

**Time is ripe to return this wonderful resource to use and navigability**

## **New life for the Ocmulgee**

*By Rick Maier*

Dance with the one you brought - great advice that we, the citizens of Macon, have forgotten. Not only do we ignore the lady that gave us life, we dance with others named Tobesofkee and Sinclair right under her nose.

I'm speaking of the grand lady – the Ocmulgee River. Instead of depending on her for transportation and food like we used to, we consume her clean water and let her choke on stumps and silt. We cut down trees and build highways along her banks, then complain that she floods or runs low.

We ought to be ashamed of ourselves! But there is hope!

Let's dredge the river to make her deep enough for boats and return the Ocmulgee to her former place of prominence. The timing couldn't be better with development of the Ocmulgee Heritage Greenway, a network of paths and parks that should attract a lot of people to the banks of the river.

### **Ocmulgee can be navigable**

Macon has always had something that Atlanta and Orlando don't – a navigable river. But we're losing her to neglect. We need to start receiving our share of the Federal tax dollars intended to maintain the waterways, just like Savannah, Brunswick and Columbus. (Yes, Columbus has a port on the Chattahoochee that connects them to the Gulf and Midwest.)

Macon exists because it was as far inland as early settlers could travel by boat, but it's been over 75 years since barges transported cotton and bricks from Macon to the coastal ports. A government boat and crew that operated in the 1950's and 1960's to "snag" debris have since been abandoned.

In 1912, the US Army Corps of Engineers identified the Ocmulgee-Oconee-Altamaha river system as a Federal Navigation Project, and proposed maintaining a channel 3 feet deep and 60 to 100 feet wide. The opportunity has long been recognized, but the funds have never been appropriated.

Shipping by boat rather than train or truck is cheap and efficient. A river terminal might convince some big manufacturer to build a factory here, or give our kaolin, paper, recycling or other industries an additional incentive to grow in Macon.

### **Travel, recreation for people**

Not only can the river be used to transport goods, it can transport people – from pleasure boats to water taxis. Plus there are many exciting recreational uses - marinas, restaurants and outdoor adventure companies to name a few.

Let's get started.

Let's urge Saxby Chambliss, Paul Coverdell and Max Cleland to get the Corps of Engineers to study these issues and bring the Ocmulgee back to life. The Chamber of Commerce, NewTown Macon and local elected representatives should lead the effort.

The big, long-term goal - getting the Corps of Engineers to dredge from Macon all the way to the coast – is a major task with many challenges.

The first hurdle is to give the Corps a reason to dredge that meets their criteria – commercial navigation, flood control or some threat to the environment. Recreation and aesthetics don't count.

We must find a big corporation to promise to build a plant that depends on navigation, or argue that a deeper channel (along with raising the levees) protects us from floods, or find some plant or animal that is facing extinction because the river bed is rising.

### **Enlist neighbors downstream**

The second challenge will be to convince our neighbors downstream in Southeast Georgia, who have resisted past attempts to open the Altamaha River to shipping, that this is a good plan for everyone.

A more bite-size, first phase might be to deepen the Ocmulgee for a several mile stretch through Macon, from the new Town Creek reservoir to the water treatment plant south of the city. We just need to figure out what to do with the dredge material, and make a commitment to continue removing silt that will flow into the deeper channel from upstream.

The river may never again be as important as roads, rails and runways, but if we don't start “dancing” with the Ocmulgee again soon, we could lose a tremendously valuable resource.

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