

# Friends of the Hatchie Work to Conserve and Improve the Hatchie River

*By Conner Franklin*

The Friends of the Hatchie organization began three years ago as a simple post on the Internet.

Since then, the Friends of the Hatchie group has evolved and is working on conserving and improving the Hatchie River as well as educating the public about the vital cultural role the Hatchie has served, both to Native Americans in antiquity and to modern man as he moved into the area.



The valuable resources that lie within the Hatchie watershed are indeed both rare and diminishing across the country. The Web link [scenichatchie@blogspot.com](mailto:scenichatchie@blogspot.com) serves as a way to relate stories and share photos among the group. As the numbers of volunteers have increased, so has their passion for this special place.

The Friends of the Hatchie have found a wonderful partner in the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association, a group crucial to the passing of the Scenic Rivers Act in 1968. Through the efforts of TSRA, the Friends of the Hatchie organization has been awarded grant money from the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agencies Stream Clean Up initiative. But what could be done with a grant, a group and a need to get wet? It was decided to simply pick up one can or bottle at a time. On September 19, 2009, Friends of the Hatchie conducted their first clean up event, not knowing what to expect. Twenty-one volunteers showed up to participate in the event in spite of overcast skies and an occasional drizzle.

An unexpected friendly competition erupted among the boats in the flotilla. The competition was to search out and find the most unique or out of place trash. One boat thought they had won the competition when they recovered a four foot unbroken fluorescent light bulb. That was topped by another crew who found and recovered a toilet. However, the most unique recovery was made by 11-year-old Will Turner. Will was working from a boat with his father, Mike Turner, both of Covington, when they found a message in a bottle. The message was dated 1989. It originated from a group who raises money to send Bibles around the world. No one knows how it got there or how long it had been in the river.

The first stream clean up event involved teams in nine boats and covered about 20 miles of the Hatchie River. The haul for the day filled a dumpster and was estimated to weigh well over 1,000 pounds. The activities could not have been successful without the assistance of the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association, the Keep Tipton County Beautiful Commission, the city of Covington, the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and the Tipton County Rescue Squad.

The Friends of the Hatchie held their second stream clean up event on September 19, 2010. This event was funded through another grant from TWRA and administered by TSRA. With the help of Haywood County Mayor Franklin Smith and the Haywood County recycling program, 100 percent of this garbage was recycled. The Friends of the Hatchie enjoyed support from Crop Production Services, their first corporate sponsor. The Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association and the Tennessee Wildlife Resources were again, invaluable partners as was the Keep Tipton County Beautiful Commission.

The second event saw teams in seven boats launched to cover 23 miles of river. This section was chosen in order to broaden the exposure of our volunteers to areas most had never experienced. In spite of several mechanical malfunctions and one biological hazard of a snake in a boat, the volunteers' ingenuity, hardiness and sense of duty to the river prevailed.

At the end of the day, the volunteers collected an estimated 1,200 pounds of garbage from the river. In total, during the two events, the group has removed well over a ton of garbage from approximately 40 miles of the Hatchie Scenic River. More events will certainly be planned and new volunteers will be welcome.

## **History of the Hatchie**

Nestled into the rolling hills and river delta of Southwest Tennessee, the Scenic Hatchie River has rolled gently to the Mississippi River for thousands of years.

Rising in Alcorn County in northern Mississippi, the Hatchie River travels northward approximately 192 miles in Tennessee touching six counties. Over that course, the river drops in elevation approximately 157 feet. This Class I river has an overall slope of about 0.8 percent and flows an average of three to four miles per hour.

Most people do not think about history as they cross any of only eight road bridges that traverse the 192-mile course of the river in Tennessee. When we travel throughout the area, we cross the river and hardly notice it, much less contemplate its impact on our culture. The archeological record shows that humans have lived along the Hatchie River since the late Archaic Period (roughly 3000 BCE).

The Woodland Period (1000 BCE to 900 AD) saw a significant increase in Native American populations. The height of culture among Native Americans in the area is described as the Mississippian Era. A wonderful example of this period is the Chucalissa Indian village on the Chickasaw Bluffs overlooking the Mississippi River in Shelby County. The site is overseen by The University of Memphis and is open to the public.

Another wonderful example of Mississippian Archeology in the area is Pinson Mounds State Archeological Park in Madison County. It is a dramatic illustration of how these civilizations thrived so long ago.

The Hatchie River has seen more human activity than most of us care to consider. In fact, it has been a vital waterway for humans since the age of the construction of Stonehenge in Europe. Into the late Mississippian Period, the area we know as West Tennessee was populated by Native Americans and was known as the Chickasaw Nation.

The Hatchie River has served as a trade route and a means of travel for hunting parties and nomadic groups. The Hatchie, along with other rivers of West Tennessee became vital routes through which European settlers would arrive. In 1818, a portion of Western Kentucky and what is now West Tennessee was ceded from the Chickasaw Nation that led to European settlers moving to the area from across the Appalachian Mountains and farther north utilizing the Mississippi River. The flood gates of settlements came when Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830 that required all Native Americans to move west across the Mississippi River.

The Hatchie River became a highway into the interior of West Tennessee with advent of steam power. This invention made it possible to import and export goods up and down the river to a terminal on the Mississippi River at Randolph. From there, goods could be exported around the world. An example is the town of Bolivar, which was originally named Hatchie Town. It was founded as a trading post on the upper Hatchie River. The post received and exported goods from the

time of its origin. Hatchie Town was formally re-named Bolivar and was established in April 1824. Period homes still stand in the Historic District of Bolivar. These structures still bear witness to the importance of the Hatchie River by displaying mill work imported from the north and transported up the river to the outpost.

Several Civil War battles occurred along the Hatchie River. The Battle of Davis Bridge in Hardeman County was centered on a bridge over the Hatchie River. The battle occurred on October 5, 1862. Another battle occurred on April 12, 1864, at Fort Pillow, overlooking the Hatchie and Mississippi Rivers in Lauderdale County. Between April 10-15, 1865, guerrillas claiming attachment to W.C. Quantrill, attacked three side wheel steam ships operating on the Hatchie River.

In 1968, the Tennessee Legislature established the Tennessee Scenic Rivers designation. Currently, there are 13 rivers and streams in Tennessee that enjoy this protective designation. Due to this protected status, the Scenic Hatchie River has become the last remaining un-channelized Mississippi tributary in the entire lower Mississippi River basin or that portion of the river between Cairo, Illinois, and the Gulf of Mexico.

These features attract outdoor enthusiasts and naturalists. The Scenic Hatchie River has the distinction of having two Federal U.S Fish and Wildlife Refuges' along its banks. The Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge near Brownsville protects 11,556 acres while also allowing public hunting and fishing in certain designated areas. The Lower Hatchie National Wildlife Refuge near Henning is comprised of 9,451 acres. Together, these National Wildlife Refuges protect and preserve over 21,000 acres of forested flood plane much as it has been for many millennia. Refuge regulations should always be consulted before planning activities these beautiful areas.

You can visit the Scenic Hatchie Web site at [scenichatchie@blogspot.com](mailto:scenichatchie@blogspot.com). The Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association Web site is <http://www.paddletsra.org>.

**(Conner Franklin is the founder of the Friends of the Hatchie conservation group. He has traveled and studied the entire length of the river including solo expeditions covering the length of the Scenic Hatchie River. He works as a field office manager for the Department of Environment and Conservation in Jackson.)**