

FERRIES ACROSS THE OCONEE

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Laurens County was without a river bridge for the first eight and half decades of its existence. Just prior to the formation of Laurens County, the first ferries were established in what is now Laurens County. Other travelers had to cross on horseback or swim across in shallow spots. The new lands west of the Oconee were just beginning to open up to settlers. Ferry boats were nothing more than a floating platform. In the days before the motor driven ferries, the ferryman and his helpers would pull the boat across the river. Ropes were tied to a series of pulleys. Accidents did happen. Ropes broke and often. When the water was high and the currents swift, many ferries shut down. Men and livestock fell into the river, some losing their lives. One could not always rely upon the ferry as a means of crossing the river.

William Neel established Dublin's first ferry in what became the most extreme southeastern part of Dublin. The ferry was established in 1804 or before, three years before the formation of Laurens County. Neel's ferry is shown on the land grant maps of 1804 opposite Land Lot 235 of the 1st Land District. This places the ferry at the mouth of Long Branch. This may be the same spot where a ferry was established by Neil Munroe and Richard Ricks in the 1820's. Neel and Jonathan Sawyer, were the first settlers of the community known as Sandbar, which later became East Dublin.

In 1806 or 1807, George G. Gaines placed his ferry at the point where the Old Savannah Road crossed the Oconee River. The ferry was put under the same rates as other county ferries in August 1810. Gaines later purchased one thousand acres along the eastern side of the ferry. The street which ran to the ferry was named in honor of Gaines who left this area around the time of the War of 1812. Gaines sold his ferry possibly to Henry C. Fuqua. Fuqua sold the ferry to wealthy landowner Jeremiah Yopp in 1831.

In 1832, Yopp petitioned the Justices of the Inferior Court for the right to charge for passage over

the river. The county approved the rates of fifty cents for loaded wagons, twenty-five cents for jersey wagons and carts, six and one-quarter cents for man and horse or footman and cattle, two cents for hogs, and one and one-half cents for sheep. Yopp operated the ferry until his death in 1852. His son-in-law sold the property to a Dublin lawyer, Young Anderson. During Anderson's ownership, the most famous visitor to Dublin may have crossed at the ferry then known as Dublin Ferry. On May 7, 1865, Confederate President Jefferson Davis crossed the Oconee River near Dublin, possibly at the ferry.

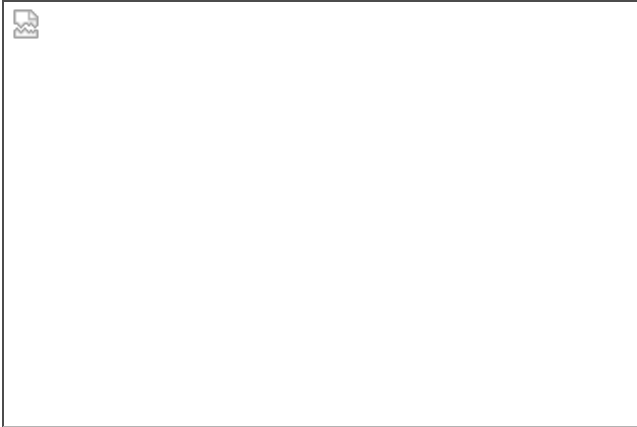


In 1870 ,John Jones was hired to build a new boat for the Dublin Ferry. The flat boat was fifty feet long and twelve feet wide. The main boat was constructed from 5" by 8" timbers with two inch planks along the bottom and one and one quarter inch plank flooring. The boat was to be ready by February. William Madison, a former slave, was awarded the contract to keep the ferry in 1871. Madison kept the ferry for fifteen consecutive years. The end of the Dublin ferry was near when talk of a bridge began to surface.

Passage on the ferry was made free to the public on June 26, 1878. Laurens County condemned the property in 1884. The area around the ferry was soon developed. The resurgent river boat companies tied their boats to docks on both sides of the ferry. Rev. W.S. Ramsay of First Baptist conducted baptismal services there in the early eighties. Dr. R.H. Hightower built warehouses and a steam mill near the ferry site. Traffic became so heavy that in 1880 the ferryman Madison called for the hiring of an additional man to handle the increasing load. Some citizens were irate when they had to wait six hours to cross the river following a meeting of the Baptist Association at Shady Grove in eastern Laurens County. Bridge proponents used the inadequate ferry as the primary reason for a bridge.

The Dublin Ferry would serve one last purpose. For the five years following the completion of the Dublin and Wrightsville Railroad to the eastern banks of the river, the ferry was used to carry passengers and freight on into Dublin. When the first permanent passenger bridge was completed in 1891, the ferry was discontinued.

Bill Madison, the black ferryman, was a popular figure in the community. Mrs. E.C. Campbell remembered that when she was a little girl all roads to the ferry were crowded on Sunday afternoons. "Uncle Bill" was known as a masterful dancer and was loved by all the children whom he would give free rides.



One incident on a cold December Saturday night in 1879 typified the skill and dedication of ferryman Madison. John B. and Russell Holmes arrived at the ferry around 10:00 in the evening. After a long day at his post, Bill was asleep in the ferryman's quarters. The gentlemen decided that they could make it across the river and not get ol' Bill up from his slumber. Russell grabbed the ferry chain and began pulling the ferry flat toward the opposite bank. Suddenly, he lost his balance and fell into the frigid waters. Without Russell holding the chain, the flat was set adrift. Russell screamed at the top of his lungs awakening Madison, who dashed into the darkness. Madison jumped into his bateau and rowed as hard as he could toward the rapidly moving craft and its blunderous operator. About a mile down river, Bill caught up with Holmes and the boat. He managed to jump from his bateau onto the ferry boat, bringing it under his control by wedging it against a cypress stump on the bank. With the assistance of a couple of onlookers, Madison was able to thaw out the would be ferryman.

For a few months in 1921 the ferry returned to Dublin. During the time while the river bridge was being refitted, Laurens County purchased the necessary boats and equipment and operated the ferry until the bridge was reopened to auto traffic. Today when the river is shallow, you can see the remnants of the ferry at the northern end of the riverwalk park at the mouth of Town Branch.

Ephraim Green was granted permission to establish a ferry in northern Laurens County on August 1, 1808. His rates were to be the same as Blackshear's. Another ferry was established in the same area by William Livingston. William Diamond was granted permission to establish a ferry at the place known as Spear's Ferry on Aug. 7, 1810. The area came to be known as Diamond Landing. It was here near Wilkes Spring in southern Laurens County where a third county ferry was sought to be established by Laurens County. Jacob Robinson was granted permission to establish a ferry on August 7, 1815. Robinson was granted permission to double the rates when the river overflowed its banks. While ferries were usually run across rivers, Maddox's Ferry was running across Big Creek before 1812.

The most famous ferry in the annals of Laurens County History is Blackshear's Ferry. Today the last remnants of the ferry are located at the end of Country Club Road three miles north of the city limits. The area around Blackshear's Ferry may have encompassed a series of ferries. A survey of Gen. David Blackshear's estate shows an old ferry about a half mile northwest of last ferry site.

The first mention of a ferry in the records of Laurens County appeared on February 2, 1808. The Justices of the Inferior Court ordered the establishment of a ferry at Blackshear's Landing. The rates approved were 50 cents for loaded wagon, 37.5 cents for empty wagons, 25 cents for loaded carts, 18.75 cents for empty carts, 37.5 cents for pleasure carriages and horses, 6.25 cents for man and horse, led horse and footman, black cattle two cents per head, and all other stock was a penny

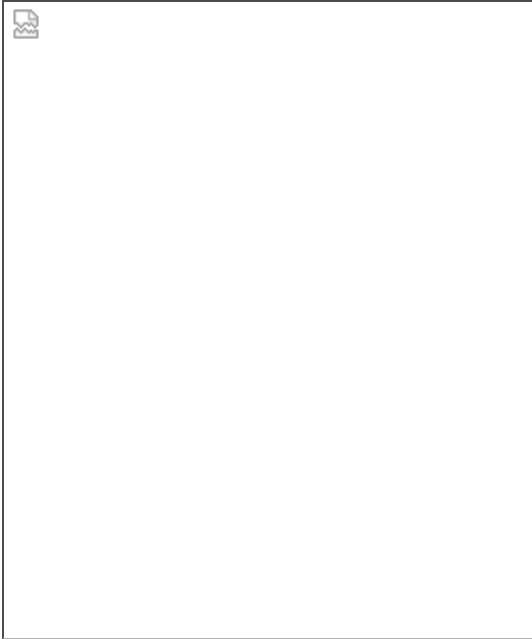
per head. The second and possibly the first site was located about a half mile southeast of the last ferry site. That ferry, known as Trammel's Ferry, was established by Jared Trammel and James Beatty at the point where the ancient Lower Uchee Indian Trail crossed the Oconee River at Carr's Bluff. It may have been established prior to the formation of the county. In 1812 orders for new roads by the Inferior Court indicated that Beatty's and Trammel's Ferries were separate ferries in the area.

The Georgia Legislature in 1819 authorized a public ferry across the Oconee River at the place formerly known as Trammel's Ferry with the same rates as previously charged, subject to modification by the Inferior Court. The law provided that all of the profits from the ferry would go to the estate of Trammel for those passengers leaving from the northeast side of the ferry landing and to James Beatty for all those passengers leaving from the southwest side of the ferry landing.

In 1823 after Beatty's death the ferry was purchased by General David Blackshear. Thereafter the third and last ferry was established by the General or his son Elijah in the 1820s. It was at this point where the 4000 cavalymen of Gen. Joseph Wheeler, C.S.A. crossed the river in November of 1864. Wheeler's men were riding down the flanks of Gen. W.T. Sherman's right wing in an attempt to get in front of "The March to the Sea."

Laurens County purchased the ferry during the May Term of Ordinary Court in 1874. At the ferry site a small house was constructed as a home for the ferryman. The job called for long days from sunup to sundown. A shelter was built to shield passengers during periods of heavy rain and a well dug to provide drinking water for the ferryman and thirsty passengers. The Laurens County commissioners had a new problem to deal with around the turn of this century. On December 5, 1910, the commissioners voted to discontinue the practice of allowing automobiles to ride on the boat with livestock. Those doing so would have to cross at their own risk.

Laurens County's property taxes included a levy for ferry operations. In 1887, the tax was seven cents for every hundred dollars of taxable property and represented 10 percent of the county's total budget. During periods of high water, the county hired additional ferry men to help guide the boat across the raging waters. Some of the ferry boats sunk on a regular basis. At other times the boats broke away and floated down river. Frank Smith was rewarded with eleven dollars for bringing back a runaway ferry boat in 1887. At times boats had to be rented until new ones could be constructed.



In their final meeting of 1931, the Laurens County Commissioners voted to close the ferry in January 15, 1932. One week later responding to a large public outcry, the ferry was reopened. Two lawyers, M.H. Blackshear, a descendant of the ferry's founder, and Joseph Chappell convinced the board of the ferry's historic value. The effort to keep the ferry open was also led by Clerk of Courts, E.S. Baldwin, Ordinary Court Judge E.D. White, and dairy farmer, Duren I. Parker. A new flat was placed in service later that spring.

The ferry continued to operate even through the lean years of the depression. On January 8, 1937, the commissioners voted to sell the ferry. Their decision again resulted in a public outcry and the matter was put on hold. The issue came up for a vote in 1939 when the commission voted to continue the operation on a month to month basis as long as it was profitable.

The ferry shut down on a Sunday in January 1940 for one day. It was the first time in the known history of the county ferry that ice floes prevented its operation. Rawls Watson, the ferry keeper, reported in the February 1, 1940 issue of "The Courier Herald" that the ice floes nearly filled the river. Rawls made one attempt to cross the river, breaking and chopping ice with his poles. The ice kept coming down the river for parts of three days. Watson said that the chunks of ice were as big as 30 feet long and 15 feet wide and having a thickness of 1 1/2 inches thick.

The issue of the operation of the ferry came up for a final determination in May of 1947. The ferry boat had been out of service for some time. M.H. Blackshear, county attorney at the time, led the effort to keep the ferry open. The commissioners found that the ferry was only necessary for the Route 2 postman. The secretary was directed to work out an alternative route. The commissioners never officially closed Blackshear's Ferry, choosing instead to not appropriate the funds to repair the damaged ferry boat.

The coming of the automobile signaled the end of the ferry. The old boats were slow and simply couldn't handle the weight of the cars. When the river was up, one had to go down to Dublin to cross. The ferry, the last vestige of 19th century transportation, was gone, never to return.

During the years in which the county operated the ferry, the right to run the ferry was put up for public auction to the highest bidder. Usually the residents of the area surrounding the ferry were the successful bidders. Rawls A. Watson, the last ferry keeper, kept the ferry longer than any other

man. Irwin Calhoun, known as the "singing ferryman," was said to have sang all day without repeating a song. Other ferry men at Blackshear's Ferry were S.L. Weaver, E.M. Lake, Joseph T. Watson, David M. Watson, J.C. Jones, J.L. Bostwick, and D.W. Skipper.

FERRY KEEPERS 1871-1947: Dublin, William Madison, 1871-1891. Blackshear's Ferry, Irwin Calhoun, 1875; Noah Anderson, 1876-7; Robert Hightower, 1878-9, Daniel Skipper, 1880, David M. Watson, 1881, 1890-2; D.W. Skipper, 1884, 1886; S.L. Weaver, 1885; David M. Watson and July Donaldson, 1887-1888; E.M. Lake, 1889; Joseph T. Watson, 1893-5, 1901, 1904-1908; John C. Jones, 1896-8; J.L. Bostick, 1899; E.F. Hagin and L.F. Hagin, 1902; Green Brantley, 1903; and Rawls A. Watson, 1911-1947.