

# The Florida East Coast Steamship Company

By Edward A. Mueller\*

Henry Morrison Flagler's relentless drive south on the East Coast of Florida in more than a decade had reached the southerly portions of what is now Brevard County. His luxurious hotels were the envy of all and during the winter resort season apparently did a capacity business.

Not content with just his Florida mainland railroad and hotel empire, Flagler embarked on a three-pronged effort to extend his holdings seaward. The three prongs were to Nassau, Havana and Key West. The sea-borne prong to Key West, however, was to be ultimately replaced by a most unique construction project, the Overseas Railroad extension to Key West. Getting to Nassau was the first objective, however, in point of time.

In the early 1890's, Flagler was thrusting his railroad ever further south. The immediate stopping place was Palm Beach and Flagler was extremely busy with both railroad and hotel projects there.

The spring of 1893 saw the Flagler purchase of a large tract of land on the body of water known as Lake Worth in what is now Palm Beach County but which was Dade County at the time. The tract of land was for a large hotel and the news of Flagler's interest in the area immediately stimulated property values and prices rose dramatically. Meanwhile railroad construction was proceeding southward to terminate for the moment at West Palm Beach.

After Flagler had given the go-ahead to build his hotel, an astonishing amount of construction activity commenced. The groundbreaking for the new hotel took place on May 1, 1893. Workmen and materials arrived overnight. Temporary tents and shacks to house the myriads sprang up and a thousand men were at work on what was to become the South's largest hotel, known as the Royal Poinciana. Before it was

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completed and opened on February 15, 1894, it had consumed five million feet of timber, 360 thousand shingles, half a million bricks, four thousand barrels of lime and 2,400 gallons of paint. Also 1,200 windows and 1,800 doors were installed in the Poinciana. Some 20 acres of walls were plastered. These figures would be formidable for almost any area today, one can imagine what the impact was on a sleepy pioneer settlement that was to be known as "The Queen of Winter Resorts."

A year later in the summer of 1895, construction was commenced on another large hotel in the area, this time one that faced the ocean. It was the Palm Beach Inn, later to be world renowned as "The Breakers."

The key to Flagler's plans was the linking of transportation and accommodations. He believed in close proximity and a relationship between them in terms of convenience to guests. Because his railroad was on the mainland at West Palm Beach, several miles away from the Royal Poinciana and Palm Beach Inn, a spur had to be built over to the ocean front from the mainland, across Lake Worth. This spur, built before the Inn opened, helped in the transfer of building supplies for the construction of the Inn. The spur was extended for over 1,000 feet into the ocean adjacent to the Inn, by construction of a pier capable of carrying trains. This would enable passengers to step from their train directly to the boat. Hotel guests needed only a short walk from their room to reach their vessel. Of course the pier had to be placed out a considerable distance to enable even the shallow draft vessels used at that time enough depth of water so as not to run aground.

The "immense pier" as it was described in promotional travel literature was built under contract by Captain J.D. Ross, a prominent marine contractor from Jacksonville. Captain Ross had constructed some of the St. John's River jetty work which was placed to make that river capable of carrying deeper draft vessels. Plans called for a timber trestle type pier, probably supported by piling (wooden) and a heavy bulkhead filled with rock at the far end of the pier, undoubtedly to hold against the expected hurricane-sized weather that occasionally developed. The pier had to be heavy enough also to carry the locomotives of the day and lighter coaches. Cost was put at \$100,000 in 1897. Then the pier was used for fishing and boating activities.

Flagler's dreams (dreams at the time, realities as events were to prove) included participation in the winter tourist trade with the Bahamas and to that purpose he acquired a brace of hotels in Nassau, the Royal Victoria and Colonial. And, of course, the next step would be to

provide the connecting link between Palm Beach and Nassau, an ocean-going vessel.

So, in mid-October, 1895, announcement was made of a steamship service to Nassau, such service to start in mid-January, 1896. The *Northumberland* was the initial vessel chosen for this purpose. This vessel was chartered and was about three years old at the time. She was a steel vessel, had twin screws, was of 1,300 tons and was 220 feet long and 33 feet wide. She had a single stack and two masts.

Flagler's steamship operations were organized under a general corporate entry known as the Florida East Coast Steamship Company. Two services were operated after the first year, the Florida-Bahamas Steamship Line and the Key West and Miami Steamship Line. Thus *Northumberland* was operated by the Florida-Bahamas Steamship Line.

The President of the Florida East Coast Steamship Company was Mr. Flagler and Vice-President was Joseph R. Parrott. These two principals were also the top officers in the parent Florida East Coast Railroad.

The *Northumberland* inaugurated service either on January 15 (Wednesday) or on the next day, January 16. One published schedule says the 16th and a later one indicates the 15th. It was just an overnight jaunt to Nassau on New Providence Island, the city of Nassau being reached just in time for breakfast. On Monday, January 20, *Northumberland* left Nassau for the first time and by February 11 had settled down to a tri-weekly Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday departure from Palm Beach and a Monday, Wednesday, Friday departure from Nassau. Service was discontinued by the first of April as the winter visitor season was over by then.

The Palm Beach Inn was open from December to April and the Royal Poinciana from January to April. The Royal Poinciana was six stories high, had 575 sleeping rooms, a ballroom, dining room, and sitting and parlor rooms. Two swimming pools were provided, one with sulphur water and one with salt water from the ocean. During the 1894-95 season, visitors were turned away for lack of space. The Palm Beach Inn By The Sea as it was termed, was of about five stories and had some 400 guest rooms. Later on it would gain fame when it became known as "The Breakers."

As Nassau was only 150 miles from the United States, the journey was a convenient half day trip from the mainland. Its climate was more tropical than any found in the U.S. at that time and winter sunshine seemed its chief selling point. Cycling was avidly resorted to, and the

beautifully-colored shallow coral-strewn waters around the area were also an attraction. The Royal Victoria Hotel had been built by the British Colonial government at a cost of \$125,000 and was four stories high, 200 feet long with wide verandahs around its lower three floors. The Florida East Coast publicity noted that the hotel manager was an American, no less.

The Key West operations also commenced in 1896. The *Shelter Island*, a sidewheeler was to start this service in mid-February from Miami. The schedule called for tri-weekly trips on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday, leaving Miami at 8 A.M., Coral Gables at 9 A.M. with arrival at Key West at 6 P.M. The return trips were scheduled to have *Shelter Island* leave Key West on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 8 A.M., arriving at Coral Gables at 5 P.M. and Miami at 6 P.M. The total trip distance was about 165 miles.

*Shelter Island* was an iron paddlewheeled vessel built in 1886 at Harlan and Hollingsworth's Delaware River shipyard. She was 176 feet long, 31 feet wide and of 10 foot draft. She had a vertical beam engine, 38 inches in diameter with an 108 inch stroke. She was of 648 gross tons, 484 net.

*Shelter Island* had the briefest career imaginable with the FEC. On February 20, 1896 she left Miami for Key West on her very first trip. Over 200 citizens of Key West came aboard her to have the honor of the first passage and many from Jacksonville were also among her passengers. Only two hours out of Miami she struck a rocky shoal or perhaps a coral-like protrusion between Grecian and Mosquito Shoals in six feet of water. She got free of the obstruction, turned on her pumps and started for Key West. Initially the pumping kept the water down but the leak became greater, the pumps became clogged and were thus unable to keep the water level from rising. Finally, the furnace fires went out due to the advancing water, steam pressure and motive power ceased, and *Shelter Island* settled to the bottom some 19 miles out of Key West. She had lost the 90 mile run to the supposed help at Key West in the form of a marine railway on which she had hoped to have her repairs effected.

No casualties resulted but *Shelter Island*, valued at \$80,000, was a total loss. She was insured for some \$60,000, however. Two Key West tugs, the *Clyde* and *Childs* came out to help and took off some of the passengers and cargo. Two wrecking schooners also arrived on the scene and "helped" with the cargo. Surprisingly enough the *Shelter Island* was in charge of a veteran pilot, Captain Cannte and the holing of the hull was a surprise to all.

*Shelter Island* had been chartered from the Montauk Steamboat Company for the winter run to Key West. In the summer she was on a run from New York city to the outer extremities of Long Island and had at least 50 staterooms as she was a night boat. She had cleared from New York only a week before on the 13th and had stopped off at Jacksonville on the 16th. The Miami-Key West Line immediately set out to find a suitable replacement (of which more later).

An intermediate service was also run at this time from Fort Lauderdale to Miami using *Biscayne*, a western-rivers type sternwheeler previously used by the Indian River Steamboat Line. Flagler's railroad had caused steamboat operations on the Indian River to dwindle away and surplus boats were accordingly available. *Biscayne* had previously been named (a) *J.W. Sweeney*. *Biscayne* scheduled a tri-weekly service leaving Fort Lauderdale at 9 A.M., arriving at Miami at 3 P.M., and went on to Coconut Grove, getting there at 4 P.M. The return trip left Coconut Grove at 9 A.M., Miami at 10 A.M. and reached Fort Lauderdale at 4 P.M. The southbound trip was made on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and the northbound one on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

*Della* alternated with *Biscayne* going southward on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and returned on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. *Della*, #157384, was a small steel propeller vessel of 38 gross tons, 22 net. She was only 67.5 feet long and 18.1 feet wide but was a good shallow water vessel as her depth of hold was three feet. Her engine was of 30 indicated horsepower and she was built in Jacksonville in 1893.

*Biscayne*, #76769, was a wooden sternwheel vessel having been



Courtesy of the Mariners Museum  
The ill-fated *Shelter Island*

built at Abbeville, Georgia in 1888. She was a comfortable 414 gross tons, 229 net, had an 80 (nominal) horsepower engine (120 indicated) and was 118.9 feet long, 34.4 feet wide and of 4.4 feet in depth.

Of course, Flagler was busily engaged in extending his railroad line to Miami but it was not until mid-April, 1896 that the railroad was completed, the first train bearing passengers arriving around April 22.

Flagler had had severe doubts about going further south than the Palm Beaches at this time but a severe freeze over the winter of 1894-95 in the Palm Beach area and the absence of such a condition in the Miami area convinced him to look southward, somewhat before he ordinarily would have done so. The Tuttle and Brickells, pioneer land holders in the Miami area, offered alternate lots from their holdings and Mrs. Julia Tuttle also gave 100 acres of land along Biscayne Bay and the Miami River for a hotel site. Flagler on his part was to extend his railroad, construct a large hotel and clear streets, finance waterworks and an electric light plant.

Surveys for the railroad started in June, 1895 track laying began by September. The usual bands of newcomers, settlers and workers made their way to Miami. In March, 1896, within two days, two steamboats (one of them the *St. Lucie*) arrived with building materials and some of Flagler's underlings. They started work on the hotel and announced that the railroad would be in Miami in about 30 days.

The Flagler hotel completed in time for the 1897 tourist season was the Royal Palm. This large hotel could accommodate 600 guests and stayed open from January to April. A smaller hotel, the Biscayne with quarters for 150 guests was also available.

Now that Miami was the obvious terminal, Palm Beach was abandoned as the departure point for Nassau and Miami took over. The *Northumberland* was not chartered for the 1897 season, the *Monticello* being instead obtained. This vessel was the old *City of Monticello*, #5339, a durable iron sidewheeler which had formerly plied from Charleston to Jacksonville in the mid-1880's after a respectable career with the Morgan Line.

*Monticello* or *City of Monticello* (her full name) was over 30 years old at the time of her service with Flagler. An iron hulled vessel she was a Harlan and Hollingsworth product (their hull #101) being built in 1866. She was a beam-engined craft with a 32 inch cylinder and a nine foot stroke for her piston. She was 892 tons, gross and 478, net. Her length was 224 feet and she was 32 feet wide with a nine foot hold depth. The

Florida East Coast Steamship Line chartered her from the Bay of Fundy Steamship Company.

*Monticello* was originally named (a) *City of Norfolk* and she had been sold to British interests in 1889 after her St. Johns service in the mid-1880's. Before that she had a long stint with the Morgan Steamship Line.

Miami was somewhat closer to Nassau than Key West and *Monticello* was placed on a Wednesday and Saturday departure schedule, leaving Miami from mid-January to mid-February and a Tuesday and Friday return schedule from the Bahamas. From February 15 to March 27 she sailed tri-weekly from Miami on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and returned from Nassau on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. All sailings were at 2 P.M. with early morning arrivals at their destinations. Sailings went back to a twice-a-week basis in late March until the end of the season in mid-April. Nassau was some 155 miles from Miami.

For the Key West route, to replace the short-lived *Shelter Island*, the venerable *City of Richmond* was purchased and renamed (b) *City of Key West* in honor of her new home. This ancient wooden sidewheeler would give good service during the next several years as she threaded the "Inside" and "Outside" passages among the Florida Keys to and from Key West. She ran on a tri-weekly basis the entire season, leaving Miami on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday and Key West on Sunday, Wednesday and Friday. Departures from both ends were at 7 A.M. so the maximum amount of daylight could be employed in the navigational hazards of the shoals enroute.

*City of Key West*, #5020, first saw the light of day in 1865 at her building in Athens, New York, Nathan and Edmonds being the constructor. Her durability was attested to by the fact that she was to have over forty years of active life and perhaps several less active years afterwards. She was distinguished by a sort of sway-backed appearance, tending to indicate that her powerful vertical beam engine located amidships was just too heavy for her. After an initial few months on the James River between Richmond and Norfolk just after the Civil War she went north to Maine waters. From 1866 to 1893 she was a "down-easter" being operated by the Portland, Bangor, Mt. Desert and Machias Steamboat Company (or one of its earlier predecessors under a similar nomenclature.)

In 1893, still going by her original name of *City of Richmond*, she was sold to New London, Connecticut interests who had her for three



years until her purchase by a St. Augustine, Florida resident. She spent a few months in Florida as *City of Richmond* and was in some way involved in helping to land munitions and men in Cuba during the filibustering days that preceded the Spanish American War. She rendezvoused with many filibustering vessels such as the famed *Three Friends*. However, in 1896 the Florida East Coast purchased her as a replacement for the ill-fated *Shelter Island*.

*City of Richmond's* chief Maine route was from Portland to Bangor using the so-called inside sheltered passage. She was of 939 gross tons, 600 net and her dimensions were 227.5 x 30.6 x 10 feet. A beam-engined vessel, her cylinder was 36 inches in diameter and her stroke was 12 feet. Her paddle wheels were 36 feet in diameter.

*City of Richmond* while in Maine service had one very serious accident. She was a very fast boat, the fastest on her route in fact and on a foggy morning in August, 1881 she ran aground on a ledge off Mark Island on the Maine coast. No lives were lost and the passengers were all safely landed. Her hull was severely damaged and in the repair her walking beam engine, stack and boilers were removed. Some ten years later when laid up for the winter at Pier 24, East River, New York City, she burned early in 1891. When raised in mid-March, 1891 two bodies (probably hoboies caught in the fire) were found in the wreckage.

After two seasons of running chartered vessels to Nassau, the ordering of a specialized new vessel for that service took place. William Cramp and Sons of Philadelphia were commissioned to build the suitable vessel and the result was *Miami*, #92830, a steel twin screw vessel. She bore Cramp's hull number 292 and was launched on October 23, 1897.

*Miami* was 239.2 feet by 40.1 feet and was 21.8 feet in depth. She was of 1,741 gross and 1,311 net tons. She was powered by two engines, triple expansion ones with cylinders of 18", 27" and 42" diameter with 25 inch stroke. She had a usual speed of 13½ knots and had a reputed top speed of 16 knots. Features were electric lights and fans in every room. She could accommodate 125 passengers and was rated at 2,000 horsepower.

The FEC had signed the contract with Cramps on June 28, 1897, the keel was laid on July 3, the first frames were erected on July 31 and she was ready for sailing in December. At her October launching she was christened with a bottle of wine by Miss Julie Russell Parsons, daughter of R.M. Parsons, a Flagler vice-president. The guest list of those attend-



ing read like a who's who of Flagler's friends. Richard Harding Davis, the soon-to-be-famous Spanish American war correspondent was also among the gathering.

Construction of *Miami* took place between a new steamer yacht, *Dorothea*, and a Japanese cruiser, *Kasagi*. Also underway in the same yard was the new U.S. battleship *Alabama*. Three Japanese naval commanders, Narita, Aoki and Takakura, were on hand to supervise the building of their *Kasagi* and also as guests partook in the launching ceremonies.

The *Miami* started her Nassau run in early 1898, the first run being on the 17th of January. As was the prior pattern she ran semi-weekly from March 29 to April 12. She departed Miami at 4 P.M. and arrived at Nassau early the next morning. Undoubtedly the approximate time schedule was followed in reverse on the return from Nassau.

The interior decorations and furnishings of the three-decked, two-tiered stateroom vessel were most elaborate. Cabins and staterooms were to be finished in white mahogany and gold. The midships dining room was tiled with rubber interlocking tiling in three colors to go along with the white and gold trim. A vaulted dome over the center "diffuses the room with truly artistic effect."

The 1898 season for the Florida East Coast in addition to the new *Miami* going to Nassau from Miami saw the *City of Key West* still on her routing to Key West. The Flagler interests had seen to it that a suitable hotel for visitors was available there, the Hotel Key West being first opened on February 15, 1897. However it remained open all year round contrasted to the winter operations of the other Flagler hotels. Most conveniently, the Hotel Key West was about three minutes walk from the steamship piers. Key West in those days was a port of some consequence as steamers from the Plant Line, Morgan Steamship Company and Mallory Line touched there.

For the 1898 season *City of Key West* was apparently captained by Stephen Bravo, one of the famous captains of Florida's steamboat days. He had served on the DeBary Line on the *St. Johns*, as well as the Indian River Steamboat Company's craft and was to work further with Flagler on the Overseas Railroad extension to Key West after the turn of the century. He is usually associated with the *St. Lucie* being her captain most of the time. Bravo was well-regarded by Flagler, such as the available records indicate.

*City of Key West* usually operated year round except for overhauls

in the city she was named for. On one such occasion in November, 1898, *Miami* replaced *City of Key West* briefly on the Miami-Key West route when the latter had to be overhauled at Wilmington, Delaware.

The destruction of the *U.S.S. Maine* in Havana harbor in mid-February, 1898 and the resulting Spanish American War focused increased interest on Cuba. The tourist business could only increase after the short war was over and the Flagler interest resulted in the establishment of the third of the three prongs, the Miami to Havana route.

To establish this service another vessel, of course, was needed. So the third vessel in the Florida East Coast system became (c) *Cocoa*, #127271, an 1879 Neafie and Levy of Philadelphia product. She had been built originally for Spain as (a) *Cuba* and during the war she was captured as a prize of war by the *USS Nashville* off Cienfuegos, Cuba on April 29, 1898. She was named (b) *Argonauta* at the time and by fall had accrued to the Florida East Coast. Renamed by the FEC as *Cocoa*, she was of 1,214 gross tons, 941, net. She was 205.4 feet long, 36 feet wide and was an iron propeller vessel of 700 horsepower.

*Cocoa* was not enough for the demands of the three individual routes so another vessel was acquired for the 1899 season, this time by charter. She was the *Lincoln* and the Kennebec Steamboat Company was her owner. Her charter was from October 27, 1898 to May, 1899. Evidently she suited the FEC for they acquired her by purchase in November, 1899.

The Kennebec Steamboat Company had her built in 1897 as *Lincoln*, #141499, by the New England Shipbuilding Company of Bath, Maine. Kennebec offered *Lincoln* on their Boston to Maine route apparently not too successfully, however. She was 203.4 feet long, 37.9 feet wide and 12.6 feet in depth. Her tonnage was 996 gross and 532 net and she had 1,600 indicated horsepower. She was a wooden twin-screw vessel, her two engines were of the triple expansion type, 15" 26" and 39" diameter cylinders with 28 inch stroke.

Accordingly for 1899 the three runs were in effect. *City of Key West* still was on the route from Miami to Key West. Since trains now came to Miami the vessel left on a schedule of Monday, Wednesday and Friday departures at 11 P.M. after arrival of the trains from the north. Key West was reached at noon the following day. After a three hour layover, the *City* left at 3 P.M. for the return trip to Miami.

On the Miami-Havana routing, *Lincoln* originally ran a Sunday and Wednesday departure schedule, leaving at 11 P.M. from Miami after trains

arrived and got to Havana at 3 P.M. the next day. *Lincoln* left Havana at noon on Tuesday and Friday and arrived in Miami the next day at 5 A.M. (Wednesday and Saturday).

The Miami-Nassau Line still ran semi-weekly the first part of the season, tri-weekly February 6 to April 4 and back to semi-weekly from April 4 to closing on the 20th. In 1899 the "season" actually started on December 1, 1898 and the *Lincoln* took the run until *Miami* came on on January 10. *Cocoa* also ran between Miami and Nassau according to the *Nautical Gazette*.

The FEC bought *Lincoln* in 1899 and renamed her (*b*) *Martinique* after doing so.

The 1900 season saw the three separate lines being run much as in the preceding year. However, the Florida East Coast Steamship Company had run its last winter season after the April visitors had ceased. In July, 1900 the Flagler interests and the Plant Steamship service consolidated their positions by merging their Miami and Tampa-based services. On July 24, 1900 the FEC vessels were officially transferred to the new line, the *Peninsular* and Occidental Steamship Company, a service that was to last for six and a half decades.

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(Note: Basic sources for this article consist of U.S. vessel records, information from informal records of the Mariners Museum, newspaper sources and schedules and timetables of the period. The Flagler Museum was especially helpful.)