

## Remembering Our Beginnings



By William B. Hartley  
Former President & Riverkeeper  
Written in 2009. Mr. Hartley passed away in 2016.

I don't remember the exact date, but I do remember exactly how the Apalachicola Riverkeeper organization had its start. At a citizen's meeting at the Apalachicola Community Center sponsored by DEP, my wife Shirley I learned about a book called the "Riverkeepers," written by Bobby Kennedy, Jr., who described the organization he had formed to help clean up the Hudson River in New York State. Also attending this meeting was former DCA representative Susan Anderson, with whom I had worked in my capacity as President of the St. George Island Plantation Owners Association. I believe Dave McLain, former Executive Director and now Policy Director at Apalachicola Riverkeeper was also in attendance at this meeting, learning more about his special interest, keeping the flow of water coming down the Apalachicola River.

I purchased the Riverkeeper book, read it and was very impressed. Soon after, Susan Anderson and I attended another DEP meeting where we were informed that the coli form count in the lower Apalachicola River was astronomical. We both immediately had an "a-ha" moment, remembering the Riverkeeper book! We each knew Andy Smith, a young environmental lawyer in Tallahassee, and we agreed he would be a perfect leader for this project if we could get him on board. So, after a lunch meeting in October

1998 with Andy at the Bahn Thai restaurant in Tallahassee, we departed firmly committed to starting a Riverkeeper organization. We quickly identified several members of the community to serve on an Advisory Board, and this Board unanimously selected Susan Anderson to become our first Riverkeeper. We found office space at a strip mall in Eastpoint at a low rate thanks to the generosity of entrepreneur Richard Plessinger. We went through the usual hoops in organizing a non-profit membership corporation, formulating bylaws, incorporating, selecting directors, fundraising, and of course publicizing our mission of protecting the Apalachicola River and Bay.

Susan got us started, but unfortunately only stayed with us for a year. Yours truly assumed the Riverkeeper role and my wife Shirley handled many of the administrative matters. All of this was done voluntarily, of course, and for five years we gave our all to this organization. It is with the deepest of gratitude and respect that we recognize the achievements which successive Boards, directors, Riverkeepers, and administrators have accomplished in turning our small, grass roots organization into a strong and very well-respected environmental advocacy force. We would particularly like to thank the Elizabeth Ordway Dunn Foundation for their early initial and repeated financial support, which enabled us to proceed and continue with our mission.

We also thank the many members and volunteers who have given so generously of their time and money to help carry out these efforts. Shirley and I are happy to have had a hand in the development of Apalachicola Riverkeeper and enormously proud of the many successes this organization has achieved in its mission of protecting the Apalachicola River and Bay. I hope to see this stewardship effort continue full speed ahead as there are many threats facing the sustenance of this unique river system, today and in the future.