

In and about the Great Sink, are to be seen incredible numbers of crocodiles, some of which are of an enormous size . . . and at this time they are so abundant, that, if permitted by them I could walk over any part of the basin and river upon their heads, which slowly float and turn about like knotty chunks or logs of wood, except then they plunge or shoot forward to bat off their associates, pressing too close to each other, or taking up fish, which continually crowd in upon them from the river and creeks . . . especially the great trout, mudfish, catfish and the various species of bream. (Travels 203–205)
The dark water flows swiftly. The gators are large and numerous, though not as abundant as in Bartram’s description. Twenty or more lounge in the mud on the autumn day I visit the prairie in the company of the biennial meeting of the Bartram Trail Conference.

How did the Great Sink clog? Local lore says that tourists and picnickers had been throwing logs into it, amusing themselves by watching the hole suck the debris down. Or perhaps it was a natural phenomenon, the collapse of the limestone around the hole’s opening. Whatever the cause, water reached a depth of as much as ten feet. The state legislature designated the former (and future) prairie a navigable body of water. In 1883 the Alachua Steam Navigation and Canal Company launched the steamer “Chacala” and two barges to carry cotton and produce across the new lake. A dock at Alachua Sink connected the boat traffic with the Florida Southern Railroad, which ran between Gainesville and the wharves at Palatka.

The water level began to drop in 1891. By the following year, Paynes Prairie was a wet grassland covered with dead fish. Following the flood, the Camp Ranch cut canals into the savanna, draining its water to use the land for grazing. By 1931 dikes and ditches traversed the prairie. This was not the first time the prairie had been used for cattle. Francisco Menéndez Marqués established La Chua Ranch here in 1640, naming it for the Great Sink (he understood the Potano Indian word for the sink as “chua,” meaning “jug”). Using Potano labor, he built a large hacienda on the north end of the prairie, between the old Spanish road and the Great Sink. His cattle grazed the forests in the winters and in the summers fed on the lush grass of the savanna. Potano cowboys herded the fat cattle to St. Augustine for slaughter.

After Creeks from Georgia attacked La Chua in September 1704, the Spanish Army, in need of the protein resources it provided, took over the ranch. Around 1750, the Spanish left the area to Ahaya and his band of Creek immigrants from the hills of Georgia. Ahaya rounded up the stray cattle and grazed them on the prairie, earning him the name “Cowkeeper.”

Beginning in 1957, the Gainesville Garden Club, led by Marjorie Carr, began to educate the public about the importance of Paynes Prairie. Their efforts resulted in the state’s purchase of a 17,346-acre tract in the basin and surrounding uplands. With the outlay of $5.1 million, the Alachua Savanna became a state preserve in 1970.

The question remained: What should the state do with the area? Proposals included flooding the prairie to make a recreational lake with campsites surrounding it. Tourists and fishermen would come; land values would rise. The state, according to Anderson, did not consider flooding an option. Rather, it decided to restore the prairie to the ecosystem Bartram had described.
Footprints across the South

Earth, along with people and organizations, is making a go of reclaiming a place of beauty, wonder, and biodiversity. From the observation tower near the visitor center on the south rim of the prairie, visitors can occasionally glimpse Spanish horses, descended from the six mares and one stallion turned loose in 1985. A bald eagle wheels in his lazy ride on thermals above Interstate 75 before turning to glide toward his nest. Grass now fills the savanna, along with shrubs and small trees.

As in most places where humans have left their imprints on the earth, however, our marks frustrate environmental restoration. Canals, dikes, and major highways have permanently changed the landscape. U.S. 441 and Interstate 75 seriously corrupt the ecosystem by preventing movement of small animals that need to migrate over the course of the seasons. Environmentalists and highway administrators found that thousands of animals from more than 80 species were killed every year along the two-mile section of U.S. 441 that cuts across the prairie, smashed flat by tires and desiccated by the sun. Most were frogs, turtles, and snakes attempting to cross the road to mate and to forage for food.

Florida Department of Transportation engineers designed a system of forty-two-inch-high barrier walls and eight underpasses (an “ecopassage”). At the top of the wall is a six-inch “lip,” such as those used in zoos. Snakes, frogs, alligators, and other animals that manage to scale the smooth vertical surface of the wall stop when they reach the lip, fall back to the floor of the wetland, and find their way to one of the underpasses.

Other impediments to restoration are harder to overcome, perhaps impossible. The Carolina parakeet is extinct. A single ivory-billed woodpecker living in a swamp in Arkansas, about seven hundred miles from Alachua, is the sole known remnant of its species. The “black wolf” and the Florida panther are rare and missing from the savanna; with effort, they might be restored if local opposition did not stand in the way.

In 1975 the state reintroduced bison. Their numbers had increased to about thirty five when a suspected brucellosis epidemic infected cattle in the area. The state reluctantly destroyed the herd. Today, the prairie managers continue to try to establish bison. In 2001 they were searching for a suitable bull to introduce to the pasturing cows. Exotic animals—such as the nine-banded armadillo and plants like elephant ear, Chinese tallow, and chinaberry—have moved in; eradicating them is a daunting challenge. Discharges from the Main Street Wastewater Treatment Plant and the Kelly Generating Plant in Gainesville flow through Sweetwater Branch and a canal and enter the prairie.

The land surrounding Paynes Prairie has taken on the look and feel of the present. North of the ruins of Rancho La Chua, barely two blocks from the
Great Sink, lies a subdivision of single-story concrete block houses. A few are neatly kept, with manicured lawns and gardens of poinsettias and hibiscus. At others, discarded refrigerators, rusting bikes, and abandoned charcoal grills spill from carports onto bare yards. Where Bartram’s companions chased deer and turkeys, pet pit bulls snarl.

The site of Cuscowilla, where Bartram drank the thin drink and ate roasted beef, hides in fields and woodlands outside Micanopy (pronounced mih-ka-no’-pi), a town that looks like Florida in the 1920s. Modest houses stand along the grid of Micanopy’s thirty streets. Moss hangs from the arches of live oak trees in the median of Cholokka Boulevard in the center of the little town. Virtually all the shops in the narrow, two-story buildings along the boulevard cater to tourists and antique hunters. An old mansion is a bed-and-breakfast inn.

Two miles northwest of Micanopy, a narrow road, entered through an iron pipe gate, passes the fee booth of Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, winds beneath arched branches of monumental live oak trees, and leads to the edge of the savanna. There, a small wooden sign proclaims, “Puc Puggy Campground”—a state park camping area tucked in a pine flat, populated by trailers and recreational vehicles.

This is about as close as a modern traveler can pitch a tent and get a hot shower in a place where the Colonial botanist made his bed. The campground is likely very near the site of Bartram’s camp. I set my tent on a pad of soft ground. Pines hold in the humid air. A wild orange tree grows at the edge of the clearing near my campsite. *Bartram seasoned his fish with the juice of the wild oranges,* I recall.

Damp with sweat from the mere labor of setting up a tent and a tarp, I shower, pull on khakis and a knit shirt, and leave for the reception that will kick off the Bartram Trail Conference tonight in Gainesville. I see no others around the campground who are doing the same. I had imagined that folks who follow Bartram are addicted to sleeping near alligators and under clouds of mosquitoes. But I’d never attended one of these meetings before and I am wrong. Though several of them, I found later, are indeed outdoors enthusiasts, tonight they have dodged the balmy autumn air and are staying in hotels.

I drive past Micanopy and toward the interstate where the Café Risque presides over the entrance ramp. I’d seen their sensuous billboards every twenty-five miles down the interstate, beginning above the Georgia line. The place looks like a 1950s Stuckey’s store, white, one story, with a steep-pitched roof. A dozen over-the-road trucks stand on the gravel in back; pickups, sedans, and sports cars line the driveway.

I recall that, on his first evening camping on what would become the Puc Puggy Campground, Bartram and the chief traders visited Cuscowilla for a ceremonial barbecue, leaving the drovers minding the camp. Bartram writes,
Footprints across the South

Our companions, whom we left at the camp, were impatient for our return, having been out horse hunting in the plains and groves during our absence. They soon left us, on a visit to the town, having there some female friends, with whom they were anxious to renew their acquaintance. The Seminole girls are by no means destitute of charms to please the rougher sex: the white traders, are fully sensible how greatly it is for their advantage to gain their affections and friendship in matters of trade and commerce; and if their love and esteem for each other is sincere, and upon principles of reciprocity, there are but few instances of their neglecting or betraying the interests and views of their temporary husbands. (Travels 194-95)

I doubt that the modern-day traders know they are maintaining an ancient tradition.

Bartram’s ride around the savanna took him west, across the routes of U.S. 441 and Interstate 75. Turning north, then east, he and the traders rode through the hills where Gainesville now stands. He passed, best I can tell, near the intersection of Williston Road and U.S. 441 where the Budget Inn, complete with microwaves and little refrigerators at a low price, has replaced the “delightful groves of Aesculus pavia, Prunus Caroliniana, a most beautiful evergreen, decorated with racemes of sweet, white blossom” described by Bartram (Travels 198).

Bivens Arm, a small lake surrounded by a nature preserve and park owned by the City of Gainesville, lies a few blocks away and drains into the savanna. Paths and raised timber walkways skirt the wetlands at the edge of dry forest. A banded water snake glides among cypress, tupelo, and elephant ear on the water’s edge. The care with which the park is laid out and maintained, its nearness to the city, and the signs instructing children in the ecology of the swamp, all speak of the influence of environmentalists in this university city.

Less than a mile north, the campus of the University of Florida sprawls over 2,000 acres: more than nine hundred buildings, plus large chunks of open spaces; a golf course; athletic fields; plots where cows and bulls graze outside the animal sheds of the veterinary school; Lake Alice, where alligators watch students and faculty; and, hidden in a thick forest near the Levin College of Law, a mound that stood on the edge of a city a thousand years ago. A historical marker beside the law school’s parking lot describes an “aboriginal burial mound,” “built about A.D. 1000 by Alachua tradition peoples, ancestors to the Potano Indians who lived in Alachua County in the 16th and 17th centuries.”

The university’s older buildings are red brick, Collegiate Gothic style with steep tiled roofs. Shaded walkways connect them with boxy parking garages.
Alachua Savanna

and modern structures. It's a city of more than forty-six thousand students and thousands of faculty, one of the five largest universities in America. Busses thunder through the campus, carrying students to remote residence halls and academic buildings.

Towering above it all is the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, home of the Gator football team, a dominating force in the Southeastern Conference. On six or seven Saturdays each year, eighty-four thousand fans jam the coliseum they call "the Swamp," where, university boosters claim, "only Gators come out alive."

Shorts, tank-tops, and day packs meet an unofficial dress code most days of the year along University Avenue, on the northern edge of the campus. Bookstores, restaurants, and copying centers line the sidewalks. Students fill the eateries by noon, speaking of coursework, exams, and football. In the evening, the rap, rock, and jazz blaring from speakers in the bars drowns their conversations. It is a lively campus, academic, but not too serious.

On the southwestern corner of the campus, across Lake Alice and near the offices of research corporations that ring the university, Powell Hall houses the Florida Museum of Natural History's Education and Exhibition Center. Bones of dinosaurs surround a replica of limestone caves. A prehistoric tropical forest looms at the end of a corridor. And Bartram is there. His word paintings of the Alachua Savanna hang in frames along one hall.

Indeed, Bartram is a cottage industry around Gainesville. Brochures describe his travels and quote his writings. Scholars study him and the flora and fauna he discovered. Garden club members and birders prowl the savanna, looking for species he listed.

Through-travelers, folks speeding south toward the world of Disney, miss the quiet grandeur of the savanna, however. My mother, father, brother, and I overlooked it on our 1950s drives to visit my grandparents in Tampa. Hot air rushed through the rolled-down windows as we counted the miles left in our two-day journey. From the highway, the prairie looked like a Midwestern scene with palmetto added. Brahma cattle grazing on flat ground. A place to get past.

Folks around the area know better. One of them, Thomas Peter Bennett, the Museum of Natural History's director from 1986 to 1996, found the prairie a place to celebrate. He wrote,

On my birthday I treated myself
and did something I have often wanted to do but have not
because of X, Y or Z.

With the 200th birthday of Travels on my mind
The attention of a traveller, as he said, should be particularly
turned to Nature,
Footprints across the South

wondering whether his visions
were still pristine romantic landscape scenes
or desecrated pollution sites, ecologically dead,
with map and a paperback version of Travels,
I left on my birth morning in a sunroofed Subaru
to celebrate Bartram in Alachua County...
Bartram's vision was altered only
by automobiles traveling at highway speed,
I drove on, with sideways glances, and like Bartram
surveyed the extensive Alachua Savanna,
a level, green plain, and scarcely a tree or bush; encircled with
high sloping hills,
covered with waving forests,
Power poles and a four-lane highway
had changed the scene from a pastoral Bartram vision to a
Futurist impression.
I turned and entered the Prairie Preserve and could scarcely
believe what I saw:
a bounding roe, just as in Bartram's account,
He views rapid approaches, rises up, lifts aloft
his antlered head, erects the white flag
and fetching a shrill whistle, says to his fleet
"follow"; he bounds off. They knew their safety here.
A Bartram vision unchanged.
(A Celebration on the 200th Anniversary of Bartram's Travels 1791)

Ah, here's what we can do with a well-used "Elysian fields." Bennett and
others who quietly, even worshipfully, pass through the Alachua Savanna with
open eyes and Travels in hand know what Aldo Leopold meant when he proposed
changing "the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to
plain member and citizen of it" (204).

Twenty-first-century Americans have many options—cut trees, blast
mountains, flood prairies, build towers, pave pastures, dig canals—but none of
these projects is a mandate.