Travels to the Mississippi River
Bartram spent the first three weeks of June 1775 exploring around the Broad and Savannah Rivers in northeastern Georgia. Then, on June 22, he joined a party of traders for a journey into the Creek territory in Alabama. Beginning at Fort Charlotte, not far from Augusta, they passed through present-day Macon, Georgia, and traveled near the current sites of Columbus, Georgia, and Montgomery, Alabama.

By late July, Bartram was exploring the wetlands of the Mobile-Tensaw Delta of Alabama, where he contracted a serious illness. Early September saw him making brief visits in Pensacola and Mobile, then traveling to the Pearl River, along the Louisiana-Mississippi border, where he spent several weeks recuperating from his fever.

A small boat took Bartram across lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas in mid-October. He arrived on the banks of the Mississippi River at Bayou Manchac and went north to Baton Rouge. In late October and early November, he explored areas around Baton Rouge, including the French territory across the river in Pointe Coupee.

While Bartram explored the Savannah River valley, British and Colonial troops met in the Battle of Bunker Hill. Less than three weeks after he left Fort Charlotte, revolutionary troops took it from the British. During his exploration of Baton Rouge, Americans waged war in Canada.
For his trip to the westernmost reaches of the British Empire, Bartram traveled with a group of "adventurers," entrepreneurs restless to launch their quests for fortune. They gathered at Fort Charlotte, on the north bank of the Savannah River northeast of Washington, Georgia, in late June 1775. Indian traders from Augusta joined them as they camped at Flat Rock. The caravan of twenty men and sixty horses followed the well-worn Upper Creek trading path through forests and grasslands along the Fall Line, near places now known as Sparta, Milledgeville, and Macon, Georgia (*Travels 377*).

Of the land that would become Hancock County, he reports, "There is some very good land on the gradual descents of the ridges and their bottoms bordering on creeks" (*Travels 378f*). His party found "pleasant grassy open plains to spread [their] beds upon, enrobed with extensive Cane meadows, affording the best of food for [their] quadrupeds." He describes grasses, varieties of flowers, sandy soil, gravelly ridges, and rock outcroppings on the highest hills.

And that is about all Bartram contributes to our knowledge of Hancock County. The story of this place hardly rates a sentence in a book about him except for the fact that its history mirrors the story of many communities scattered across rural Middle and South Georgia and reflects the struggles of the white and black people of the South to enter the modern economy and social structure. As with every town, county, and nation, however, its history is unique—and spicy.
Footprints across the South

Hancock County and its seat, Sparta, caught my attention in 1998 when I saw along nearly vacant streets vintage two- and three-story houses looking out over sidewalks where grass sprouted through cracks. Of the nearly fifty fine old houses, about fifteen had been maintained or were under restoration. Boards covered windows, and paint peeled from the siding and finely-milled bric-a-brac of the remainder. Scrub thickets grew over ruined foundations of luxurious homes left behind by wealthy families who had died or fled. Many of the venerable buildings were what one expects in a Southern town: an ornate brick courthouse; an old hotel, now used for apartments; white-sided mansions with verandas and columns set on rock foundations.

A rough fence enclosed the unmown lawn of the antebellum Pendleton-Graves House in Sparta. Yellow plastic playground toys stood in an overgrown side yard and a pogo stick reclined against the front steps. Though faded and in need of repair, the house's grandeur remained in the spires above bay windows on the second floor and ornate millwork framing its long veranda. Its barn, with a rose-shaped ventilator carved in wood by a local craftsman, was a showpiece in itself.

Up the street, tall weeds choked the brick frame of the abandoned garment factory. Dinginess clouded the plate glass windows of closed shops along Broad Street. Inside, dust and cobwebs covered trash and abandoned furniture. In the few remaining businesses, white proprietors and clerks served black customers.

What tides flowed over this place to raise its boats to sail seas of wealth only to leave them stranded on such a desolate bar? I wondered. I learned that racism, politics, and the effects of incest were behind Hancock County's demise.

Hancock County's first human inhabitants arrived in the Archaic period, some 10,000 years ago. Then, around 500 BC, a nation of Native Americans established a religious and political center on the western edge of the county. Five structures, the Shoulderbone Mounds, hidden along Whitten Creek near the Oconee River, stand as a reminder of its prominence.

By 1775, when Bartram passed through, Creek villages dotted the hills. For the swelling tide of European immigrants, however, Georgia was lush and ripe for settlement. After the Revolution, waves of immigrants from Virginia and North Carolina would clear the forests and grasslands and plant rich bottom lands and fragile hills in cotton. "Sandhillers" and "Crackers" pressed into the territory of the Creeks, forcing them, cession-by-cession, into poverty and retreat beyond the Chattahoochee River.

Except for the area along the coastline and up the Savannah River to Augusta and Wrightsborough, the state was inhabited largely by a rough, unruly breed. Towns were small and far between, roads only slightly more than Indian trading
paths, accommodations for travelers dismal and grimy. Yet, a plantation economy burgeoned and a handful of men, employing masses of slaves, grew wealthy.

Bartram’s footprints in Georgia were less than twenty years old when Eli Whitney crafted the first commercial cotton gin. Hancock County was among the areas that benefited from the fast, cheap method of preparing cotton for market. One account says that the first cotton produced for sale in the county was sold in 1796. By 1800, Hancock was the most populous county in the state and well known as a leading producer of the fiber. Over a third of its residents were slaves. Ten years later, almost half its people were black.

Forrest Shivers (The Land Between: A History of Hancock County, Georgia to 1940) says that in the 1840s, when cotton had stripped the nutrients from the soil of many parts of Georgia, planters in Hancock launched agricultural reforms. The Savannah Journal & Courier judged that “no county in Georgia can produce more intelligence and refinement than Hancock and its agricultural skill and energy are preeminent” (Shivers 67). A visitor from South Carolina wrote that Sparta was “a Modern Mecca” and that its farms and craftsmen were making it independent of the outside world.

Leading the agricultural revolution was David Dickson. The soil of his plantation was not remarkable. Dickson’s edge was management and science. He divided his slaves into small work groups. Overseeing each team was a slave who maintained constant, consistent work. Dickson also developed innovative land practices. He rotated cotton with corn and winter grass, plowed deep and in contours, and spread plant compost and manure on the fields. Terraces black men built on his land remain as green monuments on the slopes in the eastern areas of the county. The result was world-beating productivity. When other planters were selling out and moving to Alabama, Dickson and his neighbors were shipping hundreds of bales of cotton to the cotton-hungry markets. In his time, he was known as “The Prince of Georgia Farmers.”

David Dickson’s fame over the twelve decades since his death has more to do with race relations than with agriculture. When he died in 1885, he left the majority of his fortune, including over $300,000 and most of his 15,000 acres, to his daughter, Amanda America Dickson. Amanda was born in 1849 to Julia, a slave of David’s mother. Raised as her father’s princess, living in the house he built for his “outside family,” when she inherited his wealth she became the largest landowner in Hancock County and the wealthiest black woman in the South.

The bequest brought down vigorous protest from Dickson’s family and others in the state. Could a black woman be a landowner? Could she hold hundreds of thousands of dollars? Amanda took her case to the Georgia Supreme Court, which ruled that property rights were equal for black as well as white citizens.
Footprints across the South

David Dickson had led Hancock County not only to its recognition as an agricultural model but also as the site of an important legal precedent.

Although Sherman's army looted and burned plantations surrounding Sparta on its March to the Sea, the town was spared. Sparta lacked industry; the Yankees saw little reason to devastate it. Prosperity returned to the county following the war. Plantations gave way to small farms and sharecropping, but the completion of a rail line gave the area a boost. Cotton, timber, granite, and textile manufacturing enabled many residents to gain considerable affluence. The Neo-Greek Revival and Victorian mansions now idle along Broad Street are wistful reminders of these years.

Poverty fell rapidly on Hancock, however, and the boll weevil tolled the final bell. In 1922, two years after the pest arrived, only 710 bales went to market. Worldwide depressions, the absence of large industry in the county, and the concentration of wealth in the pockets of a few white people and little in the hands of the black majority made recovery from the death of King Cotton virtually impossible.

At this moment of disaster, on the falling edge of Hancock's last financial success, Jean Toomer traveled to Sparta. Coming from a politically well-connected family in Washington, D.C., he served as interim principal of the Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute for two months in the fall of 1921. Two years later, he published Cane, a book of poems and short stories that celebrated the bleak but dynamic life of Southern blacks.

In 1922, he wrote, "A visit to Georgia last fall was the starting point of almost everything of worth that I have done. I heard folk-songs come from the lips of Negro peasants. I saw the rich dusk beauty that I had heard many false accounts about, and of which till then, I was somewhat skeptical. And a deep part of my nature, a part that I had repressed, sprang suddenly to life and responded to them" (2).

"Why hasn't Hancock County rebounded with the 'New South'?" I asked around Sparta. Several residents responded, "If you want to understand what has happened here, get John Rozier's book." Rozier, a journalist with roots and a deep interest in the county, traces the county's difficulties in the late twentieth century to the era of John McCown (Black Boss: Political Revolution in a Georgia County).

When McCown moved to Sparta in 1966, three of every four residents were black, but whites ran the county. Signs above the water fountains in the old courthouse read "White" and "Colored." Schools were segregated, though the Supreme Court had outlawed the practice twelve years before.
McCown was thirty-two years old when he drove into Hancock. Born and reared in South Carolina, he had experience in the U.S. Air Force, a convincing manner, and a dream. By 1968, his political machine had taken control of the county courthouse and, at the time of his death in an airplane crash in 1976, he was known across the nation.

McCown's messianic idea was to fight the war on poverty by educating and training rural blacks and establishing industries that would enable them to stay in their communities rather than move to the ghettos of the cities. He used federal funds and large grants from the Ford Foundation to fund his East Central Committee for Opportunity (ECCO) projects: a catfish farm, a concrete block plant, a housing project, and a nightclub.

For some, ECCO was an innovative experiment of the Great Society, a beacon of hope for descendants of slaves and sharecroppers writhing in a web of despair. Others thought of the projects as radical, fraudulent schemes that could only disrupt the uneasy peace between blacks and whites.

ECCO dominated Hancock and its government. McCown hired cronies and pressured his enemies out of office. As blacks assumed the reins of power, race relations moved from paternalism to separation and hostility. When black leaders took over the school system, white citizens established a private academy. After three decades, the public schools of Hancock County remain virtually all black.

Business investors shunned the county. "No one with capital wants to invest it where it may be insecure," writes Rozier. "Prospective manufacturers feared their plants and goods might be held hostage in a community subject to the erratic control of one man" (191-92).

The night McCown left the Academy Lounge, alcohol swirling through his bloodstream, and piloted his plane into the woods not far from his airstrip, federal investigators were close to indicting him for fraud. Investigation records detail alleged kickback schemes. After McCown's death, five of his associates pled guilty to reduced charges (but later professed their innocence, saying that they had entered the pleas to avoid the extreme hardship and expense of a lengthy trial). Some Hancock County residents say his management practices set the pattern for government corruption that continues in the county.

By the late years of the twentieth century, the county's fame was not measured in bales of cotton but in its rates of poverty, unemployment, and teen pregnancy. In 2000, its unemployment rate was almost three times higher than the state's average and the average weekly wage was a bit over half the statewide average. Food stamps, aid to families, and Medicaid payments were almost double the state average. Unwed mothers bore eight of every ten babies.
Footprints across the South

in the county. Only fifteen of the state’s 159 counties had worse scores on the ACT. Hancock’s last industry, Florida Furniture, shut down in early 2001.

County leaders looked for help. They tried to woo Creek tribes in Oklahoma to move to Hancock, establish a reservation, and build a hotel and casino. When Showtime aired A House Divided, a drama based on the life of Amanda America Dickson, some Hancock Countians hoped that Sparta would draw tourists. Others thought that maybe the state would help. Governor Roy Barnes, using a grant from a fund established with part of Georgia’s share of the tobacco settlement, promised the return of industry and jobs to the county. The Saint-Gobain company received a healthy deal from the state. It opened a factory in 2002 in a new single-story brick building at the far end of the Hancock Industrial Park where scrub trees and weeds cover the vacant lots. The original plan was to employ two hundred people. “I haven’t seen the jobs out there,” a community leader told me. “Maybe a few dozen, that’s all.” During three trips to Sparta, I never saw more than twenty-seven vehicles in the Saint-Gobain parking lot. Only six sported Hancock County tags. Within the plant, a few dozen employees decorate cosmetic and perfume bottles for Estée Lauder and Ralph Lauren.

Failure and discouragement in Hancock County are as easy to spot as the rusty car behind an unpainted Greek Revival mansion on Broad Street. Finding hope requires a quest.

Robert Louis Ingram Jr.

At nine o’clock in the morning, a dozen cars and pickup trucks stand along the curbs that surround the elegant, Second Empire brick courthouse, leaving plenty of spaces for my truck. I climb stone steps and open a tall wooden door beneath a lintel that reads “1881.” Dark brown floor boards groan as I tread the vast hall where a lone black man, dressed neatly in a blue shirt and khaki pants, sits on a wooden bench beneath a bulletin board. A young black woman steps out of the police department office, fills a plastic water mug from the drinking fountain, and returns to her office.

Globe lights and fluorescent bulbs shine on the walls of the long, broad, conspicuously stark hall. A bulletin board bearing official government notices, a few job announcements from the Central State Hospital in Milledgeville, and an unframed map of the county are the extent of the decoration. Missing are memorabilia or county-promoting displays seen in most courthouses. No scenes of the countryside, descriptions of the county’s history, or portraits of notables. Are memories too controversial or bitter for public display? A portrait of David Dickson, of Edith Ingram (the first black probate judge elected in the post-Reconstruction South), or of the Glen Mary Plantation would each have its
friends and foes in the courthouse of a people who tiptoe along a tightwire of race relations—better to keep the walls barren and the portraits of the county's Confederate heroes buried in a dusty cellar.

A man, middle-aged and sturdily built with salt-and-pepper hair framing a mahogany face, walks across the room, greeting a couple leaving the probate judge's office. He wears a shiny, gray shirt, open at the collar, black slacks, and black sandals with no socks. A delicate gold chain hangs loosely around his neck. He turns to meet me, smiles, and reaches out his right hand. "I'm Robert Ingram."

He leads me into the office marked by a plastic sign that reads "Probate Judge Edith J. Ingram" and asks a young woman if we might meet in the back room. She smiles, opens a door, and clears a table in a room filled with wooden file drawers and official-looking pasteboard boxes on shelves. A green light on a fax machine blinks.

Ingram's soft, deep voice bears memories of the '60s and the days when McCown turned the county upside down. "You know, it's a myth that John McCown registered the black voters. We'd already registered by the time he arrived," he begins. "We'd go up to them on the streets and ask, 'Are you registered to vote?' I still remember the fear on their faces. 'No,' they said. 'Well, come with me, let's get you registered.' We'd go up to the registrar's office." He gestures to the upper floor of the courthouse. "They registered," he says, "but they were shaking and trembling the whole time. It was a new thing for them. They didn't know what would come.

"In the first election when a black person ran, we knew we'd won a seat on the school board. But the election officials said the white candidate had won. We had to threaten them and ask for a recount. When the votes were recounted, our candidate won. That was my grandfather, Wilkins Hunt, the first black elected to the school board. I don't know what they [the white leaders] were thinking. I guess, that we'd just go along."

I recall the words of Booker T. Washington:

I am convinced that the most harmful effect of the practice to which the people in certain sections of the South have felt themselves compelled to resort, in order to get rid of the force of the Negroes' ballot, is not wholly in the wrong done to the Negro, but in the permanent injury to the morals of the white man. The wrong to the Negro is temporary, but to the morals of the white man the injury is permanent. (165f)

Ingram continues. "When I came back from Viet Nam in 1970, I was crazy. I'd do anything. I'd been in Hell already. I joined up with John McCown."
Footprints across the South

"McCown had the right idea: Build industries where uneducated blacks could work and make a living and increase the wealth of the black community. Give them something to encourage them to stay here instead of going to the ghettos in the cities.

"The white community opposed us every step of the way. They boycotted McCown's industries. Builders went to Sandersville to get blocks when they could have bought them here. Local fish restaurants wouldn't buy our catfish. There was an 'all or none' attitude. They didn't want to accept McCown's idea because they didn't want progress under his leadership. The struggle blinded whites who did not want to see McCown succeed."

The fax machine whirs. The young woman from the judge's office opens the door and excuses herself. She pulls sheets of paper from the cradle of the machine and leaves.

"But the plan didn't end with McCown's death. The opposition didn't, either," Ingram explains. "Recently, we opened a skating rink. The idea was to give the kids something to do and teach them how to run a business. We got a state grant and built the place. We hired young people. They were responsible for the details of running the rink. And it was going well. The kids learned to keep the books, maintain the place. Then the whites started a letter-writing campaign. 'They told the state that 'they have torn up the floor.' An inspector came down from Atlanta and looked it over. He couldn't find anything wrong. But that's the way it goes."

"What will it take to get Hancock County on its feet?" I ask.

"It's going to be up to the next generation," he answers. "There's too much bad blood, suspicion. Maybe when the kids take over who were not part of the struggle in the '70s, they can get something done."

Meanwhile, he has counseled his own children to get the best education they can and find a job elsewhere, but he thinks his daughter will return to teach special education. His son works at the correctional facility on the edge of town.

"We won't strengthen until we concretely go after small industry that this county can support. We have a low level of skills and education. Big industry doesn't want to invest here. We may never get industry. Maybe recreation, fishing, and residential 'plantations' are our only hope," he says, and tells me about a large development planned nearby. Weekenders and retirees will pay big money to live in a quiet forested area and play golf, he says. "But how much money...how many jobs...can come from golf courses and big houses?"

We thank the staff for their courtesy and enter the courthouse hall. Ingram goes to his job as tax appraiser, leaving me alone in the great foyer thinking. He faced death and drugs in Viet Nam and found his lifelong battle in Hancock County,
Georgia. Time and frustration have dulled his optimism and zeal, but only a bit. I saw no despair, just deferred hope.

William and Sally

I drive south of town on Linton Road, past the overgrown campus of the defunct hospital and beyond the all-white John Hancock Academy, out toward the Country Folks Restaurant. Colleagues had taken me there on my first trip to Sparta. I had returned on later trips to eat chicken or catfish, Southern-seasoned vegetables, and cornbread and wash them down with Georgia-style sweet tea. It had always been a busy place. Construction workers, linenmen, and staff of the hospital had filled the room under the glass eyes of taxidermied deer, turkey, and bass.

As I return to my truck, a faded blue Buick pulls into the lot and stops beneath the shade of a tree. The driver, a woman with white hair, slowly gets out of the car. She is short and stooped, but she walks with sure steps to open the door for her passenger, helps him pull his legs to the ground, then removes a walker from the back seat and places it before him. He reaches out and lifts himself to lean on the aluminum bar.

“How’re y’all,” I ask. “May I help?”

The woman smiles, “No, thank you. We’re slow. But we’ll make it. Jake is ninety-four and I’m ten years younger.”

“Lived here all your life?” I ask.

“Except when I went to college. I was a school teacher.”

I ask if they have any children or grandchildren living nearby who can help them out.

“They all moved away. We’d move away, too, if we weren’t so old. All the white folks who can are moving away.”

“And the black people?” I ask. “Are they moving out?”

“Lots of them,” she answers.

Sisters

Not all of the people in the county have given up. Two sisters, Lillie Webb and Della Smith, have dreams. I find Lillie in a storefront building on Broad Street in Sparta on a day when a north wind pushes leaves along the broken sidewalk. The sign above the entrance reads “Center for Community Development.” I turn the knob on a glass door that opens with a groan.

Dust covers a handful of household items on shelves in the front window, remnants of the items on sale in the thrift shop that the organization once operated here. A half-dozen computer stations sit on ramshackle desks behind cases filled with a collection of books. Old furniture, more books, and business equipment fill the back of the room. The sole occupant sits before a computer screen that glares blue light across piles of papers and books.
Footprints across the South

“I’m looking for Lillie Webb,” I tell the small woman with a bronze face outlined by wavy black hair.

She smiles and says, “You found her.”

I explain my interest in Hancock County and ask her what her organization is doing about the poverty, schools, and unemployment.

“From 1987 to ’93, we majored on protecting the environment,” she says. “Then we formed the Center for Community Development. You have to have a sustainable community before you can have industrial development. People have to be healthy and educated before you can have jobs.”

She explains that the county has suffered from “industrial redlining” because “the community is 80% black.” She talks about self-value. “People need to have work that they want to do, that uses their creativity. We lack spiritual grounding. Real power is tapping into the ‘God power’ that is in all of us. God created. And God told us to love him and love our neighbors. That is what it means to be created in the image of God. To create in love.

“If we do that, we don’t have to look to the commissioners or to big business to fix our lives. We have given our power away. For instance, people count on the schools to educate their children. We are looking for government to solve our problems.”

Once more I ask what the organization is doing. She tells me that the funding is running out. A foundation that once provided support has stopped giving to them.

“We still have a little of the last $37,000 grant. I’m working part time.”

Della Smith shares her sister’s concerns. But her life in the corporate world shows in her approach to thinking of Hancock County. Early in 2003, she moved from Arizona back to the community she left three decades earlier to attend Clark College in Atlanta.

A gentle smile lights her face as she sits behind her desk in a brick house facing the courthouse square and talks of her childhood on the Rives Plantation. Her eyes twinkle when she talks of collecting eggs from the hen house, milking the cows, and snapping beans for dinner.

“From the time I was about eight until I was at least sixteen, I lived off and on with my grandmother on the plantation,” she explains. “I recall being the one to ring the yard bell for the field hands to come eat lunch.

“My grandmother was a wonderful, loving woman. Loved by the entire community. She made quilts and gave them to neighbors. And clothing for women that did not have as much as she did. She took food that we grew or raised on the farm to poor families. Eggs, vegetables, chickens, meat, or whatever they needed. You would have enjoyed getting to know her.
“I would often help her carry the food that was prepared in the kitchen over to the big house to serve my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather was white?” I asked.

“Leon Rives. Heir to the plantation. The land had been in the family since the eighteenth century. My grandmother was born to him after his wife died,” she explained.

“Another Amanda America in Hancock County.”

“Yes,” she says, then shakes her head. “But without the riches.”

“When I’d go with my grandmother to clean my grandfather’s house or to take food, I saw books, fine furniture, orderliness. I dreamed of living that way.”

She worked in Atlanta, met her husband, and, when his job took them to Phoenix, found work in 1979 with the fledgling Intel Corporation. By the end of the century, she was working with the top universities to increase the pool of female and minority engineers for Intel, a job she continues while she lives in Sparta.

In her early years with Intel, a friend advised her to buy all the company stock she could afford. “For years it was ‘save, save, save.’ Then I woke up and saw what I had in the stock.” A smile, almost apologetic, comes over her face as she says, “And it was ‘spend, spend, spend.’”

But her spending was not random or wasteful. She bought a house in Phoenix and property in Hancock County. And she donated to charities. “I wanted to give back to the community,” she says.

In 2003, her daughter was completing her graduate degree in engineering at Stanford and marrying. Her father was seriously ill; he would not last through the summer. Over the years on her visits home she had heard her parents discuss their concerns over the political and social issues. She returned to Sparta and, borrowing a page from her grandmother’s book, resolved to help her neighbors.

“There’s so much potential. There is also much despair. People here feel beaten down. When I have brought in speakers to the school, the kids show no hope, no dreams. Most of the adults don’t vote. Whites seldom run for public office.

“The divisions in the community are not just black and white. It’s between the haves and the have-nots. If people think you have more, they will fight you rather than work with you.”

Della’s dream is still looking for a blueprint. “I'm looking for the right thing to help the community. If we could form a non-profit. Start boys and girls clubs to supplement public education. We have to improve the infrastructure and the educational system. Given the skills levels of local people, new developments will employ locals for menial jobs only.”
Footprints across the South

In the summer of 2004, a flower sprouted in the garden of Della’s indecision and dead-end efforts. The county would soon vote on its commissioners. Believing the current officers to be ineffective, if not corrupt, Della helped pull together a coalition of white and black citizens. They recruited an African American, a retired minister, to head their ticket as candidate for chair of the commission.

Throughout the fall, they battled through bitter debates, charges, and countercharges. When the ballots were counted, the reform group had won, but with the election, the struggle to bring new directions and accountability to government was only beginning. As executive assistant to the new chair, Della found herself in the hot seat of controversy. The departing administration had drained large sums from the county’s coffers, ordering new vehicles and purchasing items that the new commission would have to pay for. Zoning, which was linked to the issue of protecting the countryside from irresponsible landfill operations, dominated commission meetings. The dream of finding new direction for the beleaguered county became clouded; Della spent long days confronting criticism.

Seated at her desk in a tiny office in the courthouse, she looks up from stacks of bills and newspaper articles and asserts, “I could walk away from this. But I promised the chairman I would help him, and I will. I am a woman of faith. I know God has a plan for me. He will see me through.”

Brother Curt

When Curtis Kedley, a brother with the Catholic Glenmary Home Missioners, arrived in Sparta, people asked why he, a white man, would intentionally move to the town. That was 1993. He continued to live there for ten years, until his Glenmary Society moved him to Kentucky. His task was race relations. Working with local Protestant ministers, he founded the Hancock County Human Relations Council.

I met with Brother Curt in the small house he rented on Hamilton Street. The heat of a Georgia summer afternoon drifted through open windows. A small man, balding, experienced in social work and rural ministry, he spoke of frustration and slow progress. Yet he held hope for the county. “We’ve made progress. Small victories. People coming together at the grassroots, finding each other, learning about the life and values of the other race.

“Still, there is so much mistrust. Decades of ill will and memories don’t go away quickly. You know, integration is hard to achieve when the white community is such a minority. I think that is a major factor in the problems here. White people still have most of the money, operate the larger businesses. But they don’t have the political power.

“The people of Hancock County are still learning that grants and government programs cannot save them. The solution must come from within.”
"Pleasant Grassy Open Plains" and Boarded Windows

Struggles of whites and blacks in Hancock County across two centuries are putting to the test the creed that Martin Luther King Jr. stated in his speech accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964: “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.”
Traffic slows near the end of Interstate 185, a few miles south of downtown Columbus, Georgia, and forms two lanes. Cars and trucks crawl toward a two-story-high arched canopy where a shining bayonet, the insignia of the Army Infantry School, points heavenward. I open my wallet to show my driver's license to a guard. He waves me past. And that is it. I'm on Fort Benning, one of the U.S. Army's most important and historic training posts. No one asks me where I am going or why I am here. I am free to drive along forest-lined roads past military training fields, small houses, and a bowling alley.

Guided only by a small map and instructions that direct me to Building Six, I lose my way and find myself in the heart of the garrison. Streets around the officers' quarters have the look of an ideal American subdivision; shady boulevards, green spaces, and running paths surround neighborhoods where George Patton, Dwight Eisenhower, and Colin Powell have lived.

Somewhere in this maze, Indians had for centuries trod their major east-west trading path. Bartram followed their trail on his southwestward journey. Early in July 1775, he crossed the river a few miles downstream of Fort Benning. The river was shallower then; it would be more than a century before the Army Corps of Engineers would blast away the shoals for the passage of steamboats to Columbus and 150 years before a dam raised the river level.

The men of the Indian town of "Uche" helped the traders in his party by ferrying their goods across the river in canoes while Bartram and his comrades swam with the horses. The traders reloaded their horses and took some refreshment. Bartram rode a few miles south with them to the town of Apalachucla, where they stayed for about a week or so.
Established in 1918 as Camp Benning, the Army expanded the post in the mid-1930s as a Great Depression federal work project. When the war in Europe broke out, the Army sent the First Infantry Division to the fort and established the Officer Candidate School and Airborne training here. Over 600,000 soldiers trained at Fort Benning during the Second World War.

Along my way, I pass Ridgway Hall, an imposing two-story building whose architecture would be prized as the central administrative building of a university. Ridgway Hall housed the School of the Americas from 1984 until 2000. Congress closed the school after a decade of nonviolent protest by those who called it "the School of the Assassins." Like most institutions in our complex democracy, the school’s value will be debated and shrouded in the mysteries of historical interpretation. Supporters of the school heaped praise upon it, claiming the United States had built relationships and trained fighters that kept Communism out of our hemisphere.

Opponents had a different take on the school. Its graduates, they said, learned torture and terrorism, then went home to murder educators, union organizers, student leaders, and religious workers in Central and South America. Most notorious in the school’s alumni directory is Manuel Noriega, the dictator of Panama who moonlighted as a drug dealer and now resides in a U.S. federal penitentiary serving a forty-year sentence for racketeering, drug trafficking, and money laundering.

Although Congress ended “the School of the Americas,” it continued to fund the education and training of civilian, military, and law enforcement students from Latin American nations through the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation in the same building. And protesters continue their watch on the activities of the institute.

Christopher Hamilton, the cultural resource manager at Fort Benning, has invited me to his office. Chris’s job is to protect the stuff left behind by Indians, settlers, planters, and the U.S. Army. Will a new building or the renovation of an old one disturb an ancient site? If sherds or stone tools turn up in a trench for a water line, should there be a full-fledged excavation or small test? And he is an educator, explaining the history and prehistory of the land within the post. He played a leading role in the publication of *Fort Benning: The Land and the People*, written by Sharyn Kane and Richard Keeton.

In his office, surrounded by shelves of archaeological reports and Army manuals, he talks of traces of human occupation on the 182,000 acres. People have lived along the Chattahoochee since early in the human settlement of North America. For at least 11,000 years before Bartram crossed the river, a succession of groups found game, seeds, and fish here and later farmed the fertile fields. They grew corn
and beans, carved artistic works from stone, and decorated pottery vessels. Copper from the Great Lakes and obsidian from the Rocky Mountains passed along the trade routes. At least a century before Spanish explorers trod the valley, Native Americans had developed a complete agricultural system and organized towns with chieftains and a hierarchy of priests as part of the Mississippian Culture, which left impressive mounds across the eastern half of the country.

Chris has offered to take me to a couple of sites. Cautious within his role as guardian of cultural resources, he asks me, “You’re not planning to excavate or look for artifacts, are you?” He’s thinking of the swarms of pothunters who have pillaged these lands for decades, removing pottery, bones, and stone tools, and leaving holes that destroy evidence and frustrate researchers.

Nostalgic for my ten years of archaeological work, I tell him, “I’d love to dig again, but only with a qualified excavation. Got anything planned?”

He smiles, tells me that no digs are in the works, then begins to manipulate electronic maps on his computer. Red shading shows areas of Benning that are protected or of interest to archaeologists. Most of them are along the river, others sprinkled along streams. We plan our excursion.

His computer beeps. He opens his e-mail and reads. “Hmmm,” he grunts, lifts the receiver of his phone and punches keys. “I’d love to have him in the group,” he says to the person on the other end of the line. “I’ll call him today and invite him to the next meeting.”

As he talks, I remember my years in government and the difficulty of getting the right people into the right room to make the right decisions. Did the men of Uchee sit around a fire, I wonder, and pass a smoldering pipe, debating who should be invited to a counsel of war or peace?

“Yellow Bow hunted along those creeks. He knows the land,” says a burly, squat fellow whose feather droops over his left ear.

“But Yellow Bow is a coward in war,” replies the tall, lean man on his right. “He would give up our land for the fur of a beaver.”

“We need to hear from Tall Deer. His father was from Tallassee.”

“And, what about Weeping Crow? The Red Sticks will be as the wolf who crouches if we leave him out.”

Chris hangs up, ending my musing.

“Dealing with bureaucracy?” I ask.

“You got it.”

As we return to the map on the monitor, the phone rings. Chris listens for a moment, then says, “I’ll have it to you by the end of the day.”

Replacing the receiver in its cradle, he turns to me. “Looks like we won’t be able to go anywhere. I’ll be in the office completing a report.” He hands me a book.
and a map, showing me how to get to the Uchee Creek Recreation Area across the river. He tells me that his office has put up some educational displays there.

Down Dixie Road, toward the river, I see machines used to train men to drop, laden with parachutes, guns, and gear, from airplanes, and I pass establishments that provide off-hours entertainment for field-toughened soldiers: the Benning Brew Pub, a movie complex, a Subway sandwich shop. This is not your father's military post, with its Spartan PX.

On the bluff above the airfield, I look down on concrete strips that spread across two square miles of bottomland. Hangars, a control tower, and operations buildings, their white paint weathered to a motley gray, press against the rise of the hills to the east. Camps of Paleo-Indians, villages, and farmsteads lie beneath the runways. Women ground corn, weave baskets, and molded pots on this ground. Men sat cross-legged or on logs, draping a deer hide over their knees, forcing a sharpened antler into a crack in a node of flint, napping a blade, shaping a spear point, arrowhead, or fishhook. Did a lodge stand there, where converging airstrips enclose a grassy triangle? Two hundred years ago, could I have heard the shouts of young men throwing spears at a rolling stone, playing a game of chunkey?

Across the Chattahoochee bridge, on the Alabama side of the river, the Army has built the Uchee Creek Recreation Area. On grounds that were the suburbs of the Uchee town, asphalt streets and parking lots surround a campground. A “country store” and boat ramp stand at the edge of the Uchee Creek. The softball field, with its chain-link backstop and aluminum bleachers, would puzzle the Uchees. They played their ball games with sticks and a deer-hide ball. No bases or foul lines. Any place on the field was fair territory for the aggressive swing of a stick that might catch an opponent’s head as well as the soaring ball.

Under the trees near the campground, a series of signboards tell of the town and archaeological work. As I read the illustrated legends, a garbage truck roars its diesel engine, lifts huge steel bins, dumps them, and drives away to some distant landfill—a midden for some future generation of archaeologists to explore.

Uchee houses, according to Bartram and later visitors, were large and neat, plastered with red clay, roofed with cypress shingles. Bartram judged the city “the largest, most compact and best situated Indian town [he] ever saw” (Travels 388).

Despite their hospitality, orderliness, and industry in 1775, the Uchees and their fellow Indians were just two generations from their ultimate relocation. Sixty years after Bartram's visit, they were living uneasily on farmsteads under the promises of a government that had already broken treaties. Overpopulation by white squatters and Indians who had migrated from Georgia had driven them to poverty. Hunger and disease wrecked their villages and farms. Joel Martin
cites a Georgia newspaper that described their plight as “a most melancholy and affecting spectacle . . . poverty and wretchedness, devastation and ruin” (163), an American version, perhaps, of the scenes of Somali babies with flies crawling on their sunken faces.

On a hill a half-dozen miles north of the Uchee town stands a monument to the Muscogee Trail of Tears. Here at Fort Mitchell, the site of the corral, is the Chattahoochee Indian Heritage Center. Above a marble pedestal surrounded by grass and small trees, twenty-five-foot tall bronze flames probe the sky. Bronze plaques planted in concrete slabs surround a plaza. They bear the names of 8,522 Muscogee (Creek) Indians enrolled in the special census of 1832, the final, written memory of a proud and productive people who lived in cities and villages up and down the nearby Chattahoochee River.

Five years after the census, the army and its contractors rounded up these children and grandchildren of those who had welcomed Bartram, then loaded them—some in shackles—on steamboats bound for Mobile. From there, soldiers drove them to the treeless flatlands of Oklahoma.

At the end of a narrow road that leads from the bronze flames, down the hill and toward the river, a construction crew unloads building materials from a tractor-trailer truck. Behind them stand the palisades of a reconstructed Fort Mitchell, almost complete. Tall pine posts of the stockade, shiny and fresh, sharpened to points at their tops, are reminders of the human pen. Workmen look up at my car, then resume their labor. When their work is completed, school children will file off buses and listen to their teachers tell the story of the Trail of Tears. Some of the boys will wander into the surrounding fields and scuff their sneakers in the dirt, looking for arrowheads. They won’t find any. The cities and towns of the Creeks lay in the fertile valleys to the south.

The youngsters would have a hard time knowing that. Historical markers along Highway 165 tell of events and characters from the Civil War. A sign commemorates Bartram’s journey but says, erroneously, that he was the Royal Botanist. No marker reminds a traveler that once-proud Indian towns lie buried beneath the fields and forests along the valley. Indeed, across Alabama, few historic site signs tell the story of the vast nation that once dominated it. Of the 643 markers set by the Alabama Historical Commission, 74 mention the Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws who once lived here. Most of those markers tell of massacres or victories of white armies. Only a handful give a brief reference to a mound or city of the Indians; none provides a clue that the Indians were any more than an impediment to European expansion.

South of Fort Mitchell, on a gentle rise, Holy Trinity borders the vast bottomland where Bartram sojourned with the Apalachiula. Alabama is a strange
place to find the name “Holy Trinity.” Religious names like Salem, Mt. Carmel, and Ebenezer dot the map and “Shiloh” shows up four times. Pious Baptists, Methodists, and Lutherans, expressing their conviction that this was a new Promised Land, left these names from the Old Testament on the landscape.

But “Holy Trinity” is so, well, Catholic. And for good reason. In 1917, Father Thomas Augustine Judge and a group of lay volunteers of the “Missionary Cenacle Apostolate” established here a center to reintroduce Alabama to Catholicism (a Spanish mission failed miserably in the late 1600s), a bold move at the time when the Ku Klux Klan, as anti-Catholic as it was racist, was experiencing a renewal.

The group opened a church and a school that reached out to the families of former slaves and established a high school seminary for young men studying for the priesthood. They built preschool and elementary school facilities in the early 1970s. The seminary moved to Virginia and the schools closed, but the shrine known as Father Judge’s Chapel remains alongside the Blessed Trinity Shrine Retreat and the St. Joseph’s Church.

I drive up a long lane, past the church and a couple of small houses. The door of a brick, single-story structure opens, and a tall, slender young man greets me, a pleasant smile on his face. A black goatee and mustache suggest that he is not out of touch with the fashion of the college campus. His clothes are modest: a cotton shirt and jeans.

“I’m Mario Sacasa,” he says, extending his right hand. “May I help you? Are you looking for someone in particular?” His tone is welcoming, with no hint that I have intruded on a holy place or a sanctuary.

I tell him that I am tracing the steps of William Bartram. He asks who Bartram was, and I tell him of the journey, of the visit to the town and ruins beside the river. His eyes widen when I tell him that my quest is to know what life is like in the places Bartram visited.

“I’ll tell you what I can about Holy Trinity. If we can find Father Berry, he can tell you more.”

Mario leads me into a tidy foyer where hallways extend past the closed office doors to a dining hall and meeting room. He describes youth retreats where animated music punctuates silence and prayer, and gatherings of adult Catholics from across the eastern United States who study and pray here.

“They come from as far as New Jersey,” he says.

“Does the ministry to black people continue?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “but we now find many Latinos as well.”

Voices of men roll up the corridor.

“Father Berry is here,” says Mario. “He can tell you more.”
He introduces me to Father Dennis Berry. The tall, slender priest, dressed in khakis and a plaid shirt, knows about the fort and Spanish mission and recalls that a monk from their order discovered the ruins in the 1950s. But Bartram is new to them, as is the story the explorer told about the desecration of the Apalachucla town.

"The old town was evacuated about twenty years ago by the general consent of the inhabitants," writes Bartram. Overcome by floods and disease, "they grew timorous and dejected, apprehending themselves to be haunted and possessed with vengeful spirits, on account of human blood that had been undeservedly spilt in this old town" (Travels 389).

He explains that Apalachucla was "the mother town or capital of the Creek or Muscogulge confederacy: sacred to peace; no captives are put to death or human blood spilt here. And when a general peace is proposed, deputies from all the towns in the confederacy assemble at this capital, in order to deliberate upon a subject of so high importance for the prosperity of the commonwealth" (Travels 389).

Bartram continues: "about fifty or sixty years ago," however, white traders, warned by their "temporary wives" of an uprising, had sought refuge in the "Peace Town." But, "whilst the chiefs were assembled in council, deliberating on ways and means to protect them, the Indians in multitudes surrounded the house and set fire to it; they all, to the number of eighteen or twenty, perished with the house in the flames" (Travels 390).

Bartram, a naturalist, not a historian or journalist, omits some details that we might like to know. What happened to the "temporary wives"? And what, we wonder, so infuriated the men of Apalachucla that they would violate not only the lives of the traders but also their own canons?

We can guess the cause of the uprising and massacre. Early in the eighteenth century, before African slave trade became more lucrative and less onerous than trade in red men, English traders—aided by Indians from Georgia—enslaved Creeks from the area now known as Alabama and Mississippi. We know the Indians resisted. It is possible that the people of Apalachucla may have seen the traders they incinerated as accessories in the crime of dragging young men to the plantations of Charleston. If anger over slave trade lay beneath the Apalachuclas’ rebellion, here, on the grounds of Holy Trinity, occurred one of the first uprisings for justice in the fledgling European-dominated America—a Colonial version of the struggle for human rights that took place in the 1960s in nearby Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma.
Footprints across the South

About thirty minutes north of Holy Trinity and Apalachuila, a “War Town,” after two centuries and a calamitous struggle, has turned to peace. Phenix City, Alabama, perches on the western bluffs of the Chattahoochee and works to overcome its reputation for lawlessness. Hulks of factory buildings and cotton mills stand abandoned along the river. Small frame houses on the streets surrounding the courthouse give way to substantial brick homes in outlying subdivisions. Strip malls, discount stores, and auto dealerships line the highways that lead north and west toward Opelika, Auburn, and Montgomery. Churches of all sizes, ages, and denominations beckon worshipers.

Phenix City stands near the ruins of “the great Coweta town.” Bartram says Coweta “is called the bloody town, where the Micos chiefs and warriors assemble when a general war is proposed, and here captives and state malefactors are put to death” (Travels 389). Although the bluffs of the river passed into white hands, the town became bloodier. The Saturday Evening Post brought Phenix City to my eyes in 1954. A teenager notices pictures and headlines about a “Sin City.” And, from what the Post said, the town lived up to this moniker and had for more than a century.

Margaret Anne Barnes (The Tragedy and the Triumph of Phenix City, Alabama) and Alan Grady (When Good Men Do Nothing: The Assassination of Albert Patterson) tell the story, beginning with the years of liquor trafficking and prostitution in a county of ruffians that led a minister to call it “Sodom” in 1833. Its tradition of lawlessness began when the Chattahoochee formed the boundary between white territory and Indian country. Debauchery and the rule of brute strength prevailed in the earliest years of white settlement and persisted into the next century. In 1915, Alabama’s prohibition law gave the town’s rum-running entrepreneurs the opportunity to parlay their whiskey trade into a lucrative enterprise. They benefitted more after the Prohibition Amendment to the U.S. Constitution went into effect in 1920.

Over the years, state officials tried on a few occasions to curb the vice, but the bootleggers prevailed through payoffs and rigged elections. Toughs ran the town. Beatings, killings, and house burnings went unprosecuted or never came to trial.

By the time prohibition was repealed in 1933, the skills of Phenix City’s ruffians had been honed and they had expanded their vice operations into gambling. A lottery, known as “The Bug,” was illegal. So were slot machines. But the gamblers bought the politicians, courts, and law enforcement. Now they were ready for the new opportunity opened by the swelling numbers of soldiers being trained across the river at Fort Benning. Lured by girls, gambling, and drink, troopers piled into taxis to be whisked to the bars on the Alabama
bluffs. When they protested loaded dice, marked cards, or the interruption of pleasure by pimps, they faced the gun butts, chains, and spiked brass knuckles of the vice lords’ bullies.

Barnes says that Phenix City enterprises stripped two million dollars from soldiers’ pockets in 1940 and that, by the end of the war, the take totaled $100 million, funding a well-oiled political machine that strengthened its grip on the county and gained notoriety across the nation. Local citizens seldom protested. Their politicians reminded them that no other industry was bringing in big bucks to the little town. And most of the victims of the system were outsiders.

Community opposition to the corruption and vice renewed in the late 1940s, however, when Hugh Bentley returned from the war and became alarmed at what he saw. A Sunday school teacher who owned a retail store in Columbus, he gathered a few friends, rallied support from ministers, and formed the Russell Betterment Association in 1951. Guided by attorney Albert Patterson, the organization drew attention to Phenix City’s corruption but found it impossible to unseat the machine’s candidates in rigged elections. Murders continued to go uninvestigated. Deputy Sheriff Albert Fuller organized a prostitution ring, stocking bars and brothels with young girls he recruited from farms and the streets of the town. Hoyt Shepherd, a prominent gambling lord, was acquitted of shooting an opponent. The man had to be shot, Shepherd and his witnesses said. He had attacked Shepherd with a two-and-a-half-inch knife. Then, in January 1952, someone bombed Bentley’s house. Patterson’s office burned the following month. Local law enforcement officials wrung their hands. There was no evidence.

Later that year, when Bentley and his allies watched for fraud at a Phenix City poll in an important election, thugs attacked them. Pictures of their bloodied faces appeared in newspapers across the nation. Still, state and local authorities stalled. And worse lay ahead.

Frustrated over the failure of their efforts to reform Phenix City through legal processes, Patterson entered the 1954 Democratic primary for state attorney general. Bentley and others fanned across the state, developing grassroots support for their champion. On the morning after the election, newspapers announced that Patterson had won out over the machine candidate by a narrow margin. When the Democratic Party put out its final tally, however, it declared that Patterson had lost. Newspapers and the Russell Betterment Association screamed. An investigation found that party officials had revised the tally sheets before sending them to Montgomery for final certification. Patterson was declared the victor.
A state grand jury called to investigate the vote fraud expected to hear Albert Patterson on June 19, 1954. He had promised to bring important evidence that would lead to indictments. Around nine o'clock on the evening of June 18, Patterson left his office, walked across a small parking lot to his car, and opened its door. Reports of three shots echoed from the brick walls of the surrounding buildings, and the attorney general-elect of Alabama lay dead.

Governor Gordon Persons declared martial law. Adjutant General Walter J. Hannah and National Guardsmen replaced local elected law enforcement officials. They filled jail cells and crammed a parking lot with confiscated gambling equipment. By the end of the year, a local grand jury, viewing evidence gathered by Hannah's investigators, had indicted 141 people on 734 counts.

As the National Guard loosened the grip of the gangsters, state-appointed prosecutors found witnesses to the Patterson murder. Though evidence often conflicted and witnesses seldom agreed, the jury convicted Albert Fuller of the murder. Two politicians were indicted but not convicted.

In *The Tragedy and the Triumph*, Barnes summarizes the events poetically, reflecting the facts as well as the legends that have grown up around what is known as "the Great Cleanup":

The bloody history of "Sin City" was over. The law-abiding people of Phenix City, led by a Sunday School teacher, a lawyer and a general, had prevailed. The three of them had not been comrades-in-arms as such, fighting side by side. They had confronted and fought the enemy separately and successively. As one exhausted his effort and failed, the next took up arms for the battle until at last the enemy was vanquished. (Prologue)

Almost fifty years after the "clean up" of Phenix City, I drive north of the town's center along a shaded highway, past quiet subdivisions and grocery stores, and into a long, paved driveway that loops around carefully landscaped gardens of camellias, azaleas, and giant oaks. Joyce Downing, one of the community's senior pillars, agrees to tell me about the days of terror and the years that have followed.

Elegantly dressed in a pink suit, Joyce invites me in and leads me through a large kitchen and into the living room. Books fill shelves; paintings hang on the walls. We sit on comfortable, satin-covered sofas, facing each other across a mahogany coffee table.

"Would you like something to drink? A Coke or some water?" she asks.

I choose the water. Through the picture window I enjoy a view of the spacious lawn while she goes to the kitchen and returns with a tall tumbler filled with ice and water.
Joyce recalls a town strangely divided. A lawless element, whose members had in large part migrated to the town to conduct their treachery, remained separate from the general citizenry. "There were two different societies in Phenix City. The churches and the schools ran the way they should. [Grady says that the racketeers actually participated in the churches and contributed to them.] We heard that 'evil things' were going on. But our parents told us to stay away from 'those places.' And we did. Youth groups at the churches kept us busy. We had swimming parties and ice cream socials. We kids stuck together and stayed away from the bars. We rode our bicycles and roller skated on the streets."

"Did any of the boys slip away and go down there to see what was going on?" I ask.

"If they did, we never found out about it. If someone 'went bad,' we didn't have anything to do with him. Our parents saw to it that the crime elements didn't get us down. We had a normal life."

When Joyce returned to Phenix City from college and married Lemuel Downing, the political machine was well established and Bentley's opposition to it was growing. Lemuel ran a successful business, placing cigarette machines in restaurants, service stations, and country stores. A candidate for office, supported by the betterment association, came to him with a marketing strategy. "I'll pay you to put matchbooks with my name on them in your cigarette machines," he offered. Lemuel agreed. Within weeks, the candidate was increasing his name recognition. The political machine, sensing a threat, sent a messenger to young Downing. Unless Downing withdrew the matchbooks, he said, the liquor distributors would stop supplying the stores that housed his vending machines. Under pressure, Lemuel sold his business.

During the "Great Cleanup," he served on the grand jury and later turned his attention to industrial development in Russell County. His efforts paid off. Corporations found Phenix City a place ripe for investment.

Citizens began to trust their public officials, says Joyce. A new school, city hall, and waterworks were built. "The whole city came together. People felt like they had control. They had faith in the police department. There was a rekindling of community feeling. Civic clubs started. Columbus and Phenix City began working together. Businessmen established shops, and my husband started a bank."

As we walk through the den on our way to the kitchen door, Joyce leads me to a corner beside the fireplace. There, in a dark wood frame, hangs a Russell County Commission resolution naming a street in the Russell County Industrial Park in honor of Lemuel Downing. Beyond her pride in her husband's role in the resurgence of Phenix City, she sees the proclamation as a symbol, a sign that a town can struggle with lawless greed and come out sound and peaceful.
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Although Phenix City rose on the ashes of Bartram’s “bloody town” of Coweta, its violence was not comparable to the Creek town’s. Muscogees entered war deliberately and with ritual. War Towns went to battle with the concurrence of those who lived in the Peace Towns. Indeed, Peace Towns contributed warriors to the armies. Bartram and others affirmed that the Muscogees, while at times brutal in war and in slaveholding, had a culture of order and justice. “If we consider them with respect to their private character or in a moral view,” Bartram wrote some years after his journey, “they must, I think, claim our approbation, if we divest ourselves of prejudice and think freely. As moral men they certainly stand in no need of European civilization” (*Travels* 489f).
Figure 8. Map of Bertran’s Travels to the Mississippi River.
July 13th we left the Apalachucla town, and three days journey brought us to Talasse, a town on the Tallapoosse river, North East great branch of the Alabama or Mobile river, having passed over a vast level plain country of expansive savannas, groves, Cane swamps and open Pine forests, watered by innumerable rivulets and brooks tributary to Apalachucla and Mobile. (Travels 396)

So began Bartram’s trip to southern Alabama. Still traveling with the traders, he crossed open plains and high forests with abundant trees, shrubs, and grape vines. On his journey southwest and on his return along the same route, he visited towns of the confederation he called “The Nation.”

Here was a land dominated by tribes and chiefdoms who knew themselves as “Muscogulge.” The English, through a series of misunderstandings and abbreviations (and, likely, a lack of concern for the preferences of the Indians) called them “Creeks.” Historian and Bartram scholar Kathryn Braund (Deerskins and Duffles) says that Creek oral tradition tells of these people drifting in from the west and incorporating native populations into their ranks. The diverse tribes, speaking different languages, had become a confederation by the time of their contact with Europeans. They shared a common culture, linked by a network of related clans, and claimed and defended certain lands as their own.

In 1775, a few trading posts punctuated the territory, trading tools, guns, whiskey, and other Atlantic Coast goods for Creek deerskins. French and Spanish outposts and forts lay in ruins. Within twenty years of Bartram’s visit,
Footprints across the South

white settlers began to establish themselves in the lush fields. Their numbers would swell by the first decade of the nineteenth century. In 1814, the Nation would be defeated, and by 1840 scarcely a trace of the Creeks would remain.

I followed Bartram's general route, driving from Holy Trinity along Russell County Road 22, then along U.S. 80. The big rigs and through-travelers are north of here, their tires whining across Interstate 85 until, close to Tuskegee, they cross the Creek trading route and the Federal Road.

These back roads lead through a few hamlets and open country with the typical Deep South landscape of rolling pastures and pine plantations. This is the northeastern tip of Alabama's "black belt," a term that Booker T. Washington said was first used to designate a part of the country which was distinguished by the colour of the soil. The part of the country possessing this thick, dark, and naturally rich soil was, of course, the part of the South where the slaves were most profitable, and consequently they were taken there in the largest numbers. Later and especially since the war, the term seems to be used wholly in a political sense—that is, to designate the counties where the black people outnumber the white. (68)

A full century later, the 2000 census found that eighty-five percent of the population of Macon County was "Black or African American." That is more than triple the proportion of African Americans living in the state of Alabama and almost seven times the national percentage.

Although the black population has dwindled a bit in recent years, as people have migrated out of the area, it continues to dominate. African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and Pentecostal churches, such as the "Pure Gospel Holiness" congregation, center communities of small frame houses. Grocers and mechanics shops are few and widely scattered. Poverty is evident. In 1999, almost a third of the families had incomes below the national poverty line.

On a five-acre tract beside an asbestos-sided house, tiny A-frame coops are homes of fighting roosters. Cords bind the colorful fowl to stakes driven into the dark soil beside each coop. These birds are bred to battle, but their owner keeps them out of reach of one another until they are loosed in a ring, surrounded by cheering bettors, to fight to the death.

Not far off the trading path is Tuskegee, the seat of Macon County. For a small town in a remote spot within the Black Belt, Tuskegee has accumulated more than its share of fame. Four experiments, three of them noble, one shameful, put the place on the map.

The first experiment was in educating former slaves. In 1881, a group of white and black citizens of the area asked Booker T. Washington, a young
teacher from Virginia, to serve as the first principal of the Normal School for Colored Teachers. Born in slavery, he had struggled to educate himself while working in a coal mine in West Virginia and at the Hampton Institute in his native state. Under Washington’s leadership, the school opened on July 4 in “a rather dilapidated shanty near the coloured Methodist church” (110). The state had provided two thousand dollars, but small donations from local white and black citizens, and loans and grants from New Englanders, provided the bulk of the funding. Before building its own quarters, the school used chicken coops and stables as classrooms. Students learned academic subjects and trades, working the fields to grow food for their own tables and building classrooms and dormitories. Washington’s work paid off and gained him fame. The school became Tuskegee Institute. Now Tuskegee University, it offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees. Almost 2,900 students enrolled in 2001.

Within Tuskegee’s walls, George Washington Carver conducted experiments that would have fascinated Bartram. Carver, born to slaves in Missouri near the end of the Civil War, had accepted a position as an instructor at the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute in 1896. Witnessing the poverty of his people, he applied his knowledge as a chemist and botanist to develop 325 products from peanuts, 108 applications for sweet potatoes, and 75 products derived from pecans—all locally grown plants, well known to the black farmers in the fields of Alabama. Adhesives, bleach, buttermilk, and plastics came from his laboratory, but were never successful in the open market.

Popular lore gives Carver more credit than he earned. School children are left with the impression that he invented peanut butter. In fact, others, including the Kelloggs of Michigan, had been producing peanut butter since the 1890s. His legacy is strongest on two fronts. The most tangible is agriculture. He found ways to restore the soils of Alabama, depleted by a century of growing only cotton, corn, and tobacco. Peanuts and sweet potatoes, rotated with other crops, enrich the soil.

According to Gene Adair (George Washington Carver), he also contributed to the nation’s sense that black people can be creative and productive. An entertaining speaker, he drew attention and acclaim from Congress and social groups. Although this fame may have been grounded partly in the nation’s need to assuage its guilt over slavery, the image of an ex-slave, working in a remote laboratory to create new products, inspired blacks to achieve and whites to put aside some of their biases.

Like Bartram, Carver was an artist whose subjects were, largely, plants. Over seventy of Carver’s paintings and drawings, most of them painted using pigments he extracted from the soil of Alabama, rest in a store room on the Tuskegee
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campus. The U.S. Park Service, which operates the George Washington Carver Museum there, has placed them in rooms where light cannot damage them, awaiting funds for their conservation and preservation.

What would Bartram make of a black artist and scientist? Bartram gave little attention to the slaves. Would he be surprised that the eye and hand of a black man could create lifelike images of roses? Slaves rowed boats for him and labored in the fields of his doomed plantation in Florida. But, while he held the Indians in high regard and thought they could be “civilized,” he had little to say about the future of the slaves.

Were he to have met the tall, slender black man who wore a flower in his lapel, would Bartram have found that they were bound by their interest in the value of plants to humanity and their skill in artistically portraying nature's intricacies and beauty, and that they also shared the view that the plants that consumed their professional interests revealed the Divine?

Quoting from one of his speeches, Carver might have told Bartram: “We get closer to God as we get more intimately and understandingly acquainted with the things he has created.”

“I'd like to hear what you think of something I wrote,” I imagine Bartram replying. “[M]y chief happiness,” quotes the Colonial explorer from his Travels, “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” (73-74).

And the old chemist would have stood, run his fingers through his short-cropped hair, and said, “I think, Mr. Bartram, that we are brothers.”

The third experiment at Tuskegee came in the early years of World War II. In July 1941, an aviation cadet class began its training on a small airfield near the campus. By the end of the war, almost a thousand pilots had graduated at Tuskegee Army Air Field, receiving commissions and pilot wings.

The record of the Tuskegee Airmen is remarkable. One group, the 99th Fighter Squadron, flew 200 bomber escort missions over Europe without losing a single bomber to enemy aircraft. According to their website, the Airmen had another more lasting and significant contribution. They say that their record of skill and professionalism assisted President Harry Truman when, in 1948, he directed equality of treatment and opportunity in all of the United States Armed Forces. This order, in time, led to the end of racial segregation in the military forces and was, by their reckoning, the first step toward racial integration in the United States.
President Bill Clinton called the fourth experiment “wrong—deeply, profoundly, morally wrong. It was an outrage to our commitment to integrity and equality for all our citizens. . . . clearly racist.” He was speaking of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. Between 1932 and 1972, the U.S. Public Health Service observed 399 black men in the late stages of syphilis. These men, for the most part illiterate sharecroppers from Macon County, were never told what disease they were suffering from or of its seriousness. Informed that they were being treated for “bad blood,” their doctors had no intention of curing them of syphilis at all. Rather, they were documenting the end-stage ravages of the disease. Even when penicillin became the drug of choice for syphilis in 1947, researchers did not offer it to the subjects, and the men were never given the choice of quitting the study.

After a 1972 front-page New York Times story about the Tuskegee Study caused a public outcry, the Public Health Service ended the project. The government compensated the participating men, and in 1997 President Clinton apologized on behalf of the nation.

Viewed together, the Tuskegee experiments show the best and worst of America’s treatment of African Americans. The idea of educating emancipated slaves in the Black Belt sprang from a coalition of black and white leaders in Alabama. Alabamians of both races supported the effort. George Washington Carver and the Tuskegee Airmen demonstrated to the nation the value of a people with the skills to realize their dreams. On the other hand, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study manifested the underlying racism of a nation that struggled to provide for the human rights of all its people.

Bartram visited the towns of “Talasee,” “Tuccabache,” and “Coolome” along the Tallapoosa River. These towns now lie abandoned under pastures and row crops northeast of the present city of Montgomery and dams impede the river’s flow, making it, in the eyes of American Rivers, the ninth most “endangered” river in the nation in 2003. The danger, says the environmental group, is in the heavy use of the river’s water by Georgia and Alabama: “Although Alabama Power Company’s R. L. Harris dam already has transformed a section of the Tallapoosa River into an ecological desert, more dams could be on the way as the sprawling Atlanta metro area seeks to develop municipal water supplies in the river’s pristine headwaters.”

As early as 1844, manufacturers were damming the shoals where the river plummets, directing water to power their mills. Tallassee, a compact, serene town that crowns the 200-foot-high western bluffs above the granite boulders in the river, became a mill town. A bell rang from the mill’s roof at 4:30 every morning.
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except Sunday, awakening the workers to report to their jobs at 6:00. With the exception of the last two years of the Civil War, when the mill buildings turned out carbines for the Confederate Army, the making of cotton and woolen goods was the life of Tallassee. Then, in 1971, the mill closed. The roof, neglected, collapsed a decade later. A lumber company stripped the building of its heavy beams, but the vine-covered rock behemoth continues its silent vigil across the shoals and the Thurlow Dam.

The use of water for power demonstrates the sweeping change that technology brought to the land. For the Creeks and their predecessors who lived in the old towns of Tallassee (Talasi) and Tuccabache (Tuckabatchee), downstream, the river was a source of life. They gathered protein from the animals within it and watched it replenish the fertility of their farmland with each spring’s flood.

With the coming of European engineering, the river became a source of energy, amplifying the labor of humans a hundredfold, and bringing wealth to the community. And the life of the river began to pass away. Those of us intrigued by the challenge of paddling a canoe or kayak through whitewater grieve the loss of a free-flowing stream that American Whitewater says “was once similar to Great Falls of the Potomac.” More significant, however, is the death of aquatic species that depend upon fresh, flowing water and that perished when deep, still water invaded their homes.

The Chamber of Commerce sees the lakes differently. As recreation sites, they make the area more attractive for business. “They add to the quality of life here,” a community leader in Tallassee told me. “Businesses want to locate where there are educated, skilled workers, near the interstates, where they can have a quiet, peaceful life in beautiful surroundings. We have it all.”

A few miles farther down the road, the ruins of Tuckabatchee lie buried under cultivated fields and pastures where herds of cattle munch grass and pecan trees spread their branches. Once the largest town in the Southeast (some say the second largest in America), Tuckabatchee was a capital of The Nation. Tecumseh, the Shawnee leader from Ohio, visited here, stirring Creeks to join his confederacy to oppose the westward expansion of the white settlers and their foreign culture.

Despite its importance, no historic marker recalls Tuckabatchee. A modern explorer who knows the story, however, can imagine the scene of the 1770s. In the valley of the Muscogulges, the only impediment in the river is a stone fish trap. Corn and tobacco grow on the vast bottomland. Near the river bluffs, smoke rises from wattle and daub huts, bearing the aroma of nuts and venison roasting. Women till gardens and children play along the edges of the river. No bottles, cans, or plastic bags lie beside the footpaths beaten into the black soil.
John Hall waggles a map above his head while three dozen members of the Bartram Trail Conference, outfitted to paddle in drizzle, look on and listen. As head naturalist of the Alabama Museum of Natural History, John has led many such trips. A scholar, Bartram reenactor, and showman, he delights in stirring school children and other Alabamians to learn the state’s natural history and, particularly, to know William Bartram.

The Sunday morning event is the climax of a weekend meeting of the conference. Every two years, people from across the nation gather to hear presentations about Bartram. The meeting mixes scholarship, photography, and a bit of poetry with travelogues, good-natured banter, and social hours. On Saturday, Mark Dauber showed photographs and described the Federal Road through south-central Alabama; Kathryn Braund, president of the conference, unraveled the mysteries of the eagle-tail standard that Creek diplomat and priests carried; and Brad Sanders, author and photographer, displayed views of communities of Cahaba or Shoals lilies.

No theater seats and lectures today, however. We’ve driven from Montgomery to the banks of the Tallapoosa River, a few miles south of Wetumpka, to drift along the river, paralleling the route Bartram took on his visit to the Creek town he called Alabama.

A quiet, quaint little town on the bottomland of the Coosa River, Wetumpka is drowsing on a Sunday morning. Sawmills and furniture factories are idle. Within vintage two-story houses, bungalows, and mobile homes, folks are reading the paper or dressing for church. On its outskirts, fast food places, convenience stores, and a Wal-Mart Supercenter already line the highway from Montgomery. The center’s layout matches other Super Wally Worlds and the products are the same. I buy a pack of pipe cleaners (same brand I buy in Atlanta), eyeglass cleaning supplies (same as Franklin, North Carolina), and trail mix (no different from the pack I found in Palatka, Florida). As the national retailers, sniffing the inpouring of refugees from nearby Montgomery, move in, they’ll enable McWorld to overcome the county’s agrarian, forest-product, small-town uniqueness. And a score of venerable, local businesses will turn out their lights forever.

John has told us to be ready to put our canoes and kayaks into the river at 9:00. By quarter 'til nine, vehicles line the broad gravel road that leads to the river’s edge. Brad Sanders, Chuck Spornick, and Bob Greene have already unloaded their kayaks when two pickups roll down the road towing canoe
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trailers. In short order, we slide our boats into the dark water. The first paddlers glide across the hundred yards of river effortlessly, waiting for the later arrivals to launch their canoes.

The Tallapoosa flows between high bluffs of clay and alluvial soil. Where farmers have cleared the trees to the edge of the river, the banks have worn away, spilling chunks of clay and brown dirt, to be washed away the next time the water rises. It is a strange economy: cut the trees to plow twenty feet closer to the river, then lose the land to erosion.

By the end of the seven-mile trip, the canoes spread along more than a half mile of the river. Boaters dig their paddles into the sluggish current. But the rain has stopped and only a light headwind slows their progress to the takeout at Fort Toulouse.

After a box lunch served in a pavilion at the park, we hear the archaeology of the site. Nomadic bands of hunters camped here around 5000 BC. About 1,600 years ago, Indians established large hunting base camps between the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers. Farming communities during the Mississippian stage, beginning around AD 1000, built compact villages surrounded by a palisade with bastions, a dry moat, and several large mounds topped with ceremonial temples.

Seeking to check the growing influence of the British, the French constructed a fort in 1717 and named it for the Comte de Toulouse. The fort was also known as the “Post of the Alabama,” named after the tribe who lived here. A small garrison of twenty to fifty French Marines manned the fort and traded in European glass beads, guns, ribbons, and household items.

By 1775, when Bartram passed through, the fort had fallen into ruins and was covered by undergrowth, “where are to be seen traces of the ancient French fortress Thoulouse; here are yet lying, half buried in the earth, a few pieces of ordnance, four and six pounders. . . two or three very large Apple trees.” The Indians remained. Bartram knew their town as “Alabama.” He thought highly of the location: “This is perhaps one of the most eligible situations for a city in the world, a level plain between the conflux of two majestic rivers” (Travels 447).

After Andrew Jackson defeated the hostile Creek faction at Horseshoe Bend in 1814, he went to the site and ordered the construction of Fort Jackson. He gathered the Indians here to sign the Treaty of Fort Jackson, an agreement that opened twenty-three million acres of land to American settlers and isolated the Creeks from further influence from the British center at Pensacola.

Bartram’s prediction of a city never became a reality. Alabama set its capital in Montgomery, the fort again fell into ruins, and the site returned to farmland until the historical commission took over.
After listening to a travel author, the group breaks up. Most wander across the lawn and enter the palisades of the restored French fort. Smoke rises from the chimney of a white cabin. Inside, in a pot that hangs above the glowing coals of a wood fire, a commission archaeologist has brewed “the black drink.” No one has a question about what the drink is; readers of Bartram know that the Muscogulges and their relatives as far south as Florida drank “a decoction or infusion of the leaves and tender shoots of the Cassine”—vaupon, Ilex vomitoria (Travels 451). During his stay at Attasse, not far up river from the Alabama town, servants entered the councilhouse bearing “very large conch shells full of black drink, advancing with slow, uniform and steady steps, their eyes or countenances lifted up, singing very low but sweetly.” They approached the king and his guests, bowed and presented their shells, “one to the king and the other to the chief of the white people.” Ceremoniously, the men drank until the brew was gone, then brought out their pipes and tobacco (Travels 452).

We latter-day imbibers take the black drink in small doses out of respect for the tradition that the Indians, in preparation for battle, drank enough of the brew that they vomited, purging their systems and, perhaps, their souls. I take one swallow, then another.

“How much of this stuff do you have to drink to vomit?” I ask.

“Do you want to vomit?” the archaeologist grins. “It takes a lot of it to make you retch. And you have to want to do it. It’s really not that potent. But a good source of caffeine.”

I get a refill and savor the brew. It tastes a lot like lapsang souchong tea, but a conch shell may add bouquet.

Bartram followed the Alabama River and again took to the trading path that would soon become the Federal Road. When he passed through Coolome he was on the edge of the land that would become Montgomery.

Alabama’s Capitol crowns a hill that rises gently out of the valley, about 150 feet higher than Coolome. A zoo, abandoned and rusting industries, and transportation terminals lie on the river bottom between the site of Coolome and the city. In contrast to this bleakness, the crest of the hill gleams with buildings of white marble and glass, interrupted by older brick structures and connected by one-way streets. This is the Capitol complex, architecturally balanced around the Greek Revival Capitol building, reconstructed in 1851. On its front porch, Confederate President Jefferson Davis was inaugurated in February of 1861.
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Down the broad boulevard to the west stands a small two-story house of worship, close enough to the capitol that fringes of the crowd that heard Jefferson Davis pledge to lead the new confederacy might have stood on its ground. The grand, shining structures of the government compound dwarf and almost hide it. But history will not let this church be lost any more than it will the big house on the hill.

Originally, the congregation was the Second Colored Baptist Church, started in 1877 by a handful of former slaves. Six years later, the church laid the foundation of a new building in a new location, using bricks discarded by the city in its paving of streets. White citizens protested the establishment of a "colored church" so near the seat of power. Had they foreseen a seamstress from Montgomery or the bright, eloquent young preacher from Atlanta, they might have been more exercised.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a crowded city bus to make room for a white passenger. She was arrested and jailed. Three days later local black leaders met at the church, now named for its location on Dexter Avenue, and formed the Montgomery Improvement Association to spearhead a boycott and negotiate with the bus company. They named the church's new minister, Martin Luther King Jr., president.

The boycott showed that a black community could unite in resistance to segregation and focused a national spotlight on King. From the pulpit of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Dr. King proclaimed the philosophy of non-violent struggle:

As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence. If you succumb to the temptation of using violence in your struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness, and your chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. (“Paul's Letter to American Christians”)

This little church, out of place among the surrounding architecture, may be considered the birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement. American society changed forever after the boycott, the campaign for the integration of public places, and the battle for voting rights that grew out of them.

Swept away before unyielding waves of white settlers and international traders of the nineteenth century, the confederation of the Muscogee “Nation,” displaced and almost destroyed, is a vague memory. The government of the new
nation that eradicated the Creeks now spends billions of dollars and thousands of lives in efforts of “nation building” in remote parts of the world. And the segregated, stratified society that moved into “the Nation’s” fields and forests seeks to construct a new confederation in which peoples of all nations and races may share in the benefits of the land.
Following Billy Bartram through southern Alabama can be a trip on a freeway. From Montgomery to Mobile, Interstate 65 closely parallels his route along the Creek trading path that later became the Federal Road. A traveler looking for his footprints need turn only a few miles west and wander the blacktop roads through the pine plantations and pastures. For the details, however, I needed a local guide.

Annie Crenshaw drives me west of Greenville, Alabama, down roads that wind along a ridge. A historian and sixth-generation resident of Butler County, pride in her state and county buoys her. Her ancestor, Judge Anderson Crenshaw, established his plantation on the ridges and creek bottoms in 1822. His holdings once covered about 20,000 acres, and a look at a map from the turn of the century tells me that his descendants covered The Ridge. Annie shows me homes owned by members of the family. We pass remnants of the Federal Road—deep ruts in an oak forest here, asphalt pavement there—that hide memories of Indian traders, settlers with wagons and mules, and troops of Andrew Jackson’s Tennesseans.

“Bartram was impressed by the size of the trees here,” Annie reminds me. “No stands of old forests remain, but I want to show you a couple of beauties.” She pulls into the driveway of an art studio in an outbuilding of the old “dogtrot” house Janis Odom has restored. Thick limbs of a massive white oak, its roots embedded under the stone terraces of a garden, arch over us. This tree, an official state “heritage tree,” and its companion oak shade about ten thousand square feet of gardens. Janis tells me that state foresters have tested the trees and find them to be at least two hundred years old. Other foresters say they may well have lived four hundred years.
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“So, this tree may have been more than a hundred years old when Bartram passed by here,” I observe.

“And such trees covered the whole ridge,” says Annie sadly.

We stroll through the garden. Azaleas are budding. Annie and Janis chat about neighbors and the community—who has died, who is sick, an upcoming event. When Janis asks me about Bartram, I tell her that he passed by here on his way to Mobile and Louisiana.

“Just over there, on the Federal Road,” says Annie, whose mother traced Bartram’s route through the county, motioning toward the east.

“He rode by the Cambrian Ridge Golf Course,” I say. Janis raises an eyebrow. “But he was two hundred years early for his tee time.” Annie had shown me the links earlier in the afternoon. Cambrian Ridge is the most vertical golf course I have seen. Its twenty-seven fairways climb up and down a steep ridge just a few yards west of Bartram’s trail. A golf course review says, “Will need your ‘A’ game to shoot in the 70s on these links.” “The range is pretty, but gives you no sense of how far you are hitting the ball due to elevation changes” (Barlow).

Speaking of such recreational features, a Chamber of Commerce employee had told me, “We have the kind of place that attracts new industry to the area. They like our people and our environment.” She nodded toward a conference room behind her office where four Korean men are talking with two local men wearing white shirts, suits, and ties.

“They were from the HWASHIN Company,” Annie filled me in as we left the old rail depot that houses the Chamber. “They manufacture parts for Hyundai. Hyundai is building its first American factory in Montgomery. HWASHIN wanted to locate nearby. Just yesterday they completed the deal to move here. They say they’ll bring 400 jobs to the county.”

The economy of the area has struggled since the days when Annie’s forebears and their slaves grew cotton for export on one of the several vast cotton plantations. Later, textile industries and lumbering ruled. But cotton planting went downhill as the fertility of the land played out and cheap foreign labor drew textile manufacturing overseas. Over the decade of the 1990s, timber industries barely supported the people of Butler County. Between 1990 and 2000, the county suffered a loss of population. Only two out of three adults had graduated from high school, and household income was two-thirds the national median. One in five families lived in poverty. Salvation will come, they hope, in the form of a Korean plant.

We drive out to Pine Flat, passing large, well-kept houses, old plantation manors, and run-down shanties. Annie tells me that this is where Bartram saw the “very remarkable grove of Dog wood trees . . . which continued nine or ten miles unalterable” (Travels 401). The flat is a narrow tabletop ridge, some ten square
miles of open fields and a few woodlands. On three sides, steep hills drop into tree-covered creek bottoms about a hundred feet below. But the dogwoods vanished generations ago as planters made room for cotton.

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Names of forts—Deposit, Dale, Mims, Madison, Bell, and more—dot maps of south-central Alabama. Each recalls the bloody decades after Bartram passed through. He traveled in a time of relative peace, when the French had lost their foothold and the British confined their activity to the coastlines. The great wave of settlers from the east coast and Europe was still dammed behind boundaries in the Georgia Piedmont. Cotton was not even crown prince.

Within a generation, white settlers had pressed into the hills and valleys, searching for agricultural prosperity. As some Muscogees continued trade with the invaders and married their men, others, the Red Sticks, agitated by the loss of farming and hunting land and pressures to fit into the white culture, took up arms.

Hostilities reached a crescendo when the United States began to battle the British in the War of 1812. Joel Martin lays the source of the animosity on the radically different values of the Creeks and the European Americans. Europeans had a “gaze of development,” a tradition of looking at land as swamps to be drained, fields to be cleared and planted, towns to be established. He contends that, though Bartram was sensitive to the Indians and to nature, he and others “unhesitatingly applied the old vision to the new land. They never saw Muskogee’s fields and streams in the ways that the Muskogees saw them, animated with a thousand nonhuman spirits. . . . From the European and euro-American perspective, the land was aching for development” (93).

When Tecumseh, a Shawnee whose mother had lived with the Creeks, stirred them into a religious passion, the Red Sticks went to war. William Weatherford, “The Red Eagle,” rose to prominence as their most visible and successful leader. Initially reluctant to join with the Red Sticks, he emerged as a warrior following the attack at Burnt Corn. Throughout the battles of the fall and winter of 1813 and 1814, he gained a reputation for fearlessness and cunning, and, after the defeat at Horseshoe Bend, he rode into Jackson’s camp, suing for peace and fair treatment of his people.

Ultimately, Weatherford succeeded in gaining only time and promises, most of which were eventually broken. He and a few other Creeks were allowed to remain in Alabama, but most lost their land and were driven to Oklahoma twenty-three years later. His remains lie under rock cairns, surrounded by tall oaks, a stately cedar, and well-pruned shrubs in a small park on the edge of the Mobile-Tensaw delta.

The Creek War broke out after a party of white militiamen fired on Creek traders and warriors at Burnt Corn Creek in July 1813. The Red Sticks retaliated by attacking Fort Mims, a plantation with a stockade beside a ferry crossing of the Alabama River. On August 30, 1813, a band of several hundred Creeks attacked. Militiamen, sent a few days earlier, were hungover. The fort’s commander, warned
by a slave that Indians were surrounding the fort, had not put them on alert. A gate, wedged open by a mound of sand, allowed the Indians easy access.

The historical marker at the site calls this the “most brutal massacre in American history . . . all but about 36 of some 550 in the fort were killed.” Another sign says about 350 died. A website gives the number killed as 516. The discrepancies may result from the capture of slaves and from contemporary exaggeration and propaganda.

Whatever the body count, the massacre stirred Tennesseans, Georgians, and others. A Nashville newspaper blared that the Creeks “have supplied us with a pretext for a dismemberment of their country.” By the following March, Andrew Jackson’s army had rallied to the “pretext” and the dismemberment was well under way. At Tohopeka, or Horseshoe Bend, on the Tallapoosa River, the European Americans and their Creek, Choctaw, and Cherokee allies defeated the final 900 Red Sticks. In August, Jackson imposed the Treaty of Fort Jackson, which required some twenty-three million acres to be ceded to the United States.

Fort Mims lies peacefully in a grove of trees at the end of a narrow road leading past a fish camp. Boats on trailers sit beside small houses and mobile homes. Women walk the roads for exercise while men wash their boats and talk of fishing the web of streams nearby. A gravel path winds through the Alabama Historical Commission site, leading to small markers that outline the palisades and buildings of the little fort and relate the story of the battle. Alone in the shade, I walk the interpretive path, met only by a gray hognose snake sunning himself.

Amidst the ruined forts and heroes’ graves, twenty-five miles east of Red Eagle’s monument, a sign stands beside a two-lane asphalt road. In a circle of yellow, red letters proclaim ‘Poarch Creek Indians.’ A black and red feather hangs from the left side of the circle; a black and white feather hangs on the right. They symbolize ancient traditions of war and peace. Behind the sign, a cluster of modern buildings and a subdivision of small houses break the monotony of the flat fields.

I park my car in a paved lot in front of the most elaborate building in the complex and walk up a flight of steps to a spacious reception area. The woman behind the desk is tall and lean. Straight black hair frames an angular face. I look into her dark eyes and try to find the Muscogulge women that Bartram described. I see, as did he, her “brow high and arched; the eye large [and] black” but she is not “remarkably short of stature” and her “visage” is not round (Travels 484). Two centuries of intermarriage with English, Scots, and Irish separate
the receptionist from Bartram’s models and, although she comes closer to his description than any other person I see on the reservation, the European DNA has made its way into her lineage.

“I’m looking for Eddie Tullis,” I say.

“His office is in the building across the street,” she replies with a smile. “This is the health center.”

I drive across an asphalt street, park between a pickup truck and a sedan in a lot beside a one-story office building, and search for the office of the Tribal Chairman. A secretary appears in the doorway of her office and says “Mr. Tullis will see you now.” She leads me down a bright hallway to a corner office where a smiling man with short, graying hair stands in the open doorway. Blueprints and folders lie on a table in front of his desk. Aerial maps and photographs hang on the walls; others lean in frames on the legs of the chairs against the far wall. Except for pictures and symbols of Indian culture, the office has the feel of a regional planning center.

“You have been a busy man,” I say as we shake hands and I think of what I have read about the nearest thing to a “chief” the Poarch have. A Navy veteran and factory worker in Pensacola when he worked in the 1964 campaign of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, he began his pilgrimage on behalf of the rights of the Poarch Band of the Creeks in 1970. He continued working at Monsanto for thirty years while he and others strove for the recognition of his people.

“In 1970, we had to prove we existed,” he says. “That took more than ten years. In 1984, the tribe was recognized by the federal government.” His drawl is pure Alabama, soft and melodic. He speaks of broken treaties, acts of Congress, and protracted legal contests stretching over 150 years.

“Now that we have won the recognition, we have a bigger job to do. We work more now for community development. In the 1950s and ’60s the leaders of the tribe realized that we had a considerable out-migration. Economics drove our people to migratory work. I can take you to little communities in South Carolina, Florida, and even Wisconsin where our people have settled. They went first to work in the groves and orchards, then settled there. My own family moved across the state line into Florida so I could go to school. Until 1946, we had only five family schools here in Escambia County.

“We have been establishing industries here so our children can stay here and earn a living. We now have six enterprises.”

When Alabamians speak of the Poarch, they mention only the casino and the tribe’s drive to open more gambling halls elsewhere in the state. But the tribe also owns a metal works, a motel, and Perdido River Farms. On the tribal land are a pecan orchard, catfish ponds, and row crops. The herd of sleek Black Angus cattle grazing in a pasture across the road belongs to the tribe.
“We're planting trees. Only longleaf pines. No loblolly or slash pines. The longleaf pines don't grow as fast, but they are the native trees. We plan to create a wildlife reserve on our property. Hunting is a big business in South Alabama.”

We talk about the longleaf forests. He recognizes the intricacy of their environment. “Like the shaker turtles,” he says.

“The gopher tortoise?”

“Yes. We use their shells for ceremonial shakers. They're hard to find these days. They live in the longleaf forests, and the longleafs, in great numbers, are gone.”

According to scholars, Bartram “discovered” the gopher tortoise. But much of what white men consider “discoveries” was long known to the Native Americans.

I ask him about the community behind the tribal headquarters.

“The tribe owns 105 houses on the reservation. Those are mostly for senior citizens,” he says. “A few years ago, we saw that the young people had moved away. The elders were living in old frame houses and trailers around the backcountry. Their houses were in sorry condition and they had no one to help them or care for them. We built the houses and encouraged them to move here, where they'd be close to the clinic.”

He walks around his desk and lifts a framed color aerial photograph showing a narrow road running through green fields. “This is where we are right now. It was taken about ten years ago. I want to get another picture that shows what we've done here.”

“To be a member of the Poarch Tribe,” says Eddie, “a person must be at least quarter blood Creek. There are other groups recognized by the state. But we are the only one that is federally recognized.”

“How did your ancestors stay here when the others were sent to Oklahoma?”

“Some of the Creeks were friendly to the U.S. government. They fought alongside the white troops in the War of 1812, and President Jackson remembered them from their service at the Battle of New Orleans. When the government sent most of the Creeks on the Trail of Tears, it let some of us stay. Those who had actively fought with the United States were permitted a land grant of one square mile.”

In 1836, Congress passed a law allowing some of the Creeks to set aside 640 acres as reservations. Eventually, in 1985, slightly less than 230 acres were declared a reservation.

“We're beginning to interest our educated youth in history,” says Eddie. “So far, little research has been done.” He darts through a list of battles and treaties: Burnt Corn, Fort Mims, Horseshoe Bend, and more, claiming that roadside markers and history books “don't get it right.” “It may be that the data
is not there,” he says, “but I am hoping that we can interest some of our young people in educating themselves as historians and digging into the old records and tell our story.”

Nina Gayle Thrower is the tribe’s historian. She meets me in her office in an old school building, converted to a museum and offices. Sitting on a sofa covered with beige plastic and surrounded by shelves of books, she gives me her own take on Poarch history.

“Fort Mims was a setup,” she says. “The government wanted us to attack so they could justify a war and drive us out. Why else would they send Beasley [to command the fort]? He was a drunkard. Incompetent. An inspector had already found that the gate couldn’t be closed. But Beasley didn’t fix it. The Red Sticks gave Jackson just what he wanted: a massacre.”

Her disdain for government goes deeper and extends farther up the road of history. “We [the ancestors of the Poarch] were White Sticks. We fought alongside the Tennesseans. We were promised land. But only a few White Sticks got any land. Most of them were driven off to Oklahoma with the rest of the Creeks. That’s government for you: use you, then let you go. It took us more than 150 years in the courts to get the little bit of land we have here.”

Academic historians point out that the designation “White Stick” is a very recent name, adopted as a kind of shorthand to speak of those Creeks who did not rise up against the whites. Whatever the name, Nina Gayle Thrower’s argument is clear: the Creeks who allied with Jackson did not get fair treatment.

Nearby Atmore is anything but an Indian town. Although the number of Creeks in Escambia County has increased due to the reservation, the 2000 census found fewer than 1,200 “American Indian and Alaska Native” people. That’s three out of every hundred.

The town wakes early. Children wait for school busses at seven-thirty; at eight o’clock, shopkeepers open their shops along South Main and down Nashville Street. But it remains a dreamy place, its homes and churches shaded by large oaks, magnolias, and longleaf pines. Seldom do more than two cars wait at a traffic signal.

For breakfast, I find Sutton’s Restaurant in the Greyhound station. A sign says it has been serving since 1946. From its dingy tan walls and the tattered, plastic cushions on the chairs, I suspect that the place hasn’t changed much since then. I slip into a booth beside a window, order a scrambled egg, bacon, a biscuit, grits, and decaffeinated coffee, and scan the room. The fact that only four tables are filled at breakfast time concerns me, but not as much as the health department notice that blares in large, black numerals that the place earned a seventy-nine rating on its last inspection.
The waitress returns, concern on her face. "We're out of decaf, honey," she says. "Will reg'lar be OK?"

"Sure," I answer, suspecting that they ran out of decaf five years ago.
She brings my coffee. "Cream and sugar, honey?"
"No, thanks, darlin'. Black."

The bacon, covered by only a bit of molten grease, looks all right, but the scrambled egg is a fried egg served sunny side down. I stick my fork under the puddle of butter that decorates the center of a pile of grits, take a taste, and rake the oily mass to the edge of the plate. The biscuit will be all I eat.

As I finish my coffee, I look across the street and railroad tracks. A twenty-by-thirty-foot American flag flies above the tiny Amtrak depot. Slightly faded, it lofts in the gentle breeze, rising and falling slowly from the upraised extended ladder of an old fire truck. Yellow ribbons, similar to those on trees and the backstop of the baseball field at the city park, hang from the narrow columns of the depot. The "Coalition of the Willing" has been fighting only two days in Iraq, but the town is showing its support quietly and firmly.

I pay my check at a window beside the lunch counter and turn to look at the large composite photograph hanging in a frame beside the door. Below pictures of people visiting the Viet Nam Memorial in Washington are charcoal rubbings of names from the wall.

"Can you tell me about this?" I ask a man wearing a ball cap.

"It's our boys who died in Viet Nam," he says. "We had a lot of soldiers and Marines lost over there."

"Looks like a group went up to visit the memorial."

"Yes. But that was years ago. Now we have another bunch of boys in Iraq. And a couple of girls, too."

Towns like this, patriotic and economically strapped, are recruiting grounds for a large number of our nation's men and women in camouflage.

I walk beside him to his white pickup truck.

"What do people do for a living in Atmore?" I ask.

"Mostly work in the factories. Used to be a lot of farming and tree cutting. But now it's mainly manufacturing."

"I see that K-Mart is closing down," I say.

"Yeah. They came in here years ago. All the stores downtown closed up. Now their company has financial troubles, so they shut down and leave us with nothing."

Red Sticks and Wilderness
Footprints across the South

Tan, silt-stained water eddies around the put-in where four men, following Bartram into the Tensaw Delta, are launching canoes and kayaks. A woodpecker hammers on a tree out in the swamp. Tree frogs chirp. A swirl in the water tells us that a garfish has been watching the procession and is moving out of the way.

"Bartram’s forest sounded about like what we are hearing," says Keith Gauldin, who manages the Bartram Canoe Trail for the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and has volunteered to lead this trip for the Bartram Trail Conference. "Except he would have heard passenger pigeons and red wolves. Maybe Carolina parakeets." The green, yellow, and orange parakeets, the only native parrot of the United States, were driven to extinction when they took a liking to the seeds of many kinds of fruit and grain crops and deforestation reduced their habitat. Bartram saw them in the cypress along the St. Johns River, not far from where the last flock, thirty birds, was spotted in 1920.

Beside the dock, slick with wet silt from high water, Verne Kennedy, my friend and colleague of outdoor ventures for more than thirty-five years, sits in his kayak, struggling to tighten his paddling skirt. Downstream a few yards, nails hold a diamond-shaped yellow trail sign to a tupelo gum tree. Beneath it hang three rectangular markers for three trails.

Under the shade of a broad-brimmed straw hat, Keith guides his green canoe into midstream. "We’re taking the Globe Creek Trail," he says. "One of you lead. I want to know if the signs keep you on the trail." Keith has paddled all one hundred miles of the network of canoe trails, fixing the signs where curving, splitting streams might lead a paddler astray. His chain saw has opened paths past fallen trees.

The naming of these trails for Bartram is not casual. Following his trip to Mobile with the traders and "adventurers," the explorer "set off from Mobile up the river in a trading boat, and was landed at Taensa bluff, the seat of Major Farmer . . . to spend some days in his family." In "a light canoe" (probably a dugout, not much more than a log with a hole carved out), he continued his voyage up the river, finding the wax tree, and "well cultivated plantations, on the fertile islands." He discovered here the Oenothera grandiflora (evening primrose) and described it in vivid detail (Travels 405–06).
Thinking of Bartram’s adventure into this delta in a dugout, Brad Sanders remarks, “Bartram was a real man. He came here in July and paddled a dugout canoe upstream for several days.” The wisdom of Brad’s observation hits us later, when we enter Globe Creek. Until now, we have floated with the current, guiding our boats around tight bends and negotiating trees that have fallen across the water since Keith’s last chainsaw expedition. In Globe Creek’s wide water, however, the current is slight and a south wind presses against our bows. Even in our lightweight, well-designed modern craft, shaped to cut the surface and remain stable, we struggle; Bartram paddled in slack water, fighting the current on his way northward and, almost certainly, the south wind on his descent. Occasionally, when I think of his traveling through steamy, insect-swarming Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana in July and August, I have thought him a bit daft or, perhaps, compulsive. But in the end, I take it that he had an unusual commitment to his mission. And yes, Brad, Bartram was “a real man.”

We face one hazard unknown to Bartram. Though he may have passed an occasional trading boat, he never contended with the power boats of the “No Hard Hat Bream Tournament” that churn Tensaw Lake the day we paddle it. A hundred or more bass boats had launched that day from the Upper Bryant and Hubbard’s landings. Throughout the morning, we paddle by men and women who flip worms and crickets into the water beside tangles of limbs, hoping to lure bluegills, sunfish, and shellcrackers onto their hooks. Finding no fish under one tree, the anglers gun their engines and rush to another favored hole, sending wakes crashing against the shores and rocking our boats.

We paddle along low banks covered with young trees and shrubs left behind by timber cutters who exploited the delta into the early part of the twentieth century and continue to cut small tracts. An occasional large bald cypress extends its roots into the mud and raises its knees, but today’s “large” cypress measures about five feet in diameter above the spread of its root system—small, compared to the eight- to twelve-foot columns Bartram reported. During our eight-mile trip, we see a couple of dozen of the grand trees.

In the 1950s, various Alabama agencies began to acquire land along the river system of the delta. By 2000, the state and federal governments owned about one hundred thousand acres. The Department of Conservation and Natural Resources began planning and building the water trails in 2000 and officially opened them to the public in 2003. In 2004, they installed floating platforms for camping.

Biologists, bird watchers, and outdoor enthusiasts consider the Mobile-Tensaw Delta a treasure. For millennia, waters of the Coosa, Tallapoosa, Black Warrior, Tombigbee, and Alabama rivers have met here. Roots catch rich soils
drained from Georgia, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama to create a ten-mile-wide swath of marsh, cypress-tupelo swamp, and bottomland hardwood where prowls forty mammal species, including black bears, along with 126 species of fish, 60 of reptiles, and 30 of amphibians.

As we round a bend in Globe Creek, a swallow-tailed kite circles above the trees. Black feathers outline its white belly and the undersides of its wings, and a forked tail spreads abruptly as it dips and soars in search of insects. This raptor is a visitor; it spends the winters in South America and finds its nesting place here in the delta. The range of swallow-tailed kites once extended up the Mississippi valley as far as Minnesota. By the early 1900s, its numbers had plummeted, due largely to the cutting of trees. Today, it is rarely seen outside Florida.

Restoration of the habitat of the kite and other species has become a project in Alabama. The state sets aside a portion of the interest collected from offshore oil leases and places it in the Forever Wild Land Trust. A good label, “Forever Wild.” It names a dream of land that can be restored somewhat to the nature Bartram found before commercial timber cutting began.

Cypress may once again tower in abundant numbers and deer, bear, and migratory birds may someday find refuge in the thickets. Wildness may come. But restoration of anything that resembles the forests that Bartram knew won’t happen quickly. Seeds dropped from the big cypresses will sprout in the mud of the rising and falling rivers. If the wakes of power boats don’t dig the soil from their roots and the timber interests can be kept at bay, they’ll slowly grow into straight shafts with flat, spreading crowns. Their trunks will thicken and arch their branches over wide areas of wax trees. And Evan and Connor, my critter-fascinated grandsons, will, in their senior years, find the wildness that Keith and his colleagues labor to restore.
THE SIRE OF RIVERS

"S"hould be a good day for sailing," I say as John steps down from the
cab of his truck. Burly, with the hands of a welder and the smile of a bartender—
both professions of his varied past—he answers, "Any day's good for sailing. The
wind looks good, if it doesn't turn out of the east."

On a spring morning, we've rendezvoused with John and Carolyn McGoogan
at a service station on the east edge of Baton Rouge. We follow their boat trailer,
swinging along narrow roads that wind through forests of pine, live oak, and
ash. Past French Settlement, we turn onto a gravel driveway and stop at a public
landing on the Amite River.

Old hands at sailing, they need no help sliding the eighteen-foot craft off
its trailer. Becky (my wife at the time) and I busy ourselves transferring a couple
of small gear bags and plastic sacks filled with food and drinks from the cars to
the cockpit of the boat.

"Want some help with the mast?" I ask, but too late. John's thick, broad
shoulders are already bulging beneath his shirt as he raises the shiny aluminum
pole and locks it into place.

As Carolyn stows the gear and goodies, I walk across the gravel to a pickup
truck where two men are tying their green bateau to a rusty trailer. Their dark
hands are thick and lined, their faces covered by days' growth of black whiskers.
Strands of thick, oily hair that look like the tail feathers of a crow reach from
beneath their ball caps and over the dingy collars of their T-shirts.

"Catch any?" I ask.

The short, stocky man reaches over the gunwales of the boat and opens an
ice chest, revealing a load of large, blue-gray catfish and silvery buffalo.
Footprints across the South

“Do you run trot lines?” I guess, thinking it would be difficult, even on a good day, to pull that many fish from the river using rod and reel.

“Bout twenty,” he says. “Don’t you boys go pullin’ any of ’em.” His face tells me he isn’t joking.

“Thanks,” I say. “We’ll leave your trot lines in the water.” I return to the sailboat. John cranks the five-horse engine. The little motor purrs and churns the dark brown water as we back away from the pier and turn downstream. Carolyn pulls a bottle from a cabinet beneath her seat and pours John an inch of amber liquid.

“John’s got to have his rum when he sails. Makes him think he’s still in the Caribbean. Would you like some?” The couple had returned a few months before from a year of island hopping. Carolyn had taken an appointment as superintendent of the Louisiana Training Institute in Baker—a state facility for juvenile offenders—and John had landed a job with the undersecretary of the Department of Corrections, where we worked together.

A ski boat breezes past, ignoring the “No Wake Zone” sign and sloshing waves against the bulkheads lining the banks. Behind these low timber walls, houses, some of them the size of a suburban home, most three- or four-room cabins, serve as fishing camps for weekend getaways. A handful poise on creosote pilings, raised above the floods that swell the river almost every spring. The rest stand on slabs or blocks. In an annual ritual, TV reporters interview their owners, recording their acid complaints that the state should do more flood control. A dam at Pathview and another on the Comite would do just fine, they say.

The river broadens. John kills the motor, hoists the main sail, and we tack. It’s hard work. When the boat approaches a shore, John turns abruptly while Carolyn guides the spar to let the sail fill as we head across the river. We hear a whining engine behind us and look back to see a cigarette boat speeding down the stream, oblivious to our craft.

“Damn fool,” grunts John as he steers toward the right bank. Carolyn lowers the sail in time to slow us as we rush toward a stump. Becky squeals as a snake drops from a branch a few feet away. The speed boat roars past, sloshing our craft against a tangle of branches and vines.

After an hour, we see the mouth of the river and the open water of Lake Maurepas. But the river turns tightly here and a southeast wind is in our faces. Waves pound the shore and jostle the young cypresses.

“Lower the sail and crank the engine,” shouts John. “We can’t make it into the lake.” We don’t have room to tack, and the engine won’t push through the breakers. Carolyn quickly furls the sail and I pull the engine rope. John tacks close to a thicket of dark brown, slender stumps on the left bank, then turns the helm hard starboard and we come about, facing upstream.
As we sail back up the Amite, my reading of Bartram is ten years into the future. I am unaware that I am retracing his voyage of the autumn of 1775 (he writes that it was 1777, but his chronology is often wrong). He was recovering from a fever he had contracted while in the Alabama delta. Feverish, his eyes draining “a most painful defluxion of pellucid, corrosive water” (Travels 418), he had traveled from Mobile, taking a four- or five-week break at “Pearl island” to treat his ailment. Still plagued by poor eyesight, he boarded “a handsome large boat with three Negroes to navigate her,” coasted along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, through Pass Manchac, and into Lake “Mauripas” (Maurepas). On the northwest shore of the lake, the boat entered the “Amete” and carried him up the “Iberville” (now Bayou Manchac). No speeding boats threatened them. At the traders’ warehouses, possibly at Alligator Bayou, he alighted and took to foot.

A road near the northern bank of the bayou led him westward “under the shadow of a grand forest,” and he emerged on the Mississippi. Briskly, he walked to the banks of the river, where he “stood for a time as it were fascinated by the magnificence of the great sire of rivers” (Travels 427).

He had followed the British route to the Mississippi. Spain held New Orleans and the land some seventy miles north to Bayou Manchac. This made the south bank of Bayou Manchac an international border. At the time, it was a peaceful boundary. Four years later, Don Bernardo de Galvez would lead his army across the bayou, fire a few cannon balls into the fort at Baton Rouge (called New Richmond in 1775), and claim the region for Spain. The Spanish would hold it until 1810, when the United States annexed it.

The trip took several days by water, but a journey by land would have required a detour to the north, skirting marshes and crossing dozens of streams. Since the building of Interstates 10 and 12, the distance can be covered in a matter of three hours.

Along the Amite, the large trees are gone, cut away for prized cypress lumber, but, except for the fishing camps, an occasional restaurant, and the traffic of motorboats, the river looks much as Bartram knew it. Dense forests, shady and filled with vicious mosquitoes, hug its banks. Alligators lounge on logs along the banks or lie prone in the water, their snouts and eyes breaking the surface like three dark-green tennis balls floating in a triangular formation. Snowy egrets stand awkwardly on tree branches or stride slowly through the shallows at the river’s edge, washed by the wakes of skiers and bass boats.

Oh, and did I mention the canals that divert water from the swamps? And the plastic sheets, half-inflated basketballs, and sherds of vinyl siding that hang in the trees?
Twenty years later, when I am tracking Bartram, sport fishing hamlets still nestle between the river and the swamps along the Amite. No dams have been built, but the Corps of Engineers, hearing the complaints and eager to slosh their dredges, is considering “all reasonable measures to provide flood damage reductions and improve environmental conditions.”

A modern traveler following Bayou Manchac from the Amite to the Mississippi finds that the stream, no longer flooded by overflows of the big river, is shallow and filled with young cypress trees. Bartram’s road is shredded by a maze of highways and subdivisions and cut by Interstate 10 and the Airline Highway (U.S. 61). But Spanish Lake and its swamps, extending across 13,000 acres about 7 miles south of the bayou, provide a lonely pocket of undeveloped land and a memory of the earth Bartram knew. Tupelo and a few old-growth cypresses, one of them 700 years old, with five-foot tall knees, shoot upward from shallow water along Alligator Bayou, surrounded by wax myrtle.

Spanish Lake barely escaped the bulldozers and dredges that eat the wetlands of Louisiana. In the early 1990s a group of local citizens, led by environmentalists Frank Bonifay and Jim Ragland, fought off a waste incinerator company and an airport development project. When they saw a logging crew clear-cut sixty acres of the swamp, they began their advocacy with the goal of permanently protecting the area. Using their own money to buy 350 acres of the swamp, they established Bluff Swamp Wildlife Refuge and Botanical Gardens, then led Ascension Parish to purchase 901 acres and donate it to their nonprofit group.

On a cool autumn afternoon, I drive south from Baton Rouge on Nicholson Drive, turn onto Bayou Paul Lane and follow a gravel road along Bayou Manchac. Inside the unpainted cypress bait shop of Alligator Bayou Tours, set near a concrete control structure where Alligator Bayou empties into Bayou Manchac, a pet nutria scampers across the rough wood floor. One terrarium holds a young alligator. In another, a pair of rat snakes lounge. The nutria sniffs my socks as Lisa, the attendant, explains that there won’t be an evening ecotour. “We have a twenty-person minimum,” she says gently. “I’m sorry. We don’t run the tour unless we have enough people.”

“Then I’ll rent a canoe,” I say.

I complete a form, swearing that I will return the canoe unscathed and not hold the company liable for snake bites and the like, and pay my rental for two hours. Lisa leads me to the front porch, hands me a flotation vest, and opens a large wooden locker. “You may pick out a paddle,” she says.
A small fleet of fiberglass canoes lie keels-up beside a boat ramp. I turn one over and push it into the pale green duckweed that floats on the water. Wind has pushed rafts of the pale green plant into the lagoon. It surrounds the boat and clings to the paddle. Rounding a bend where a great blue heron watches my sluggish progress, I find that the opening to Cypress Flats is clear of duckweed but that the wind is now running straight over my bow. I kneel in the center of the canoe, hoping to catch less wind, but I drive a winding course. J-strokes and ruddering can't keep me moving straight ahead. While the whitewater of the Appalachians and Arkansas can be tough, and I found the headwinds on the Bartram canoe trail challenging, the duckweed and wind in my face on Alligator Bayou beats me. I feel a long way from my chiropractor.

I turn the boat, putting the wind to my back, and steady the craft. Relaxed for the first time in this suburban wilderness, I enjoy the low evening sun and the shadows of cypress trees spared from becoming timbers and flower bed mulch. The first frog of the evening croaks a greeting and, as I paddle down the bayou toward the duckweed bed, the heron steps to a branch and gives me a look. I think he winks, nods, says, “Good decision. You'd never have made it to the lake and back by dark.”

Seven blue tractors stand on the crest of the east levee where the Mississippi River makes a broad right turn around Manchac Point and flows west for five miles. The machines face north, toward Baton Rouge, their rotary mowers behind them like tails of iron beavers. If Andrew Jackson had not cut off Bayou Manchac from the river in 1814 for strategic reasons and the Corps of Engineers had not built the serpentine levee of earth, stone, and concrete in the early years of the twentieth century, the spot where the mowers stand would have been on the southern bank of the bayou. But the bayou no longer connects with the river. The nearest it gets is 700 feet. And, at this point, it is difficult to call it a bayou. It's more of a cypress slough.

Those of us whose experience with creeks and rivers comes from tramping the uplands have to orient ourselves to a different order of nature when we get to the Mississippi delta. We are accustomed to spring branches emptying into creeks and creeks into rivers. But bayous in this part of Louisiana flow out of the river, not into it.

Sediment from more than 1,245,000 square miles of mountains, forests, farmland, and cities swirl in the river and pass Bayou Manchac. Until the levees were built, waves of this juice, with its organic treasure, sloshed outward into the network of bayous and made their way to the Gulf of Mexico through the deep,
ancient Atchafalaya River or smaller, slow-moving streams. The delta dispersed water from New York, Georgia, Montana, and eighteen other states, as well as two Canadian provinces, through about 6,000 square miles of wetlands along 125 miles of coast in Louisiana. For more than 10,000 years, Bayou Manchac flowed out of the river, winding southeast through stands of Southern magnolias, tulip trees, and walnuts until it emptied into the Amite. From there, its waters went to the Gulf via Lakes Maurepas, Pontchartrain, and Borgne. Now, cut off from its main source, the bayou is an unfortunate disowned child of the "sire of rivers."

Bartram's description of the river and its banks portrays their wildness:

it is not expansion of surface alone that strikes us with ideas of magnificence, the altitude, and theatrical ascents of its pensile banks, the steady course of the mighty flood, the trees, high forests, even the particular object, as well as societies, bear the stamp of superiority and excellence; all unite or combine in exhibiting a prospect of the grand sublime. The banks of the river at Manchac, though frequently overflowed by the vernal inundations, are about fifty feet perpendicular height above the surface of the water . . . and these precipices being an accumulation of the sediment of muddy waters, annually brought down with the floods, of a light loamy consistence, are continually cracking and parting, present to view deep yawning chasms, in time split off, as the active perpetual current undermines, and the mighty masses of earth tumble headlong into the river, whose impetuous current sweeps away and lodges them elsewhere. (Travels 427f)

The duration of Bartram's trip up the river from Manchac to New Richmond (now Baton Rouge) also testifies to the river's power. He and a "gentleman" got into a boat rowed by slaves to ascend the river. While the distance from Bayou Manchac to Baton Rouge is only fifteen miles (not the "more than forty miles" reported by Bartram), the trip required two days, including rest stops at an Indian village and several plantations.

Even with its levees, the magnificence of the river at Manchac fascinates now as it did on the autumn day when Bartram marveled over it. He had seen other great rivers, but none brought out as much ink from his nib as the Mississippi. Above Jacksonville, for example, the St. Johns is wider than the "great sire." But its flow is limp. His "mighty Altamaha" is narrower and sluggish compared to the deep, turbid, dark waters of the Mississippi. River pilots work hard for their pay at Manchac Point, avoiding sand bars and finding the currents to push their tows of a dozen or more barges up the stream.
Though the river’s power endures, the scene isn’t quite right. Levees crunch the river and curb its passion to spread across the floodplains. The Corps of Engineers calls the system of levees and floodgates and diversion canals “improvement of the Mississippi River.” Not having a house washed away several times in each generation is, of course, more civil than facing an unbound, feral river. That the levee system is an “improvement” of the Mississippi is subject to debate, however. How do you improve upon a wild, twisting river that has cut its way from the bogs of Lake Itasca in Minnesota and gathered the waters of the Rockies, Appalachians, and Ozarks to spread its nourishing broth to trees, grasses, oysters, and shrimp across an area bigger than the state of Connecticut?

As with most human interventions in the earth’s systems, the channeling of the Mississippi, along with other projects in the Louisiana lowlands, has brought losses. While the riverbanks are secure, the vast wetlands have been slipping away. The river, forced to stay within the bounds that the nation chose for it, carries its load of decayed hemlock needles from the Smokies, grass from Iowa, and maple leaves from Pennsylvania into the Gulf of Mexico. There, the organic goodies sink to the bottom of the sea, their opportunity for replenishing and fertilizing land gone. Wetlands are the losers. No longer able to add the rich deposits to their mass and fertility, they wash away.

I first learned of the distress of the wetlands in the late 1980s. I owned a fishing camp, a tiny house consisting of two rooms and a bath. It stood precariously on creosote stilts beside Bayou Petite Caillou, a stream that runs south from Houma and empties into the Gulf through Bay Cocodrie and Bay Chaland. The camp, with its asbestos siding and rusting, red-painted corrugated tin roof, wasn’t much to look at. But it gave me a nice retreat from my job in the bureaucracy of Baton Rouge. Best of all, in my little blue aluminum boat, I had access to some of the best fishing in America.

On Friday evenings the locals, mostly Cajuns, gathered with weekend fisherfolk at Terry and Rosalie Lapeyrour’s store and bar on Robinson Canal. Terry and Rosalie almost always cooked a cauldron of gumbo, jambalaya, or redfish stew and laid out loaves of white bread. Guests brought cakes, slaw, or salad. Beer flowed along with an occasional Bloody Mary. The conversations, carried on over the rumble of laughter and the music from a jukebox, ranged from fishing to sex, with a few stories of grandchildren thrown in for good measure.

One evening, a Cajun woman, her face lined by decades in the sun, brought her scrapbook. Knowing my interest in the area and its environment, she turned past snapshots of family reunions to a page of faded black and white pictures. In a couple of the prints I could discern a pasture where scrawny cows munched on lush grass behind a barbed-wire fence.
Footprints across the South

“You know where dat is?” she asked. “Jus’guess.”
I took a leap and named a place up the road, near Chauvin.
“Aw, no, cher,” she said. “Dat’s d’bayou where you been fishing at.”
The pasture, she said, was near Cocodrie. Over the years, saltwater has covered it. Presumably, forever. If you know the shallow channels, you can drive your boat over the former grazing land to reach Little Cocodrie Bayou and connect to a long, narrow inlet behind the Louisiana Universities Marine Consortium research center.

Levees can’t carry the full responsibility for the loss of marshes, however. During the early and middle years of the twentieth century, oil companies made their mark. To shorten routes to the drilling rigs in the bays and tidal bayous, they cut canals. These straight ditches, some more than a hundred feet wide with hard, shiny banks, make islands of peninsulas. Work boats speed along them, taking crews to the rigs. Small tugs push barges. Their wakes grind away at the banks of soil and ancient shells. Not only do the canals give oil workers access to the marshes, they also provide a route for more sea water to intrude. Grasses and small shrubs, accustomed to brackish water and springtime washings of fresh water, tremble and die. With roots no longer holding the soil, the islands erode. One old-timer told of the day he drove his boat to his camp out in the marsh after a hurricane. It was demolished, he said. Where the little house had been was a pile of splintered lumber under a flaton.

“What is a flaton?” I asked.

“It’s a floating marsh,” he explained, “a mat of soil and grass floating out in the marsh.”

The breaking away of the flatons has increased, he said, over the past couple of decades. A Louisiana government website says that coastal Louisiana vanishes at the rate of one acre every thirty-five minutes. Estimates of the total loss since 1930 range up to 1,900 square miles of wetlands.

What really matters about the marshes of south Louisiana is not so much the land that is lost but the life: plants and animals, many unseen without microscopes; tiny mollusks, useless to humans but vital to birds, mammals, and fish; ducks, mink, muskrats, otters, and ocean life. This network of tidal bayous is one of the most prolific maternity wards and nurseries of the gulf, Caribbean, and South Atlantic. Trout, flounder, red drum, shrimp, and oysters spawn in the shallow waters, depending on just the right mixture of salt and fresh water. Their offspring grow seaworthy here, then migrate out to the Gulf on the fast-flowing tides of spring. No better snapshot of this activity is found than on a paupier.

Scattered across the marshes of Terrebonne Parish, in spots where the tides move swiftly through deep holes in the bayous, nets dangle from tall frames
made of welded pipes that stand on wooden platforms. In the springtime, when
the maturing shrimp migrate out of the marshes in great numbers, men ride
their bateaus out to these paupiers for all-night vigils. They lower the nets into
the water until the bar holding them stretches parallel to the surface of the
bayou, bending and groaning at the tug of the current. Periodically, after a few
beers and a snack of vienna sausage or a bologna sandwich, they raise the net and
extract a load of shrimp. Before dawn, when the tide has turned, the shrimpers
load their baskets and coolers into their boats and make their way home or to
a seafood shop. Tons of the succulent crustaceans make it past the paupiers, of
course, and become prey for trawlers, food for the fish that roam the bays and
Gulf, and the mamas and papas of next year’s shrimp.

Louisiana took note of the wetlands. In October 2003, voters approved
three amendments to the state’s constitution that would fund restoration
projects. The plan is to divert water from the Mississippi through the levees,
reintroducing water into the lowlands in a process mimicking the natural
overflow of the river. Sediments would deposit material in the marshes and
nourish vegetation.

The plan may work, if federal financial support flows to the ambitious
project. But it has come too late to help New Orleans. Surges of water pushed
by Hurricane Katrina broke sea walls and levees that protect the city from
floods. Water rose rapidly, turning the Crescent City into a bay of water, sewage,
flotsam, and vermin. Panic and death followed. Environmentalists were quick to
note that the lost marshes could have reduced the storm’s effects. Indeed, some
of them, including Joe Suhayda, an oceanographer at Louisiana State University,
pointed out the relationship between the wetlands and the safety of New Orleans
as early as 2002. On Bill Moyers’s NOW (National Public Broadcasting), he
predicted quite accurately the disaster that Katrina left behind. Suhayda said
that the wetlands reduced storm surges, but that now the water in the bays that
replaced the marshes actually adds to hurricanes’ power.

Effects of other technological mistakes and environmental meddling, as well
as corporate greed and carelessness, surround Bayou Manchac. From a few miles
south of the bayou to the outskirts of New Orleans, locals know the border of
the river as “the chemical corridor.” Environmentalists have tagged it “cancer
alley,” reflecting the high incidence of cancers and stillbirths that they blame
on the toxic byproducts of the chemical manufacturers. Stories of wind-borne
fumes and smoke spilling from vents and chimneys of factories abound, as do
reports of asthma, stillbirths, miscarriages, neurological diseases, and cancers.
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In the 1980s, Chris Gaudet, a pharmacist practicing in St. Gabriel, publicized what she called an unusually high rate of breast cancer and miscarriages in her area. Studies of the allegations resulted in mixed conclusions about the link between the chemicals and the diseases, but the suspicions continue. At the same time, the Superfund for cleanup of toxic waste sites focused on several plots along the river where chemicals were dumped. In 1998, the Borden company agreed to a settlement of Environmental Protection Agency charges that they had defiled the air, soil, and groundwater in the area. They paid a fine of $3.6 million and said they would clean up the ground water and donate $400,000 to buy equipment for local emergency response units.

More recently, a manufacturer of atrazine, an agricultural weed killer produced at a plant in St. Gabriel at the rate of seventy million pounds a year, found itself embroiled in a controversy over the safety of its product. It was bad enough that frogs exposed to runoffs of the chemical from farm fields have been found to suffer reproductive abnormalities. Now it appears that workers at the plant have a rate of prostate cancer fourteen times as great as other men.

Such stories are rampant along the river. While farmers in Missouri talk about the weather and commuters in Atlanta complain about the traffic, dinner table conversations from Baton Rouge to New Orleans often revolve around facts and rumors of pollution. Residents speak of Superfund sites—Cleve Reber, Bayou Sorrell, Old Inger—as they do of reprobate neighbors. They can be excused if they can't pronounce the polysyllabic names of the chemicals that companies dumped and left in the soil along "the great sire of rivers." When they balance the risks against their need for family income, they often stifle their fears and continue to vote for the politicians who give the industries massive tax breaks. Caught up in the complexities of the global economy, they live simple lives, prizing their small houses, big-screen TVs, and fishing boats. And they live in a wasteland that has replaced the grand forests and wild swamps that met the first Europeans to visit their broad valley.

What hope exists is in the efforts of people like Chris Gaudet, sounding the alarm, and Jim Ragland and Frank Bonifay, acting upon their concerns for the environment and leading government officials to promote ecological reforms.
Baton Rouge was clothed in flowers, like a bride—no, much more so; like a greenhouse. For we were in the absolute South now—no modifications, no compromises, no halfway measures. The magnolia trees in the Capitol grounds were lovely and fragrant, with their dense rich foliage and huge snowball blossoms.... And there was a tropical sun overhead, and a tropical swelter in the air.

— Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 1882

I lived in Baton Rouge for ten years, beginning slightly after the bicentennial of Bartram’s visit and overlapping the centennial of Mark Twain’s reminiscent trip down the Mississippi. During that time, I enjoyed the flowers and foliage and endured the swelter that brings a light sweat at 6:30 in the morning on the trip to pick up the *Morning Advocate* at the curb. The people were helpful and warm, the cultural events adequate, and the fun abundant.

But, having lived in more than half the Southern states and traveled through them all, I can’t say that the Baton Rouge I knew was “the absolute South.” At least not the “Old South” that Twain described. Returning at the turn of the twenty-first century, he would recognize only a few features of the city. Bartram would have a much harder time. Of the sites Bartram explored, only Jacksonville has outdone Baton Rouge in erasing the frontier outpost character that greeted Bartram. Charleston and Savannah retain remnants of their Colonial past and the seaports that put them on Bartram’s itinerary. But Baton Rouge has only the river and one plantation house (Magnolia Mound, built five years after his visit)
to recall the town he knew. Otherwise, the city sprawls east and south of a hub created by a diverse economy, shrouding its Colonial past.

Bartram spent three weeks in the area of “Baton Rouge.” When he arrived here, on the western edge of the British Empire, a few plantations skirted the fort of New Richmond. He lodged with a planter. Historians think this was William Dunbar, a wealthy man with scientific interests of his own, but from Bartram’s writings we only know about a mysterious “arborescent aromatic vine,” “a new and beautiful species of Verbena” (Travels 436), and plants under cultivation in gardens and fields: Tube-rose, Scotch grass (imported from the West Indies), and humble plant, which he suggests was an invasive species. Yet, despite the lack of detail in Bartram’s description, Baton Rouge is a fitting place to end the quest for the social and environmental changes that have occurred in the South since he crossed it. Resting at the western end of Bartram’s trail, and the western edge of England’s holdings in America, the city’s economy and culture embody much of what the South has become.

At the close of the seventeenth century, the French called the place Baton Rouge, “Red Stick,” after the bloodstained ceremonial post that the Indians had erected on the banks of the river. Since then, it has evolved from an outpost fortress into the seat of Louisiana’s government and petro-industry.

From the pinnacle of the Louisiana capitol building, I enjoy a panorama. The legislature is not in session. Spaces in the parking lot, surrounded by lawns and gardens, are open. I climb forty-eight steps, each step named for a state of the Union at the time it was built, and stand on a broad patio where the names of Alaska and Hawaii are engraved. Governor Huey P. Long had the white art deco skyscraper built in 1932. It is the tallest of any capitol in the nation.

Through heavy, ornate bronze doors, I enter a softly lit rotunda with a bronze map of the state in its center. An elevator carries me swiftly past floors that house the governor’s offices and other state bureaucracies. Its doors open on a drab room on the twenty-seventh floor, where another elevator runs the final three floors to the observation deck, 450 feet above the green lawns and massive live oak trees of the capitol grounds.

To the west, almost straight down from the top of the tower, two tugboats push three dozen barges up the churning, turbid waters of the Mississippi. Moored on the far bank, about a half mile away, empty barges lie idle. Beyond them, Interstate 10 stretches like an arrow through the flat fields of sugar plantations and across the vast Atchafalaya swamps.

Around the northern arch of the city, steam and smoke rise from the massive Exxon refinery. A rusted-out, abandoned aluminum plant and other factories hug the river. Behind them, away from the river, spreads a grid of narrow streets.
through neighborhoods of white frame houses. Southern University, perched on a bluff where the “red stick” once stood, overlooks Devil’s Swamp, a wetland the city uses as a landfill.

On the shallow hills flanking the river south of the State Capitol, shady residential neighborhoods and strip malls surround the government and financial center of the city. Beyond them, Tiger Stadium dominates the red tile roofs of Louisiana State University. Farther out, where Bartram visited with Indians displaced from Alabama, homes with columns and high-pitched roofs sit on vast, flat lawns of St. Augustine grass surrounded by meandering bayous.

Throughout the city, live oak trees still bend their branches toward the ground along boulevards and the lawns of homes in neighborhoods and estates. “Urban pioneers” have preserved the Garden District and restored houses in Beauregard Town and Spanish Town. Beneath Interstate 10, egrets roost on the branches of cypress trees in City Park Lake. Cyclists on the bike path circling the lake pedal past elephant ear plants at the water’s edge and admire opulent houses along the sparkling waters.

*The "Little Sham Castle"

From a bluff at the end of tree-shaded North Boulevard, the Old State Capitol, built in 1849, looks down on the river. When Mark Twain last passed by, the state was restoring it from the damage caused when Union soldiers quartered their horses in its atrium and scorched it when a cooking fire got out of hand. Twain thought the castle-like structure was the “ugliest thing on the Mississippi” and offered the opinion that

Sir Walter Scott is probably responsible for the capitol building; for it is not conceivable that this little sham castle would ever have been built if he had not run the people mad, a couple of generations ago, with his medieval romances . . . . It is pathetic enough that a whitewashed castle, with turrets and things—materials all unguenuine within and without, pretending to be what they are not—should ever have been built in this otherwise honorable place; but it is much more pathetic to see this architectural falsehood undergoing restoration and perpetuation in our day, when it would have been so easy to let dynamite finish what a charitable fire began, then devote this restoration money to the building of something genuine. (244)

Mark Twain’s eloquence could not sway the politicians. The refurbished building, surrounded by magnolias and oaks, is a tourist spot. Within it, spiral staircases and wood-floored legislative chambers reflect rays of light from arched
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stained glass windows. In the office where Huey Long and his brother Earl held court, I think I smell cigar smoke.

On the river, downhill from the old building’s western entrance, gray gun turrets, stacks, and the mast of the USS Kidd rise above the levee. A steel frame holds the World War II destroyer upright on the river mud. Turning my eyes to the left, I see Catfish Town.

The Legend of Catfish Town

Once upon a time, floods poured water into low spots along the river. Then, when the river slid back into its banks, fish became trapped in shallow pools. Men and boys waded in and grappled with the slithering, shiny critters. They filled baskets and took them home to fry.

When the levees were built, the river stayed within its banks. Companies built warehouses beside the river, near the railroad. But the people of the town did not forget the wonderful days of fishing. They named the warehouse area “Catfish Town.”

Years later, the town built its docks and rail yards elsewhere. The long, narrow brick buildings stood forlorn, their heavy wooden doors locked. Grass grew between the cobblestones; vines crept along the loading docks.

Then a very wise man, the mayor of the town, thought: “The city can buy Catfish Town. We will turn it into a mall, filled with shops and restaurants. Pittsburgh did this with its waterfront. And Baltimore. Even San Antonio, whose river was not much more than a ditch.”

“People will come from far and wide,” said the city’s bankers, “to see this marvel. They will drink beer and wine and dance beside our river. They will bring money.”

And so it was that the city raised millions of dollars. And when they had gotten enough money, they began to clean up Catfish Town. People of the town rented spaces in the buildings. They brought stoves for cooking gumbo and alligator sauce piquant and ovens for baking pizza. And they put them in a courtyard, indoors.

On the first day of July 1984, headlines said, “It’s A New Day.” Kegs of beer and loads of shrimp arrived on trucks. T-shirts were hung on racks and souvenirs displayed on shelves. Then, on America’s 208th birthday, townspeople drove and walked to the open plaza. In late afternoon, as the hot sun beamed over the shiny, new rooftops of the old buildings, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the plaza paved with bricks. Mothers and fathers drank beer from plastic cups and the children ate ice cream. A band played Cajun music. And all the town was happy.

Two U.S. senators came. A man introduced them. He said that they had helped get money from the federal government. The senators said that Catfish
Town was a wonderful example of how federal and local governments can work together. And the people of the town clapped and cheered.

Then the man introduced a small, balding man who wore the black garment and stiff white collar of a priest. The bishop said, “Let us pray.” For several minutes he told God about Catfish Town and about the people who worked hard “to make this day possible.” A boy with curly red hair nudged his father and whispered, “Doesn’t God know everything?” His dad whispered that they’d talk about it later, and the boy hushed. And then the bishop said, in a slow, soft voice, “God bless America...; God bless Baton Rouge...; and God Bless Catfish Town. Amen.”

People smiled and nodded. But a few snickered and said, “Who will come to this place? Why would they come?” But most said, “God bless Catfish Town.” And they bought jambalaya and fried chicken and beer and danced late into the night.

For months, people shopped at Catfish Town. Couples went to the rooftop of a restaurant on the levee to slurp raw oysters and drink beer. Office workers ate lunch in the food court.

Hard times came to Baton Rouge when oil prices dropped. People stopped going to Catfish Town. The shops closed, the restaurants, too. After three years, the newspaper said that Catfish Town was in financial trouble. It had cost almost $20 million but was never more than two-thirds rented out. And a bank that had lent money to the place wanted to be paid. Catfish Town closed.

Six years passed. A business named Jazz Enterprises bought eleven buildings and ten acres. They paid only $3.25 million. The next year, 1994, they built a hotel and a fancy walkway out to the river. It was shiny and pretty. At the end of the walkway, on the river, they berthed a big boat, shaped like a Mississippi River gambling boat. They named it the “Argosy Casino.”

The boy with curly red hair grew up and moved away. One day, he asked his father if God had blessed Catfish Town. His Dad told him that God works in mysterious ways.

**Guv’ment**

One in every five of the 200,000 people in Baton Rouge who go to work every day is heading for a government job, most with the State of Louisiana. I worked with a number of these people. Most want to get things done. They want the state hospitals to treat people well, the elders to have a good life, and the prisons to be safe and secure. They work hard in a tough political environment.

Among the many enterprises of the state are ten general hospitals. These are full-blown, complete health care centers with emergency rooms, maternity wards, coronary care, and the like. In addition, they have well-baby clinics. It’s a tradition, unique in America, that began in 1735 when Jean Louis, a sailor,
bequeathed his savings to establish the first charity hospital in New Orleans. Since then, the state has opened nine more hospitals. And, on almost every day since 1735, they’ve been in financial trouble.

Pat O’Connor, an old friend and political scientist, has labored for decades in the state’s health care system. His perennial quest: trying to find ways to keep Louisiana’s hospitals solvent and providing quality care. Pat’s job keeps him busy bringing information and options to the politicians who dabble with strategies for providing these services to the uninsured people of the state. Should the hospitals be privatized? Run by the university? Operated by a state agency? Shut down? For 250 years, leaders have grappled with the issues.

When Pat retires, he’ll continue what now occupies him on evenings and weekends. It’s Bartram-like work, with roots, stamens, pistils. He trades his bureaucrat’s white shirt and tie for jeans and a floppy-brimmed hat. For thirty years he has gathered specimens of iris from the bogs and low forests of the state. The amended soil in his backyard is filled with clumps of them. Pat cross-pollinates the flowers and has developed more than a dozen new varieties.

This horticulture is a work of love and a contribution not only to the world of botany but to Pat’s sanity. Politicians often turn Pat’s well-researched proposals for strengthening the hospital system into mulch; but each spring, in his backyard, his garden experiments bloom, satisfyingly, on slender, green stalks.

Pat and his fellow employees work in an environment where “small-government–spend-as-little-as-you-can” legislators perennially tussle with social reformers and demagogues who want as much state service as taxes will buy. And they do it in a state where scandals reach legendary proportions.

Corruption is a venerable tradition and a fine art in Louisiana befitting a state, a pundit once noted, whose founding fathers include pirate Jean Lafitte. Most memorable among the political rascals have been the powerful Huey P. Long, his brother Earl, and Edwin Edwards, the “Silver Fox” of the late twentieth century. Occasional side trips into order and reform serve only to highlight the riotous missteps of the politicians who have earned the state its reputation as the “northernmost banana republic.”

Governors wield extraordinary power in Louisiana. Gathering taxes into the state coffers, they distribute favors to fiscally-strapped parishes and communities across the bayous, prairies, and piney woods.

A larger-than-life statue of Huey Pierce Long rises above his grave on the spacious, oak-shaded lawn in front of the State Capitol grounds. Self-proclaimed “Kingfish” of Louisiana, he was governor from 1928 to 1932 and U.S. Senator from 1930 until 1935. Long’s shadow extends beyond the capitol grounds. He maneuvered the development of Louisiana State University into a major
institution. Highways, bridges, schools, and hospitals, funded by taxes on the oil industry, maintain his memory across the city and the state.

Decades later, stories of “Huey” fill the Baton Rouge air like the sounds of spring peepers in a swamp. A frequently told tale has to do with football and the circus. Huey was caught up in developing the LSU football team. In 1934, after an expansion of the stadium, Long predicted record crowds at the games. When he learned that the advance sales for the opening game were lagging, he checked around. He found that Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus was scheduled to be in Baton Rouge the same day.

Huey called John Ringling North, owner of the circus. Explaining the conflict in scheduling, Long asked North to reschedule the circus. North turned him down. Then the senator explained, “We have a dip law here in Louisiana. Animals that cross the state line must be dipped and then placed in quarantine for three weeks.”

North moved the circus to New Orleans for that night.

Folks in Baton Rouge tell these stories with an air of glee and, as with all legends, a sense that they are explaining their culture. Having long since concluded that deals and trickery are standard fare amongst politicians and that the public can do little to reverse the trend, they use the politicians as butts of jokes (“Hide your wallets and your sister; the legislature is in town.”) and anecdotes:

When Huey was planning to build the Airline Highway, he went to the governor of Mississippi. Asked him to kick in a few million to help build a bridge over the Mississippi at Baton Rouge. The governor of Mississippi said, “Why should the State of Mississippi fund a bridge in Louisiana?” Huey said, “Cause if you don't he'p out, we'll have to build the bridge so low that ocean-going ships can't go any farther up the river. Mississippi will be shut out from having a seaport.” The Mississippi governor refused, so Huey had the bridge built low to the water, an' best Mississippi can do is get barge freight.

Some politicians join the frivolity. In 1975, when Edwin Edwards was running for the second of his four terms as governor, a reporter confronted him about unscrupulous paybacks to friends and supporters. “You don't have to worry about that for my second term,” Edwards quipped. “I paid them all back during my first term.” Another Edwin legend has him saying, when discussing his prospects for election, “The only way I won't be elected is if they find me in bed with a live boy or a dead girl.”

Besides tales of his alleged abuse of the powers of his office, the “Fast Eddie” Edwards legends include stories of womanizing and high-stakes gambling.
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During one of his federal racketeering trials in the 1980s, prosecutors revealed that he gambled in Las Vegas under the name “T. Wong.” Corruption related to the gambling industry in Louisiana closed his political career when a federal court convicted him in 2000 for shaking down New Orleans casinos that were seeking licenses to operate. In 2002, he began serving a ten-year sentence in a federal penitentiary.

Government became fairly stable—if less interesting—during some administrations in the 1980s and into the new millennium. The Foster administration had a positive impact on the city by consolidating state offices in the downtown area and replacing dilapidated buildings with modern ones. The old business district is slowly coming back to life. Although the vintage Kresge Building and other shops along Third Street remain vacant, with cemetery fern (Pteris vittata) clinging to the mortar between the bricks of the second-story walls, restaurants and night spots fill the spaces where pharmacies, boutiques, and men’s stores once formed the city’s shopping district.

Education

Yellow buildings, topped with red tile roofs, surround the quadrangle at the heart of Louisiana State University. A ten-minute drive from the State Capitol, the campus stretches across two miles of land that once was a plantation on the Mississippi levee.

LSU began in 1877 as a little military academy in the center of the state with hardly more than a squad of cadets. By 2002, almost 1,300 faculty and 32,000 students from every state and over 120 countries were circulating through these buildings and grounds. Many of the students seek an education; others come to partake of the legendary good times.

The Princeton Review gave LSU top billing in its 2000 ranking of top party schools. Playboy ranked it number four in 2002. Beer flows in a steady stream through the taps at taverns and restaurants just outside the main campus gate. Heavy kegs arrive at frat houses on Friday and leave empty on Monday mornings.

When I studied at LSU, a number of serious students spent late hours with me in the Middleton Library and in computer labs, tapping the big databases and taking notes. With its history of petroleum research, the state has funded a bountiful supply of energy research. From the beer to the big research grants, the university injects more than a half-billion dollars into the Baton Rouge economy each year.

For a large number of Louisianians, LSU exists for what happens at 7:30 p.m. on autumn Saturdays in Tiger Stadium. Close to 100,000 people walk past the cage of a Bengal tiger named Mike and file through the turnstiles into the stadium known as “Death Valley.” When there is a home game, a pep rally spirit
consumes the entire town. Conversations are more animated. Never assume that a car will stop for a red light; he may be on his way to a tailgate party.

I learned early in my days in the city that being a rabid Tiger fan has nothing to do with being a student or alumnus. Many Exxon employees who wouldn't be able to direct you to the student center claim the Tigers as “their team.” Call them during a game and you get their answering machines.

As the Tigers prowl the south side of town, the Jaguars roam on the north. Southern University sprawls over a river bluff near the airport. Begun in New Orleans as a Reconstruction-era school to educate emancipated slaves and their children, the school originally followed the Tuskegee and Hampton model. Tinsmithing, carpentry, and agriculture had places alongside elementary, secondary, and a few college-level courses. Students from plantation sharecropper houses learned English, Latin, and mathematics.

When the school relocated from New Orleans in 1914, it continued its home economics and industrial arts offerings and added two years of college courses. By 1930 it had become a four-year college and then expanded to university status. Today, Southern offers bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees, with more than four hundred faculty instructing almost 9,000 students. While Southern is a historically black institution that the African American community looks to with pride, more than three hundred of its students are white.

Industry

The night watchman was puzzled. Wind was rushing out of the hole that the ice plant in Shreveport had drilled for a water well. He struck a match, expecting the wind to blow it out. Instead, the wind roared into flame. The story, passed along for 130 years, doesn’t say what happened to the watchman or how the fire was put out, but it does recall that the discovery of natural gas beneath the crust of Louisiana in 1870 began an industry that has grown into the state’s major asset.

At first, gas was not much more than a curiosity. The ice plant piped it to its factory and used it for lighting, but no one exploited the gas field commercially for another thirty years. By the first decade of the twentieth century, however, the quest for petroleum had swept the state. In 1901, drillers brought in the first commercial oil in the state. National firms converged. In 1909, the Standard Oil refinery (Exxon, today) in Baton Rouge went on stream. It remains, in terms of capacity, among the largest oil refineries on the North American continent. A year later, Louisiana's first long-distance oil pipeline was transporting crude oil from the northwestern corner of the state to the Baton Rouge plant.

Standard Oil was just the beginning. Not far downstream from the place where Bartram stood, fascinated by the magnificence of the “great sire of rivers,” processing plants that use petroleum stand fence-to-fence along the banks of
Footprints across the South

the river. Shining pipes, elevated above the highways, reach from factories and depots into the holds of oceangoing ships on the river. By day, the scenery along the River Road from Baton Rouge to New Orleans is a strange mixture of plantations, small frame houses, and steam rising from stacks. After dark, the view is surreal. Orange light reflects from the clouds, and flares of discarded gases shoot into the air.

More than sixty million tons of cargo, much of it petroleum and products made from petroleum, along with agricultural products, flowed in and out of the Port of Baton Rouge in 2002. The port ranked tenth in the nation that year.

People

Thousands have poured into the city over the past century, attracted by jobs in industry, government, and the universities. They arrive when the petro economy is good, then pack their moving vans when oil prices sink. During the oil depression of the late 1980s, truck rental companies were paying people to drive trucks from North Carolina and Georgia to Louisiana. Most of the city's working population, however, came from small towns and farms in Louisiana and Mississippi.

Two of these people, Cotton and Duckye Duhon, lived in the little white stucco two-bedroom next to my cypress-sided cottage in the Garden District. Cotton had grown up in St. James Parish, along the river, south of Baton Rouge. His bulbous, florid nose and the slight glaze in his eyes told of years of drinking. "When I was a boy, my mother would fix me a cherry bounce," he told me. "Wild cherries, water, sugar, wine, and white lighting, soaked for six weeks. She'd pour it over ice."

When Cotton finished high school, he looked for a job in Baton Rouge. He found one with Standard Oil and remained at the refinery until he retired. In his thirties, after his mother died, he met Duckye. Since moving to the city from Mississippi, she had been a hairdresser, then had a long career in the Western Union office. Both had retired on solid company pensions.

They followed LSU football closely, even named their dog "Tiger." In their younger years, Cotton and Duckye had bought LSU season tickets, but as they aged and the cost of the tickets rose, they resorted to radio and television. They knew all the players' names, qualifications, and records, their hometowns and family histories. Twenty years after the team integrated, Cotton still spoke with nostalgia about the days when the Tigers were all "white boys from Louisiana."

As the city has grown, downsides of urban development have shown up. Residents are beginning to sound like Atlantans, complaining about the traffic congestion and air pollution. And they have outgrown their sewer system. After
a federal judge ordered them to stop fouling the river, the city and parish planned a massive sewage improvement project that will cost more than $400 million.

Whether from the peak of the State Capitol or in the neighborhoods, Bartram’s New Richmond and Twain’s “absolute South . . . no modifications, no compromises, no halfway measures” is hard to find. The Southland, long reluctant to shed its rural garments, has a twenty-first-century, cosmopolitan wardrobe. Baton Rouge is one of the cities in the vanguard of the changes. Industry, education, and communication have made it so. The slate of the historical past has been wiped almost clean by a universal “American” way of life.