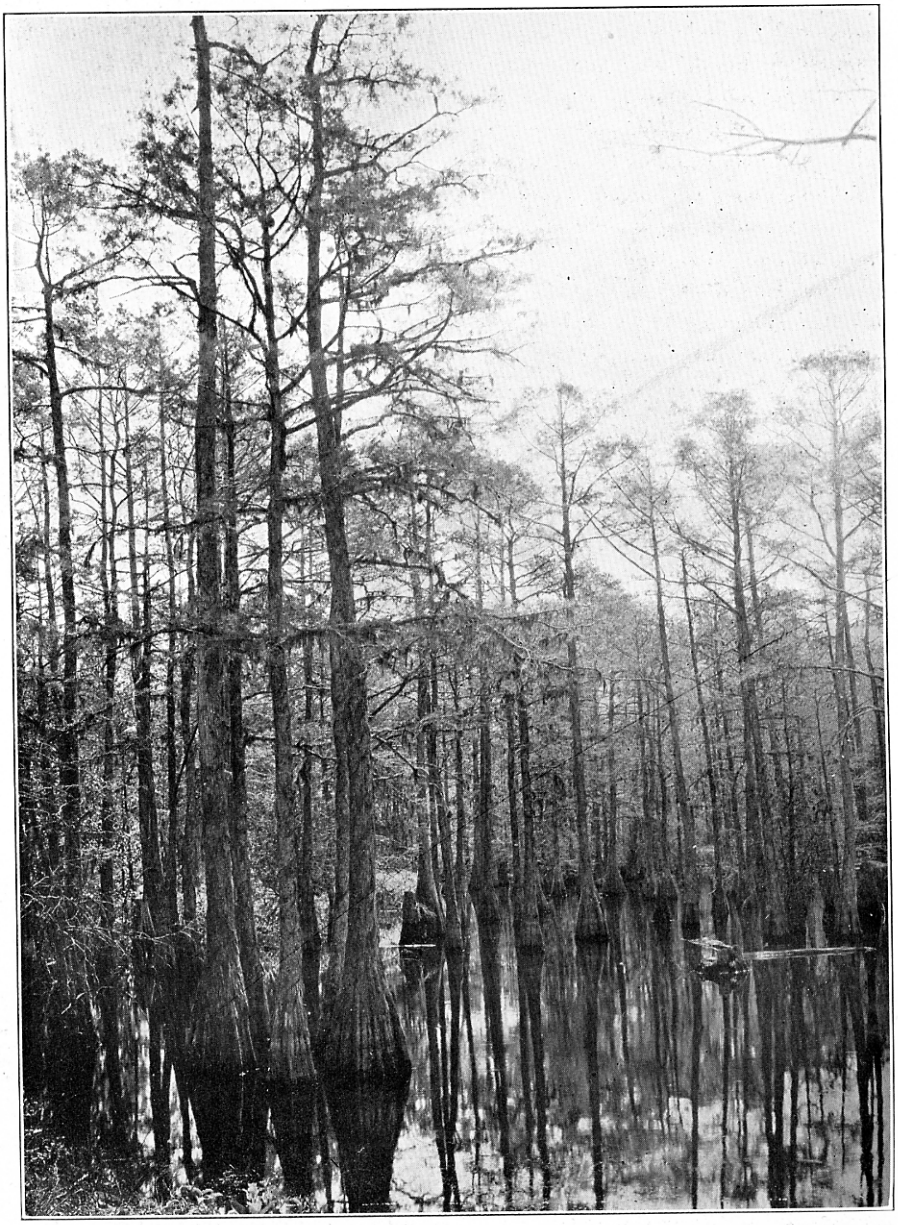
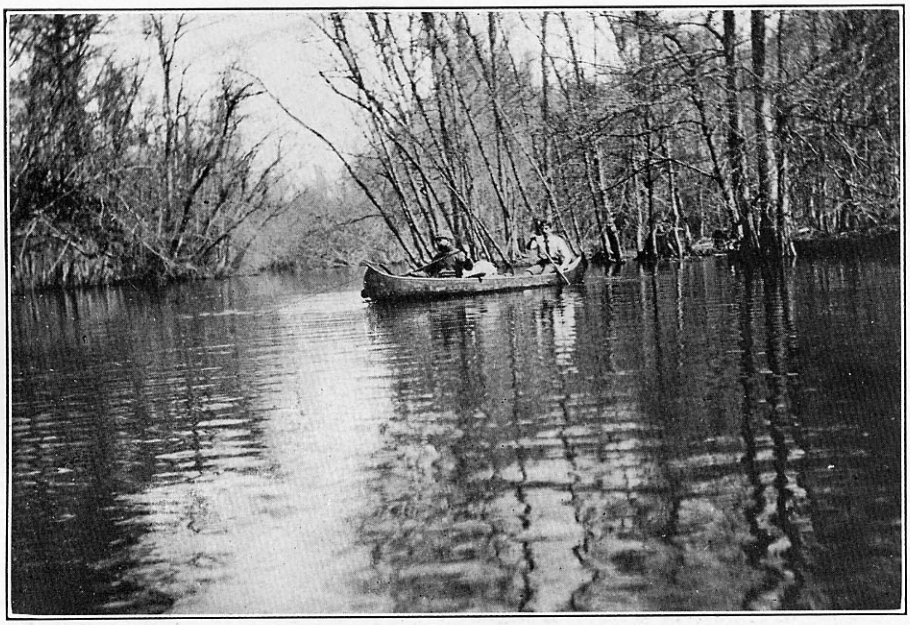


CYPRESSES AT WILLARDS.



VIEWS ON THE POCOMOKE RIVER.

Down the Pocomoke

BY GEORGE SPENCER MORRIS

Willards lies halfway down the peninsula and midway between the Chesapeake and the sea. It was barely sunrise when two of us arrived upon the scene, having passed a strenuous night.

Leaving Philadelphia at eleven p. m. we reached Salisbury at about three a. m., where a two-horse team awaited us. Rain was then descending in torrents, and for the remainder of the night we drove in the darkness through the storm and the mud. At daybreak we jogged into the small and sleepy settlement of Willards, which was still for the most part wrapped in slumber. Here we secured a villainous breakfast, and were joined an hour later by the four other members of our party. They came from the east by the little railroad which here spans the peninsula. They had left Philadelphia at four p. m. on the previous day, had spent the night comfortably at the little town of Berlin, and now, well fortified by sleep and food, they were the better prepared to enter upon the activities of the coming day. Our canoes and other paraphernalia had preceded us. They were quickly loaded upon a two-horse open vehicle. Without regret we turned our backs on Willards and went down the sandy road which led to the Pocomoke, a mile to the eastward.

This is one of the most northerly of the cypress rivers. Perhaps it should hardly be called a cypress river, for its banks and adjoining marshes are heavily timbered with a great variety of bog-growing trees, among which the cypress has a bare majority; nor does it here grow to the great size which it attains on the more southern streams.

The waters of the Pocomoke are restrained in a mill-pond just below Willards. Hundreds of cypresses rise from the placid surface of the pond. The road which we followed led across the dam, and by it stood the mill. Here just below the rumbling wheel we slipped our canoes into the clear brown water and were ready to start on our winding way southward

through the recesses of the great gray swamp. Bits of broken sunshine were beginning to flash through the clouds, patches of blue showed here and there through the tree-tops. Without doubt we were to have a good day for running some twenty-five or thirty miles of the Pocomoke.

The swamp was alive with birds; the air was full of their songs; it was evident that the first great rush of the migration was on. The sprightly ringing notes of the Water Thrush came from along the banks; all through the swamp the Tufted Tits were calling. The blood-red Cardinal flashed among the tangles of green briar and wild grape, and his wonderful whistle came, as always, clear-cut and incisive. From every part of the swamp were flying the varied notes of the great Carolina Wren, most marvelous songster of them all. These four species seem always to be the principal performers in the great spring orchestra that greets one on entering that wooded swamp-land of these southern rivers. And then comes the crowd of humbler musicians that make up the body of the orchestra: the warblers, with voices for the most part thin and reed-like, accented perhaps by the ringing notes of the Yellow-throated Warblers coming from the upper branches, or by the lively repetitions of the Maryland Yellow-throat from somewhere near the ground; the vireos fluting away in somewhat careless fashion among the treetops; a touch of pathos thrown in here and there by the tremulous, plaintive whistle of the White-throat from among the thickets. One misses the violins of the thrushes in these early April concerts; the birds are there, but for the most part silent, yet unquestionably we heard the first faint trilling of the Hermit one morning just at daybreak when in our camp on the lower Pocomoke. To all this concert is added the running accompaniment of the drums of the woodpeckers and tapping of nuthatches. The Flicker, the Downy and Hairy, the Red-bellied and Yellow-bellied all beat their light tattoo, while loud through the forest roars the bass thunder of the great Pileated as he drives that powerful bill against the sounding surface of some hollow limb.

The navigation of the river was surprisingly easy. We had looked for log-obstructions but found very little if any trouble

of this sort. The course of the stream is not difficult to follow. It does not break up and ramify in bewildering fashion like the Blackwater River of southern Virginia, down which we had canoed on previous years. Yet while the banks are clearly defined, they are rarely firm or dry and we went for hours through a region that did not show a possible camp-site. At rare intervals we came to wood-roads leading across the swamp. These spanned the river with low wooden bridges, under which it was difficult and sometimes impossible to force the canoes.

For almost the entire day we had the sense of being completely buried in the great swamp. There were no glimpses out into the open country, no sound of singing darkies in distant fields, no lowing of cattle nor barking of dogs. There were few, if any pines to give relief to the vague, gray waste about us. The buds were swelling but as yet showed no green to speak of. The maples were touched with a tinge of red, and the briary thickets were taking on the first tender tones of Spring, yet the season was backward and even the bird migration appeared to be in its quite early stages. On that day's run we saw no Prothonotary Warblers. The first glimpse of that bit of feathered flame, seen after long absence, always sends through some of us the thrill of new discovery.

Great companies of Rusty Grackles are characteristic of these cypress swamps. They were numerous on the Pocomoke though not quite so abundant as on the more southern rivers. Their song (if such it may be called) becomes a most interesting harmony when hundreds of them tune their little pipes together in one great chorus, reminding one somewhat of the high, sweet peeping of hylas.

The Barred Owl is always an object of interest in these southern swamps. He is a visible as well as an audible presence, for we often see him by day sitting like a grim, gray cat above us as we drift down the stream. When nightfall comes his dog-like cries sound weird through the forest, mingled with the hurried notes of the Whip-poor-will.

Occasionally as we rounded suddenly some bend in the river ducks would spring up before us. These were usually Wood Duck, but we also saw Mallard and the little Hooded Merganser.

Sometimes a Great Blue Heron would rise before us and go down stream with heavy plodding flight. Add to these a couple of Night Herons, a Green Heron, and a few Spotted Sandpipers and you have the list of water birds seen on the trip. The three last named species were all seen on the lower stretches of the river on or near tidewater.

There were some bits of the river more marsh-like in character than others; by this I mean that there were openings in the wooded swamps with an abundant growth of aquatic plant life, reeds and rushes and slender green grasses waving in the water. Such spots must furnish ideal feeding grounds for ducks in winter.

It was well toward the close of the day when we began to detect unmistakable evidences of tidewater, and we knew that our camp-site was not far distant. The banks of the river became firmer and more defined; pines now formed the background against which rose the trunks of cypress and gum. The tide seemed to be at half ebb; the line of high water could be seen distinctly along the banks.

Some members of our party had taken this trip before and had given us a glowing account of the charms of a camp-site previously selected in a grove of noble pines. At length we reached the spot, but alas, the woodman's axe had felled the grove, and so far as the pines were concerned, had wrought havoc for a considerable distance on either hand. Still it was not a bad camp-site. Many trees were still standing and the untouched forest was close at hand. Evening was upon us, so up went the tent; the fire soon gleamed bright and warm in the chill twilight and savory odors from frying pan and boiling pot soon greeted the hungry party, who had put about thirty miles behind their paddles since morning.

With this spot as a base we now spent several days in exploring the region about us, studying its birds and plants, and seeking a closer acquaintance with its pickerel, perch and bass. Our piscatorial efforts were not crowned with much success, although enough pickerel were caught by our more expert fishermen to vary the monotony of the larder.

About a mile below our camp a smaller stream joined the

Pocomoke. Pushing our canoes up against its swift current we came ere long to an old mill with its dam and the mill-pond above it. A great part of this pond was thickly set with small cypress trees. Its headwaters were lost in dense thickets which even the slender canoes could not penetrate. Here at last we found the Prothonotary Warbler, the most splendid species of his group, and on the shores of this pond we also saw the Hooded Warbler.

Leaving our canoes, two of us one day pushed on back into the pine woods and explored their dark green aisles. Here the Pine Warbler was common as it always is in such localites. Often the monotonous twitter of this species is the only evidence of bird-life in the sandy pine regions of New Jersey, Virginia, or the Carolinas.

It is in these woods that we also find the little Brown-headed Nuthatches. Their cheerful chuckles and chatters and their bright and busy ways give a pleasant accent to the somewhat gloomy forest. We came upon them several times in the pines of the Pocomoke region.

It is interesting to realize that at a point only one hundred miles south of Philadelphia we may thus get on intimate terms with species which in the Delaware Valley are wholly unknown or only met with as very rare stragglers. In this group we may put the Prothonotary, Yellow-throated and Hooded Warblers, the Brown-headed Nuthatch, the Mockingbird, the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, the Red-bellied and the Pileated Woodpeckers.

Our camp on the Pocomoke, while in a secluded and lonely spot, was yet not far removed from civilization. In the distance we could hear the Killdeers calling from the furrowed fields, and at night the bay of the farmer's dog would mingle with the hooting of the Barred Owl. This proximity to a civilization which we saw little of really increased our list of species, for the meeting of field and woodland is always a good bird-ground. Here we could pick up the different varieties of finches, and here we would startle the Quail, which would whirr back into the dense thickets of the river bottom.

Yes, taking it all in all, it was a good country, and a region where somehow a bit of the real South seems to have slipped very far north.