



The historic Suwannee River winds west in the Florida panhandle near Live Oak. Immortalized by Stephen Foster in the state song *Old Folks at Home*, the river is framed by limestone outcroppings and cypress trees. Its tea-like color comes from the tannins leached by the fallen leaves and roots of trees.

SUWANEE ON THE SYLLABUS

USFSP students
paddle the river to learn about
their home and themselves.

STORY BY TERRY TOMALIN
PHOTOS BY SCOTT KEELER

Paige McDaniel thought she knew the Suwannee.

The 20-year-old from Naples had paddled the river in the spring when the water was high and fast. She had been a little nervous. She knew that one errant stroke could dump her and all her camping gear into the swift, dark water. But somehow, the senior from Naples had made it through.

Now, six months later, she was back on its banks again, this time as a teaching assistant.

"The water is so much lower," she told her canoe mate. "This is like a totally different river."

Atangel Hernandez, a 22-year-old from Spring Hill, wasn't listening. The aspiring stand-up comic was ready to hit the water. He had spent most of his college years behind a computer screen. The prospect of a canoe trip down Florida's iconic river had him more excited than the release of the new Star Wars video game.

Then it happened ... a splash followed by a shriek.

Hernandez, who played center for his high

school football team, stepped into the canoe slightly left of center, then both he, McDaniel and a canoe full of equipment went for a swim.

"When do people tip over," I asked the class after both students were safe and sound on dry land.

"Getting in and out of a canoe," they answered in unison.

"Getting in and out of a canoe," I responded. "But this is just a minor setback. We improvise. We adapt. We overcome."

Welcome to Outdoor Leadership 101. The class, offered each spring and fall at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, is designed to force undergraduates to test their limits and gain the tools they need to make decisions in difficult situations.

When formulating the syllabus several years ago, I decided the Suwannee would be the ideal classroom. I first saw this river in the spring of 1980. I was a junior at USF, new to Florida, and traveled much of it in an old, beat-up aluminum canoe.

Since then, I have probably paddled the Suwannee dozens of times, each trip familiar but never

“It doesn’t take long to forget about all the things you think you have to do. Once you’re paddling, you focus on the river. You feel like you are part of something much bigger.”

Teaching assistant Paige McDaniel, on paddling the Suwannee River

the same. Over the years, I’ve been cold, wet, tired, hungry, thirsty, sunburned, bitten by bugs and even charged by a big bull gator in the middle of the night. The Suwannee taught me much about Florida, but even more about myself.

For the students, most of whom had never been on an overnight campout, let alone a multi-day wilderness trip down a wild Florida river, it was a chance to see their home state, raw and uncensored.

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At its head waters on the southern edge of the great Okefenokee Swamp, it doesn’t look like much of a river. By Florida standards, some might call it a creek, a minor waterway, hardly worth a song.

But head downstream, along the ancient shoreline they call the Cody Scarp, and the river gains a little confidence. The current picks up as the water flows through steep limestone banks and down across Big Shoals, the closest thing this sea-level state has to a real set of rapids.

By the time you get to White Springs, site of an old plantation built near a water hole long-held sacred by the area’s original inhabitants, the river runs in all its glory.

“Wild and unspoiled ... that’s how I’d describe it,” said McDaniel, who learned so much about herself on her first trip down the Suwannee she had to come back again.

Like most Floridians, McDaniel didn’t know much about this iconic Florida waterway other than that it is mentioned in the state song. Like its author Stephen Foster, she had never seen, let alone paddled, the state’s most



University of South Florida St. Petersburg students Taylor Russell, left, and Paige McDaniel paddle their canoe past knotted tree roots on the bank of the Suwannee River. McDaniel was making her second trip, after her first encounter with the river convinced her to pursue a career in the outdoors.



USFSP students from the outdoors leadership class gather around the campfire for games and stories at the Holton Creek River Camp on the banks of the Suwannee River.

famous river.

Foster, a Yankee, had never stepped foot in Florida when he wrote *Old Folks at Home*. It didn’t matter the name was actually Su-wan-nee, with three distinct syllables. He just dropped the “u” and shortened it to “Swannee” so it would rhyme.

The Florida Legislature, tickled that somebody would write about a local river, named it the state song in 1935, thereby sentencing generations of Florida school children to forever misspell the name Suwannee.

But the USF students — who hailed from all over Florida — didn’t want to

play Trivial Pursuit. They came to see the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, a five-year, \$10 million joint effort of state and local governments. The 170-mile trail has a system of hubs — small towns, state parks and remote river camps — conveniently located one day’s travel apart.

McDaniel and her classmates put in at White Springs on a Tuesday morning for a three-day, 39-mile trip to Suwannee River State Park.

Canoeing takes time, and at first it is hard for students who live in an age of interstate commerce and satellite communication to slow down and think

about the journey, not just the destination.

“It doesn’t take long to forget about all the things you think you have to do,” McDaniel said. “Once you’re paddling, you focus on the river.”

“You feel like you are part of something much bigger.”

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Humans have lived along the Suwannee for more than 10,000 years. When the Spanish Conquistador Panfilo de Narvaez arrived at its banks in the spring of 1528, the area was home to Timucua Indians.

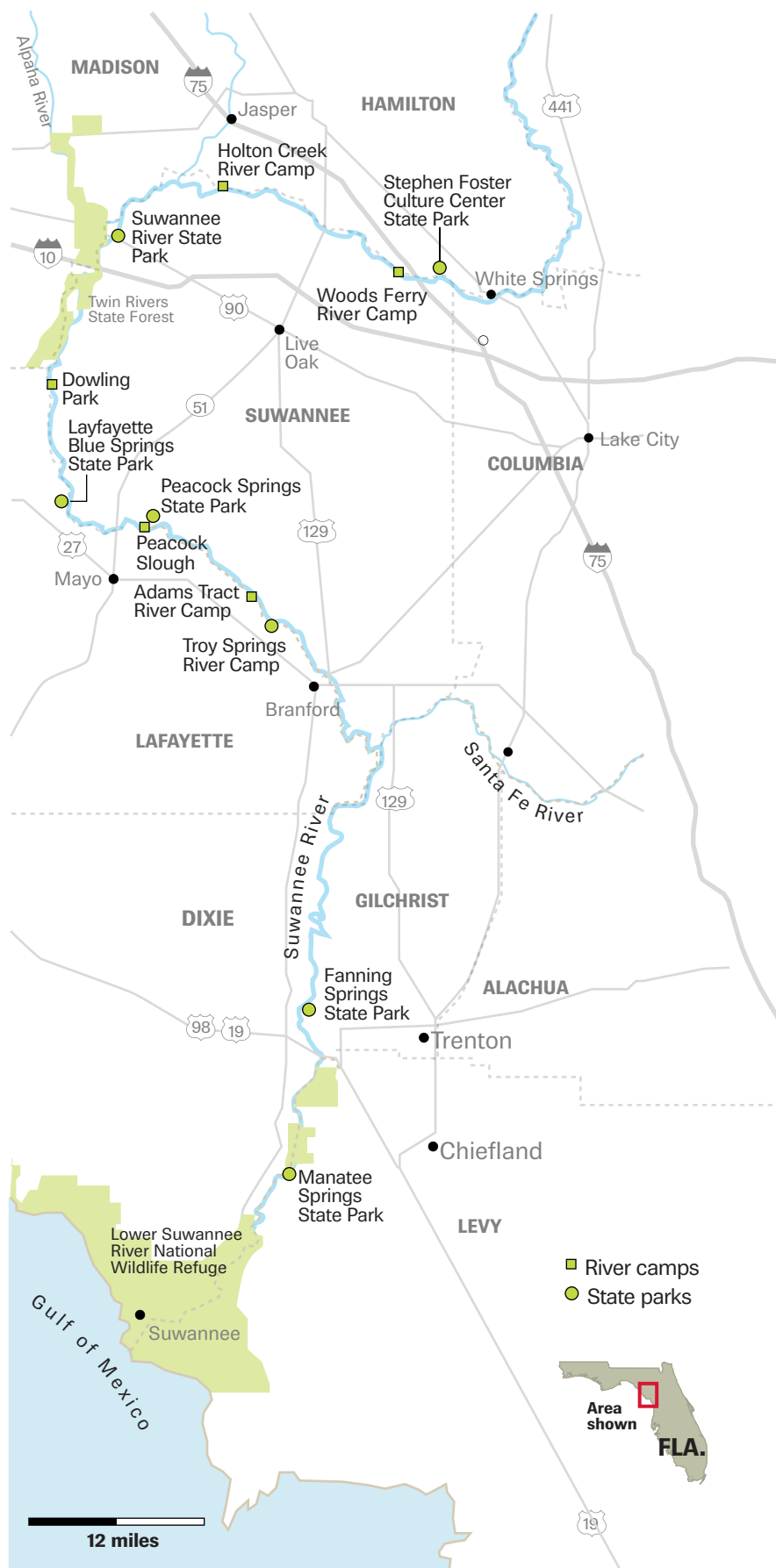
The Suwannee River Wilderness Trail harkens back to a time when the easiest way to get from one place to another was by water, not by land.

Kayla Robbins, an environmental science major from Daytona Beach, thought about the role the river played throughout history.

“As we were paddling I thought about all those people who must have traveled the same route over the years,” she said. “It is pretty amazing when you stop to think about it.”

The famed naturalist William Bartram visited the Suwannee in the summer of 1774. He noted the river’s exceptional clarity, which has puzzled historians ever since, for one of the things people notice first about the Suwannee is the dark hue of the water.

“It’s kind of spooky,” said Robbins, a



DON MORRIS | Times

22-year-old who grew up on the Atlantic Ocean and had never really explored the state's inland waterways. "I don't like it when I can't see the bottom ... you don't know what's down there."

The tea-like color comes from the tannins leached by the fallen leaves and roots of trees at the river's headwaters in the Okefenokee.

Some speculate that Bartram might have visited the Suwannee in a time of drought. Less dark water from the swamp means more clear water from springs — and the Suwannee has hundreds of them.

Pulling into the landing at the Woods Ferry River Camp at the end of the first day nobody had to be reminded to be careful. One capsized canoe was enough.

A major component of the students' learning experience is logistics. How do you get gear and food from the dock to the camp? Everybody's tired. Nobody wants to make a fire, prep food, cook or clean up. But there are no fast food drive-thru windows on the Suwannee. So the students must rally, sometimes grudgingly, but eventually they pull together.

After a rib-sticking beef stew cooked in a cast-iron pot and the camaraderie of the campfire, the crew had a new lease on life.

"Honestly, I was ready to give up after dumping the canoe," said Hernandez, the lineman from Pasco County. "But you know ... I made it this far. So why not all the way?"

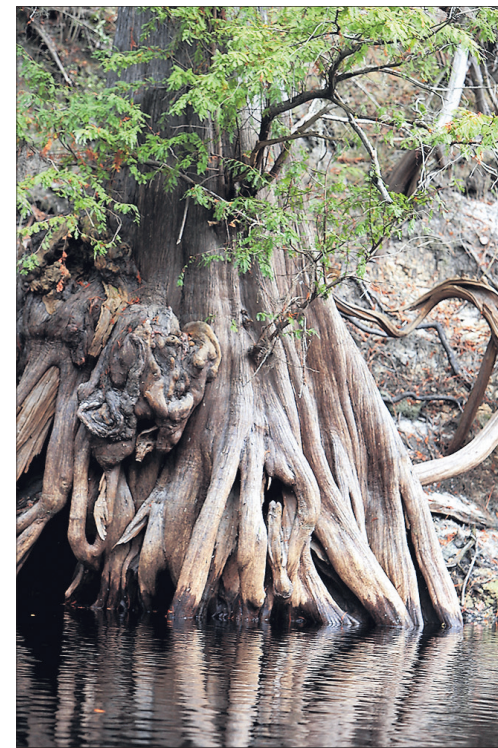
His classmates were glad that he rallied. With roughly one-third of the 39 miles behind them, they still had a lot of paddling ahead.

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The next day, up at 5, packed and ready to go by 7, the caravan of canoes made good time in the cool morning air, stopping once to check out a small unnamed creek that fed the river.

Nobody knows exactly how many freshwater springs lie in the Suwannee Basin, but the major ones — Troy, Fanning and Ichetucknee — are major attractions.

Some things haven't changed. Back in the mid 1800s, many believed Florida's freshwater springs had healing properties. A hotel was built at Suwannee Springs to cater to northern visitors. The resort even had a bottling plant so those who couldn't make the



A large cypress tree forms an artistic pattern along the banks of the Suwannee River near Live Oak.

trip could still benefit from the Suwannee's therapeutic powers.

Most dismiss the idea of Suwannee snake oil. Some, including McDaniel, think those old-timers might have been on to something.

"When we first got on the river, I was so stressed out with school," she recalled. "The river has a way of leaving you feeling totally recharged."

But the Suwannee did more than just cure rheumatism. After the Civil War, steamboats travelled up and down the river, transporting people, livestock and trade goods to the interior. The last steamboat, the City of Hawkinsville, made its final run in 1922, and now sits on the bottom 100 yards south of the railroad trestle at Old Town.

Today, boats powered by gasoline instead of steam, run up and down the river. Instead of dodging Confederate cannonballs, they steer clear of sturgeon, a prehistoric fish that loves to jump, especially during the warm, summer months.

"I kept waiting to see one," said Robbins, the surfer girl from Daytona. "I am used to the ocean with lots of fish. At first I thought the whole idea of a freshwater river was kind of boring, but after

continued on page 16

"Sitting up there on that bluff by that bend in the river, with water all around, I couldn't help but think about all those who had been in that same spot before me. How lucky are we to get to still enjoy it." **Student Jared Allen** of Brandon



USFSP students in the outdoors leadership class pass the main spring along the Suwannee River. The spring discharges sulfur water from behind a man-made limestone wall.

a day or so I started to realize that the Suwannee had its own kind of beauty.”

Limestone rock formations along the river bank, giant cypress trees and towering live oaks on the bluffs above made up for the lack of wildlife.

“This is the real Florida,” she added. “I think it is something that everybody should see.”

The second day was the longest for the students. After nearly eight hours in a canoe, they were glad to see the staircase that led to the Holton Creek River Camp. Their chores — unloading the canoes, fixing dinner and making the fire — were finished quickly. They took advantage of the extra time to talk.

Jake Fox, a 21-year-old from Fort Lauderdale, had never ventured into Florida’s interior. “I’m a saltwater guy ... I fish, dive, but always in the ocean,” he said. “I had no idea what to expect.”

The Styrofoam cups, empty bottles and plastic bags Fox had grown accustomed to seeing in the canals of South Florida were absent on the Suwannee.

“It really blew me away to see how well protected and clean the shoreline was,” Fox said. “Why can’t we do that everywhere in the state?”

Fox, who said he considers himself an independent, middle-of-the road kind of guy when it comes to politics, said his three days on the Suwannee made him more aware of the fragile state of Florida’s environment.

“It is now definitely one of my top issues,” said Fox, who plans to work in the insurance industry after he graduates. “I think the whole experience will help me a better informed voter.”

The Suwannee does have its troubles. The old-timers say that many of the springs that feed the river don’t put out like they used to — too many people using water for farms, homes and businesses.

Water quality has deteriorated, too, thanks to leaky septic tanks and agricultural runoff. The change is not visible to the eye, but yearly health advisories show how fragile the river is. Still, the Suwannee flows on.

“You can tell that this is an old river ... ancient,” said Jared Allen, a former college football player from Brandon who recently went back to school after an injury forced him to the sidelines. “You can just look at these steep limestone banks and realize that it has seen

some history.”

Married with a young daughter, the 27-year-old is a little older and a bit wiser than his fellow students. As the sun dropped below the live oaks around the fire pit at the camp, and the barred owls started caterwauling, Allen said he felt like he stepped back in time.

“Sitting up there on that bluff by that bend in the river, with water all around, I couldn’t help but think about all those who had been in that same spot before me,” he said. “How lucky are we to get to still enjoy it. I can’t wait to come back and show my little girl.”

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On the third and final day, everybody is anxious to head home. They are tired and cranky, but when the boat ramp at Suwannee River State Park finally comes into sight, they begin to have second thoughts.

As we carry the canoes up the steep embankment, I hear them making plans for another trip, this time without their teacher.

I stop and smile and think of a quote from Lao Tzu that I share at the beginning of each semester: “A leader is best

If you go

The 170-mile Suwannee River Wilderness Trail starts in White Springs and flows to the Gulf of Mexico. The five river camps, Woods Ferry, Holton Creek, Dowling Park, Peacock Slough and Adams Tract river camps are open to the public year round, free of charge. Each river camp has five raised, screened sleeping platforms, tent sites, hot showers and restrooms. To make reservations, call 1-800-868-9914 or go to floridastateparks.org.

Rent canoes at American Canoe Adventures, White Springs, aca1.com, (386) 397-1309 or the Suwannee Canoe Outpost, Spirit of the Suwannee Music Park, Live Oak, canoeoutpost.com, (386) 364-4991.

when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.”

It makes me stop and smile. **f**

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