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Establishing a Bartram Trail in Putnam County

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Bartram Trail in Putnam County



Sam Carr explains it all to JFS editors Hallock and Blanton. Photo Credit: Eric Breitenbach.

Introduction

William Bartram's exploration of Florida is familiar to people throughout the world, thanks to the publication of his *Travels* in 1791, a book describing his journey throughout eight southern colonies during the years 1773-1777. Bartram's florid and vivid descriptions of his encounters with the indigenous people, nature at its best and at its worst, his discovery and illustration of hitherto undocumented tropical flora

and fauna, and his eloquent musings about nature made his book a worldwide sensation. Although many people know that Bartram came from Philadelphia to explore Florida during this period and have read his *Travels*, few are aware that it is possible to travel the St. Johns River in the wake of William Bartram.

The Bartram Trail

Readers of Bartram's *Travels* have longed to follow William's small boat as it made its way up the St. Johns River. Although his wake has long ago dissipated and the Florida of Bartram's *Travels* is vastly different today, the watery path still remains. Much of the flora and fauna described so vividly by William can still be seen along the banks of the river, and thanks to those confining banks, even today we can follow with some certainty, if not the identical route, closely to it. The Bartram Trail in Putnam County was formed in order to re-establish the sites of William Bartram's travels in our region and make them accessible

via waterway, hiking, biking, and driving routes.



Photo credit: Bartram Trail in Putnam County

Mapping the Sites

Establishing the Bartram sites on land and water depends on reading Bartram carefully. But here things get complicated. While the 1773-1777 travels of William in Florida are well known, remarkably few are aware of the nearly identical journey made by his father, John Bartram, in 1765--or that William accompanied him on this trip up the St. Johns River. As scholars, historians, and Bartram aficionados throughout the world have read and studied the documents generated during and after these trips, it is generally agreed that William Bartram's *Travels*, published in 1791 is actually a compilation of descriptions of places, people, and events that occurred during both trips. Consequently, the chronology of the

Travels is so sadly confused as to have misled practically all who have attempted to cite his dates. The Bartram Heritage Report (1979) warns: "When reading the *Travels*, we must remember that it is not a literal rendition of experience, but a story that manipulates time, point of view, theme, imagery, and other narrative devices to make its impression. Despite its occasional lapses in accuracy, *Travels* remains an orderly, well organized account. A glance at a map of Bartram's actual travels reveals a meandering and repetitious itinerary"(25).

The existence of an alternative account of William's second journey up the St. Johns further complicates matters, at least insofar as providing clues as to the locations of the various sites he visited in his subsequent trip. This second account was crafted much earlier than his *Travels*, in the form of a report to his benefactor Dr. John Fothergill, who funded his expedition. A more recent version of this *Report*, along with an excellent commentary, was published in 1942 by Francis Harper. It was Harper's conclusion that although both *Travels* and the

Report to Fothergill cover the same general ground, they are far from being mere duplicates, and further Harper contends that the *Report* may be considered more reliable than the *Travels* on most of the points where the two are at variance (Harper, 123). Given that the *Report* was penned many years before *Travels* and thus the author's memory fresher and additionally that *Travels* was professionally edited and not a duplicate of the manuscript provided by the author lend a great deal of credence to Harper's conclusions.

Consequently, retracing the actual route and identifying the exact locations of the various sites and events described by William in his *Travels* is, to say the least, a challenge. However, our inability to exactly retrace the routes taken by both Bartrams and to pinpoint many of their stopping places and campsites is, strangely, not so much daunting as it is stimulating. For it is this uncertainty that gives us each the challenge of retracing the path with our copies of William's *Travels* and the *Report* and John's *Journal* in hand and determining for ourselves the

locations that even today, may bear close resemblance to their natural state as described by the Bartrams.



Photo credit: Bartram Trail in Putnam County

The sites chosen for inclusion in the Putnam County Bartram Paddling Trail along the St. Johns reflect this philosophy. The locations are based on the information and descriptions provided in the three documents, the *Journal*, the *Report*, and *Travels*, as though each was independent of the other. Other resources that were used to establish the locations include the many online tools and documents that were not available to earlier researchers like Francis Harper, as well as information contributed by Putnam County residents and river experts that have first-hand and intimate knowledge of the St. Johns River and Putnam County. The routes shown in the various maps and figures and the locations provided by Putnam

County are based on the best information available at the time they were drafted. The commentary provided for each site presents both the rationale for the routes to and from the site as well as that for the chosen location as well as any conflicting arguments that may arise from comparing the information provided in each of the documents. In this way, individual readers can determine for themselves where they are indeed following in the wake and walking in the footsteps of the Bartrams as they toured Putnam County.



Photo credit: Bartram Trail in Putnam County

Putnam County's Bartram Trail

The Putnam County Bartram Trail was developed to assist those interested in following in the wake and footsteps of John and William Bartram by providing resources and tools that will enable

them to be successful. Using the available writings of John and William as well as those of respected historians, each of the likely locations where the Bartrams touched shore either to camp or explore has been identified and mapped. These locations along the St. Johns River, identified as Sites, are numbered sequentially from north to south, rather than in the chronological order in which they were visited.

Coordinates, given in degree, decimal minutes, are provided for each site. In some cases, these coordinates can be very accurate, especially where landmarks mentioned in the Bartram's writings, such as streams or springs, still exist today. In other cases, they can only be considered approximate.

A commentary is provided for each site, summarizing the details surrounding each site including the Bartram's descriptions of the site, their routes of approach and departure, and various conditions that may have affected their route and choice of landing sites. If a site was used by both John and William and subsequently by William on his second

trip, the commentary provides background on both visits.

Following the commentary, excerpts from the *Journal* and/or *Travels* is provided so that the visitor can have ready access to the actual texts relevant to a particular site. These excerpts include not only the observations made by the Bartrams at the site, but also those made along the routes leading up to and away from the site.

Maps have been prepared for each site and likely locations of campsites used or any shoreline explorations noted. Likely routes, based on wind conditions, mode of travel and the various texts have been plotted as well. Where historic maps are available and are useful they have been included. (Bartram Trail in Putnam County).

Finally, any additional resources, particularly those that are web-based and can be accessed electronically, have been included for each site so that they too can be used to enhance the experience of following the trail.

The Putnam County Bartram Paddling Trail is intended to be a continual

work in progress. As additional resources are found the information provided will be updated with the goal of providing the best and most accurate information available to those who wish to follow the Bartrams through Putnam County.



Photo credit: Bartram Trail in Putnam County

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