

Railway constructed a line in 1899 that operated from Valdosta, Georgia to Jacksonville, Florida. Passing immediately south of the survey area and extending for approximately 110 miles (main line) crossing southern Georgia and northern Florida, this line was nicknamed the “Jacksonville Short Line.” This railroad also had approximately 45 spur-line miles, most of which were logging routes. In 1902, this line was purchased by the Georgia Southern and Florida Railway (RailGa.com 2019).

Early Euroamerican settlers in the area were largely subsistence farmers raising cattle and hogs and cultivating small corn fields and gardens. Log houses were built that were surrounded by outbuildings for grain storage, supplies, and sugar production. A pattern of a few scattered homesteads continued in the region well into the twentieth century. Although several Antebellum period rice plantations were built to the east along the lower St. Marys and Satilla Rivers, no plantations were present close to the Okefenokee Swamp (Kirkland and Cook 2007:19).

The Georgia Legislature sold the swamp to the Suwanee Canal Company, comprised of former Confederate officers and wealthy investors, in 1891. That year, the canal company began digging over twenty miles of ditches and canal to drain the swamp to the St. Marys River through Trail Ridge to create arable lands for rice, sugar cane, and cotton farming. A sawmill was built to harvest logs using steamboats and steam-powered equipment. By the early twentieth century, however, the abundant railroads allowed for the construction of sawmills, turpentine stills, and extensive logging bringing an influx of people to fill these industry jobs (Trowell 1998b; Kirkland and Cook 2007:19-20).

Throughout the twentieth century, the swamp property went passed through a few different hands. By 1901, the property owned by the former Suwanee Canal Company was in the possession of Charles Hebard of Philadelphia who owned extensive lumber businesses in Michigan and Pennsylvania. After he died in 1901, his sons took over and formed the Hebard Lumber Company of Thomas County, Georgia in 1904. They leased the Okefenokee Swamp property to a subsidiary, the Hebard Cypress Company of West Virginia, who harvested cypress from the swamp between 1909 and 1927. A large sawmill was built west of Waycross to manufacture lumber and shingles and a settlement known as Hebardville grew up around the mill. A rail line, the Waycross and Southern, was completed from Hebardville to the northwestern edge of the swamp in 1909-1910 and from there, railroads were built throughout the swamp to log cypress trees from the northern and western areas. A number of smaller logging companies had joined the effort with logging camps established on Billy’s Island, at The Pocket, and on Jones Island by 1918. Logging continued until the depletion of old growth cypress by the mid-1920s by which time the larger companies were shutting down with the last logging operations completed in 1942 (Trowell 1998b; Kirkland and Cook 2007:20).

The Hebard family had built a small cabin on Floyds Island within the Okefenokee Swamp in 1925, which was used as a private hunting and fishing resort until the mid-1930s. It remains in good condition as a camping and research facility listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Calls for preservation of the Okefenokee Swamp began as early as 1902 by geographer Roland M. Harper and supported by scientists from Cornell University who began studying the swamp after 1912. The short-lived Okefenokee Society was organized by 1919 to further the cause of swamp preservation and died two years later. In 1929, the Georgia Society of Naturalists was organized which worked to lobby the Georgia legislature to convince the federal government to purchase the property. Although several Georgia politicians introduced congressional bills thereafter to preserve the swamp, their attempts failed (Trowell 1998b; Kirkland and Cook 2007:20-21).