

Seeking a Sanctuary A Chronicle of Efforts to Preserve the Okefenokee

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For centuries, maybe millennia, men have sought refuge in the depths of the Okefenokee wilderness. Plants and animals also sought sanctuary there. For generations the Swamp also served as a public common, a resource safety net for people in need. In 1891 the State of Georgia sold the property to the Suwanee Canal Company for private commercial development. When this venture failed, the owners sold the property to Charles Hebard, a prominent lumberman from Philadelphia. A few individuals, cognizant of the embryonic national conservation movement, suggested preservation of the Okefenokee as a natural area. But most of the pristine landscape was modified by logging before organized efforts succeeded in acquiring the property as a wildlife sanctuary in 1937.

Roland M. Harper called for the preservation of swamps in 1906 and 1909.¹ He listed their importance as headwaters for streams, refuges for wildlife against their extermination by hunters, natural research laboratories, and lastly, for their beauty. He praised the diversity of the scenery in the Okefenokee Swamp, noting that "There is nothing else exactly like it in the world." But Harper's call for preservation was lost in the metallic pounding of railroad construction, pile drivers, and steam-powered logging skidders. The Hebard Cypress Company initiated a major industrial logging operation on the northwestern rim of the Okefenokee in 1909.² The Americus Manufacturing Company (C.M. Council of Americus, Georgia) also began logging cypress timber from the southwestern corner of the Okefenokee in 1909.³ Harper's articles were words drifting in the doldrums of public apathy.

¹ Roland M. Harper, Some Neglected Aspects of the Campaign Against Swamps, Southern Woodlands, August 1906, 46-67; Roland M. Harper, Okefenokee Swamp, Popular Science Monthly, (74) June 1909, 596-614.

² Waycross Weekly Herald, January 9, 1909; January 23, 1909; February 13, 1909; Waycross Journal-Herald, October 23, 1909.

³ Americus Weekly-Times, October 29, 1908; Deed: J.J., J.W. & N. Langdale to C.M. Council, January 25, 1909, Clinch County Superior Court Deed Record Book AA, pp. 273-276.