In 1860 a party of Jacksonville people bought a steamer with the intention of starting a line between Jacksonville and New York. This vessel, the Flambeau, was bought in the North. She was put on the ways for repairs, but the war came on and the enterprise was abandoned, the stockholders losing what they had put into it. A Federal gunboat by this name operated in Southern waters during the war and it is not improbable that she was the same vessel that the Jacksonville people had bought in 1860.

In the early days, the steamers burned lightwood knots for fuel, and a great volume of dense black smoke was emitted from their stacks. Some idle person was generally on the lookout, and when the smoke of a steamer was seen, he would start the cry, “Steamboat, steamboat, coming round the point,” when the inhabitants would collect at the wharf, to hear the latest news. The arrival of a steamer in those days was an event of much importance.

After the War

The Federal gunboats swept the St. Johns clear of river steamboats, but when peace was declared a few of the oldtimers found their way back into the trade. The Darlington returned and was the pioneer boat on the river for many years. The Hattie Brock came back; likewise the St. Johns, renamed Helen Getty, and the St. Marys, renamed Nick King. The Robert Lear was the first boat to Enterprise after the war. Soon other boats made their appearance, gradually increasing in numbers until in the early 1880’s the river fairly swarmed with them, carrying passengers up and down the river or loaded to the gunwales with freight. The orange trees set out after the war on the estates up the river had come into full bearing, and as there were no railroads south of Jacksonville, this was a lucrative business for the river boats. They played their part, and a most important one, too, in the development of Jacksonville, as they made the St. Johns River into a pulsating artery of trade, furnishing the only means of transportation for freight and passengers to a large portion of the peninsula.

The spirit of rivalry among some of the steamboat lines developed a number of passenger boats the equal of those anywhere in the United States. The John Sylvester and the Sylvan Glen were very fast boats belonging to different lines.