

Drifting Along the Sassagoula River



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Walt Disney World has many impressive bodies of water, both inside the parks and out. Bay Lake itself caught Walt's eye and became the northern anchor of the Walt Disney World resort. In its day, River Country was the wildest and wettest spot on property, allowing for fun at the old swimming hole. Epcot features a grand lagoon to celebrate World Showcase and the nightly fireworks spectacular Illuminations. The Magic Kingdom's Jungle Cruise boats ply the majestic rivers of the world. Outside the parks, Downtown Disney borders on the Village Lake, with the supple Sassagoula River's delta feeding into it.

Walt Disney World, with four parks and multiple resorts, reflects many facets of American life, past, present and future. For example, Liberty Square at the Magic Kingdom captures the spirit of Colonial America, Sunset Boulevard at Disney's Hollywood Studios reflects the bountiful optimism of 1930's Los Angeles, and the Wilderness Lodge echoes the magnificent National Park lodges found in Yellowstone and the great Northwest. Given all this, it's easy to see Walt Disney World as a microcosm of the United States. If the mighty Mississippi River, the majestic ribbon that separates our Eastern and Western halves, is the iconic waterway of America, then the Sassagoula River is Walt Disney World's Mississippi. In fact, Sassagoula is one of the many names given to the Mississippi. Native Americans all along the river coined different names for it, including Sassagoula, proffered upon it from a tribe along its southern banks. Disney Imagineers used this name when rebranding the existing waterway on the southwest corner of the Walt Disney World property, tying it to the newly created Southern-themed resorts Port Orleans and Dixie Landings.

The beginning of the Sassagoula River can be traced back to one of two starting points – 1967, when the development of Walt Disney World property began, and 1704, when French explorers Pierre D'Orr and Philip Leane founded Port Orleans. Both stories are equally fascinating.

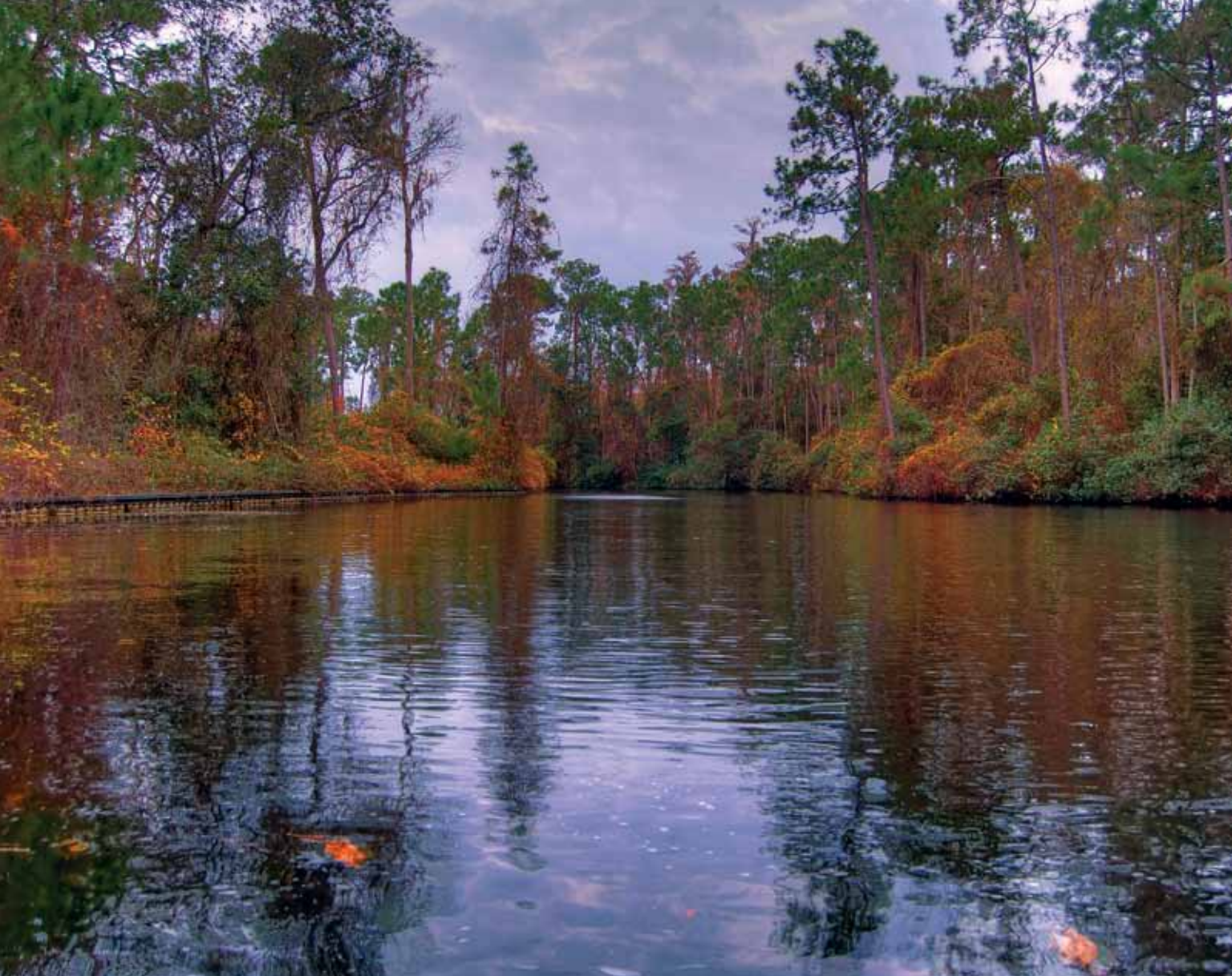
The Walt Disney Company purchased over forty-three square miles of Florida land to build its next Magic Kingdom and Walt's ambitious "City of Tomorrow." The size and scope of the property was as daunting as it was promising. Before the Magic Kingdom could be built, the property would need to be molded into shape, to accommodate not only the first park but also several resorts and a suitable infrastructure for future development. The Walt Disney Company was the primary landowner and utilized a unique element of the Florida state law; it petitioned the State legislature to form its own Drainage District, per Chapter 298 of the state

Statutes. It successfully created the Reedy Creek Drainage District, named after a natural creek running through the property. Disney now had the preliminary tool to begin management of its property, much of it swampland. Disney took it a step further, working with the Florida state legislature to create an Improvement District. Disney argued that this was necessary if it was to proceed with EPCOT as Walt originally envisioned it. On May 12, 1967 the Reedy Creek Improvement District was formed, giving Disney wide-ranging powers to manage its property, allowing for the creation and maintenance of roads, public utilities and, of course, a massive effort to tame and control the swamps.

Disney relied on its Joes to get the job done – Admiral Joe Fowler and Joe Potter. Admiral Joseph Fowler brought a "can do" spirit to the development of the Florida property, tapping into his experience from his similar role of leading the construction of Disneyland. He was the Senior Vice President of both construction and engineering of Walt Disney Productions, overseeing the staggering task of building the Vacation Kingdom. William E. "Joe" Potter teamed with Walt during the 1964-65 Worlds Fair, in which Disney presented its groundbreaking audio-animatronic character of Abraham Lincoln. Potter joined the Walt Disney Company shortly thereafter as vice president of Florida Planning, and led the construction of the Walt Disney World property infrastructure.

To transform the property, over fifty miles of canals and levees were built, allowing for better water control of the property. Named after Potter, the canals were dubbed "Joe's Ditches." All in all, it was important to maintain a consistent water level between droughts and floods, and not damage the environment. It was also important that the canals have a natural look. The simplest construction method would have the canals as straight lines, but legendary Imagineer John Hench successfully argued that the canals should curve and have varying widths, as if following natural contours of the land and appearing as genuine rivers or creeks. The canals are self-regulating, with simple gates that allow for water flow or constriction. They require neither electricity nor human monitoring, instead relying on gravity to open or close, depending on adjacent water levels. Aerial views of the property show how extensive the canal system runs. The largest originates at the southeastern corner of Bay Lake and traverses south, passing by Fort Wilderness and running briefly between Epcot Center Drive and the Port Orleans and Old Key West resorts. It continues on, eventually passing under Interstate 4 and curling around





and beyond the Disney-inspired town of Celebration. This artery has many tributaries stemming from it, including a major branch that connects into the Sassagoula, ensuring that the aquatic DNA from Bay Lake is shared throughout the property.

In the late 1980s, Disney began development of Dixie Landings and Port Orleans, and the canal system was enhanced to provide an authentic backdrop to the resorts. Port Orleans opened in 1991 and Dixie Landings in 1992. Both resorts have a Southern theme and derive much of their identity from the river. Disney developed extensive back-stories for the resorts, originally published in the *Sassagoula Sentinel* for Port Orleans Guests, and the *Sassagoula Times* for Dixie Landings Guests. These tales, which we've discussed in one of our past issues, were presented in lavish faux newspapers with typography and photographs appropriate to a bygone era. Over the years, much has changed. The two

resorts have formally merged and are now Port Orleans French Quarter and Port Orleans Riverside. The *Sentinel* and *Times* are no longer published but the stories they told are still very much alive.

Before the Port Orleans resorts were built, the canal leading up to them had to be expanded. The channel was expanded north, creating a fork in the canal next to the 16th hole of the Lake Buena Vista golf course. The excavated soil was used to form several islands in the canal; the modestly sized *Beaux Tie Island* across from the French Quarter dock, and the larger *Ol' Man Island* at Port Orleans Riverside which features a lavish swimming pool and slides, a playground and a fishin' hole. A major engineering feat on *Ol' Man Island* was completed with the arrival of a mature 85-ton oak tree (*Quercus virginiana*) that serves as a visual anchor to the island. Appropriately enough, it arrived on Earth Day – April 22, 1991. It took a total of three days, along with months of

painstaking preparation, to arrange the slow-motion journey from what is now Disney's Animal Kingdom property to the island.

The Sassagoula River, over two miles in length, originates in a wide circle around Ol' Man Island at Port Orleans Riverside. Guests arriving at this resort may observe that when checking in, you are "booking passage" with the Sassagoula Steamboat Company. The river wends south passing by Port Orleans French Quarter on the right and a portion of the golf course on the left. After passing under Disney Vacation Club Way, it traverses through protected wetlands, which host the recently updated Treehouse Villas. The waterway next reaches another branch, with one path leading to the Old Key West Resort and the other heading past the Saratoga Springs Resort and ultimately delivering into Village Lake and Downtown Disney. Along the way, the Sassagoula varies in both width and depth, much like a real river would. It ranges from twenty to fifty feet wide, and can reach depths of over twelve feet. It's difficult to gauge the depth due to the unique dark caramel color of the water. Cypress trees dominate the wetlands, and the tannins from these trees spill into the water and give it its unique tint.

With a river steeped in the history of the Old South, it's only fitting that "steamboats" ply the water, offering a water taxi service. Naturally, the pontoon boats that transport Guests between the resorts and Downtown Disney bear the insignia of the Sassagoula Steamboat Company. Over a dozen craft are used in the fleet, ranging from twenty-eight to thirty-three feet in length. The longer boats serve the Port Orleans Guests while the shorter craft are used for Old Key West and Saratoga Springs Resort Guests. The nautical names of the boats reflect the Southern charm they evoke. Just imagine a cool evening aboard the Blossom Queen, the Jazz Lady or the Crescent City Queen on a lazy trip to Downtown Disney underneath a crescent moon.

As would be expected of any Disney vacation, there is plenty of recreation to be enjoyed on, along and around the Sassagoula. Watercraft rentals are available at the Port Orleans Riverside marina, featuring pontoon boats that can accommodate six to ten persons. Two-person watercraft are also available for zippier excursions, although speed and wake restrictions apply at marked areas. Young buccaneers can seek the treasure of Captain John Lafitte, the infamous New Orleans pirate in the Bayou Pirate Adventure. In the spirit of Tom Sawyer, Guests can enjoy a lazy day of fishing on Ol' Man Island with authentic cane poles. The water is stocked with catfish, bluegill and bass fish, and just

about everyone emerges with a "fish story" to tell. There are no souvenirs, however, as all fishing at Walt Disney World is catch-and-release. The Sassagoula offers a romantic side as well, featuring horse-drawn carriage rides that take Guests between the two Port Orleans resorts along the riverbank. Exercise enthusiasts can run, jog or walk along the manicured grounds of the Port Orleans resorts. A one mile loop is available along the riverbanks in the Port Orleans Riverside resort, while a longer course is available that extends into the Port Orleans French Quarter property. Golfers at Walt Disney World can enjoy the challenging Lake Buena Vista golf course, teeing off at the Saratoga Springs resort and traversing along and over the Sassagoula at numerous intersections.

There is an abundance of wildlife on the Sassagoula, both above and below the waterline. Past the genteel charm of Port Orleans but before the kinetic energy of Downtown Disney lays a soothing stretch of pristine wetlands. Cardinals, red-bellied woodpeckers and gray catbirds dominate the sky and branches of the cypress, magnolia and long-leaf pine trees. Egrets and herons can be found along the waterline, wading through the Sassagoula in search of their next meal. High above may be ospreys, using keen vision to find their prey. Along the Sassagoula, Disney wildlife management has placed several solar-powered fish feeders, which release food at random intervals. This was necessary since the previous method involved feeding the fish directly from a boat. The problem was that the birds in the area quickly recognized that the boat meant mealtime! Not all wildlife along the Sassagoula is welcome, however. Mosquitoes are naturally present in the swampland and are a nuisance and a health risk, but their population is kept under control by way of natural predators. Birdhouses sitting atop long poles dot the southern banks of the Sassagoula along the manicured greens of the Lake Buena Vista golf course. These are the home of the tiny but mighty martin, an aerial-feeding bird that feasts on mosquitoes.

The Sassagoula River interconnects several resorts at Walt Disney World, passes by a challenging eighteen-hole golf course, traverses a protected wetlands area and empties into the Village Lake with the vast dining and shopping resources of Downtown Disney. Lodging, recreation, dining and commerce, all a part of the magical Disney experience. In this one corner of the vast Walt Disney World property, the Sassagoula touches upon all the elements of an amazing Disney vacation.



