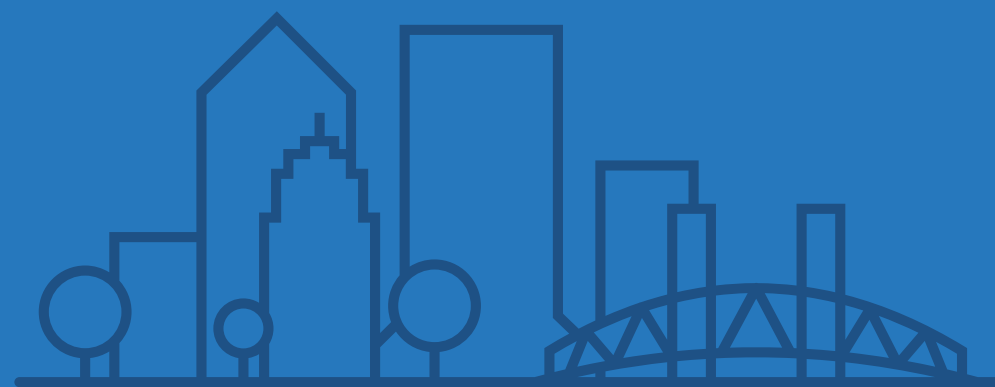


THE ST. JOHNS RIVER - 200 YEARS OF JACKSONVILLE, 12,000 YEARS OF HISTORY



BOLD CITY
BICENTENNIAL
—
PROGRESS & PERSEVERANCE THROUGH
200 YEARS OF JACKSONVILLE'S HISTORY

Examining the history of Jacksonville is, in many ways, examining the relationship between people and the waterways of Northeast Florida over time. The St. Johns River is Jacksonville's greatest defining natural feature and is the connecting thread to the region's past, present and future.



Overhead view of the St. Johns River Estuary system, c. 2016. *St. Johns River Water Management District.*

For twelve thousand years, humans have lived along the banks of the St. Johns. Paleo-Indian arrowheads have been discovered in the Jacksonville Beach area dating to at least 10,000 B.C., while mounds and additional archeological evidence illustrates a sustained human presence along the St. Johns River Basin dating from at least that time through the early 1500s. Timucua-speaking peoples, including the Mocama, lived, played, fished and fought along the riverfront in the years leading up to first contact with European settlers.

The French constructed the first European settlement on mainland American soil, Fort Caroline, along the banks of the St. Johns in 1562. For centuries after, the Spanish Empire utilized the St. Johns River as part of a global trade network, stretching from South America to the Philippines and beyond. The modern shipping route between Barcelona, Spain and Jacksonville, Florida is a lasting legacy of this interconnected imperial web that tied Northeast Florida to the wider world.



Timucua Natives prepare a feast along the banks of the St. Johns River. Early European accounts describe such scenes dotting the St. Johns River shoreline.

Jacksonville's humble origins begin along the St. Johns River. The Cowford Settlement on the North Bank of the St. Johns, located at the narrowest crossing point of the lower river, arose after 1763, when the British widened ancient Native American trails to establish the King's Road from New Smyrna to Savannah. The King's Road met the Cowford at the modern-day intersection of Liberty Street and Bay Street in Downtown Jacksonville.

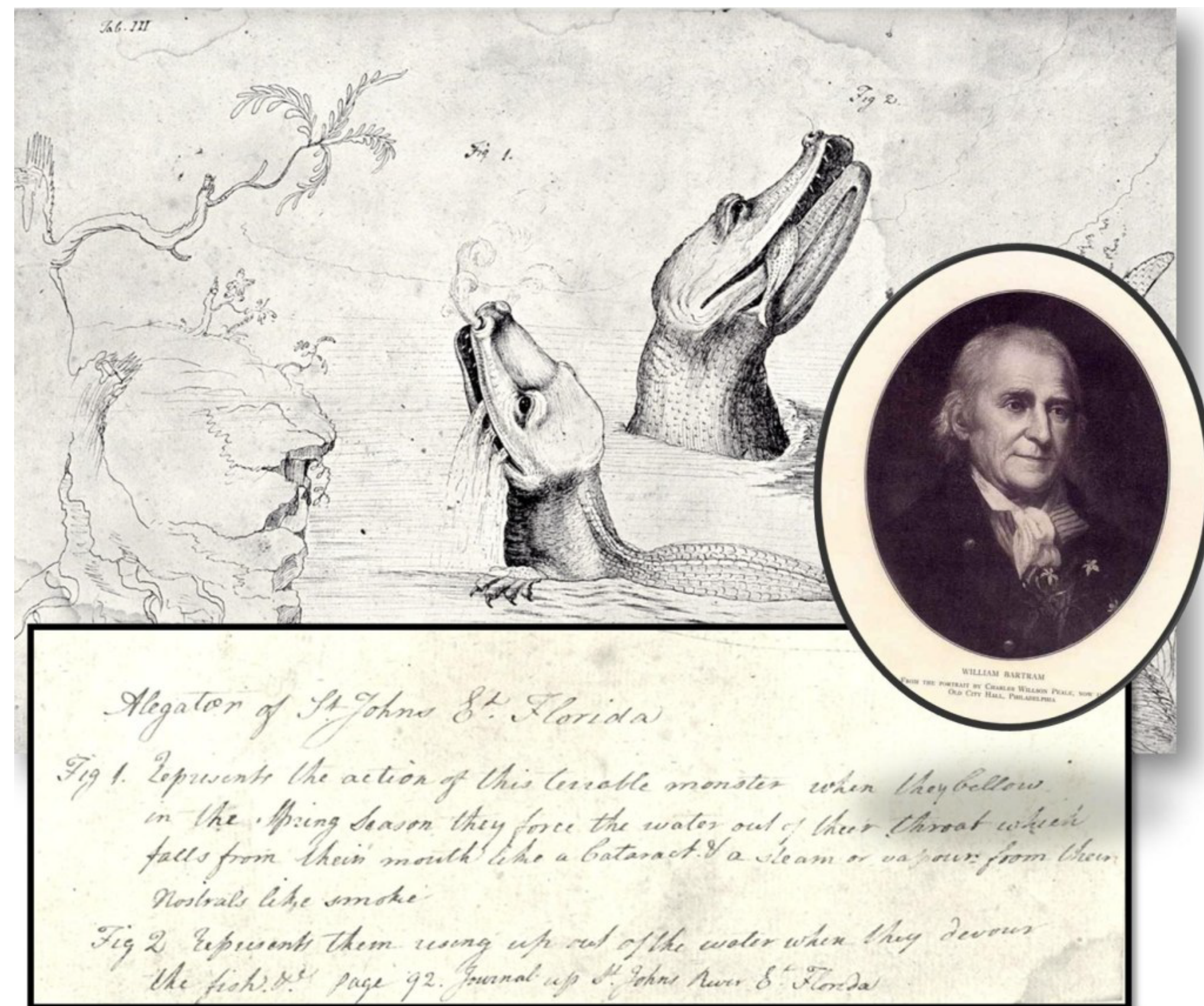


1791 map of Northeast Florida identifying "Cow Ford" (Cowford) at the crossing point of the King's Road and the St. Johns River.

**“COWFORD” IS AN ANGLICIZED VERSION OF A
NATIVE AMERICAN PHRASE, “WACCA PILATKA,”
MEANING, “PLACE OF COW’S CROSSING.”**



Depiction of the Cowford, c. 1765. *Jacksonville Historical Society.*

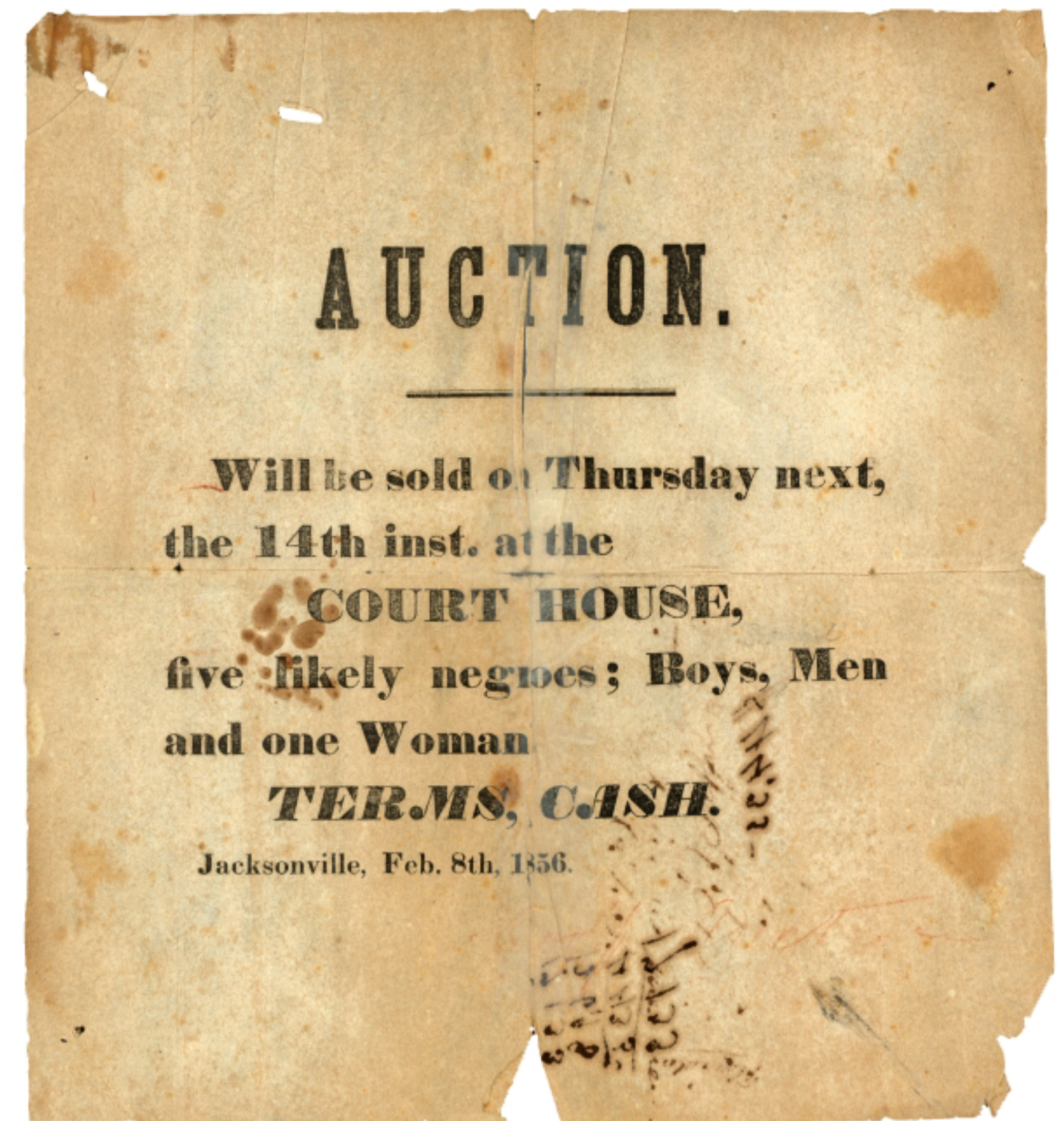


William Bartram and his sketchbook of the “Alligator of St. Johns, Florida.”
Jacksonville Historical Society.

William Bartram, son of royal botanist John Bartram, explored the St. Johns River in 1765 and again in 1774, keeping detailed records of the region’s unique flora and fauna. His 1791 masterwork “Travels” includes dramatic retellings of his journeys along the river and ignited “Florida Fever” in England. Bartram’s works drew attention and new settlers to the St. Johns River Basin, including to the Cowford area.

After Isaiah D. Hart platted the town of Jacksonville in 1822 and settlers began to arrive in the area, the area quickly developed into a hub for shipping and trade. Its location at the mouth of the St. Johns River made Jacksonville a key stop for ships sailing further inland or out to the Atlantic, while its connection to the King’s Road brought land-based trade and settlers from Florida, Georgia and beyond.

Not all was sweet on the waters of the St. Johns during Jacksonville's first decades. While white settlers laid claim to the riverfront and constructed towns along its banks, they did so while benefitting from the enslavement of African peoples. Much of the trade that came to Jacksonville along the St. Johns waterways from the 1820s to the 1860s centered around slavery and the products of African bondage, not least of which was cotton. From the first days of British settlement in the region after 1763 until the Union Army occupation of Jacksonville during the Civil War, slave ships entered the St. Johns River port. Public auctions took place on the steps of the Jacksonville city courthouse, as this 1856 poster indicates.



Announcement of a slave auction in Jacksonville, 1856.
State Library of Florida Archives.

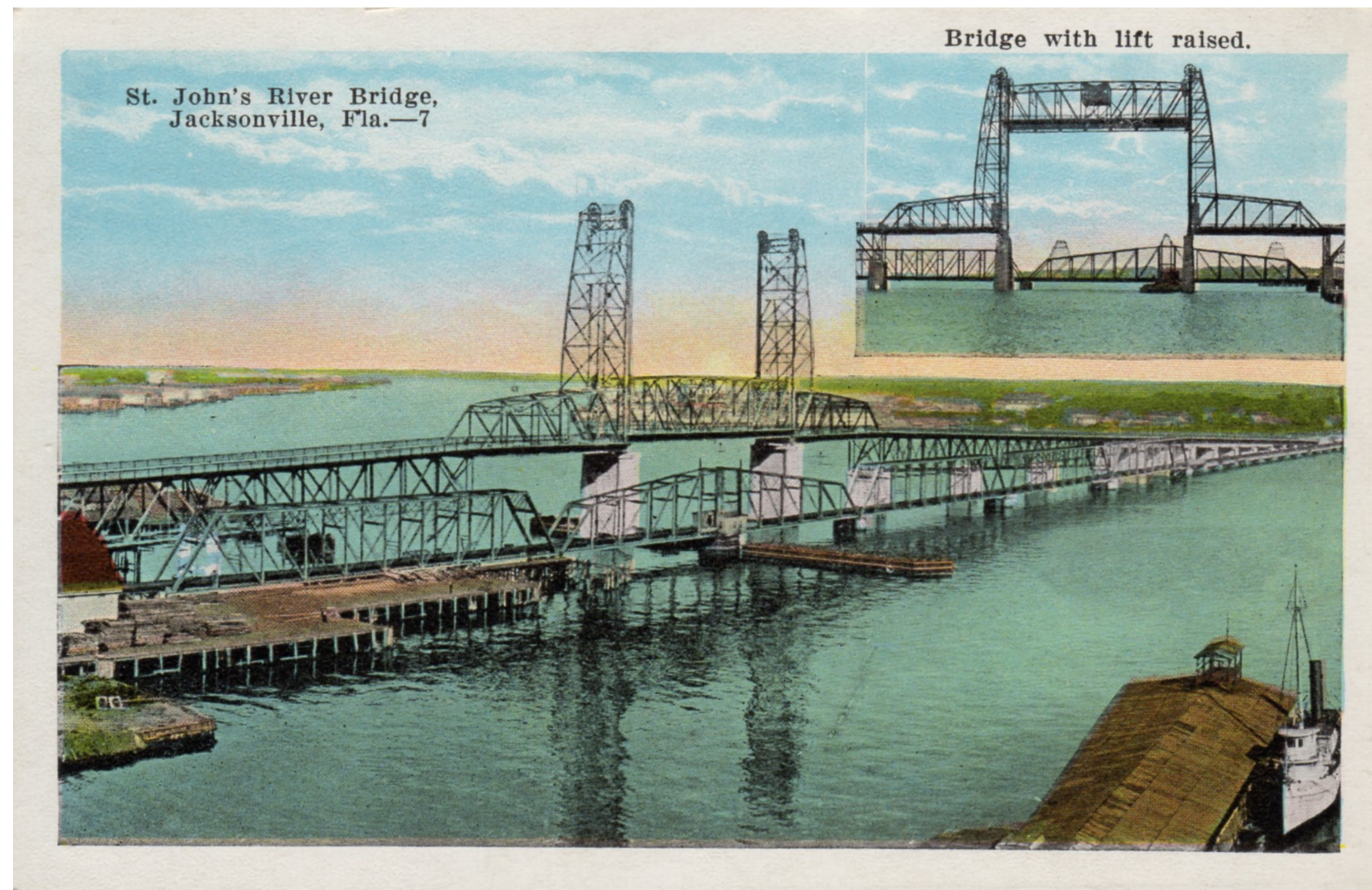


Section of a light battery by the St. Johns River during the Civil War, c. 1863. *Library of Congress.*

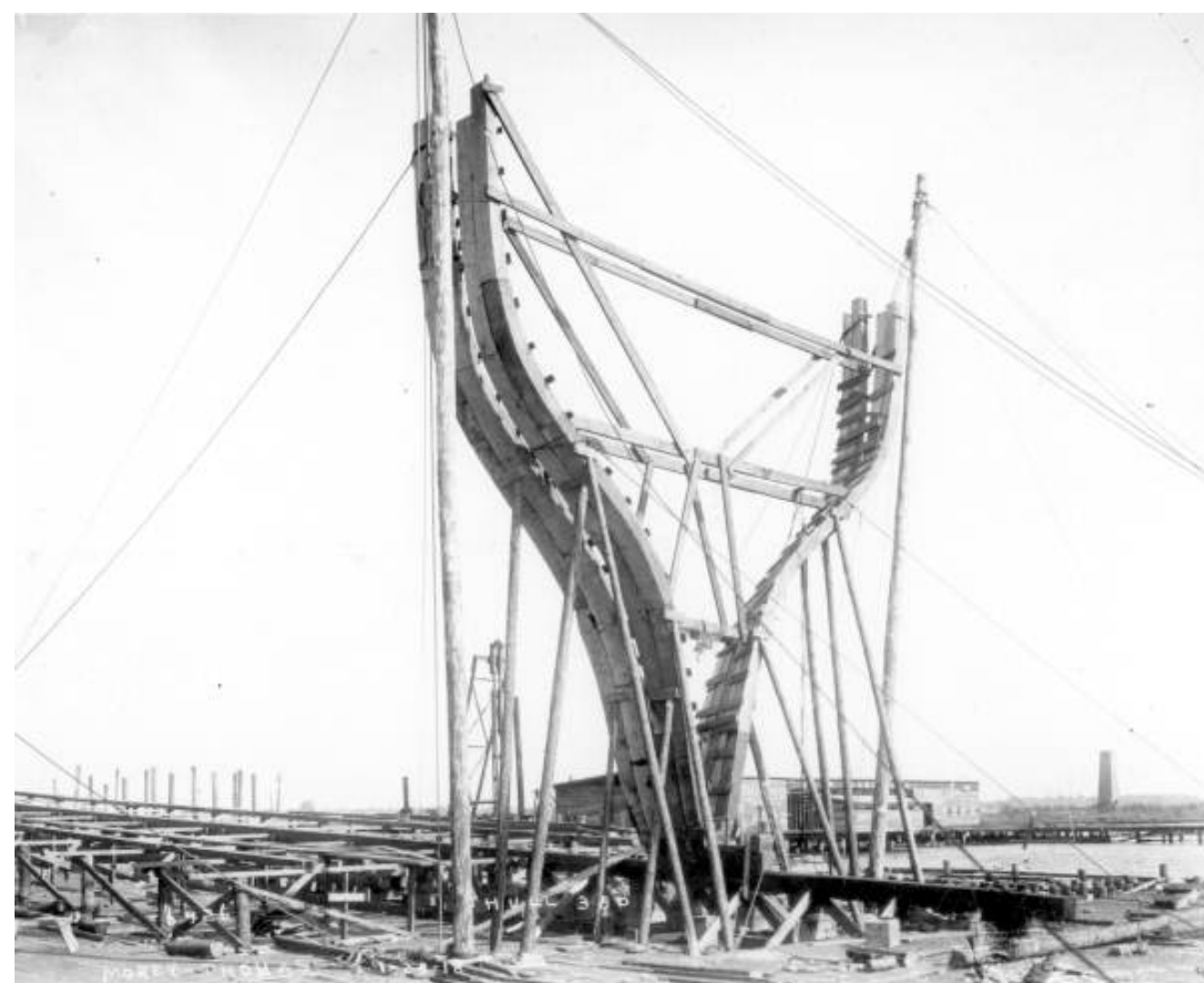
During the Civil War, the St. Johns River was a strategic supply port for the Confederate Army, as cattle and hogs were shipped to Florida to feed their soldiers. For this reason, Jacksonville changed hands several times throughout the conflict, with Union forces occupying the city from 1862 through 1865. Ultimately, Union control of the St. Johns waterway proved key in hampering Confederate forces in Florida and contributed to the Union's eventual victory in the war. Though African Americans living in Jacksonville were free after 1865, inequities brought about by American slavery and systemic racism still persisted.



Steamboat on the St. Johns River, c. 2010.
St. Johns River Historical Society.



Postcard of the St. Johns River Bridge in Downtown Jacksonville, c. 1920. *Jacksonville Historical Society.*



Wooden ship construction
at Morey & Thomas
Shipyard, Jacksonville, FL.
Florida Memory.

In the decades after the Civil War, Jacksonville developed into a major trade and ship-building port. The Jacksonville Shipyards became a center for significant economic activity by the turn of the Twentieth Century, with as many as 50 ships constructed on the riverfront per week and up to 1,500 ships entering and leaving the port per day.

Jacksonville's status as a shipping center also made it a key strategic port for the U.S. military. During World War II, Mayport and NAS Jax grew into two significant waterfront military stations in the region. Since the end of World War II, Mayport and NAS Jax have drawn many Americans from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities to settle in Northeast Florida. As a port city with a strong military influence, Jacksonville today is home to diverse cultural and ethnic groups, including large and thriving Muslim American, Filipino American, Indian American, and Chinese American communities.



Jacksonville
Shipyards, c. 1914.
Florida Memory.

As Jacksonville grew during the mid-Twentieth century, river traffic diversified to include a higher percentage of cruise-liners, local leisure boating and river taxi services. The city also saw a growth in the number of bridges and highways during the 1950s and 1960s, including the construction of the Mathews Bridge in 1953 and the Hart Bridge in 1967.

In the years following consolidation in 1968, the Jacksonville Shipyards slowly fell into disuse and the city's air and waterways experienced heightened levels of industrial pollution—due in part to contamination from the old Shipyards grounds and also from growth in industrial activities on the City's Northbank and Northside areas. Excess rainwater runoff, carrying pollutants and excess fertilizer from housing developments caused seasonal algae blooms in the St. Johns River. The algae choked the river's natural ecosystem and endangered populations of dolphins, manatees, turtles and fish that call the brackish waters of the river home. By 1992, the St. Johns riverfront was at both an economic and ecological nadir.



An algae bloom – accelerated through excess fertilizer entering the river basin – overtakes the St. Johns River. *WJCT*.

Today, traffic on the St. Johns River and waterways continues to serve as a reflection of Jacksonville's growth and development. The National Football League awarding the Jaguars Franchise to the city in 1993 has brought significant activity to the riverfront in the decades since, while recent development projects intend to transform the old Shipyards into a major tourism and entertainment hub for the city and region. Efforts by local and regional groups, such as the St. Johns Riverkeeper, have also sought to improve the health of the river and preserve the region's unique ecological niches. Although these efforts continue, much work remains to ensure that the St. Johns River, its wildlife and its peoples will persevere for decades to come.



A bird's-eye view of the Shipyards looking West. *St. John's Riverkeeper.*