

THE SOPCHOPPY RIVER

by [Frank Howard](#)
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As with the other rivers in Wakulla County, the early names of this river are difficult to pin down. One of the oldest dated maps (1683) with the river named calls it the Rio Chachave. Although the early explorers frequently christened lands, bays, lakes, and rivers with names from their own culture, they also retained the Indian names for some of them. In one of the local Indian languages the word SOKHE meant convulsing or twisting and the word CHAPKE meant long. The name Chachave may be a Spanish rendition of the local name "Long Twisting River" for the Sopchoppy is certainly that. If so, note that some of the local languages were spoken without closing the lips (except for the "m" sound). Think of that and say "Chachave" or "Sokhe Chapke!"

That this river has a long history is verified by the relics found both in and around it. Early maps indicate a Tocobaga Indian village to the west of the river but does not show any villages on the river. The written history, however, is vague and indirect as references to the river itself during the Spanish periods are not readily found. Also, the English, arriving late on the scene, failed to mention the river at all. An English map dated 1730 does not even show a river in this vicinity. Although, finally, the John Williams map of 1827 again shows a river in this location he fails to put a name for it on the map.

Shortly after Florida became a Territory in the 1820's many settlers came in to fill up the port area at St. Marks. Others sought areas away from those busy spots but still near a waterway. Some, such as the Raker brothers (from Germany), gained large tracts of land. Their tract reached from Tallahassee to the coast. Others, such the Lavender family (1821) moved onto small tracts to farm. Also the three Roberts (N., R., and W.) came in 1833 to set up farms along the Sopchoppy. The real influx of settlers on the river came after Wakulla County was carved out of Leon County in 1843.

It helps to put this period of time into perspective by recalling that some early settlers of this area were out fighting in the Seminole wars of the 1830's. While it seems the local Indians were just trying to exist as best they could, it was during this time that the wife of one of the Raker brothers was killed, along with her family, by Indians on her family's place up near Jump Creek.

Indians certainly still lived in the area as a village then existed on the lower Sopchoppy River. A Mr. Farr, who came to the area with Angus Morrison (Mrs. Florida Roberts' grandfather) in 1840, married an Indian maiden from that village. At least one Indian family still lived just below the old Harms place, but on the west side of the river, as late as 1904. During this period of time the only town on the river was Greenough. (The first bridge over the river was at Greenough but that was not until 1880.)

The town of Greenough centered around the old Rouse Mill on Mill Creek. It was after fighting in the Seminole War of 1837 and staying awhile in Tallahassee that Sampson Roddenberry

moved to the town of Greenough. His brother had already started a farm near there. By 1850 the Roddenberry family name was on six homesteads, all of them around the present town of Sopchoppy. This is also the time when R. W. Ashmore moved into the area which would later be called Ashmore Station.

There are a great many tales about the Civil War period. One of the best illustrations for the kind of shortages tolerated during a time when so many of Wakulla County's finest were away on distant battlefields is a story about salt. Recall that in the age before refrigerators, curing meat and fish by one of the principal curing processes (brine pickled, salt cured, or sugar cured) was a necessity before it could be shipped or stored.

Salt was so scarce there were many involved all along the coast in evaporating seawater to recover the salt. Federal gunboats frequently caused a halt to these processes. A Wakulla Countian, Dr. Bradford, came up with the idea of scraping the floors of the ever-present smokehouses and diluting the scrapings. After allowing the salt in the scrapings to go into solution (and the mud to settle!). The clear liquid was decanted off and boiled until the water was evaporated away. This way salt that had dribbled off meat being cured over the years could be recovered. The idea not only quickly caught on, but was presented by the good Doctor at state level for others to utilize.

After those war years there were also some other tribulations (carpetbaggers?). Perhaps the worst of those were a couple of storms. In 1873 a "great equinoctial" storm (hurricane) swept the area doing much damage. But it was the storm and flood of 1899 that swept away the only bridge and most of the farms on the west side of the river. 1899 was a year to remember throughout this part of Florida. In Carrabelle, some 27 ships were sent ashore by the great winds with many of them ruined. This was also the year Sopchoppy saw 7 inches of snow! It is also the year that ended commercial orange growing this far north.

The town of Sopchoppy appeared on the scene in 1894 when the CT&G Railroad Company laid out a town, beside their newly constructed tracks, on their own property which was on the other side of the river from Greenough. They then began a strong advertising plan which brought many new "pioneers" in. Many of them soon left when they found the advertisements concerning rich soil and mild climate had been overstated!

Others stayed and Greenough moved to Sopchoppy. After all, the old bridge over the river was a swinging bridge which swayed when being crossed (rebuilt in 1899 in the same manner, it did last until 1936 when a truck loaded with logs went trough it into the river). Also, there was no store in Greenough. In the past it had been a monthly trip over the one road to Ladd's store in Newport for the family supplies.

The railroad made the area accessible in a way few had imagined before. Supplies could be delivered right in town. Local products could either leave the same way or, if one lived down river, by boat to McIntyre Station and be shipped from there to the coastal markets at Carrabelle. Naval Stores (Turps, pinetar, etc.), honey, beeswax, and a host of other products could be shipped north.

Sopchoppy even sported its own newspaper for awhile during the period from 1910 to about 1912. Mr. Walter Harms, who came to Sopchoppy after reading those Railroad Company advertisements, wrote and printed the "Sopchoppy Argosy." Mr. Harms was one of those who realized the need for quick shipping for, as a man of many trades, he was successful at chicken farming in the 1920's. Starting with only a dozen or so chickens, by 1929 he had 8 chicken houses each producing a large quantity of eggs for market.

Some 50 miles in length, the Sopchoppy River is almost totally within Wakulla County. Much of it is protected from the escalating population of the other rivers as much of it is within the National Forest. Also, the Bradwell Bay area has kept it from suffering the extensive logging that other rivers have undergone. The bay also provides the river with the large source of tannins needed to give the river its characteristic dark tea color. The size of this river's basin is small enough that a "fresh" or freshet of rainwater will quickly change the flow rate (and color!) of the river.

This river also holds, along its banks, a goodly number of archaeological sites which must be preserved. There simply aren't enough sites remaining in "unraided" condition to give us complete pictures of who the people were that lived here long before the Europeans came. We know little enough about the ones who lived here at the time of [Narvaez](#) and DeSoto. Let us all work to assure these sites remain undisturbed until people who are fully qualified to do such work are available.