The first indication in Jacksonville of the impending crisis was on March 20, 1917, when the port commissioners placed the German steamship Freda Leonardt under surveillance for an alleged statement by her crew that in the event of war they would blow up the municipal electric light plant here. The vessel was moved upstream and anchored off Commodore's Point. The nation even now was quietly preparing for war. On March 27 the local battalion of Naval Militia was ordered to recruit to war strength, and the local Red Cross, which had been preparing for a week or more, reported that it was ready.

In the week preceding the declaration of war general mass-meetings of the citizens were held and public safety committees were organized; the city council joined in by passing a public safety act appropriating $2,000 for immediate use and $3,000 more if needed. The Government had already opened a recruiting station here and had begun to list local industries convertible for war purposes. April 5, the Jacksonville Real Estate Exchange passed a resolution requesting the Government to designate Jacksonville as a mobilization point for troops in the event of war. So the public mind was well prepared to receive the news that war had been declared, and when it came there was a spontaneous outburst of patriotic demonstration amidst a then unique, but very inspiring feature—the whir of aeroplanes over and around the city, from Earl Dodge's aviation training camp at Black Point. The Freda Leonardt was immediately seized by the Government and her officers and crew removed (they were later sent to New Orleans). The local battalion of Naval Militia was called to the colors and mobilized at once. Recruiting for military service was active.