

## A JOURNEY ON THE ST. JOHNS Grade 3-5

### OBJECTIVES:

- To introduce students to the idea that waterway travel was important to Florida.
- To practice narrative writing and illustrations.
- To introduce students to the use of primary sources to learn about steamboats.

### FCAT STRANDS ADDRESSED:

**Reading Exam:** Reference and Research

**Writing Exam:** Narrative writing

### SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS/ BENCHMARKS:

#### ***SOCIAL STUDIES***

**Strand A:** *Time, Continuity, and Change [History]*

**Standard 2:** *The student understands the world from its beginning to the time of the Renaissance.*

**Benchmark SS.A.2.2.2** The student understands developments in transportation and communication in various societies.

#### ***LANGUAGE ARTS***

**Strand A:** *Reading*

**Standard 2:** *The student constructs meaning from a wide range of texts.*

**Benchmark: LA.A.2.2.8** The student selects and uses a variety of appropriate reference materials, including multiple representations of information, such as maps, charts and photos to gather information for research projects.

**Strand B:** *Writing*

**Standard 2:** *The student writes to communicate ideas and information effectively.*

**Benchmark LA.B.2.2.5** The student creates narratives in which ideas, detail, and events are in logical order and are relevant to the story line.

## **MATERIALS:**

Primary Source material (attached)

Materials to make illustrations (possibly watercolors or colored pencils)

Pencils and paper

## **PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES:**

1. Using the background information, as well as the websites provided, explain to the class the importance of the St. Johns River in the early transportation and population increase in Florida.
2. Discuss with the class that you are going to read them a primary source. Clarify how that means this will be an actual account of a person's trip on the St. Johns in the 1850s. Talk about how the language may sound strange because the way we speak has changed over time. The accounts are from a winter visitor and were written in the *New York Times* over 150 years ago.
3. As you read the articles, ask the students to close their eyes and picture themselves on a steamboat on the St. Johns River. Invite them to remember images they can draw that would help to illustrate the steamboat, the river, the animals, and all the surroundings.
4. After you have read the accounts, make a class list of all the things they could illustrate according to images they remembered from these two letters.
5. You can then either have the students pick what they'd like to draw or assign them a topic. What they use to draw with is up to you. You may want to consider using watercolors or colored pencils if they are available.
6. After the illustrations are complete, find a wall or bulletin board to display them.
7. Inform the students that the next step will be to write on what they feel it would have been like aboard a steamboat in the 1850s. In their narrative account, they can include answers to questions such as:
  - Why am I on this steamboat?
  - Where is this steamboat going?
  - What cargo does this steamboat carry?
  - What do I see as I travel on the river?
  - How long will I be on the steamboat?
8. The travelers can share their narrative accounts and then post them with the illustrations.

## AT THE HISTORY CENTER

1. When you visit the History Center, let the children know that they can see a scene from the St. Johns River. If they look through one of the windows on the train, they will see the Port of Sanford. What was the importance of the steamboat to Florida's people and economy?

## POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES:

1. Have the students do a three to five-minute commercial message selling a boat trip down the St. Johns River.
2. Have students design their own steamboat.
3. Compare and contrast the life of a traveler versus a crew member on the steamboat.
4. Use Florida maps to retrace the voyage down the St. Johns.
5. Calculate the distance and time a trip would take. Compare to a trip on land or air today.
6. Edit the Primary Sources so that they meet today's standards (i.e., eliminate run-on sentences, etc.)

## RESOURCES:

### *Internet*

History of St. Johns River <http://www.jacksonvillestory.com/St.%20Johns%20River.htm>

St. Johns River Alliance <http://www.floridariver.org/>

St. Johns River Keeper <http://www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org/>

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (St. Johns River)  
<http://www.epa.gov/rivers/98rivers/fstjohn.html>

St. Johns River Water Management District <http://sjr.state.fl.us/>

Steamboats <http://www.steamboats.com/> and <http://www.steamboats.org/>

***Books***

Debary-Baya Merchant's Line. *Into Tropical Florida: A Round Trip on the St. Johns River*. New York: Leve & Alden's Publication Department, 1890.

Mueller, Edward A. *St. Johns River Steamboats*. Jacksonville, FL: Privately published by the author, 1986.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Steamboating on the St. Johns-1830-1885*. Melbourne, FL: Kellersberger Fund of South Brevard Historical Society, 1980.

***Other Sources***

Dunnavant, Sandra. *Steamboats in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Florida Heritage Education Program Lesson Plan. Historical Resources, Department of State, The State of Florida, 1997.

## TEACHER BACKGROUND

During the 1800s, travel by land in Florida was difficult and dangerous. Roads were paths through dense forests and boggy swampland. Since Florida is crisscrossed with rivers and streams, pioneers used the waterways as a fast, safe means of transportation. Thus, water transportation played an important role in the early settlements of Florida by the white man.

Sailing ships had brought in some of the early settlers. However, these ships could not navigate the inland waterways. After steam began to be used for propulsion in the 1800s, steamboats started to supplant sailing vessels.

In Florida, the steamboat era began in the early 1820s and ended in the 1920s. During the 1800s, steamboats were plentiful, especially on the St. Johns River where approximately 300 vessels operated.

The most often used steamboats on the rivers were of the coastal river type. These steamers had one or two decks, sidewheels, fairly good passenger accommodations, the ability to carry some freight, one stack, and a graceful, shapely appearance.

Most of the steamboats were less than 200 feet in length and 30 feet in width. There were even smaller steamboats used. These sixty- to eighty-foot long steamers were used primarily for transporting passengers in a local area.

The first steamboat to visit Florida was the *George Washington*, a sidewheeler. It is alleged to have reached Jacksonville, then a settlement of a few hundred people, on May 18 or 19, 1829. The trip originated in Savannah and took 34 hours.

## PRIMARY SOURCE ACCOUNT OF A JOURNEY ON THE ST. JOHNS

These are two letters, both written by “L.N.,” were printed in the *New York Times* in 1853. From Mueller, Edward A. *Steamboating on the St. Johns-1830-1885*. Melbourne, FL: Kellersberger Fund of South Brevard Historical Society, 1980.

### *Upper St. Johns, Monday, Feb. 28, 1853*

I write you from the Southern extremity of steam navigation on the St. Johns River. We have taken a long journey from its mouth to get here, about 300 miles, but already are richly repaid for our troubles.

How little can you imagine, sitting by your warm fireside, listening to the howling blast of the month that often with you “comes in like a lion,” as they roar about your doors and windows, of the beautiful out-door life we lead here, of the soft airs, and the sweet perfumes that greet us every step of our journey. We entered the St. Johns about evening. Like myself, almost every Northerner is agreeably surprised in the river. In size, it is grand and majestic, and it sweeps along through the land with a sort of consciousness of its own strength. The Hudson near its mouth, may compare with it in size, but in dignity, in quiet repose and grandeur, it reminded me of the “Big Potomac,” and I should think equaled that river near Washington, in the volume of its waters. For the first one hundred miles, the St. Johns is from a half a mile to three miles in width; above that, the river narrows, spreading at times into a succession of lakes, as the Indian name signifies – Welaka or Helaka, River of Lakes – and spoken by the lips of a Seminole, one of the most musical of words.

Its shores are for the most part flat, and not particularly interesting. Plantations occasionally appear, and saw mills are rapidly increasing around Jacksonville, and give business to boats on the river. We stopped at Picolatta for an hour. Here we find a plantation with a single house, a neat pretty cottage, buried in foliage and moss. It is the usual landing place for all visitors to St Augustine, and the house accommodates a number of travelers. It is directly on the bank of the river, and is surrounded with oak trees, which are covered with the long gray moss. It hangs in festoons and droops many feet from the lofty branches, and sways back and forth in the wind like a sad colored mantle.

The soil is a fair sample of Florida soil – a light sand – in the pine woods often a pure white, and containing but a small portion of vegetable matter, so that much of it is unfit for cultivation without manuring.

From Picolatta we proceed to Pilatka, which is a small village on the river, occupied as an army station during the Florida War. It contains a few old buildings erected for the use of the army, two or three boarding houses, and a few residents. It has recently passed into the hands of an enterprising company, who are doing much to improve the place. The most attractive feature about it, is a natural grove, mostly of oak, south of the village. In

the spring it is certainly one of the loveliest spots nature ever made. Walking through it for the first time, one can hardly be persuaded that nature alone has laid it out; has arranged the beautiful trunks of large trees, and the groups of smaller shrubbery displaying themselves in such graceful and different forms, - then the openings between of soft green turf, the winding paths, and the glimpses of the river under the large trees, here and there dense leafy nooks and lawns, so invitingly cool in this sunny climate, to the pedestrian, while every now and then you catch the breath of some fragrant flowering shrub, and looking about see the yellow jasmine climbing over a tall tree, and scattering its bright blossoms like stars on the ground.

At Pilatka we exchanged our Savannah boat for a smaller one with a lighter draft of water, suitable for the upper part of the river.

In the morning we were up soon after sunrise, and on deck watching the beautiful panorama before and behind us as we glided on. That night we had a slight frost - something very unusual so late in the season, and we felt its coolness very perceptibly. As soon as the sun was up however, we were aware of its gentle beams, and by 9 o'clock it was delightfully warm on deck, and the ladies' parasols were in requisition.

The river above Pilatka becomes narrower and at once assumes a new and picturesque beauty in its windings. The banks are generally thickly wooded, and as most of the land is the rich "hammock" the trees are of a very large growth. Vegetation at this season is like the last of May in New York. Did you ever imagine how delightful it is to go south and meet spring? Passing from the cold and frosty air of a northern latitude, the raw winds, the damp snowy sensation coming from the mountains, so penetrating and so disagreeable, exchanging these for soft southern airs, perpetual sunshine, first the tender buds, and the delicate leaves of the oak, the ash and the maple, then the rich foliage of late Spring, and lastly, the full leave and dense shade of Summer; thus one lives through, in a few days, like a poets dream, the most beautiful season of the year.

The green of the forest is wonderfully varied. We have the oak, the cypress, the elder, the pine, and the palmetto, which grows more and more abundant as we go farther South. They afford great variety of form and color. There you see the dark green branches of mistletoe, easily distinguished from the oak, to which it clings with its deadly embrace. There rises a huge cypress from the edge of the water, with its cone like base, perhaps 20 to 25 feet in circumference, from which shoots up the tall slender shaft of the tree. The branches project, tuft with a light and feathery foliage, and laden below with the long wavy moss, that hangs over the still water, and adds its soft and beautiful color to the perfectly painted picture below.

Sometimes the river widens into a lake, and we glide over its still waters only scaring the waterfowl and startling the alligators. The largest of the lakes is Lake George, 35 miles above Pilatka, and is 15 miles by 7, a beautiful sheet of water, with one island of 300 acres, now owned by a South Carolina planter, and occupied a part of the year as his residence.

After crossing this lake it became high noon, and as we entered the river again we saw the alligators sunning themselves on logs, or going down their “slides” into the water in search of fish. These “slides” appearing here and there among the thickets at the waters edge, at first sight look like places where cattle come down to drink. There are paths which the alligators were going in and coming out of the water, and where they lie and sun themselves. Many shots were fired from our little boat, and not a few of them took effect. One huge animal was killed with two shots from a double-barreled gun. He was a least 14 feet in length, and as the first shot wounded him, he stood upon his legs, and opened his long jaws, when the second struck him in the head, and death transfixed him in that attitude. His mouth, throat, and tongue were of a light yellow and his teeth were plainly to be seen. These teeth are much sought after by travelers, and make very pretty ornaments when carved and polished. In the water no part of his body is visible except for the top of his head, which looks like a bit of wood floating, but on land, of all the animals I ever saw, the alligator was the most hideously ugly. A large serpent would perhaps inspire more fear, but less disgust. He is slow and clumsy in his motions, covered with scales, from which the bullet glances harmless, on the upper part of his body; huge jaws that open the whole length of his head, small, leaden eyes, his feet armed with enormous black claws on the forefoot, and four on the hind, his long, heavy tail dragging after him as he goes, and a strong, disagreeable odor of musk about him, I am sure no fabled dragon of old could exceed him in pretensions to ugliness.

We were detained that night by fog on the river, and the next morning reached Enterprize, on Lake Monroe, where we tarry for the present. The orange trees, its birds and its springs, I must defer to my next. Yours ever, L.N.

***Upper St. Johns, Tuesday, March 15, 1853***

We left Enterprize [*sic*] this morning, and tomorrow morning shall be at the end of our river journey. I write by lamplight, in the little cabin of our boat, a few items which I neglected in my last.

The soils of Florida may be divided into the pine woods, and the hammock land. The pine woods have a poor and light soil, which produces timber of but little value, and a coarse grass upon which the deer browse, and under which the gopher and salamander rat burrow and raise their mounds. The hammock is a rich vegetable loam, covered often with a heavy growth of timber-oak, cypress, and magnolia—and densely filled with a tangled mass of underbrush, vines, and shrubs. When cleared, this makes the finest of land for planting, and such crops of cotton are raised upon it as to induce many planters from the other States to move in. Up and down the river, for many miles, this hammock lines the shores; not a trace of civilization is to be seen; not a tree has ever been felled; and the only inhabitants are the animals and the birds. At this season the hammock are alive with these bright-feathered, sweet-voiced denizens; the smaller ones in the woods – the water fowl on the river and lakes. Of the former there is almost an endless variety. I have counted six different species of woodpeckers, some of them very handsome and brilliant in their colors.

The brightest and most common of the smaller birds, is the redbird, which frequents the orange groves, and sits chirping and flitting about in the warmest and sunniest nooks. The male is nearly as large as the robin, of a bright and brilliant scarlet, with a crest of a deeper shade upon his head. The swallows and martins are abundant and flocks of green paroquets [*sic*] are occasionally to be seen. These are of such a vivid green, that sitting in the tree, it is with difficulty they can be distinguished from the leaves. The yellow-breasted lark and the bluebird are common.

On the water we see ducks and geese, cranes and herons, snipes and fish-hawks. It is too late in the season for the flocks of migratory ducks; last year, in January, I found them in such numbers on the lakes in this vicinity, that the water was actually black with them; and, like the hum of a vast multitude, the whole air was filled with their chattering noise. Most of these are a small duck commonly called the dive-dopper. The name is taken from the flight of the birds, which skims so low over the water as to dip his wings at every stroke, and then sinks quickly down, just like the “skipping-stones” the boys love to throw. When a gun is fired into their midst, they rise like a cloud, but soon settle again on the water. With them is the English duck, considered very fine eating; and occasionally the snow white heron and the blue. The curlews, white and pink, are sometimes found here; the pink is in great requisition for fans. The wing and tail feathers are of the most beautiful rose color, the quill in each being a very deep shade of the same hue.

As for the flowers, one might write a volume about them. They are scattered everywhere. The sandy soil of pine land is gemmed with them now – different kinds of orchids, bright yellow and large blue violets. The delicate sensitive briar, *Arimosa*, is in flower, and quantities of it abound in open sunny places. The flower is apparently a tuft of light purple stamens, with a slight and pleasant smell. The plant is so exquisitely delicate that you can get no pleasure in plucking it; its leaves close in a moment, never to open again; and if you remove it with the root, it drops, never to revive. The slightest breath of air shuts the leaves, and an insect alighting on one of the branches seems to make the whole plant shudder and shrink away.

The pride of the southern woods just now, is the Jasmine [*sic*], which grows in profuse luxuriance in the hammock, and covers many a fantastic tree and bare trunk with its wreaths of sweet-scented flowers.

This morning we stopped to “wood” at a green opening surrounded and shut in by trees and pretty shrubbery. Half a dozen of us sprang on shore for a ramble. We found traces of wheels in a place where a road had been. I saw at a little distance a stately magnolia, towering above the other trees, and made my way through a thicket of merciless briars and vines, to the foot of it. It was one of the finest trees I ever saw. I judged it to be about eighty feet in height. It rises about thirty without a branch – a very straight and smooth shaft, three feet in diameter, at the base. The branches come out, slightly pendant, loaded with their beautiful foliage. The leaf of this species (*Grand-iflora*) is as large as my hand, thick, very glossy, and of a rich dark green. The outline of the top is a graceful oval,

and all together I thought it the most elegant tree I had ever seen. When in bloom, it is certainly the queen of the woods.

We had this evening, on the river, one of those beautiful sunsets I hope never to forget. The sun went down clear, as it most invariably does here. The river banks are thickly wooded for the most part, and in its windings many beautiful points crowned with picturesque trees, appear and disappear. As the sun gets low, streams of the warm golden light fall through the trees, on the bright green carpet below, and reveal far-off clusters and groups of trucks, graceful forms, and bent and gnarled stumps, that otherwise would be hidden by the dense shade over head. Often a large oak, in some grotesque and crooked fashion, stretches itself out over the water, its huge limbs all draped and covered with the soft gray moss that hangs in festoons and folds about it. How still it is! And what a soft and ethereal color it takes in the sunset light! The lightest of the eider down, fasten together in some mysterious way, and hanging motionless, could not equal it in beauty.

How still and smooth the water, not like a liquid at all, but like some highly-burnished metal, reflecting the gorgeous sky above, and every branch, and shred of moss, that leans over it! Between the points of land, and under the large trees, how dark and heavy the shadows! How still and black the pools of water. Dark and deep enough for Zenobia.

You shiver and look away, to where the sunlight lingers, loath to leave such beauty, on the freshest and softest of green, besprinkled with flowers. This is for Una, "ladie mild."

"A chosen plott of fertile land.  
Emongst wide waves sett –  
No dainty flower of herb that grows on ground,  
No arborett with painted blossoms drest,  
And smelling sweete, but there it might be found  
To bud out faire, and her sweete smells throwe all around."