

The Okeehumkee on the Oklawaha River

A PAINTING BY CHRISTOPHER M. STILL

OIL ON LINEN, 126" BY 48"

The Civil War is over and the slaves free. It is the late 1800s, and a small steamboat winds its way through the serpentine curves of the Oklawaha River at night. Its passengers are visitors and adventure seekers from northern states. As they pass by giant cypress trees and under Spanish moss, their way lit by fire, these first Florida tourists are thrilled by white-tailed deer, large, plumed birds, and huge, prehistoric-looking alligators that appear out of the shadows along the river's edge. The stories they had read about the natural beauty and wonders of this southern state were certainly true.

But this idyllic scene contains some signs of trouble. Exotic water hyacinths, like the one seen above the alligator's back, were introduced into the rivers and began an ongoing invasion. The herons and egrets, found by looking carefully into the painting's shadows, were so admired for their plumes—used on ladies' hats—that they were nearly hunted to extinction. Although they were eventually spared due to efforts of the National Audubon Society founded in 1905, the native Carolina parakeets, pictured on the right side of the painting, were not so fortunate.

And while tourists idly cruised in these "floating palaces", life was forever changing for the pioneers,

trappers, farmers and former slaves who lived and worked here. Florida was no longer on its way to becoming another cotton state. New businesses like citrus farming, phosphate mining, and tourism were pushing the rapid growth of transportation industries, and the state was ripe with opportunity. Investors

from the north came, not for the scenery, but to get in on the expected boom, and to take advantage of the confusion and disarray left in the wake of the war.

Federal troops, the Freedman's Bureau, and radical Republicans also arrived, ostensibly to help improve conditions for Florida's African American citizens during Reconstruction. For a very short time they succeeded, evidenced by the election in 1868 of 19 black men to the state legislature—including Jonathon Gibbs, a pastor, who later became Florida's Secretary of State. Unfortunately, this

progress was dramatically reversed in 1877.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, *Palmetto Leaves*, sits above the painting's frame on the right. Northern readers were so taken by her descriptions of Florida, that they came to see it for themselves, and often stayed. This painting is a reminder that most of the natural wonders that give Florida its unique identity and atmosphere, can still be found—as exciting today as they were at the end of the 19th century.

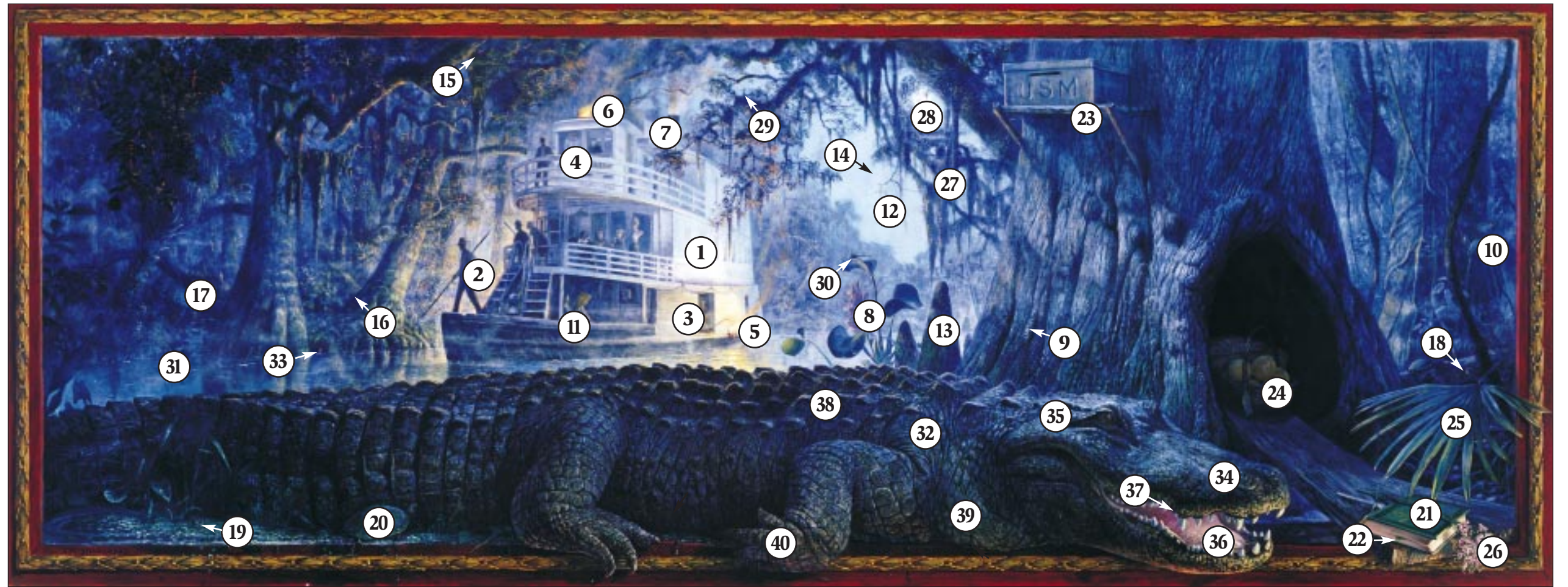


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Designed into this painting are two converging lines, one on the alligator's back and one along the river's edge. If the viewer walks by the painting while focusing on the steamboat, the boat will appear to rock back and forth.

This work includes the themes of the others, such as eyes looking out at the viewer and Florida maps. The outline of the state appears near the center, delineated by trees, with branches indicating railroad lines of the times.



- 1) **Okeehumkee Steam Boat.** The *Okeehumkee* was the longest serving steamboat on the Oklawaha route. Such shallow draft steamers were specially built for navigating Florida's narrow winding rivers. The engine and paddle wheel were concealed in the lower part of the boat. They were often overloaded with passengers, and the reckless shooting of guns, along with the annoyance of bugs and branches, prompted some to make the return trip by train.
- 2) **Man with Pole.** Typically a member of the crew stood at the front of the steamboat with a long pole to help the pilot navigate around potential hazards such as sunken trees and overhanging limbs.
- 3) **Deckhand with Water.** A man stands ready with a bucket of water to extinguish the flame in the iron basket.
- 4) **Wheelhouse or Pilothouse.** Two men were required to be stationed here at night. The pilot commanded the crew and directed the wheelman.
- 5) **Iron Basket.** Postcards from this era show iron baskets like these, used for additional light, on the sides of steamers. Aged parts of pine trees called pine knots, pitch knots, or lighter knots were usually burned in the baskets. These knots were full of resin, lit easily, and burned for a long time.
- 6) **Iron Box.** A box on top of the pilothouse held burning pine knots to help light the way. It also allowed the hunters and sightseers to view wildlife along the river.
- 7) **Life Boat.** There was real danger in traveling on the rivers. Many boats sank and passengers were drowned.
- 8) **Water Hyacinth.** These invasive South American plants were given out as souvenirs at an exposition in New Orleans in 1884, and one made its way to Florida as a water garden specimen

- 9) **Apple Snail Eggs.** The apple snail, a primary food source for the limpkin and the snail kite, climbs out of the water to lay its white clusters of eggs.
- 10) **Carolina Parakeets.** Several historical accounts had hunters shooting at these colorful birds, the country's only native parrots, from the decks of steamboats. Soon after the turn of the century they became extinct. Easy for hunters and farmers to kill, when a member of their flock was shot the others would remain with their fallen companion instead of flying away. Artist and naturalist John James Audubon's paintings provide one of the few pictorial references of them.
- 11) **Man with Map.** With few roads, and railroads limited to major ports during this period, steamboats and sailboats were a primary means of transportation on the ocean, gulf and rivers.
- 12) **Map of Florida.** An opening in the trees forms the shape of the state and is based on Drew's map from the 1880's. Some of the branches depict the limited rail lines of this period.

- 13) **Cypress Knees.** This unique root system at the base of cypress trees is thought to aid aeration and help prevent rot. A careful look will reveal a green tree frog, sometimes called a "cowbell" from the sound it makes, clinging to the knee's bark.
- 14) **Bat.** This flying mammal consumes tremendous numbers of insects each night, providing a valuable service to Floridians. There are 17 species of bats in Florida.
- 15) **Possums.** A family of Virginia opossums, the only native marsupial in the U.S., can be seen by the glow of their eyes in branches above the boat.
- 16) **Raccoon.** Like many animals, the raccoon comes to the river's edge to find foods such as snails, frogs, mussels and crayfish.
- 17) **White-tailed Deer.** Commonly sighted by the tourists along the banks of the river, white-tailed deer play a key role in the Florida food chain.
- 18) **Water Moccasin.** This venomous water snake is also known as a "Cotton-mouth" because it displays the white insides of its mouth when threatened.
- 19) **Pig Frog.** The pig frog strongly resembles the slightly larger bullfrog, and gets its name from the grunting sound of its call.

- 20) **Peninsula Cooter.** This is a common Florida turtle, often seen basking in the sun during the day. The term "cooter" has been used as a folk name for freshwater turtles.
- 21) **"Palmetto Leaves".** Harriet Beecher Stowe, best known as the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the controversial book said to have sparked the Civil War, settled in the small Florida town of Mandarin on the St. John's River in 1867. She would wave to the passing steamboats from her porch. Her 1872 book of sketches, *Palmetto Leaves*, describing an idyllic Florida life, is considered the first unsolicited promotion of Florida to interest northern tourists.
- 22) **Orange Leaf.** Visitors on passing boats sometimes tried to grab orange leaves from Harriet Beecher Stowe's grove to press as keepsakes.
- 23) **Cypress Tree.** The exotic trip along the Oklawaha River was captured in stories and engravings that were published for northern readers. One engraving from the late 1880's depicts a hollow trunk and mail box such as the one shown here. U.S.M. stands for U.S. Mail.
- 24) **Basket of Oranges and Package.** The artist imagined this space to be used to place larger packages and perhaps a

- 25) **Palmetto Leaf.** The fronds and threads of the palmetto were used by settlers in much the same way native Americans used them for thousands of years. Makeshift huts and baskets made this plant a valuable resource for poor homesteaders. Today they still make a fine skewer for cooking a fish or toasting a marshmallow over an open fire.
- 26) **Vanilla Weed.** This native plant, whose leaves have a vanilla scent and flavor, was gathered by river dwellers for trade. It was mixed with pipe tobacco to sweeten its flavor and scent. Cotton, tobacco, citrus, sugar, salt and lumber were widely transported by ships during this era.
- 27) **Spanish Moss.** This epiphytic bromeliad, sometimes called "graybeard", got its name from folk tales about a Spaniard who caught his beard in the tree branches. The black filament at its core was commercially "ginned" for use as stuffing in mattresses, cushions, coffins, and later, automobile seats. Today it is still gathered and sold as a craft material, indoor mulch and packing.
- 28) **Full Moon.** A full moon is a romantic sight in any age and time.

- 29) **Yellow Crowned Night Heron.** Active in the evenings, this bird nests above the river as the passengers drift by.
- 30) **Dragonfly.** These beneficial insects are masterful flyers, able to operate their front and rear wings independently. They feed on mosquitoes, flies and gnats, and their aquatic larvae (nymphs) feed on mosquito and other insect larvae.
- 31) **Emerald Water.** The light of the moon shines on the Silver River. On the final leg of its journey, the boat turns from the darker tannin-stained Oklawaha River heading up the Silver River to its source, Silver Springs.
- 32) **Alligator.** Named by Spanish explorers "el lagarto" meaning "the lizard", the alligator is an important part of Florida's heritage and plays a major role in the ecology of its wetlands. Just one example are "gator holes", the trenches they dig for themselves as the water table drops. These provide homes, water, and food for a number of other creatures during dry seasons. Although hunted for meat, they have been most often killed for their strong, fashionable hides. Alligator leather is valued for purses, shoes, wallets, belts and suitcases. As their numbers fell (Continued on the back)

dramatically through the years, they were given Federal protection beginning in 1962. While no longer an endangered species, they are still carefully managed and protected. It is illegal for the public to feed, tease, harass, molest, capture or kill an alligator. These restrictions not only protect alligators but the growing number of people who coexist with them.

33) Eyes. Alligators can be seen at night by the red reflection in their eyes. Each eye has two eyelids: one clear to allow for sight and a degree of protection, and another that cleans and protects the eye when submerged, acting something like goggles.

34) Nostrils. A fleshy appendage acts as a valve to close and open the nostril depending upon whether the animal is above or under the water.

35) Ears. Often only the eyes, ears and nostrils of the “gator” are above the water, a useful aquatic adaptation for hunting or staying cool beneath the surface.

36) Teeth. An alligator has 60 to 90 cone shaped serrated teeth. Throughout its

lifetime, as teeth are broken off or lost, new ones replace them.

37) ISOs (*Integumentary Sense Organs*).

These small black pores, sometimes referred to as “pepper,” on an alligator’s jaw are dermal sensory receptors. Although it is not completely clear how they function, they are believed to detect pressure changes and allow the alligator to detect prey, even when under muddy water.

38) Scutes. Scutes are embedded bony plates which help to protect the alligator as armor, and also serve to help regulate the reptile’s body temperature. Each plate is perforated with blood vessels that collect the sun’s heat and distribute it through the body, acting much like a solar cell.

39) Bellowing. When ready to mate the alligator makes a resonating bark from deep in its throat that can be heard by potential partners for miles.

40) Feet. An alligator has five toes in front and four toes in back. Their webbed feet are well adapted for swimming, with the hind feet acting as rudders.

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