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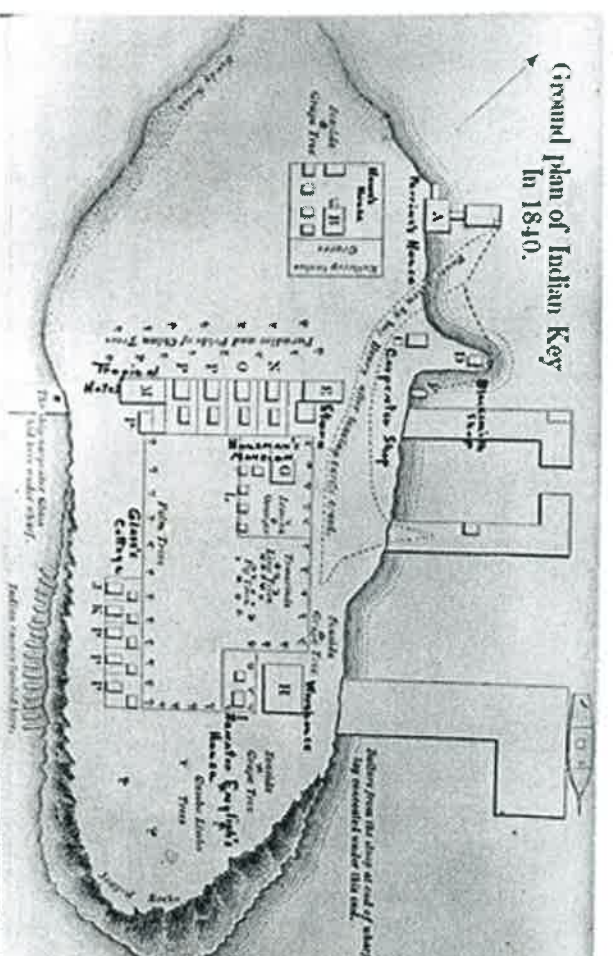
## The Florida Keys at the Outbreak of the Second Seminole War:1836

By Dr. Joe Knetsch

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Indian Key, in Florida's Territorial Period, 1821-1845, was one of the most controversial settlements in the Territory. The major reason for this was Jacob Housman. The ambitions of Jacob Housman are well established in the Island's history, from his seeking status for it as a port of entry to making it the county seat of the newly created Dade County, in 1836. Housman, as historian Michael Schene has noted, went so far as to construct a courthouse on the island with his own funds. Also documented is the erstwhile Housman's conviction for embezzling goods taken from the *Ajax*, which had grounded on Carysfort Reef in 1836. Schene has also recorded the fact that most of the appointed officers for the newly formed County of Dade, were friends and associates of the notorious wrecker.<sup>1</sup> Yet, the exploits of Jacob Housman are not the only story of the famous Key in 1836.

As early as April 24, 1835, Major Francis L. Dade received orders to patrol between Cape Florida and Charlotte Harbor, "to examine the County lying between the above-mentioned points, and to order and compel to return to their boundary line, all the Indians that may be found without it."<sup>2</sup> The report of Indians moving outside of their assigned area raised a few apprehensions, but did not appear to greatly disturb most of the residents. A routine report of a message found in a bottle captured the attention of the Jacksonville Courier on August 6, 1835, but little else was reported. By August 20th, the same paper confidently reported: "There can be no doubt now, but that the Seminole Indi-



*Drawing of Indian Key dated 1840. Photo credit: Monroe County Library.*

ans will commence their emigration on the 1st day of November next." Little wonder Mr. Spencer began advertising his health resort on Indian Key and noting his: "... very commodious buildings, sufficient to accommodate any number of persons who may favor him with a call, with separate rooms fitted expressly for families."<sup>3</sup> Although there were occasional notices of Indians in the area, no one seemed too alarmed.

Being isolated from the mainland and Key West, it took some time for the news of "Dade's Massacre" and the killing of Indian Agent Wiley Thompson to reach Indian Key. Yet, disaster closer to home was soon learned of, when the family of Captain William Cooley was slaughtered at New River, just eight days after the Dade

debacle. On January 11, 1836, William Whitehead, collector of customs at Key West, notified Commodore Alexander Dallas of the immediate situation: "Dear Sir. Most painful intelligence has been received today from the Main land, of the massacre of two Companies U. S. Troops, with all their officers, while marching from Tampa Bay to Fort King. - Intelligence has also been received that the Indians in the Vicinity of Cape Florida have likewise massacred a family on the Coast, and that the inhabitants of all Settlements in that vicinity are removing down towards Key West."<sup>4</sup> What Whitehead failed to realize was that most of the settlers had already reached Indian Key by this time