

Driving Tours

1. Boykin to Stateburg

This scenic stretch of pastoral countryside harkens back to an earlier era when South Carolina was primarily an agriculture state. Working farms and forests are still evident and much history occurred here. From I-20 take U.S. 521 south for 2.8 miles, then take the right fork, S.C. 261. After a few miles you will enter the community of Boykin where one of the last skirmishes of the Civil War, Boykin's Mill, took place during Potters Raid on April 18, 1865.

The Boykin Company Grille (803-425-6724) offers gifts and good food and is

open for lunch from Tuesday through Saturday, 11:30a.m. to 2:00p.m., and supper, 5:30 to 9:00p.m., from Thursday through Saturday (and bluegrass on Friday and Saturday night). The Mill Pond Steak House specializes in fine certified Angus beef and is open from 5:00 to 10:00p.m., Tuesday through Saturday; call 803-425-8825. Boykin also features the Broome Place where brooms are made by hand on 100 year-old original equipment; hours are 10:30a.m. to 5:00p.m., Tuesday through Friday and 10:30a.m. to 2:00p.m. on Saturday; call 803-425-0933.

Proceeding southward on Highway 261, one passes through more rural countryside. Shortly after passing the Kershaw-Sumter County line, the entrance to the Wateree Prison Farm appears on the right. This medium-security prison consists of more than 7,000 acres including eight miles on the Wateree River, and is a self-sustaining

operation that provides milk, grits and corn meal for the state's nearly 24,000 inmates. At 3.8 miles south of the Wateree Prison, 261 makes a sharp curve to the right while crossing Rattling Creek. Here the Civil War skirmish at Dinkins Mill occurred on April 19, 1865, ten days after Confederate surrender at Appomattox Court House.

Nearly two miles south of this curve, a historical marker on the right highlights Oakland Plantation, known locally as "Dixie Hall." This private plantation, dating back to a royal grant from 1735, served as a headquarters for both Confederate and Union Forces in 1865. About a mile past Oakland Plantation, turn right onto the Horatio-Hagood Road, County Road 37, which takes you to the cross roads of Horatio and the Lenoir Country Store and Post Office. The country store, on the National Register of Historic Places, has been in operation by the same family for nearly 200 years. As

expected in an old-time country store, Lenoir's has a variety of offerings ranging from dry goods to penny candy.

Return on the same road to Highway on 261; turn south on 261, drive for a little more than a mile and turn left on Meeting House Road (County Road 488). Proceed 1.6 miles and follow the signs to the General Thomas Sumter Memorial Park. Sumter, the "Gamecock," was one of three partisan generals in South Carolina during the Revolution and the last surviving general officer of the Revolutionary War. Sumter's only son, Thomas Sumter Jr., is also buried here, but the most imposing monument in the park is the brick chapel housing the remains of Thomas Sumter Jr.'s wife, Nathalie de Lage Sumter, a devout Catholic and native of France.

On Meeting House Road, soon after leaving SC 261 and before you reach the

General Sumter Memorial Park, you will pass a distinctive white church with green trim on your right, the High Hills Baptist Church. Founded in 1772, the present structure was built in 1803 on land granted by General Thomas Sumter. The Reverend Richard Furman guided this church during the tumultuous years of the Revolution and later became the founder of Furman University.

As you proceed southward again on Highway 261, the land begins to rise quickly and signals that you are approaching the old community and National Historic District of Stateburg in the heart of the High Hills of the Santee. Legend has it that Stateburg lost out to Columbia by one vote of becoming the new capital of South Carolina, but this is more fiction than fact.

The lovely Episcopal Church of the Holy Cross is Stateburg's most visible structure. Of Victorian Gothic design, it was built between 1850-1852 and features a unique construction, pisé terre, or rammed earth. This technique involves compacting successive layers of soil between forms to make a wall. Designated a National Historic Landmark in 1973, the Church of the Holy Cross has such notable South Carolinians buried in its cemetery as Joel Roberts Poinsett, statesman, diplomat, and naturalist, and George Mabry, a Medal of Honor winner in World War II.

Just before coming to the stoplight at the intersection of Highway 261 and US 378, a historical marker appears on the left side of the road. This sign celebrates Highway 261, a road with a long history in this area that was at one time called the Catawba Path. Later it connected Charleston to Camden and was called the "Great Charleston Road." This is probably the same road traveled by John Lawson when he came through the area in 1701. As with many old roads in the state, it has also been called the Kings Highway. Further north, an eastern branch of this road extended into Pennsylvania called the "Great War Road" that was heavily used by the Scotch-Irish who emigrated to the Carolina backcountry after the Revolutionary War.

2. Wedgefield to Rimini

Highway 261 continues southward across the stoplight intersection with U.S. Highway 378 at Stateburg. The red clay cut banks and hilly terrain (the elevation here is 378 feet above sea level) are a reminder that you are still within the High Hills of the Santee. The small community of Wedgefield on the CSX Rail Line is the last chance for gasoline and a soda and a pack of nabs for the next few miles. Batten's Grocery and Café is a well-known stop for sportsmen and locals.

At 3.8 miles south of Wedgefield, Highway 261 curves to the left while a paved road that quickly turns to dirt forks to the right; take this right fork and then immediately turn right on the dirt road, Arthur Gayle Road, to the Singleton Cemetery. Follow Arthur Gayle Road, which passes through fields, woodlands and rural homes, for 2.4 miles. There will be a dirt drive on the right leading to the cemetery which is gated off and you will have to walk the last 300 yards to it. This isolated and serene cemetery, tucked away in the woods of Manchester State Forest, is the resting place of the Singleton family who immigrated to Sumter County from Virginia in the 1750s and became one of the most prominent and wealthiest families in the region. Buried here are the family patriarch, Col. Matthew Singleton, as well as George McDuffie, Governor, U.S. Senator, and University of South Carolina trustee president. The Singleton family owned thousands of acres of plantations, including the beautiful Kensington Mansion on the west side of the Wateree Valley in Richland County almost directly across from the cemetery.

Returning the way you came to Highway 261, turn right (south) and at 1.3 miles, a gravel entrance road on the right takes you to the Manchester State Forest Headquarters (open 8:30a.m. to 4:00p.m., Monday through Friday). Back on 261, another 1.1 miles past the entrance road to Manchester there will be a paved road on the right, County Road 63, Poinsett Park Road, leading to Poinsett State Park (see above). Continuing southward on 261, all of the land on the left is part of the U.S. Air Force's Poinsett Electronic Bomb Range where F-16s practice low-level bomb and strafing runs.

This stretch of highway, in the heart of the Manchester State Forest, is an isolated remnant of ancient sand dunes similar to the fall line sand hills that run through Columbia and Camden 25 miles to the north. The droughty, infertile, sandy soil is best for growing longleaf pine and "scrub oak," and this area was part of a government reclamation and resettlement project in the 1930s.

Proceeding on 261, and 2.5 miles south of the entrance to Poinsett State Park, take the right fork (County Road 51, Camp Mac Boykin Road). At mile 1.6, St. Marks Episcopal Church appears on the left. The beauty of this church, constructed in 1855, is all the more striking because of its isolation and peaceful setting in the middle of Manchester State Forest. Six governors worshipped here or at previous church locations, and it was the parish church for two prominent families of the area, the Richardsons and Mannings. The dirt drive directly across from St. Marks Episcopal Church leads to Millford Plantation, considered by many as the finest example of Greek Revival residential architecture in America. Constructed between 1839 and 1841 by John Laurence Manning, later a South Carolina governor, this magnificent home has been restored by Richard Hampton Jenrette and is open to the public on the first Saturday of each month, February-December, and every Saturday in April. For guided tours call 803-452-6194; there is an admission charge.

At 1.4 miles beyond St. Marks Church you will come to Fulton Crossroads intersection and Fulton Cemetery on the left. A roadside historical marker commemorates Col. David DuBose Gaillard, who was born near here and went on to become one of the primary engineers of the Panama Canal. The paved road to the right at this intersection, County Road 808, goes to Mill Creek County Park a short distance away. At 1.3 miles south of Fulton Crossroads a dirt road to the right takes you to Sparkleberry Landing, the main jumping off point to the beautiful Sparkleberry Swamp.

The little crossroads of Rimini (pronounced with a long "i" on the end) is nearly 3 miles beyond the turn to Sparkleberry. Just before the Rimini railroad tracks, a paved road on the right takes you to Pack's Landing on the eastern shore of Upper Lake Marion. Pack's is a full-service landing that provides food, ice, bait and tackle.

Just to the south of Rimini, one of the more interesting actions of the Revolutionary War, called the Battle of Halfway Swamp, took place when the British Major McLeod, who had been harried and pushed by the "Swamp Fox," Francis Marion, called for a duel between 20 of his best men and 20 of Marion's. Marion selected his men and the duel was about to take place when McLeod changed his mind and fled up the River Road.

Proceeding southward from Rimini, take the right fork, the Old River Road, County Road 76, and you cross into Clarendon County. At one mile south of Rimini, a beautiful mill pond appears on your left. Full of lime-green duckweed and old cypress trees festooned with Spanish moss, Elliott's Mill Pond is a delight for nature photographers and artists (this is private property but the views from the road are public). Just beyond the Mill Pond, a dirt road on the right takes you to Elliott's Landing on the eastern shore of Lake Marion.

The southern boundary of the COWASEE Basin ends here but the Old River Road continues through more scenic countryside with interesting stops such as the Richardson Cemetery, located on the right, 2.3 miles south of Rimini. The historical marker notes that the family patriarch and Revolutionary war hero General Richard Richardson is buried here along with two Governors, James B. Richardson and John P. Richardson, who was also the founder of the Citadel.

Carolina King Resort Landing (formerly Billups Landing), Jack's Creek Landing and the Santee National Wildlife Refuge are all to the south on the shores of Lake Marion. The Refuge includes a visitors center, hiking and birding trails, and the historic Fort Watson Revolutionary War battle site which sits atop an old Indian mound.

On the way to Santee National Wildlife Refuge is the Liberty Hill AME Church, home church for the Briggs and Delaine families who were part of the famous landmark school desegregation case in 1954, Brown vs. the Board of Education. The nearby village of Summertown, an old summer resort town for the planters of the area, features some beautiful old homes as well as the Summertown Diner (open every day except Thursday) one of the best local eateries anywhere.

3. Western Basin Tour, Calhoun County

This tour starts southward on US 176 from the intersection of I-20 and US 176 (exit 119). Lands near this exit belong to Carolina Eastman, the largest maker of plastics for the soft drink/bottled water industry in the United States. Recently Starbucks established a

coffee roasting plant, one of only five in the world, at the Calhoun County Industrial Park. Calhoun County was carved out of the old Orangeburg District in 1908. Many of the first settlers in this part of the state came from Germany and Switzerland. Calhoun is mostly a rural county with a population of about 12,000. Farming here is still a viable and dominant way of life.

Proceed southward on 176. Continue on 176, past US Highway 21 that forks to the right and goes to Orangeburg. This fork roughly defines the center of the Sandy Run Community. The terrain starts to become notably hillier and more reminiscent of the Piedmont than the flat Coastal Plain. At mile 7.0, on the left, is the Sandy Run Lutheran Church, founded ca. 1765 and one of the oldest Lutheran Churches in the state. The current church was constructed in 1919.

At mile 13.5, turn left at County Road 24, the Old Belleville Road. This road is named for Revolutionary War hero Col. William Thomas's Belleville Plantation, formerly located near Fort Motte. This pastoral road winds through scenic country side and parallels the Congaree River one to three miles to the east.

At mile 20.5, turn left by the Mt. Carmel Baptist Church onto County Road 25, Purple Martin Road. This short road comes to a "T" at mile 22, where you will turn left onto Fort Motte Road. At mile 25 look for a dirt drive on the left, Turkey Track Lane. This dirt road leads to the Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve, a 200-acre SCDNR property that overlooks the Congaree River and offers spectacular views of the Congaree National Park (see above).

One mile south of Turkey Track Lane, centered on the Norfolk-Southern Railway crossing, is the tiny community of Fort Motte, named after a Revolutionary War battle fought near here on May 12, 1781. As with many rural South Carolina communities, Fort Motte thrived in the heyday when cotton was king. A century ago on a Saturday afternoon the streets would have been lined with mule wagons and farmers swapping stories and stocking up on provisions. A short drive around the old town reveals a few quiet residences and crumbling brick store fronts. The remains of the old jail, built in 1906, resemble something out of the Wild West.

Continue southward on the Fort Motte Road. Two miles from the railroad tracks, the St. Matthews Parish Episcopal Church appears on a rise on the left surrounded by farmland. The present structure dates from about 1850 but the church was first organized in the 1760s. One-half mile south of this church you will come to the intersection with US Highway 601 called Willes Crossroads. Turn left onto Highway 601 for 1.6 miles then turn right onto SC 267 (McCord's Ferry Road). This part of Calhoun County is well known for its large farms planted in cotton, corn and soybeans. As you head further south on SC 267, the roadsides become more wooded. After a few miles, near the junction with SC 33, is the community of Lone Star and a side road that takes you to Low Falls Landing on the west bank of the Santee River and the upper reaches of Lake Marion. South of Lone Star, SC 267 crosses Halfway Swamp and the southern terminus of the COWASEE Basin Focus Area boundary.

The drive on 267 continues through more scenic countryside that includes the towns of Elloree and Santee. The 2,500-acre Santee State Park on the west side of Lake Marion near Elloree has public landing access to Lake Marion with campsites and cabin rentals. The Santee National Wildlife Refuge is also located nearby a few miles east of Santee. For those with a big appetite, the Lone Star BBQ, located just north of Santee off SC Highway 6, is highly recommended.

4. Lower Richland Tour

The back roads and by-ways of rural Lower Richland County offer a pleasant change of pace to the sprawl and traffic in the remainder of the county. This was at one time a major cotton producing area of South Carolina and it still retains much of its agricultural heritage. Lower Richland is also the home of South Carolina's only national park, the Congaree National Park, which is a tour in itself.

This tour starts at the junction of I-77 and Bluff Road (SC 48) on the southeast side of Columbia. Proceed south on Bluff Road for 7.5 miles and turn left (north) on County Road 37, Lower Richland Blvd. Proceed 2 miles, and on the right is a sign pointing to the Harriet Barber House. Turn to the right on a dirt drive and the house will appear on the right. The Harriet Barber House is on land made available by purchase to freed slaves by the South Carolina Land Commission, an agency established after the Civil War to give freedmen the opportunity to own land. The land and home have been in the same family since 1872 and were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Returning to Lower Richland Boulevard, turn right (north) and at 0.7 miles you will come to a railroad track. Proceed across the track and you will be in the small village of Hopkins, named after one of the founding families of Lower Richland that came south in the 1700s from Virginia. Continue for 0.2 miles past the railroad and then take the right fork onto Horrell Hill Road. On the right is the Hopkins Presbyterian Church and directly across the street is the old Hopkins Graded School (now a private residence), both on the National Register as excellent examples of a late nineteenth century intact small rural church and school.

Proceed east on County Road 66 (Cabin Creek Road) for 4.2 miles and turn left (north) on County Road 85, Elm Savannah Road. On the left will appear the quaint St. John's Episcopal Church Congreg. This church was established in 1859 by some of the prominent families that settled Lower Richland County, and many are buried in the cemetery.

After driving south on SC 769 (Congaree Road) for 2.2 miles past Elm Savannah Road, there will appear on your right an authentic southern BBQ restaurant, Big T's. This is worth a stop if it's anywhere near lunch or supper. SC 769 intersects with SC 48 (Bluff Road) at the community of Gadsden, named after James Gadsden (1788-1858), President of the South Carolina Railroad Company from 1840-1850 and Minister to Mexico who negotiated the Gadsden Purchase in 1853 that acquired parts of southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico.

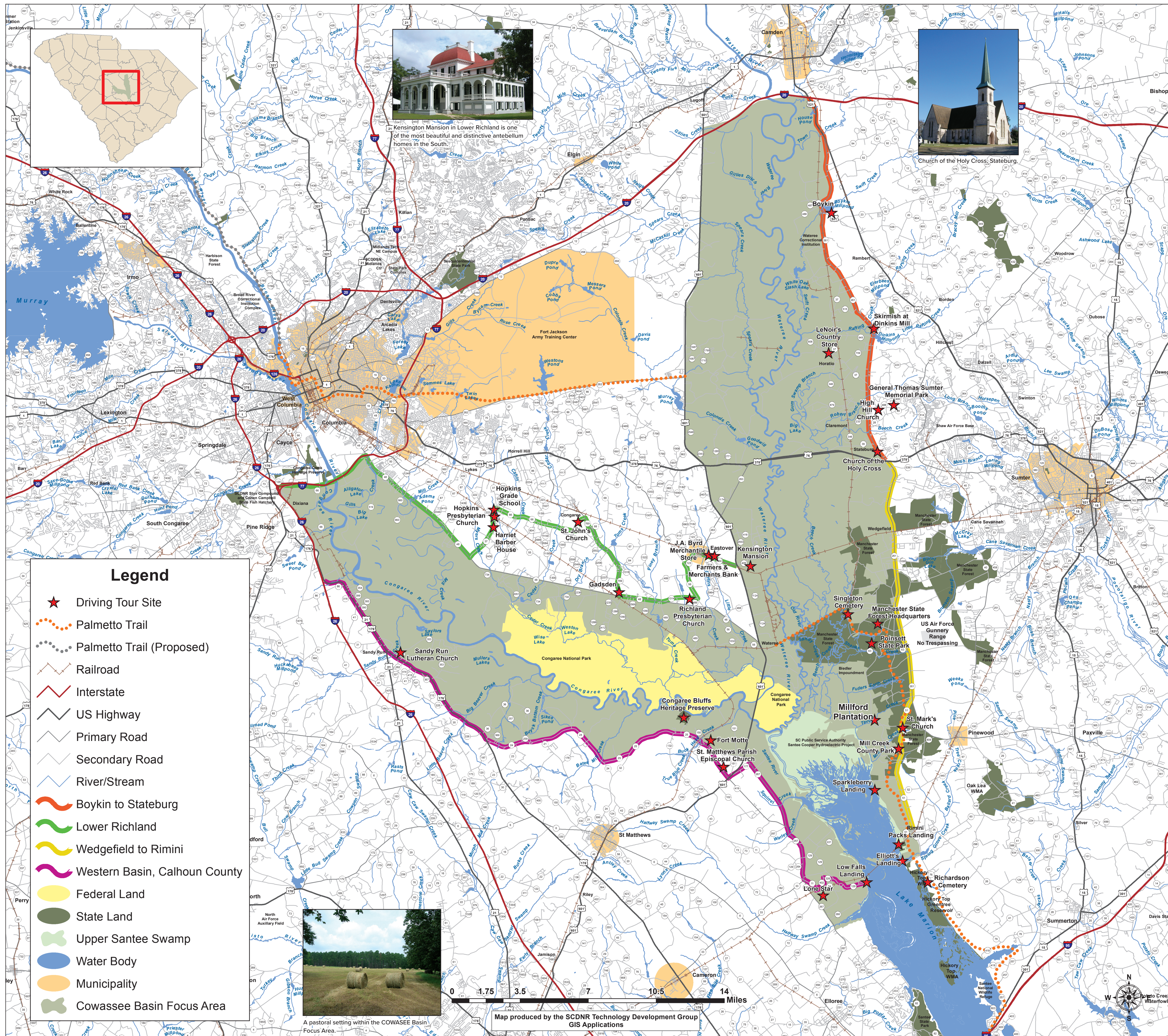
If Big T's is not open, J.D.'s Diner at Gadsden may be. The menu includes sandwiches and regular "blue plate" specials. From Gadsden proceed southward on Bluff Road for 2.3 miles, then make a slight left onto Fork Church Road, County Road 1314. The Richland Presbyterian Church will appear at 1.5 miles on your left. Constructed in 1883, this quaint little country church is an excellent example of a "rare, virtually unaltered nineteenth century" small rural Southern church. It was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1986.

Continue eastward on Fork Church Road. At the intersection with Poultry Lane, County Road 56, turn left (north) and proceed for 1.8 miles, then turn right onto Chalk Street, County Road 123, which ends shortly at the town of Eastover. Like so many other small communities throughout South Carolina, Eastover flourished during the heyday of cotton and railroads. The old two-story brick building on Main Street, representing a former bank and mercantile store, is on the National Register of Historic Places as the J.A. Byrd Mercantile Store, and the Farmer and Merchants Bank Building, ca. 1910. The former is a significant architectural example of a commercial building and general store from the early twentieth century while the latter is also an excellent example of early twentieth century commercial architecture. After the demise of cotton, the Farmer and Merchants Bank served as the town's post office and library.

Continue eastward on SC 764 until it intersects with US Highway 601. Directly ahead is a magnolia-lined drive leading to Kensington Mansion, one of the most distinctive antebellum plantation homes in South Carolina. Kensington was constructed between 1851-1853 by Colonel Matthew Richard Singleton, a member of one of the wealthiest planter families in the state. Kensington is an outstanding example of the Italianate Revival architecture and features a domed, metal roof. The interior has beautiful examples of intricate molding and trim work. It was put on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971.

Kensington was carefully restored by Union Camp, later International Paper Company, from 1983-84. The Scarborough-Hamer Foundation has furnished the mansion with a large collection of Victorian furniture, ceramics and other antiques. Guided tours are available to the public on Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 9:30a.m., 11:00a.m., 1:00p.m., and 2:30p.m. Kensington is also extensively decorated for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. For more information, call 803-353-0456.

Driving north on US 601 will take you back to US 378 and Columbia to the west or Sumter to the east.



A pastoral setting within the COWASEE Basin Focus Area.

Map produced by the SCDNR Technology Development Group GIS Applications



COWASEE BASIN

Tour Guide



Photo by Jane Willcox Salley

www.dnr.sc.gov/cowasee

COWASEE Basin Tour Guide

In 1700, the intrepid English explorer John Lawson traveled from Charleston through the backcountry of South Carolina and eventually to coastal North Carolina. After leaving the lowlands and swamps of the coast, Lawson's small party, which was traveling along an old Indian trading path on the north side of the Santee River, entered central South Carolina and to his astonishment and delight, a land of "great Ridges of Mountains." On January 12, 1701, Lawson described one such mountain as an "Alp with a Top like a Sugar-loaf, advanc'd its Head above all others...."

We think Lawson was somewhere in the vicinity of what was later Stateburg and that his alp was Cook's Mountain, at 374 feet above sea level, one of the highest points in eastern Richland County. The "great Ridges of Mountains" with the scenic views that so delighted Lawson and his party would later become known as the famous "High Hills of the Santee."

Remarkably, more than 300 years later the view of Cook's Mountain remains much the same as when John Lawson first described it. Indeed, the entire Wateree River Valley from Camden south to the junction with the Santee River is a huge swath of green space and mostly undeveloped land that still retains much of its rural character and natural heritage in one of the fastest growing regions in the state. And to the west, the Congaree River and adjoining bluffs and high hills are as undeveloped as the Wateree.



Photo by Patrick Moore & SouthWings.

These two large river systems merge together in the heart of South Carolina to form the Santee River. This area, containing some of the most significant natural, historical and cultural resources in South Carolina, has come to be called the COWASEE Basin in honor of the three rivers that comprise it. Recognizing its importance, conservationists, led by private landowners and the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, created the COWASEE Basin Focus Area in 2005.

Based on a model of success in the ACE Basin south of Charleston, the COWASEE Basin Focus Area is a private-lands initiative that seeks to protect wildlife habitat, wetlands and water quality, and maintain the rural traditions and working farms and forests of this 315,000-acre ecosystem through the use of voluntary conservation easements. In the process the Focus Area Task Force, a partnership of private landowners, conservation organizations and natural resource agencies, also hopes to alert the general public as well as community planners, business, civic and political leaders to the extraordinary values of the COWASEE Basin.

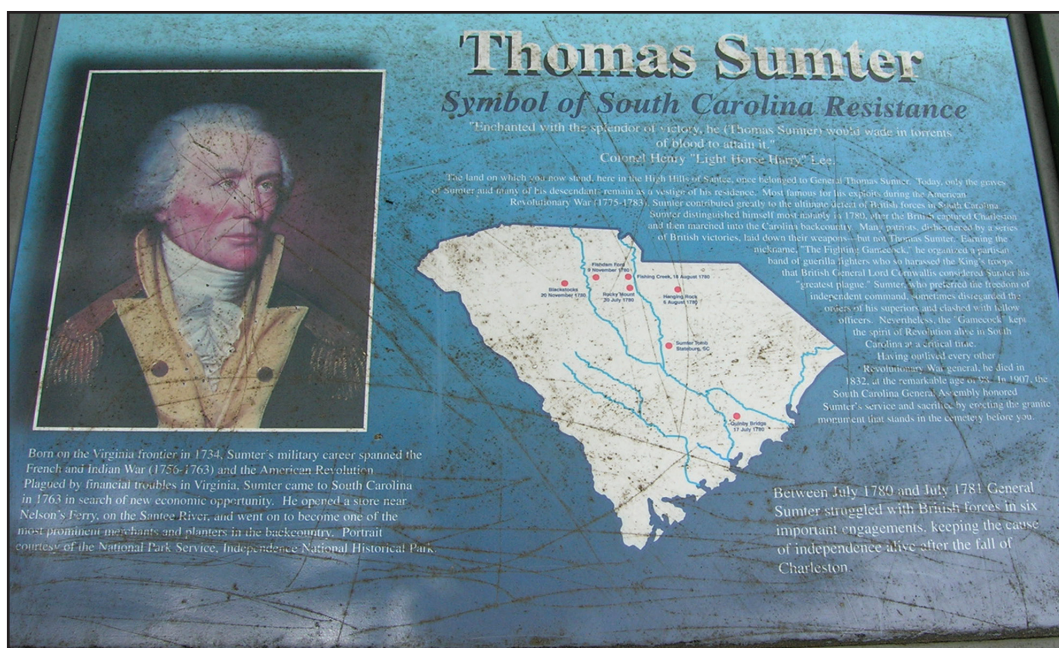
History

Currently the COWASEE Basin has 28 sites on the National Register of Historic Places including four National Historic Landmarks and one National Historic District, Stateburg. Some of the most significant events in South Carolina's rich history have taken place here. The Basin was, in fact, part of the very first European exploration of the interior of the United States when in 1540 Hernando De Soto's 600 Spanish conquistadors marched up the west bank of the Wateree River searching for the legendary Indian town of Cofitachequi. Considered by most archaeologists to have been located on the east bank of the Wateree a few miles below Camden, Cofitachequi in De Soto's day was rumored to be full of gold and silver, but the Spaniards instead found only freshwater pearls and stores of corn.

By the time of John Lawson's visit 160 years later, Indian populations within the Basin had declined, perhaps due in part to infectious diseases introduced by the Spanish. Lawson provided invaluable detail about the Indian inhabitants and natural features of the area in his book, *A New Voyage to Carolina*. He provided, for example, some of the best information we have on the Congaree Native Americans which at that time were living in the vicinity of Stateburg.

With the founding of Charleston in 1670, white traders and trappers began filing into the interior of South Carolina to trade with and obtain furs and hides from the Native Americans. Settlers and homesteaders followed on the heels of the traders, and by the early 1700s the first residences, primitive affairs by later antebellum plantation standards, were showing up in the countryside. Many of the early settlers, in addition to coming from the coast, came down from Virginia and North Carolina. Much of the land on the south side of the Congaree River was settled by Germans and Swiss.

The Revolutionary War came relatively late to South Carolina compared to her sister colonies to the north but the state played a pivotal role in securing American independence. Within South Carolina, the COWASEE Basin was the scene of much action between the Patriots and the Redcoats and featured some of the most prominent and influential leaders on both sides. Thomas Sumter, the



Thomas Sumter was one of the great partisan leaders of the Revolution and the last surviving general of that war.

"Gamecock," made forays against the British from the High Hills of the Santee. After the War, Sumter owned much property in the High Hills and was laid to rest here.

America's first guerilla fighter, Francis Marion, the fabled "Swamp Fox," harassed and fought British regulars and Tories at locations within and near the COWASEE Basin. One of Marion's most famous engagements was the siege of Fort Motte (along with Lt Col. "Light-Horse" Harry Lee) on the south bank of the Congaree River in Calhoun County. The prominent Richardson family from the southern end of the High Hills of Santee produced many political and military leaders including militia General Richard Richardson. From the west side of the Basin, Col. William "Danger" Thomson was another prominent militia leader who served his state and country well during war and peace. Commodore Alexander Gillon skippered the frigate "South Carolina" during the Revolution and established a large estate, "Gillon's Retreat," along the south bank of the Congaree River and is buried there. One of George Washington's most capable generals, Nathanael Greene, was responsible for much of the Patriot successes in South Carolina. Greene's Continental Army used the High Hills of the Santee as a retreat and "camp of repose."

The peace and prosperity that followed the Revolutionary War allowed for the development of large plantation estates within the Basin, with cotton and enslaved people as the basis for new-found wealth. Planters were able to devote large sums of money to build some of the most distinctive and unique architectural structures in the South. Foremost among these grand homes still standing is Kensington Mansion (1854), an Italianate Revival structure built by Richard Singleton; Millford Plantation (c. 1839), built by John Laurence Manning and one of the best examples of Greek Revival architecture in America; Mulberry Plantation (1820), a Federal-style home; and the Borough House (c. 1758) which, along with its dependencies, forms the largest complex of pise de terre (rammed earth) structures in the United States.

The planters also built churches of note such as the Church of the Holy Cross at Stateburg, a National Historic Landmark, the beautiful St. Marks Episcopal Church surrounded by Manchester State Forest and St. Matthews Parish Episcopal Church near Ft. Motte.

On the west side of the Basin, among the scenic Congaree River Bluffs, the planters of the old Orangeburg District, part of which later became Calhoun County, constructed fine homes including Col. Thomson's Belleville Plantation and Oakland Plantation built by Col. Thomson's grandson, William Sabb Thomson. The planters also started a summer resort settlement for health reasons in the early 1800s called "Totness." At its peak shortly before the Civil War, Totness supported about 40 families for six months of the year.

Natural History

The heart of the COWASEE Basin consists of the life-giving waters of the Congaree, Wateree and Upper Santee Rivers and the fertile floodplains nourished by them. These great rivers drain an immense watershed of 13,000-square miles that stretches far into western North Carolina. The floodplain forests of the COWASEE Basin are some of the most extensive and biologically diverse in the Southeast. They support nearly a hundred species of woody shrubs and trees, and are some of the most productive wildlife habitats in North America. Some of the densest wintering songbird populations in the eastern United States have been recorded in these bottomland forests, and they are strongholds for such Neotropical migratory birds as the prothonotary warbler and the uncommon Swainson's warbler that breed in them and overwinter in tropical Central or South America. Two areas within the Basin, the Congaree National Park and the Upper Santee Swamp, have been recognized as Important Bird Areas by the National Audubon Society because of their outstanding bird values.



Prothonotary warbler feeding its young.

Photo by Joe Kegley.

The COWASEE Basin has a strong and enduring hunting and fishing culture. Abundant waters and wetlands provide for some of the finest freshwater fishing in the state, and at one time the Basin supported the state's largest wintering mallard population. The extensive bottomland forests are a significant wood duck production and wintering ground, and the Focus Area is now a priority waterfowl restoration area.

Other water birds finding refuge in the wetlands of the COWASEE Basin include yellow-crowned night heron, great egret, great blue heron, little blue heron, cattle egret, white ibis, anhinga and double-crested cormorant. During its post-breeding dispersal from coastal rookeries, the endangered wood stork forages in the numerous shallow pools and wetlands of the Basin.

The Basin supports a number of raptor species including bald eagle, osprey, red-shouldered and red-tailed hawk, Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawk, Mississippi kite, northern harrier, American kestrel, barred owl, great horned owl and screech owl.

A large alligator population is found in the Basin with many individuals exceeding ten feet in length. One of the largest documented alligators in South Carolina, a specimen housed in the State Museum, came from the Upper Santee Swamp within the Basin and was 13 feet long and weighed 647 pounds. More recently, alligator hunters took one in this area that was 13 and a half feet long.

Needless to say, the rich waters of the COWASEE are an outstanding fishery resource for catfish, sunfish, large-mouth bass, striped bass, shad, herring and others. And the endangered short-nosed sturgeon is also found in the Upper Santee, Congaree and possibly the Wateree Rivers.

Offering a marked contrast to the hardwood lowlands, the high hills and bluffs that border the river bottoms offer spectacular views and a geologic history that dates back millions of years to when the Atlantic Ocean filled the valleys of the Santee, Wateree and Congaree. Underlain with erosion-resistant ironstone and sandstone, the high hills and bluffs, some of which exceed 350 feet above sea level, support vegetation more typical of the Upper Piedmont and Mountains such as sourwood, mountain laurel, white ash, beech, white oak and short-leaf pine. Few places in South Carolina can offer the variety of plants found in the

COWASEE Basin, or the strange juxtaposition of Spanish moss growing on short leaf pine, or mountain laurel and sparkleberry growing side by side.

Places to See

Although most of COWASEE Basin is in private ownership, no other Focus Area in South Carolina supports the variety of public lands, including the state's only national park as well as a state forest, a state park, a heritage preserve and the beautiful Sparkleberry Swamp, a sportsman's and naturalist's paradise.

Congaree National Park

In the heart of the COWASEE Basin lies the Congaree National Park. Consisting of nearly 26,000 acres, the Park was established in 1976 as Congaree National Monument to preserve the last remaining stand of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest left in the United States. In 2003, the park was expanded to include additional lands east to the Wateree River and gained the designation of National Park.

Nearly 90 species of trees and shrubs, 200 species of birds, 45 species of reptiles and 33 species of amphibians have been recorded at the Park, which is one of the most biologically diverse in the national park system. Due to its pristine condition, many state and national champion trees, the biggest of their kind, occur here. The Park also supports one of the tallest hardwood forests in the temperate world, with many of the oaks, sweetgums, sycamores and others exceeding 130 feet and some greater than 150 feet tall. Currently the tallest known tree in South Carolina, nearly 170 feet tall or 17 stories high, is the national champion loblolly pine at Congaree.

Congaree National Park is open to visitors 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. The park's Harry Hampton Visitor Center is open from 9:00a.m. to 5:00p.m. Tuesday through Saturday, and closed on federal holidays. A 2.4-mile wheelchair-accessible boardwalk loop provides first-time visitors an overview of the outstanding natural features of the Park. For those with more time, more than 25 miles of self-guided trails beckon. Guided walks led by experienced



Breathtaking views, like this one from the Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve in Calhoun County, are notable features of the COWASEE Basin.

naturalists are offered to the public throughout the week. Free guided canoe trips (a two-week advance sign-up is required) are also provided every Saturday and Sunday. Camp grounds are available, and nearly all of the Park is open to backcountry camping. Campers need a permit, free of charge, available at the Harry Hampton Visitor's Center. For more information, call 803-776-4396 or visit <http://www.nps.gov/cong>.

Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve

Located atop a high bluff on the south side of the Congaree River in Calhoun County, opposite the Congaree National Park, the 200-acre Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve, managed by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, offers spectacular views of the Congaree floodplain nearly 200 feet below. On a clear day, the view eastward can extend all the way into Sumter County more than 20 miles away. Established in 2001, the Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve was set aside for educational, scientific and general public use and to preserve a rare community type of river bluff and ravine forest. The Preserve is open during day-light hours all year (camping is prohibited). In addition to a scenic overlook, the Preserve features several miles of trails and an educational facility available for educational groups with an environmental or cultural mission. For more information, call 803-734-3886 or visit <http://www.dnr.sc.gov/managed/heritage/conglbluffs/description.html>.

Manchester State Forest

Located in western Sumter County south of Wedgefield, Manchester State Forest is a multiple-use 28,000 acre forest dedicated to providing sustainable yields of forest products as well as general outdoor recreation such as hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain and OHV biking and horseback riding. Permits are required for all outdoor activities except hiking. Much of the Forest lies atop a large ridge of isolated sandy soil covered with longleaf pine and scrub oaks. However, there is much varied terrain and habitat diversity within the Forest ranging from bottomland hardwood forest to rich hardwood bluffs. Much of the Forest is also managed cooperatively with SCDNR as a Wildlife Management Area. Several ponds (electric motors only) and creeks are available for fishing. A rifle and pistol range (803-494-4885) is open on Saturday from 8:30a.m. to 4:30p.m., and Sunday from 1:00 to 5:00p.m. For more information, contact Manchester State Forest, 6740 Headquarters Road, Wedgefield, SC 29168; call 803-494-8196 or visit <http://www.state.sc.us/forest/refman.htm>.

The Palmetto Trail

The COWASEE Basin has more than 25 miles of the well-known Palmetto Trail, a statewide "mountains to the sea" public hiking trail. The trail sections include the "High Hills Passage," the "Wateree Passage," and a segment of the "Lake Marion Passage." One of the most diverse sections of the Palmetto Trail, the "Wateree Passage" starts out from Poinsett State Park, skirts the edge of the Wateree Swamp floodplain, then rises dramatically to a hardwood bluff overlooking the Wateree floodplain with scenic vistas that extend westward into Richland County and beyond. The trail drops back into the floodplain and continues for much of the way to the Wateree River on top of an old abandoned railroad causeway. Total trail length is 7.2 miles (one way). The "High Hills" Passage, 9.4 miles in length, extends from Poinsett State Park to Mill Creek County Park.

A third segment of the Palmetto Trail, the Lake Marion Passage, exits Manchester State Forest, and extends southward from Mill Creek County Park to Packs Landing on the edge of Lake Marion and beyond. The section from Mill Creek County Park to Sparkleberry Landing is about 5 miles in length

while the trail between Sparkleberry and Packs Landing that skirts the edge of Sparkleberry and Upper Lake Marion is 4 miles long. For more information call 803-771-0870 or visit www.palmettoconservation.org.

Mill Creek County Park

Managed by the Sumter County Recreation Department, this quiet, secluded park surrounded by Manchester State Forest has an attractive fishing pond and features picnic and camping facilities (both primitive and hook-ups), a shower house and lodge for rent, hiking trails, equestrian facilities and access to the Palmetto Trail and the nearby Manchester State Forest. For more information, contact Sumter County Recreation Department, 155 Haynsworth Street, Sumter, SC 29150 or call 803-436-2248.

Poinsett State Park

A lesser-known jewel of the State Park system, the 1,000-acre Poinsett State Park, named for diplomat and naturalist Joel Roberts Poinsett, lies within the High Hills of the Santee on the edge of the Wateree Swamp. The entrance to the park features a scenic drive bordered with mountain laurel and walls constructed in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps of coquina, a local material consisting of limestone and fossilized shells. It includes an old mill pond that dates back to the Revolution, nature trails and hardwood ravines featuring native azaleas, beech, white oak and sourwood trees; a scenic vista overlooking the Wateree floodplain; and camping, fishing and access to segments of the Palmetto Trail. Clean, rustic cabins are available to rent by the week or weekend.

For more information, call 803-494-8177 or visit <http://southcarolinaparks.com/park-finder/state-park/662.aspx>.

Sparkleberry Swamp

One of the premier paddling destinations in South Carolina, as well as one of the most beautiful, Sparkleberry Swamp is a watery wilderness of cypress



Sparkleberry Swamp is one of the most scenic and popular paddling destinations in South Carolina.

and tupelo trees dripping with Spanish moss and abundant wildlife including waterfowl, wading birds, otter, alligators, osprey and eagles. Located within the 16,000-acre Upper Santee Swamp owned and managed by the South Carolina Public Service Authority (Santee-Cooper), Sparkleberry is also a famous public fishing and hunting retreat as well as a haven for the nature photographer, naturalist and paddler. Accessible only by small motorized boat or canoe/kayak, Sparkleberry features numerous waterways, creeks, ponds and oxbow lakes that are difficult for the novice and first-time visitor to navigate without an experienced guide or GPS unit.

The primary access points to Sparkleberry are Sparkleberry Landing in Sumter County a couple of miles north of Rimini, and Pack's and Elliott's Landing at Rimini. For a map of Sparkleberry, see sparkleberry.com. The Palmetto Paddlers (palmettopaddlers.org) also periodically offers group tours of Sparkleberry.

Float Trips

One of the best ways to experience the COWASEE Basin is a canoe/kayak trip down the Congaree or Wateree Rivers or one of their tributaries. The Congaree River, designated the nation's first "Blue Trail" by American Rivers in 2007 and named a National Recreation Trail by the Department of the Interior in 2008, is 50 miles long from several put-ins in the Columbia area to the next public take-out at U.S. 601 at Bates Bridge. The highlight of the trail is the section along the Congaree National Park, a protected wilderness area that is home to the largest tract of old growth bottomland hardwood forests in the U.S. For most paddlers this would be at least a two day/one night trip. Sandbars provide good camping opportunities, however they can become inundated with little or no warning due to upstream hydropower operations. Be sure to pull your boat to high ground and tie it down. Camping is also available in Congaree National Park with a free backcountry permit.

The Wateree River Blue Trail, dedicated in June 2009, starts near the City of Camden below Lake Wateree Dam and extends approximately 80 or 90 miles to the take-outs at U.S. 601 at Bates Bridge on the Congaree River.



A landowner proudly displays his COWASEE Basin sign in the heart of the focus area.

The Wateree River Blue Trail offers some of the best opportunities for multiple overnight camping in an undisturbed river corridor east of the Mississippi. The first definable float section within the COWASEE Basin is an approximate 43-mile stretch from the put-in at U.S. 1 at Camden to the take-out at the U.S. 378 Bridge. There is no public access on this stretch of the river but camping is available on sandbars below the high water mark. Be aware that river levels can change with little or no warning so be sure to camp as high as possible and always tie your boat down. The second section of the Wateree, from U.S. 378 southward to Low Falls Landing in Calhoun County or the landing at U.S. 601 at Bates Bridge on the Congaree River, extends between 30 and 38 miles depending on which take-out you use. If you are planning to take out at 601 you must paddle upstream for about mile and a half after reaching the confluence with the Congaree River. If you plan to take out at Low Falls Landing, you will paddle through a section of the Upper Santee River, formed by the merger of the Wateree with the Congaree. This stretch, from U.S. 378 down, does include some public river frontage: Manchester State Forest on the east bank just south of an abandoned railroad trestle; part of the Congaree National Park on the west bank of the lower Wateree for a 5-mile stretch above its confluence with the Congaree; and a small section on the south bank of the Congaree River owned by Santee-Cooper and located just above its confluence with the Wateree. For more information on both the Wateree River and Congaree River Blue Trails, visit <http://congareriverbluetrail.blogspot.com> and <http://watereeriverbluetrailguide.blogspot.com>. Maps for both trails are available at outdoor stores, outfitters and chambers of commerce in Columbia and Camden.

A one-day float trip is possible by putting in at Bates Bridge Landing at U.S. 601 at the Congaree, and padding downstream on the Santee to Low Falls Landing, 14 miles away (an average paddler can make about two miles an hour, making this a seven-hour trip not counting stops). The landing, just below the Norfolk-Southern railroad trestle, is not visible from the river so look for the canal cut into the west bank that leads a short distance away to the landing. An alternative take-out point is at Pack's Landing, located about two miles away on a dredged canal on the east side of the river bordering the railroad trestle.



The focus area is a priority waterfowl restoration area where many partners are implementing research and management to improve waterfowl habitat and populations. Staff from the S.C. Dept. of Natural Resources and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band mallards as part of a waterfowl monitoring project.

Shorter float trips of a half-day or less are possible within the Congaree National Park. This is a great way to experience the sights and sounds of one of South Carolina's most pristine wilderness areas. Two put-in points are located within the park: one at Bannister's Bridge where Cedar Creek crosses Old Bluff Road, and one at the South Cedar Creek Landing on South Cedar Creek Road near Gadsden.

Cedar Creek at Bannister's Bridge is more narrow and shallow, with swifter current, than further downstream. After Bannister's Bridge, the next take-out point is South Cedar Creek Landing, 7 miles downstream. The Bannister's Bridge to South Cedar Creek section can take 4-8 hours, depending on water levels and the number of downed trees and logs in the channel. Check with the park by phone to determine creek conditions before your trip.

The water is deeper, wider and has less current at South Cedar Creek Landing. This is a good landing for padding downstream an hour or so and padding back upstream if you only have one vehicle and limited time, otherwise the next take out point is at Bates Bridge Landing on the Congaree River at US Highway 601. Bates Bridge is 19 miles away (it's 7 miles from South Cedar Creek Landing to the Congaree River and another 12 miles downstream from where Cedar Creek enters the Congaree River to the 601 boat landing take-out). This can be a full day's paddle in summer and an overnighter during shorter daylight periods. In all cases, check with Park staff about water levels, known trail blockages and weather conditions. Periodic droughts and low water can make Cedar Creek difficult to navigate because of exposed logs and debris. Conversely, at high water levels, flooding can obscure the Cedar Creek channel and make paddling on the Congaree River potentially dangerous.

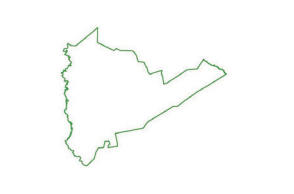
Bates Old River is another scenic canoeing stretch that can be done in a relatively short period. Located just east of US Highway 601 and surrounded by the Congaree National Park, Bates Old River is a former bend of the Congaree River that was cut off from the main channel many years ago. These old abandoned river meanders are known as oxbow lakes and at four miles long, Bates Old River is one of the largest oxbow lakes in South Carolina. The put-in is an easy to miss unimproved dirt drive on the east side of US 601, 1.1 miles south of the railroad crossing at 601.

Note: water levels can change quickly on these rivers and creeks; at high water, sandbar campsites will be under water and currents will be swift; check water levels and gages before departing. Boaters should wear life jackets, file a float plan and bring adequate food, water, change of clothing in a waterproof bag, camping gear, sunscreen, bug repellent and a first aid kit.

The non-profit conservation organization American Rivers (www.americanrivers.org) has excellent free detailed maps of both the Congaree and Wateree River "Blue Trails." Their Columbia office number is 803-771-7206.

Photography not credited was taken by SCDNR staff or Congaree Land Trust.

The Conservation Fund



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