

III

Politics and Activism



Watching the Little Wekiva, a Red Bird on a Branch

Democracy most of all affiliates with the open air, is sunny and hardy and sane only with Nature -- just as much as Art is. Something is required to temper both -- to check them, restrain them from excess, morbidity. I have wanted, before departure, to bear special testimony to a very old lesson and requisite. American Democracy, in its myriad personalities, in factories, work-shops, stores, offices -- through the dense streets and houses of cities, and all their manifold sophisticated life -- must either be fibred, vitalized, by regular contact with out-door light and air and growths, farm-scenes, animals, fields, trees, birds, sun-warmth and free skies, or it will certainly dwindle and pale.

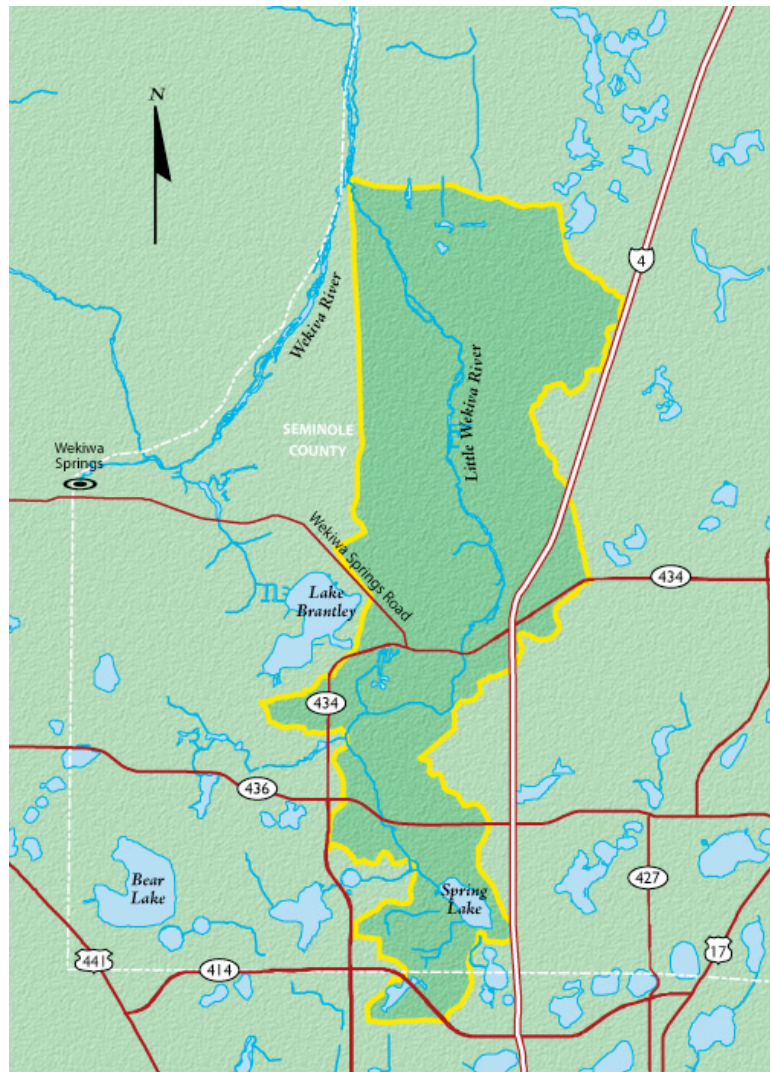
Whitman: "Democracy and Nature," the last entry in *Specimen Days*

The Little Wekiva River, the Friends

When they built Interstate 4 from Daytona Beach to Tampa in the late 1960's, it ran four lanes roughly northeast to southwest until it got just above Orlando where, to this day, it drops like a plumb line once it reaches the edge of the Wekiva basin. When it gets to the downtown, at the heart of Orlando, it crosses the east-west SR 50, also called Colonial Drive. These two major arteries make the crosshairs for the outerbelt that now circles more than three quarters of the metropolitan area, lacking only the northwest quadrant that would go over the Wekiva basin itself.

Both the Wekiva and Little Wekiva sub-basins, that is, their rain-catching watershed areas, begin at the route 50 margin in the south and by a chain of lakes, runs, canals, and such eventually flow into a narrow channel. Most of the forty-two miles of the Little Wekiva's run has been swallowed up by urbanization: industrial sites, apartment complexes, large tract developments, golf courses, and mall to mall streets. It's hard to find any river in there.

From a large community called Rosemont, the river flows out across SR441 and eventually goes underground for a while through a giant culvert under another development. Then it resurfaces as a fairly well-raging drainage ditch about twenty feet wide and in high



Courtesy of the St. Johns River Water Management District by permission.

rains four feet deep, causing extensive erosion that eventually reaches miles downstream. This is where the Water Management District begins its map.

Following a succession of smaller neighborhoods like Riverbrook and River Run, we enter now the city of Altamonte Springs. Originally a tourist town of 1200 acres, built in 1882 along the South Florida Railroad, they first called it Snowville because the population in winter swelled to 300. Later, because of the advertising about the nearby springs, the present name was adopted. A great portion of the surrounding land was planted in orange groves and once had a large citrus processing plant in the middle of the Little Wekiva's run. It spewed out a considerable amount of pollution into the little river, but who cared?

The force that really drives the Little Wekiva, however, and keeps it from being completely disowned by its sister tributaries is the set of three powerful springs that are located, believe it or not, about three blocks from the juncture of I-4 and SR 434. In a gated development called The Springs, 950 homes weave in and around the ridges surrounding Sanlando Springs (25 mgd) and two smaller ones, Palm Spring and Starbuck Spring, plus a handful of smaller boils and seeps that help to "clean up" the run and rejuvenate the water flow.

The stream before this point is often so low, it is barely canoeable; but after the springs, it becomes quite quickly a beautiful and swift, wild ride. In spite of the high-priced homes of the Markham Woods area that occasionally peek in at you, the Little Wekiva maintains here its pristine character and these last six miles are more than worthy of the high caliber of the Wekiva wilderness, as the black bears will attest. At times the Little Wekiva narrows to as little as ten or fifteen feet and in high water seasons presents a challenge for the paddler that lasts for five miles before we enter the main river. As far as we know the native Timucuan did not occupy the Little Wekiva, except for a small mound at the very end of the run.

The confluence of the Little Wekiva and the Upper Wekiva spawns a school of islands that wiggle back and forth to create alternating channels where the bird life is extraordinary. One mile downstream on the backside of two long islands, you can find the Twin Mounds, the subject of Brent Weisman's 1993 archaeological study through which we have learned a great deal about the native Timucuan culture indigenous to the Wekiva basin.

About a mile from the Twin Mounds on the west side we cross the Orange County line into Lake County and then the traces of an old Atlantic Coast Line Railroad which used to carry nineteenth-century folk and goods from Longwood to Eustis. The rail bed and the old wooden bridge which caught on fire have been dismantled and the land largely restored. A number of Florida black bears are enamored of this stretch of the river, wandering occasionally through the home sites closest to the water.

The lowland floodplain begins to narrow then from several miles wide to a thousand feet and so the river broadens into what most people call the Flats, running wide and open for four miles. Now the river has banks you could build on, but there's still enough forest at the edge to hide the handful of developments along the Longwood Markham Road on the east side. One such

development called the Plantation never came to be, however, through a grass-roots effort and the tract has now been purchased by Seminole County.

Next on our downstream paddle, a cove to the left takes us into Wekiva Falls, a fountain really, created by Eugene Middlebrooks when he rammed a twenty-four inch pipe down into the aquifer and had it squirt out of a gothic tower, two stories high. He hung a sign out on SR 46 to lure tourists and travelers to this ninth wonder of the world, waterfalls in the Wekiva flats.

For twenty years Middlebrooks has been at odds with the Water Management District and ecologists for this unwanted disruption of the geological system, but so far the wily bobcat has succeeded in keeping it in the courts. I like the pleasant, old world—some might say “honky-tonk”—atmosphere of Wekiva Falls because it reminds me of the days of free orange juice and the highwaymen who were selling their bright paintings on the roadsides of east coast Florida in the ‘fifties. Middlebrooks runs a large trailer camp here, the kind of setting you might expect in one of John D. MacDonald’s Florida mystery novels.

If the story of conservation in Wekiva had ended in 1969 with the opening of the Wekiwa Springs State Park, the shaping of the landscape of the basin would be easy to imagine: the central park of 6000 acres would have become entirely surrounded by the city. Disney World opened in 1972 and growth immediately started to fill into the basin from the heart of Orlando, northward, especially along the I-4 corridor. The Deltona Corporation, which built an entire city north of Sanford in the lowlands of the St. Johns River, owned the land between Rock Springs Run and the Wekiva River and was eager to develop it as well. They got as far as getting a bridge built, but the road into their vast acreage never got done before the corporation itself went under. Hence, the Bridge to Nowhere.

In the 1970’s Bill Partington, a local environmental activist, gathered a few people to get the river designated as a Florida Wild and Scenic River, but their efforts failed. In 1976 land for the Lower Wekiva River State Preserve was purchased, adding more acres to the protection far north; but otherwise conservation was at a standstill and little was being done to study and protect the river.

It was largely the people of the Markham Woods area, living like otters along the river, who made the 911 call in the early 1980’s when pollution from new sources, esp. the city of Altamonte Springs, started to endanger aquatic life along their properties. They gathered a number of other specialists and incorporated as The Friends of the Wekiva River, Inc. (FOWR) in 1982 and began a movement that is still going strong and setting the tone for community of the land in Central Florida.