

STEAMBOATS AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
THE OCKLAWAHA AND ST. JOHNS RIVERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The interior of Florida remained undeveloped until late in the nineteenth century primarily because of a lack of reliable transportation systems in North-central Florida. Railroads had been built along much of the Atlantic Coast but did not exist in the interior of Florida with the exception of the Fernandina to Cedar Key line, and the West India Transfer Railroad (Fig. 1). Wagon roads between major cities were poor and did little to stimulate commercial activity in urban areas. As a result, the principal means of transportation which evolved in the area was steamboats used for passenger and commercial traffic on the navigable tributaries of the St. Johns River.

This paper focuses on the twenty-year period from 1880 to 1900 to show how a particular mode of transport changed the economics, land use, and geography of North-central Florida. Information comes from

contemporary writings about the growth of the areas from Palatka to Silver Springs and Ocala before the turn of the century.

Rise of Steamboats

The importance of steamboat transport in the late 1880s was recorded in De Berard's *Steamboats in the Hyacinths*, an early account of Jacksonville's development. One of her informants recalled that "Before the coming of the steamboats to the river, the only communication between Jacksonville and the south side of the city was by rowboat, but after the 1880s, a hundred stern and side wheelers ran on the St. Johns" (Fig. 2)¹

The Ocklawaha, a tributary of the St. Johns, was featured in the 1876 *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, in which it was described as follows:

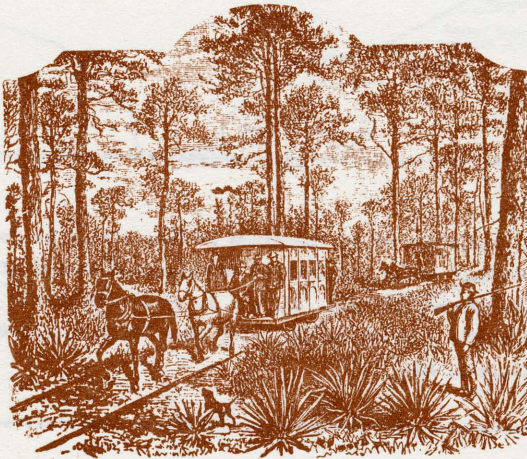


Fig. 1. En route for St. Augustine, 1874. Source: footnote 6, p. 7.

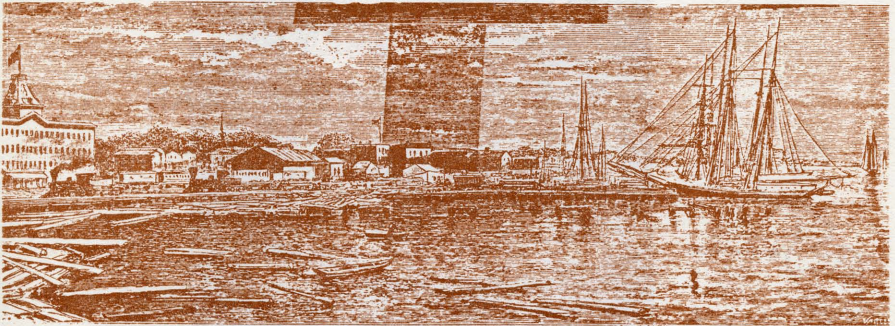


Fig. 2. Jacksonville, 1874. Source: footnote 6, p. 2.

we passed the landings here and there, swampways where rafts of cypress logs were waiting, towed aside to give us a channel, and at last we came to the fair waters of which we heard. Silver Springs, beautiful enchanted pool, who can describe thee! About one hundred miles from the mouth of the Ocklawaha, a silvery stream enters the river; we turn out of our chocolate-colored tide, and sail up this crystal channel, which carries us along between open prairies and savannas covered with flowers.²

A letter from E. N. Spinney in the winter of 1892 stated that "Prior to the coming of the railroads in the 1880s, the Oklawaha was busy with commercial traffic, almost all goods entering or leaving the area [were] by water."³

The development of dependable transport increased the population of Marion County and of Ocala, the early terminus of the St. Johns River route. The population of the county seat tripled in three years and the business aggregate went up 600 percent between the years 1888 and 1891. The changes are shown in Table 1.

The most prestigious and long-lived steamboat line was that of the H. L. Hart Company which had its beginnings in the 1860s (Fig. 3). The first River steamer was the *James Burt*, but little is known about her. Bradford Mitchell, writing about the Hart lines, noted that:

The majority of early steamers had to depend for verbal description on shipbuilders, travelogues or adventurers, all of whom are likely to suffer from one defect of expression or another. But the Hart vessels of the early seventies had the hon-

Table 1
"Phenomenal Growth of Ocala since 1880"

Year	Resident Population	Aggregate Business*
1880	500	.5
1882	800	.7
1884	1,200	1.0
1886	1,500	1.5
1888	2,000	2.0
1890	5,000	7.0
1891	6,500	14.0

*Millions of dollars.

Source: footnote 12, p. 15.

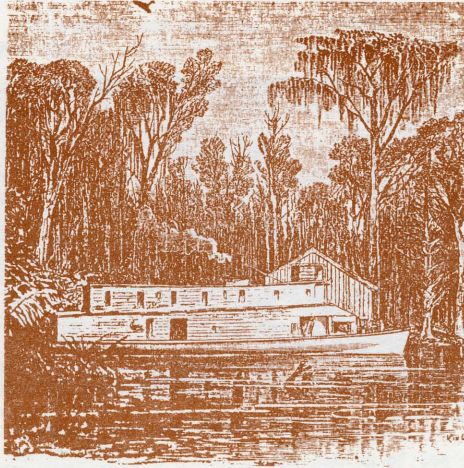


Fig. 3. The *Marion* lying at Silver Springs, Florida, 1874. Source: footnote 6, p. 21.

or of being described by two authors of some renown-- a dubious honor, admittedly, since neither writer could find anything very complimentary to say.⁴

These writers were Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Cullen Bryant.⁵

The geographic and economic impact of the Hart steamboat line on St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers was considerable. This is documented in the literature of the late nineteenth century. Hart was but one of many entrepreneurs who used the St. Johns River to open central Florida to agricultural exploitation and set the pattern for development for the next half century.

Hart's experiments with citrus production near Palatka marked the beginnings of what was to become a twentieth-century agricultural phenomenon which relied on river transportation for its initial success. His groves were a source of encouragement to other land owners in the area because of the profits he derived from the small, seven hundred tree farm. For instance, in 1874 his annual gross income

was projected in excess of \$15,000, based on citrus production from his grove. A popular writer visiting his area noted that "an adjacent nursery to Hart's small farm had 100,000 young trees awaiting transplanting and budding."⁶ Sites along the St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers thus became core areas for citrus production, and more than one million seedlings were planted by 1874 with a density of one hundred trees per acre (Figs. 4, 5 and 6).

By 1880 citrus had been accepted as a major export crop of North-central Florida. In that year Silvia Sunshine, a well-known writer, described the development in the area: "Civilization has commenced making its mark on the Ocklawaha," she said, "and the march of improvement, which never tires in its efforts, is leaving footprints here. These new developments are visible from the various landings which the steamer makes, as it advances through the rapid current."⁷ Yet a scant ten years earlier T. B. Thorpe had written that "the mouth of the Ocklawaha River looked scarcely wide enough to admit a skiff, much less a steamer" (Fig. 7).⁸

HART LINE LANDINGS

ON THE OKLAWAHA

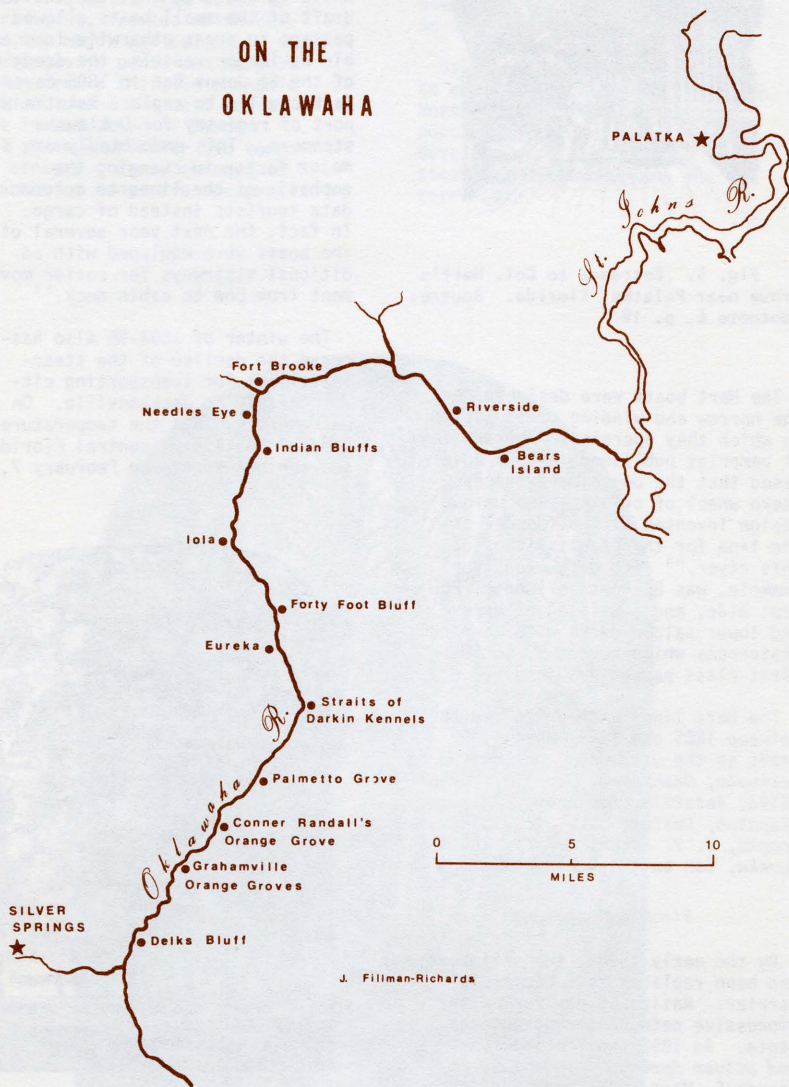


Fig. 4



Fig. 5. Entrance to Col. Hart's grove near Palatka, Florida. Source: footnote 6, p. 18.

utility, stating that "these steamers were built expressly for tourist travel."¹²

Several factors helped to bring about the demise of the small steamboat transportation system before the turn of the twentieth century. While it was true that the shallow draft of the small boats allowed passage in areas otherwise inaccessible by larger vessels, the dredging of the St. Johns Bar in 1885 caused Jacksonville to replace Palatka as port of registry for Ocklawaha steamers. This undoubtedly was a major factor in changing the emphasis of the lines to accommodate tourists instead of cargo. In fact, the next year several of the boats were equipped with additional stairways for easier movement from bow to cabin deck.¹³

The winter of 1894-95 also hastened the decline of the steamboat lines for transporting citrus cheaply to Jacksonville. On December 29, 1894 the temperature dropped to 14°F in central Florida and another freeze on February 7,

The Hart boats were designed for the narrow and winding river system on which they operated. A promotional pamphlet published in 1897 advertised that the boats were "recess stern wheel of original and unique design invented by the founder of the line for the peculiarities of this river."⁹ The *Okahumkee*, for example, was 86 feet in length, 25 feet wide, and consisted of upper and lower saloon decks with 25 to 30 staterooms which housed 50 to 60 first-class passengers (Fig. 8).¹⁰

The Hart line reached its zenith between 1885 and 1888, when such craft as the *Ocklawaha*, *Marion*, *Seminole*, *Okahumkee*, *Osceola*, *Tuskawilla*, *Astatula*, *Forester*, *Lake Dolly*, *Dispatch*, *Wekiva*, *Lake Dora*, *Lake Apopka*, *J. Y. Speer*, *Griffin* and the *Eureka*, ran on the *Ocklawaha*.¹¹

Steamboat Decline

By the early 1890s, the steamboat had been replaced as a commercial carrier. Railroads now formed an impressive network throughout the state. An 1892 publication, *Ocala and Silver Springs Company*, by George S. Mayo, mentioned the once-famed *Ocklawaha* steamer company in passing and misrepresented it



Fig. 6. Fruit and flowers in "the Oklawaha," 1876. Source: footnote 2, p. 176.

1895 destroyed forever the commercial citrus groves of North-central Florida. The damage to citrus and other crops is estimated to have been \$100,000,000.¹⁴

The changing function of the steamboat was in large part a consequence of a shift from water to rail transport, freezes which destroyed the major agricultural crop, changes in ports and harbors resulting from a shift in economic activities toward the east coast, and the introduction of large coastal steamships after the turn of the century. Early changes in transportation modes are document-

ed directly or indirectly in the literature. For example, Spinney's letter of 1892 and De Berard's interviews both cited the steamboat as a means of commercial transportation for moving goods entering or leaving the area. Yet by the 1890s the function of the steamboat had shifted exclusively to the tourist trade.

Steamboat transport as a means to carry cargo was short lived in North-central Florida, but the population changes and land use developments stimulated by the steamboat traffic became set irreversibly.



Fig. 7. Palmetto thicket, 1876. Source: footnote 2, p. 168.

Fig. 8. The *Oklawaha*, 1876. Source: footnote 2, p. 162.



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1. Ella Teague De Berard, *Steamboats in the Hyacinths* (Daytona Beach: College Publishing Co., 1956), p. 11.
2. C. F. Woolson, "The Oklawaha," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 52, no. 308 (January, 1876): p. 171.
3. E. N. Spinney, Reprint of letter of Winter, 1892.
4. C. Bradford Mitchell, *Paddle Wheel Inboard* (Salem, Mass.: American Neptune, 1947), p. 52.
5. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Palmetto Leaves* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press facsimile reproduction of the 1873 edition, 1968); William Cullen Bryant, *Picturesque America* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1874).
6. Edward King, "Pictures from Florida," *Scribners* 9, no. 1 (Nov., 1874): p.20.
7. Silvia Sunshine, *Petals Plucked from Sunny Climes* (Nashville, Tennessee: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1880), p. 66.
8. T. B. Thorpe, "The St. Johns and Ocklawaha Rivers, Florida," *Appleton's Journal*, Nov. 12-Dec. 31, 1870, p. 577-84.
9. Hart Line Route Map of the Ocklawaha River, Palatka, Florida, 1897.
10. *Ibid.*
11. De Berard, *Steamboats in the Hyacinths*, p. 54.
12. George Mayo, *Ocala and Silver Springs Company* (Ocala, Florida: Ocala and Silver Springs Co., 1892), p. 22.
13. De Berard, *Steamboats in the Hyacinths*, p. 58.
14. Leeila Copeland, and J. E. Dovel, *La Florida: Its Lands and People* (Austin, Texas: The Steck Company Publishers, 1957).