Historians often talk about the importance of getting immersed in their work. Usually, this dictum is figurative in nature but late one Sunday morning in the spring of 2002, I took the advice quite literally. On a canoe trip on the St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers, I flipped the boat not once, but twice into the placid blue-green waters of the twisting Ocklawaha. Our companions, accompanying me in their kayaks, quickly dubbed the spot “Wet Man’s Bend,” and added to my embarrassment by chronicling the experience in the Orlando Sentinel. “I tease [the historians],” wrote travel reporter Lisa Carden, “that they are taking their research of the river a little far.” The journey, even with the unexpected swim, convinced me that research into the Cross Florida Barge Canal was not just another investigation of the past. Indeed, the canal and its history are central to understanding modern-day Florida and how it got to where it is today. However, a major question remains—why is the history of something that never happened so important? Started twice, once in the 1930s and again in the 1960s, the canal was never completed. All that remains today are the faded dreams of supporters and the physical remains of two failed effort to cross the peninsula. And yet, the abortive canal touched far more than the river I was canoeing, a quiet stream that would have been obliterated in the wake of a giant ditch filled with relentless barge traffic.

The story of the canal—both as a ship canal in the 1930s and a more modest barge canal along the same path in the 1960s—reveals much about competing visions of progress and preservation in Florida. From the halls of Congress to the committee rooms
of the Tallahassee statehouse, from the boardrooms of the Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce to the drawing boards of the Army Corps of Engineers, and even to the very banks of the Ocklawaha River, the waterway, in its many iterations and designs, has played a major part in the development of the Sunshine State since its territorial days. And though many may consign the story of the canal to history, its twin legacies, the Marjorie Harris Carr Cross Florida Greenway and the George Kirkpatrick Dam, with its accompanying Rodman Reservoir, remain contentious issues well into the twenty-first century, decades after canal construction finally ceased in 1971.

The canal reveals much about those competing visions of progress, economic growth, and preservation, as well as the use of political power to achieve those goals. It is also the story of an emerging environmental movement in the 1960s and how that movement halted the construction of a major federal public works project. It illustrates the importance of citizen activism–how a rag-tag bunch of north Florida residents with little power and influence faced down a formidable alliance of business interests and state and federal officials, including the Army Corps of Engineers–and won. At the same time, it is the story of Marjorie Harris Carr, the “mere Micanopy housewife” who took it upon herself to mobilize these activists and oppose what she saw as the destruction of natural Florida and in the process became a national symbol of the power of environmentalism. It is also the story of a similar group of citizens in the 1930s, who challenged the authority of the federal government under Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal–and won as well. But the canal’s importance goes beyond these environmental struggles to shed light on the changing nature of politics in 20th century Florida and the nation at large, as New Deal liberalism lost its power to shape the destinies of average citizens. Finally, it is a story of
redemption and how an ugly scar across the state’s midsection became a jewel-like linear park. The ultimate irony remains that the location once designated for the canal, from land purchased to fulfill the commercial and financial aspirations of business leaders, now provides a piece of natural Florida, serving as a buffer against the constant incursions of growth and development.

The Cross Florida Barge Canal’s history is as rich and long as the history of Florida itself. Well before the Sunshine State became associated with citrus production, retirement communities, and Disney World, many Floridians dreamed of digging a ditch across the peninsula to connect the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. To do so would invite unprecedented growth and prosperity and place Florida at the very center of American commerce. It was an ambitious vision, one in keeping with the emergence of a sophisticated national economy that began with the establishment of New York’s Erie Canal. Early on, canal boosters and their legislative allies understood that such a large-scale project would depend upon the largesse of the federal government. From the 1820s onward, any debate over canal construction therefore centered Washington, D.C., making a cross Florida canal a truly national issue. The federal connection was further strengthened by the institutional presence of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers which was intimately involved in the planning and development of the waterway. As decades evolved into centuries, sheer bureaucratic inertia—reinforced by the persistent drumbeat of local boosterism—strengthened the Corps’ commitment to the project regardless of economic costs, potential benefits, and environmental consequences. Thus by the 1960s, the project appeared to have a life of its own, even as economic and environmental exigencies seriously challenged its legitimacy.

Although is became a divisive issue by the 1960s, the canal’s early history was marked by relative consensus. The late 19th and early 20th centuries saw canal advocates pushing state
and local officials to build the project. These boosters, usually local businessman from cities such as Jacksonville and Ocala, envisioned the canal as an engine of economic growth for the state. Until the Great Depression, few doubted the necessity of the project—rather the debate centered on its funding and location. From the 1840s onward, the Army Corps of Engineers conducted numerous surveys that resulted in the selection of twenty-eight potential canal routes ranging from southern Georgia to Lake Okeechobee. In 1932, the Corps finally chose route 13-B as the most practical and cost-effective path for a waterway across the state. Starting at the Atlantic Ocean, it began in Jacksonville and followed the St. John’s River to Palatka, and then along the Ocklawaha River to a point near Silver Springs. It then cut westward across land below Ocala to Dunnellon and finally along the course of the Withlacoochee River until it entered the Gulf of Mexico near Yankeetown. More than just carving a route directly through the Central Florida Ridge, the nearly 200 mile long 30 foot deep Ship Canal included significant alterations to the St. Johns, Ocklawaha, and Withlacoochee Rivers, as well as a dredged channel nearly twenty miles into the Gulf of Mexico. The project was of such monumental scale that, when completed, it would significantly dwarf such iconic projects as the Panama and Suez Canals.

Ironically, the 1930s Ship Canal’s groundbreaking owed its existence more to the politics of the Great Depression rather than to the technical rationale for its necessity. With the national unemployment rate reaching nearly 25 percent, the need for a work project trumped all other considerations and construction began in September 1935 as part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal. But with that start came a host of new arguments that questioned the efficacy of the project. A strange coalition of opponents, combining cranky fiscal conservatives, central Florida citrus and vegetable growers, port officials from Miami and Tampa, and conservation groups from around the state, organized to stop the canal. This primarily local movement soon found national allies like
Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg, who saw the Ship Canal as a symbol of Franklin Roosevelt’s profligate spending and unprecedented federal power. Roosevelt’s support for the project waned in the face of this intense local and national opposition. Within a year, the cranes and bulldozers fell silent as the federal government pulled the plug on the project. It was a rare defeat for one of FDR’s major programs. By all rights, this decision should have spelled the end of the canal but local boosters and congressional supporters would not let their dream die so quickly. By altering the design to make the project less destructive to Florida’s aquifer and tying its importance to broader concerns about national defense in a world on the edge of war in the late 1930s, these supporters brought the canal back to life.

In 1942, as German U-Boats ravaged merchant shipping off the Florida coast, Congress passed a bill authorizing the construction of another canal across the state following the same route as the abortive New Deal work project. This one, however, would be a barge canal; only 12 feet deep with attendant locks and dams. The canal would be an important link in the protected shipping of oil and gas from the fields of Texas to East Coast markets. Though it appeared canal boosters had won a great victory, Congress never appropriated the money to build the project, as more pressing war needs took higher priority. Once again, the canal was on hold. For the next twenty-two years, the struggle for canal appropriations became an annual congressional rite. Finally, in 1964, with the money encumbered, President Lyndon Johnson traveled to Palatka to initiate the groundbreaking of the Cross-Florida Barge canal. The dream of canal supporters seemed well on its way to reality until it ran up against a new generation of environmental activists determined to preserve the Ocklawaha River. Led by Marjorie Carr, these critics forged a movement centered around scientific expertise, citizen activism, and the use of the legal system that challenged a political and institutional juggernaut intent on completing the canal. Through sheer persistence—as Carr later put it, “timing, knowledge of the facts, and staying in the fight
until it is well and truly won”–they overcame enormous obstacles and in seven years convinced both the courts and President Richard Nixon to halt construction. Once again, the cranes and bulldozers stood silent–this time for good. Less than one-third complete, the Cross-Florida Barge Canal soon became a monument to the lack of consensus over the meaning of development and progress. It also vividly underscored the growing power of a grass-roots environmental movement determined to prevent the canal from destroying natural Florida, particularly the relatively untouched Ocklawaha River. Though construction halted in January 1971, controversy over the canal and its legacy did not stop. Since canal supporters had waited so long for the fulfillment of their dream, they were not about to yield easily to their adversaries. As John Pennekamp, the great editorialist of the Miami Herald wrote in 1972, “The only thing certain about the future of the cross-state canal and the Ocklawaha River is that the argument will continue unabated and none of the involved interests are giving up.”
This time the contentious debate swirled around the fate of existing canal structures on the Ocklawaha itself—especially the Rodman Dam, which the state of Florida officially designated as the George Kirkpatrick Dam in 1998. Though canal construction halted in 1971, the dam and its adjoining reservoir had already been completed and still remain in place today. For environmentalists, stopping the canal was only half the battle; as from the beginning their efforts centered on preserving the Ocklawaha River. To this day, they cannot claim complete victory until the dam is removed and the Ocklawaha is restored to its original free-flowing condition. This will provide, according to a pro-restoration press release, “a rare opportunity to correct an environmental disaster” and allow “the restored Ocklawaha [to become] a legacy we leave for future generations.” On the other hand, their opponents no longer seek the completion of the canal. Instead, their goal is to retain the dam and the Rodman Reservoir created by it. In their eyes, the dam established a “viable and complex ecosystem that supports a wide variety of native plants and wildlife.” The once inaccessible river has now been replaced by an expansive reservoir providing significant recreational opportunities for the general public. Removal of the dam would drain the reservoir and thus eliminate one of the premier bass fishing spots in America. Since 1971, neither group has had the political clout to impose its will on the other and bring an end to the controversy. Therefore, the debate concerning the dam’s removal has become a perennial rite of spring in the Florida Legislature. As a 2007 op-ed piece in the Daytona Beach News-Journal noted:

The fight over Rodman Reservoir transcends party loyalty. It crosses legislative alliances, defies political ideology and has defeated Florida governors as canny as Lawton Chiles and Jeb Bush. In a state with a short political attention span, this issue revolves around a dam that will be 40 years old next year. Over that time, the Vietnam War ended, the Soviet Union dissolved, Apartheid ended in South Africa and the European Union was formed. But the issue of what to do about the Rodman Dam – excuse me, the
Kirkpatrick dam – defies a political solution.”

The history of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal, therefore, is not just a story about modern Florida—in many respects it is the story of modern Florida. As Floridians struggle with the issues of growth and preservation in a fragile and increasingly finite environment, the almost 200 year legacy of this project looms as a cautionary tale over present-day public policy discussions. What makes the story even more important is that it appears to have no ending, debate over the ultimate disposition of canal structures is as current as the most recent legislative session. It also tells us much about the equally fragile nature of America’s political system. Both canal supporters and opponents used all aspects of both state and national governments—elected officials in both the executive and legislative branches, the courts, even ostensible apolitical bureaucracies—to achieve their goals. The results suggest that the American political system, especially in Florida, either worked as a vibrant responsive form of democracy, or that it was controlled by special interests far removed from the lives of ordinary citizens. It all depended on who you talked to—and when.

The mixed legacy of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal serves as a reminder that history provides no easy answers for the future. In 1971, environmentalists celebrated President Richard Nixon’s decision to halt canal construction to save the Ocklawaha River. For both them and their adversaries, the cross Florida waterway was dead. Yet, only sixty miles south, another cross Florida connection was just being completed as the canal received its death notice. I-4, the interstate highway that tied Florida’s Gulf coast to the Atlantic would profoundly re-shape the state and provide the transportation infrastructure necessary for the kind of unprecedented economic growth and rapid development that canal boosters could only dream of. The highway also allowed access to another mega-project associated with 1971—Disney World. Congressman
Charles Bennett, a Jacksonville Democrat who vigorously supported the canal, saw the ironies inherent in those events when he proclaimed that “Walt Disney’s never-never land of Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse will damage Florida’s ecology more than the now-stymied Cross-State Barge Canal.” Predicting that the new theme park, especially in comparison to an enhanced waterway, would be nothing but “concrete buildings and asphalt,” Bennett presciently pointed to the prevailing environmental problem facing the Sunshine State today: urban sprawl. With more than a little bitterness, he observed that Disney’s creation near Orlando “will be helpful economically, but it will destroy more ecologically than the canal ever would.”
Bennett was no doubt on target about Disney World’s impact but he certainly failed to appreciate the significance of the canal debate and the environmental movement it spawned. In the end, the story of the canal is the story of the Ocklawaha River. For Marjorie Carr and her allies, it most certainly was the case. They understood the importance of preserving one of Florida’s last free flowing natural rivers from not only the direct threat of the canal but the broader challenge of rapid development associated with a booming postwar economy. As early as 1965, Carr warned that “the Ocklawaha will become a symbol—whether of man’s folly or man’s wisdom remains to be seen.” The anti-canal movement may have saved the Ocklawaha but not before the Army Corps of Engineers had left its mark. The result is a linear park that not only bears Carr’s name but also the scars of the Kirkpatrick Dam and Rodman Reservoir. The river remains a vestige of a natural Florida where, in the words of an Orlando Sentinel reporter, “it is important to understand this mystical place and, in the midst of its kaleidoscope of natural beauty, to contemplate our relationship with it.” And yet because the fate of the Ocklawaha still remains unresolved, many environmentalists feel they cannot rest. As Bill Partington, one of the primary leaders in the struggle against the canal, explained in 1990, “being an environmentalist in Florida means never having to say you’re satisfied.” While Partington was speaking directly about the river, he could have easily been referring to the larger environmental challenges facing the Sunshine State. Marjorie Carr, as usual, put it best only a year before her death. The effort to save the Ocklawaha is “not a north central Florida local issue. The Ocklawaha River is a glorious part of Florida's natural heritage. Floridians should be aware that if they can't save the Ocklawaha they have little chance of saving any of the remaining lovely wild places in Florida.”
Competing Interests in the 1960s-1970s

*Florida Defenders of the Environment/ Environmental Defense Fund on one side*

*Army Corps of Engineers/Canal Authority/Economic Boosters from Ocala, Jacksonville, & Palatka on the other*

Competing Interest in the current dispute

*Florida Defenders of the Environment/Federal Agencies/Florida state government on one side*

*Save Rodman Reservoir/Putnam County residents/ some FL state officials on the other side*
1. “Return to the River,” Orlando Sentinel, May 5, 2002. Throughout the years, the spelling of the Ocklawaha River has undergone many iterations. We have endeavored to leave those spellings intact with all direct quotations. Otherwise we rely on the current standard of “Ocklawaha.”


