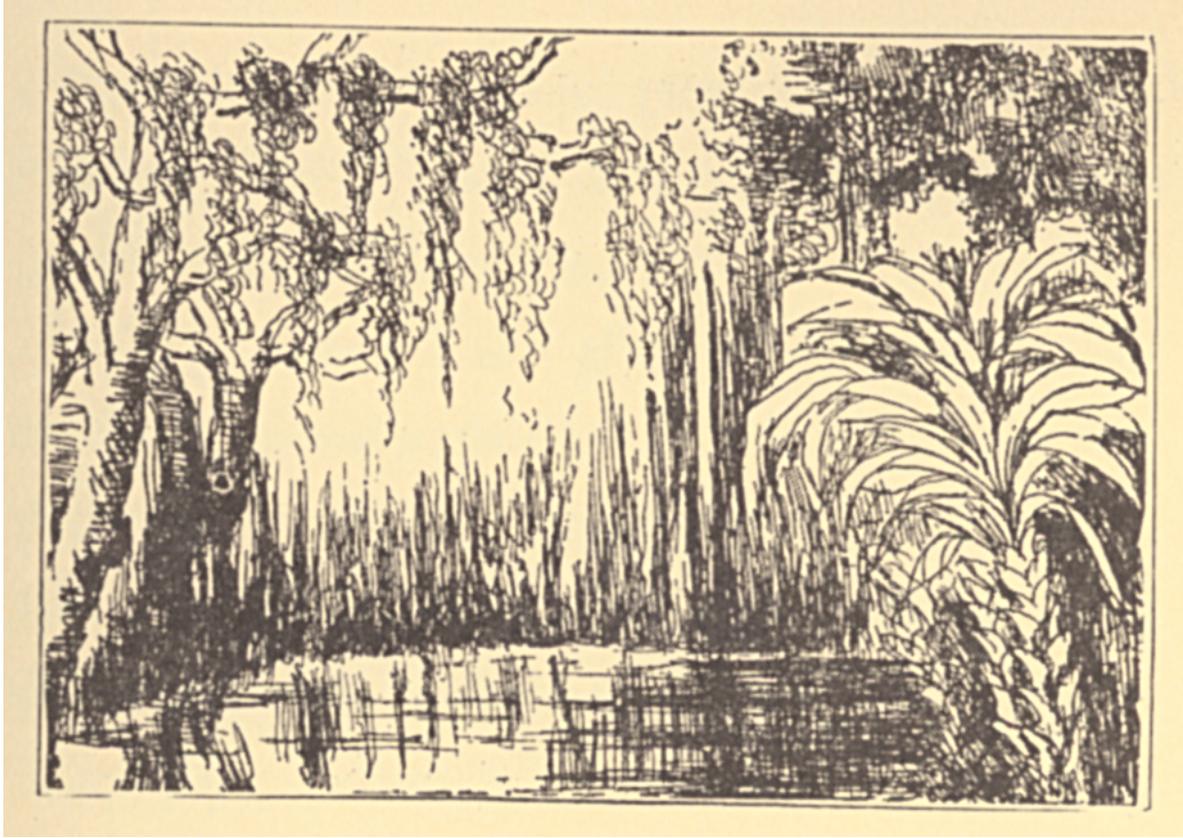


The Grand Tour up River



(excerpts from *Palmetto Leaves* pages 247-256)

The book, Palmetto Leaves, was published in 1872. The author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, was living in Mandarin, Florida (near Jacksonville). In this excerpt, she describes a tour by boat up the St. John's River.

The St. John's is the grand water-highway through some of the most beautiful portions of Florida; and tourists, safely seated at ease on the decks of steamers, can penetrate into the mysteries and wonders of unbroken tropical forests.

During the "season," boats continually run from Jacksonville to Enterprise, and back again; the round trip being made for a moderate sum and giving, in a very easy and comparatively inexpensive manner, as much of the peculiar scenery as mere tourists care to see.

The St. John's River below Pilatka has few distinguishing features to mark it out from other great rivers. It is so wide, that the foliage of the shores cannot be definitely made out; and the tourist here, expecting his palm-trees and his magnolias and flowering-vines, is disappointed by sailing in what seems' a never-ending great lake, where the shores are off in the distance too far to make out any thing in particular. But, after leaving Pilatka, the river grows narrower, the overhanging banks approach nearer, and the foliage becomes more decidedly tropical in its character.

The palmetto-tree appears in all stages, —from its earliest growth, when it looks like a fountain of great, green fan-leaves bursting from the earth, to its perfect shape, when, sixty or seventy feet in height, it rears its fan crown high in air. The oldest trees may be known by a perfectly smooth trunk; all traces of the scaly formation by which it has built itself up in ring after ring of leaves being obliterated. But younger trees, thirty or forty feet in height, often show a trunk which seems to present a regular criss-cross of basket-work, —the remaining scales from whence the old leaves have decayed and dropped away. These scaly trunks are often full of ferns, wild flowers, and vines, which hang in fantastic draperies down their sides, and form leafy and flowery pillars. The palmetto-hammocks, as they are called, are often miles in extent along the banks of the rivers. The tops of the palms rise up round in the distance as do many hay-cocks, and seeming to rise one above another far as the eye can reach.



A riverboat in Florida

In going up the river, darkness overtook us shortly after leaving Pilatka. We sat in a golden twilight, and saw the shores every moment becoming more beautiful; but when the twilight faded, and there was no moon, we sought the repose of our cabin. It was sultry as August, although only the first part of May; and our younger and sprightlier members, who were on the less breezy side of the boat, after fruitlessly trying to sleep, arose and dressed themselves, and sat all night on deck.

By this means they saw a sight worth seeing, and one which we should have watched all night to see. The boat's course at night is through narrows of the river, where we could hear the crashing and crackling of bushes and trees, and sometimes a violent thud, as the boat, in turning and winding, struck against the bank. On the forward part two great braziers were kept filled with blazing, resinous light-wood, to guide the pilot in the path of the boat. The effect of this glare of red light as the steamer passed through the palmetto hummocks and moss-hung grottoes of the forest was something that must have been indescribably weird and beautiful; and our young friends made us suitably regret that our more airy sleeping-accommodations had lost us this experience.