

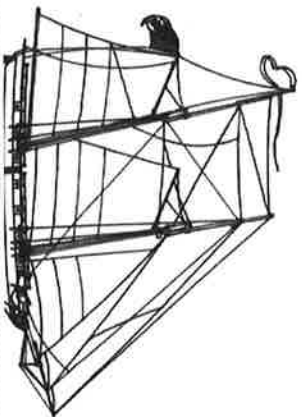
# Florida Keys

## Sea Heritage Journal

VOL. 17 NO. 4

Summer 2007

USS SHARK



OFFICIAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE KEY WEST MARITIME HISTORICAL SOCIETY

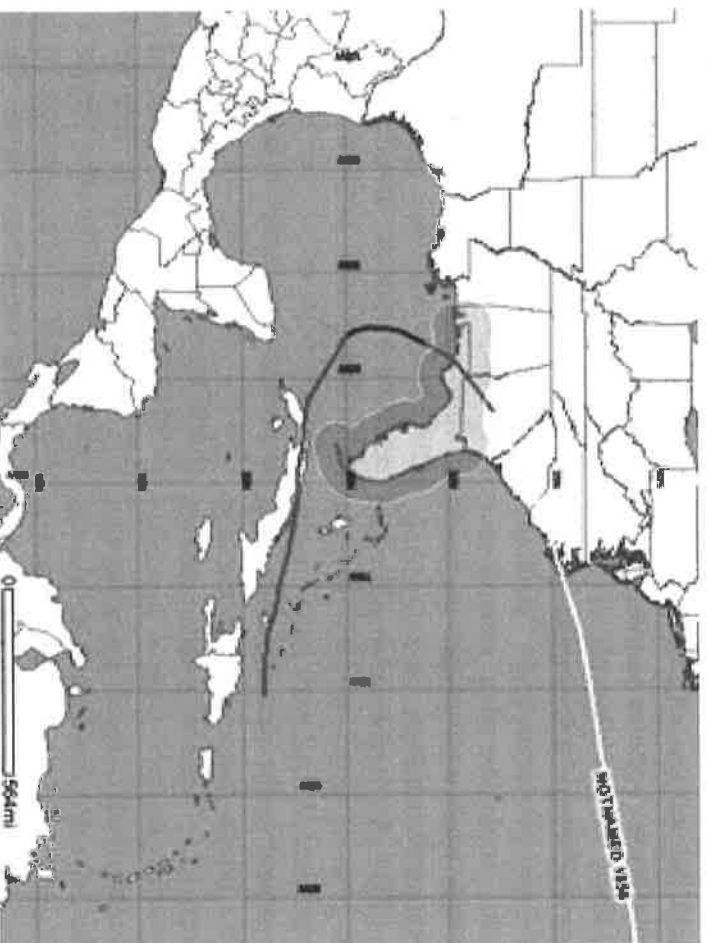
## Disaster and Survival in the 1856 Hurricane

By John Viele

In the 1850s, Key West was the second largest city in Florida and the busiest seaport. Every day, scores of ships passed by in the Straits of Florida on their way to and from the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Many stopped at Key West for supplies, provision, water, repairs to hull and rigging, or to obtain medical aid for sick or injured seamen. Along the reef, a dozen or more sloops and schooners maintained a vigilant watch for any ships so unfortunate as to go aground on the coral heads.

In those days, there was no weather station in Key West, and even if there had been, there was no way to broadcast warnings to ships at sea. Ships' masters were their own forecasters. They watched changes in barometric pressure and temperature, studied cloud formations, and wave patterns. They put all this information together with the experience of years at sea to predict weather they might encounter.

In August of 1856, a hurricane born in the Atlantic, traveled over the island of Inagua in the Bahamas



*Track of the 1856 Hurricane. Photo credit: National Weather Service.*

doing considerable damage. It years earlier, survived.

The storm continued on a west-northwest track which took it along the north coast of Cuba. By 27 August, gale force winds were felt in Key West and by ships in the Straits of Florida. As the storm continued on its track, winds in the Straits increased to hurricane force. Water covered Sand Key to a depth of six feet. Wind and waves destroyed the wooden buildings, boats, and a wharf on the island.

However, the iron-screw-pile lighthouse, completed just three

The storm caused considerable damage to the construction sites at Fort Zachary Taylor and Sombbrero Key Lighthouse off Marathon, but only minor damage in Key West. Shipping in the Straits of Florida, however, suffered heavily. Three vessels sank and eight crewmen lost their lives.

The storm drove the ship **Isaac Allerton**, with a very valuable

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