

HISTORY OF KEY WEST

By Jerry Wilkinson



Early Key West circa 1826

If you are not familiar with the general area,
click [HERE](#) for a basic Lower Keys area map.

Prologue

Key West, like the other Florida Keys, began as a coral forest under the sea water - marine life was its population. As the polar ice caps reformed and the sea level dropped, terrestrial plant and animal life found its way. Soil was formed by decaying organic matter and storm actions. For millenniums the ocean continued to drop and the ocean currents, wind currents, birds, etc. continued to propagate the islands. Eventually human life forms found their way. This pyramiding of trillions of life cells, along with the forces of nature, produced an island called Cayo Hueso by early Spanish travelers.

A note on the word "Key" used to identify an island. Its origin is not well established except by usage. Most believe that it began by the Spanish adapting the word "cayo" from the Taino Indians of Hispanola and Cuba referring to small islands. The Spanish normally used "isla" for island and "islet" for small island. At least in the New World, they appear to use "cayo" and "cayuelo" for a very small island. The English used "Cay" or "Kay" such as Cay Sal Banks. Cay is pronounced by Americans as the letter "K," but by Englishmen as the word 'Key.' I am not certain if the written and the pronounced versions made any difference. Anyway, English maps of the Keys made just prior to the Revolutionary War of 1776 used the word "Key." A Colonial American court record of the "Libel of Dennis and Allen vs the snow St. Fermin alias Britanis" in 1744 used the word "Keys" referring to the Florida Keys. This is one case where an American court reporter might write "Key" when an Englishmen pronounced 'Cay.' See the Admiralty Papers, Vol. 2, 1743 -1744.

The native aborigines and subsequent native groups were the first settlers of Key West. The Europeans were tourists for its first 300 odd years of historic existence. Europeans stopped for fresh water on these islands, which stood as

silent as the martyrs for which they were first named. The silence was broken occasionally by those seeking refuge from being shipwrecked, to fish, to lumber, to salvage, etc. Other than the Native Americans, apparently no one settled permanently until about the time Florida became a United States territory in 1821. There are scattered references, but no specifics, to New Englanders and Bahamians as permanent settlers before the early 1800s.

The history of Key West is much like the rest of the Keys until 1821. Its natural deep water port was the deepest port between New Orleans and Norfolk, Virginia. Key West quickly became an economic center, was settled rapidly and became Florida's largest populated city. It had professional residents such as doctors, lawyers, insurance representatives, politicians, military personnel, journalists, publishers, etc. most of whom by vocation made some written documentation. These documentation's have made Key West history easier to be 'history', not fable. Politically, Key West was Monroe County. In population alone it overwhelmed all the remaining Keys for about a century and a half. Therefore, the following is nowhere a complete outline of its history.

Genesis

From a historian's point of view, Key West has an interesting beginning. To be considered is the island's ownership as private property, ownership by the Territory of Florida, ownership by the U.S. Government and finally as a local incorporated entity. John W. Simonton purchased the island on January 19, 1822 from Juan Pablo Salas, who had acquired it as a Spanish Land Grant in 1815 from Don Juan de Estrata, but as a new U.S. Territory the original Don Juan de Estrata Land Grant to Salas had to be confirmed - no U.S. deed could be granted. In reality it went round and round with claims and counter claims. Attempts to follow these look like a spider web. John Simonton soon took on three northern partners: John Whitehead, John Fleeming and Pardon Greene. On the scene arrived General John Geddes of Charleston who had also purchased Key West. It was discovered that Don Juan Salas had sold it twice, first to John Strong, a lawyer no less, and then to Simonton. As if this were not bad enough, Strong had also previously sold Key West to George Murray before John Geddes. In summary, Salas sold it twice, Strong and Simonton, and Strong twice, Murray and Geddes. Simonton had already divided it up amongst three others: Whitehead, Fleeming and Greene. Greene made several strategic moves by buying up claims in his name. On May 23, 1828, Congress acknowledged the land grant of Salas was confirmed. Simonton as the legal owner. We might surmise that this was Florida's first land scam.

Amazing as it legally appears, the Territory of Florida with an Act of Incorporation incorporated the City of Key West on January 8, 1828. I have never fully researched this, but my understanding with Monroe County's Territorial Representative Richard Fitzpatrick changed its name to the Town of Key West on November 28, 1828. This was probably repealed? Fitzpatrick was the one who made Indian Key the County Seat of Dade County.

Here Comes the Navy

When England possessed Florida in 1763, the Spanish contended that the Keys was North Havana. On March 25, 1822, Navy Lt. Commandant Matthew C. Perry sailed the Navy schooner *Shark* to Key West, surveyed and planted the U.S. flag, physically claiming the Keys as United States property. There were no protests so the Keys were United States property. The same year the president authorized a custom house at Key West. Mr. Joel Yancy was the first collector of customs.

For history purposes, Lt. Perry did cause a minor confusion. He renamed Cayo Hueso (Key West) to "Thompson's Island" for the Secretary of the Navy Smith Thompson and the harbor "Port Rogers" for the president of the Board of Navy Commissioners.

As to the name Key West, there is little doubt that it was some form of translation from the Spanish 'Cayo' (Key) and 'Hueso', if indeed the name was Hueso. The Spanish word Hueso [Way-so] means bone in English. A few believe that it came from the seven-year apple tree found in the Keys, which was also called hueso by the Spanish. Regardless of its origin, the name Key West prevailed with time.

Piracy was a problem in the West Indies open waters and Congress decided to protect US shipping. The task was given to the Navy. Partly on reports by Lt. Perry, the Navy on February 1, 1823, ordered Commodore David Porter to establish a depot in Key West to end piracy. Slave ships were included as an act of piracy.

The aforementioned civilians preceded the military into Key West. However, they were having problems deciding who was the rightful owner. Commodore David Porter arrived in April 1823 with his West Indies Squadron to establish the depot.

Commodore Porter had no problem knowing who owned Thompson's Island, the United States did, and he simply took charge. He supported the name of Thompson's Island and

Port Rogers; and further named the naval depot 'Allenton' after Lt. William Allen who was killed by pirates. For some it was difficult to determine who disliked Commodore Porter more, the pirates or the residents of 'Thompson's Island.' It should be noted that the civilian residents knew that their success totally depended on the military defending the island. Porter lost his command in 1825 and in 1826 the Navy moved the Navy base to Pensacola. A coal and supply facility remained at Key West.

In October 1824 one of Porter's officers heard stolen goods were stored in Fajardo, Puerto Rico. When he landed without permission, he was seized, imprisoned as a pirate and later released. Enraged, Porter marched ashore with 200 men and compelled the Spanish to make atonement for their actions. It is a long story but it was deemed that he exceeded his authority and was suspended by court-martial. In August 1826 he resigned and became the General of Marine for Mexico's navy. In this capacity he also haunted the residents of Key West in the years to come.

However, Commodore Porter was extremely successful in protecting Key West from pirates, but he could not protect it from yellow fever, lack of fresh water and the 'wrecking' industry. (See the General History page on wrecking.) Key West was a 'natural' for the relatively new US industry of salvaging wrecked ships. It had a natural deep water seaport, was situated on the primary shipping route and had a natural resource in its front yard - the Florida Reefs. The Gulf Stream route was irresistible as a shipping route and in many cases practically unavoidable. Some of the richest cargoes passed and wrecked in its front yard. All they had to do was sit back and wait.

Legalizing Wrecking

Location, location, location is the cry of any good businessman. Then, in 1825 the Federal Wrecking Act prescribed that all property wrecked in US waters be taken to a US Port of Entry. Commodore Porter left the same year for Pensacola. 1828 was a pivotal year. In 1828 Key West was designated a Port of Entry. Key West grew from a desolated

island into a bustling city within a few years. Congress acknowledged Simonton as the owner and Key West incorporated twice, once as a city on January 8, 1928, then as a town on November 28, 1928. Congress created the 'Superior Court of the Southern District' with admiralty power. Judge James Webb was its first judge, but his successor, William Marvin, will be the most remembered. He authored the Law of Wreck and Salvage and later was provisional governor of Florida at the close of the Civil War. In 1832, Key West reverted to a charter type city government.



W.A. Whitehead sketch of Key West, June 1938

During this time John Whitehead's brother, William, surveyed the city in 1829. Southard was the Secretary of the Navy, hence Southard Street and Eaton was Secretary of the Army, hence Eaton Street. William Duval was the first Territorial Governor of Florida, hence Duval Street.

Wrecking could provide quick monetary rewards. One of the early Charleston settlers in Key West was Richard Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick was 30-years old when he arrived in Key West. He became the only authorized auctioneer for wrecking property before the 1828 law. Reportedly in one year he made around \$10,000 in fees alone. This would be equivalent to about \$280,000 today. We will read of his name later.

Two years after the aforementioned 1828 events, the census of 1830 revealed Key West's population was 517. The year before, 258 acres were mapped as a town with 64 blocks. These early settlers were primarily from the New England states, not the Bahamas. Key West grew as a maritime, a military and a county seat community. By 1850 there were 2,645 and in 1890 there were 18,080 residents.

The following from the United States "Enumeration's" provides an insight into the early population growth of Key West.

YEAR	WHITES	FREE BLACKS	SLAVES	TOTAL
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1830	368	83	66	517
1840	516	76	96	688
1850	2,088	126	431	2,645
1860	2,302	160	451	2,913
1870	4,631	1,026	---	5,675

For reference some later decades of population are: 1880 = 9,890; 1890 = 18,080; 1900 = 17,114; 1910 = 19,945; 1920 = 20,000; 1930 = 12,831; 1940 = 12,927; and 1950 = 21,792 (excluding military).

Key West had its first newspaper, the *Register*, in 1829. The *Key West Gazette* followed in 1831, then the *Enquirer* in 1834. The present day *Key West Citizen* began as *The Citizen* in 1904 and consolidated with *The Inter-Ocean*.

Around 1830, salt production began in the present day airport's general area. There was a large need for salt for food preservation. About 50,000 bushels of salt was usual, however an early rainy season could 'wash' away the profits. William Whitehead and Richard Fitzpatrick were prominent salt producers. Wrecking remained the economy of Key West of which Fitzpatrick owned several wrecking ships. The military history continued with the arrival of the US Army in 1831. Major James Glassel commanded two companies camped on North Beach. This was good timing as the Second Seminole War was approaching. The Army was to be a larger influence than originally expected.

Wrecking however was the real industry of the Keys. A sad but curious wreck occurred in 1831. In December, the ship *Maria* wrecked on the reef and the wreckers save all of its 250 passengers and crew. They were brought to Key West which according to the 1830 census had a total population of only 517. Somehow, the residents took care of all the survivors until arrangements could be made.

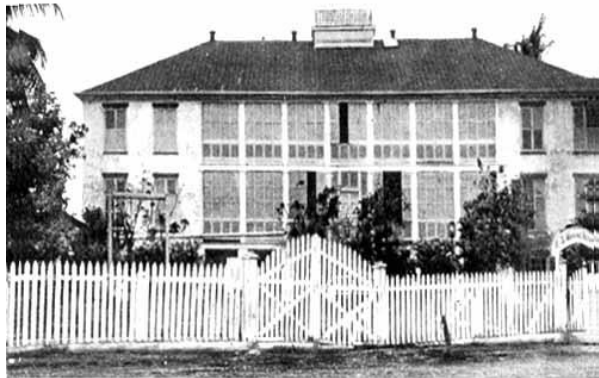
Jacob Housman, also a wrecker, did not get along well with the Key West wrecking courts, so he sought to establish a port of entry on Indian Key. He did not succeed; however, he upset the tranquility, such as it was, of Monroe County. He was not alone in this feat as by now Richard Fitzpatrick had been elected several times to Florida's Legislative Council. Housman and 56 others had petitioned for the

division of Monroe County. One of the main stated objections was traveling to Key West for jury duty.

One reason for presenting this history is our current tendency of thinking of Monroe County only as it exists today. Fitzpatrick had become Monroe County's Territorial Council Representative at Tallahassee. In 1836 he was elected the council president and easily pushed through a bill dividing Monroe County. This established the entire eastern section of former Monroe County as Dade County on February 4, 1836. The size of Monroe County was reduced by about half with Key West as its major settlement. Fitzpatrick had since the 1830s acquired extensive land holdings in the new county of Dade. Indian Key was the county seat.

In December 1835 the Second Seminole War commenced with the killing of Major Francis Dade. (See web page on the Seminoles.) Throughout the entire Florida War, Key West was never attacked. However, on August 7, 1840, Indian Key was attacked and burned except for one house. (See web page on Indian Key.)

One of the outcomes of the War of 1812 was a coastal defense system. Extensive plans followed developing usually brick fortifications. Construction of Fort Taylor by the US Army began in 1845 only to experience major destruction the next year by the Hurricane of 1846. Work continued on the brick structure in time to be a major influence at the outbreak of the Civil War. Another 1845 brick structure was the completion of the two-story Marine Hospital on August 2, 1845.



Marine Hospital at Key West established in 1844

Originally built for the U.S. Merchant Marine the 40-bed hospital served many until its closure in February 1943.

A new industry was looming for Key West - the sponge industry. The value of processed sponges was realized in the 1840s. The Bahamians were well adapted for this occupation and came to Key West in droves. Key West quickly became a sponge center and this industry helped Key West when the wrecking industry slowed down. It was also an alternate job

while the wreckers were awaiting a wreck to occur. As the 1850 census records indicate, Key West rebuilt after the destruction of the 1846 hurricane. The construction of Fort Taylor, the sponge industry and the highly successful wrecking industry contributed to Key West's rapid growth. Key West began to lose the sponge monopoly to Florida's west coast around 1870.

Some experts estimate that if today's measuring devices had been available, the Great Hurricane of 1846 (October 11 and 12) would have been a category-5 hurricane. The collector of customs, Steven Mallory, wrote that of 600 houses all but eight were destroyed or damaged. The offshore Sand Key and harbor lighthouses were destroyed. Water rose to about 8-feet in the lower streets. Did this discourage the residents? Evidently not as the above enumeration's indicate about a 300 percent growth between 1840 and 1850. In May 1859 Key West experienced the first of its large fires. A fire in the L.M. Shaefer warehouse burned all but two houses in the two blocks formed by Green, Front, Simonton and Whitehead streets. -

The Civil War Looms

The work at Fort Taylor was the first federal permanent building in Key West since Commodore Porter. At the outset of the Civil War, Florida was a confederate state. It was expected that Key West would be also. The Union had a considerable force in Key West because of the construction of Fort Taylor under Captain E. B. Hunt (Corps of Engineers). Key West was taken easily when at night on January 13, 1861, Captain James Brannan took possession of the city while it slept. Key West played a major role during the war because of its strategic location. A special city election was conducted to replace all the previously elected officers. Alexander Patterson was elected mayor.

The Civil War was largely responsible for Key West becoming Florida's largest city. Competing cities in size were to the north and some, as Jacksonville, suffered considerably. Key West was the center of the Union's Gulf and East Gulf blockading forces and profited economically. Many ships from many nations were seized and brought into Key West's harbor for disposition. Work finally began on the two Martello Towers. Key West also was the support base for Fort Jefferson. How the city government of Key West functioned is not clear.

On December 8, 1866, Monroe County got part of its original land back when its present boundary was established starting "at the mouth of Broad Creek, a stream separating

Cayo Largo from Old Roads [sic] Key, extending thence in a direct line to Mudd Point." This places the north boundary at about Mile Marker 114.

Shipping lanes connected Key West with the world, but in 1866 another step was taken. Key West became the hub for the International Ocean Telegraph Company (IOTC) underwater cable line. The line connected Havana, Cuba to Punta Rassa on Monroe County's west coast to the United States. On August 21, 1867 the mayor of Key West exchanged telegrams with Cuban Captain-General Joaquin Manzanos. It paid a huge role for the United States to have communications with Cuba in the Spanish American War (1898). The Key West cable manager, Martin Hellings, operated an intelligence office for the U.S. government.

After a half century of settling, the 1870 census shows Key West's population as 5,675. In the same half century the total Upper Keys for five islands population was 133. No one lived on Lower Matecumbe Key, the sixth principal island.

The Key West Cigar

One should not overlook the influence of the Cuban population. They had continually grown since William Wall, an Englishman, started a Key West cigar factory in 1831. The Cuban Independence War of 1868 (Ten Years War) assured Key West of becoming a cigar capital. Spanish became the second language. The *El Republicano* newspaper was printed in Spanish in 1870. It went farther than this; in 1875 Carlos Cespedes was elected mayor. The economic timing of this new force was great as lighthouses were being built and the wrecking industry was destined to decline. The coming of the steam ship also greatly reduced the number of ships that wrecked.

Cuban cigar workers were accustomed to unions, but they were weak at first. As labor union membership grew, their power grew. In



Cigar rolling in Key West circa 1900

1885 there was a major cigar worker's strike which lasted for months and Vicente Ybor, a principal manufacturer, moved to

Tampa. Of course, Tampa offered a variety of 'good deals' and other cigar companies or individual workers followed.

Fire was no stranger in Key West and Key Westers were always vigilant for fire in their mostly wooded city. Recorded in 1843 was the burning of a waterfront warehouse. The simple fire fighting equipment proved almost useless and was thrown into the water in disgust. Again in 1859 the city was tested by flames which took out a small section. One person intentionally blew up his house to make a fire gap. Then in 1886 a fire destroyed the entire downtown section in the early morning hours of April 1. This was not April fools. The fire started at 2 a.m. in the San Carlos Hall on Duval Street between Fleming and Southard streets. High winds fanned the flames while an inadequate fire fighting system fought almost in vain - the primary steam operated fire engine was in New York for repairs. Again, blowing up buildings was done, but three people died in the process. Twelve hours later over 50 buildings, one the cigar box manufacturer, and six wharves were destroyed. Four lost their lives. When one sees a historic red brick building in Key West, most likely it was constructed after 1886.

One example was the red brick Key West Customs House at the end of Whitehead Street which has been wonderfully restored today. The contract for its construction was let in December 1888 and was occupied three years later. Its total cost was \$107,955.96.

- Public Transportation -

The cigar industry also led Key West into the twentieth century in transportation. Eduardo Hidalgo Gato introduced a mule powered streetcar system to connect "Gatoville" to the downtown area in the 1880s. I am not certain of the exact date. Signs on the streetcars exhibited in early photos denotes it as the "K-W St Car Association."

The cigar industry was fraught with strikes. It was during one, or the threat of one, that Gato was more or less forced to sell mule driven system during a boycott of the line in 1894. A Cincinnati company purchased it and converted it to electric streetcars. The name Stone and Webster comes to my mind. The electric streetcars were removed from service in 1927 and the tracks removed.

- You Can't Beat Success -

By this time Key West was the largest city in Florida. To make it even larger in May 1889 the Florida Legislature granted a new charter to the city placing the entire island within the city limits. This change also provide power to float bonds for street improvements. Another charter change in 1891 authorized a mayor and made the city clerk, marshal, tax collector and assessor, treasurer and chief-of-police elected offices. Jacksonville eventually exceeded the population of Key West by incorporating most of Duval County - a numbers game. Successful cities spring back from almost overwhelming odds. Within a few years after the fire, Key West appeared to be better than ever. Mule drawn street cars appeared and the Peninsular and Occidental Steamship Company (P&O) began biweekly sailing's between Tampa, Key West and Havana. An electric power plant was operational as were, a new courthouse, a turtle canning plant, a new post office. They had to be new as they had been destroyed or damaged so badly that replacement was the only answer. In 1889 the Florida Legislature granted Key West a new charter expanding the city's boundaries to include the entire island. Partly due to the city limit boundary change, the population almost doubled between 1880 (9,890) and 1890 (18,080).

In the 1890s, the sponge market thrived. One entrepreneur was A. J. Arapian, a Greek immigrant known locally as the 'sponge king.' His annual sales approached \$500,000.

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