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The Florida Keys - Volume 3 The Wreckers

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CHAPTER 6

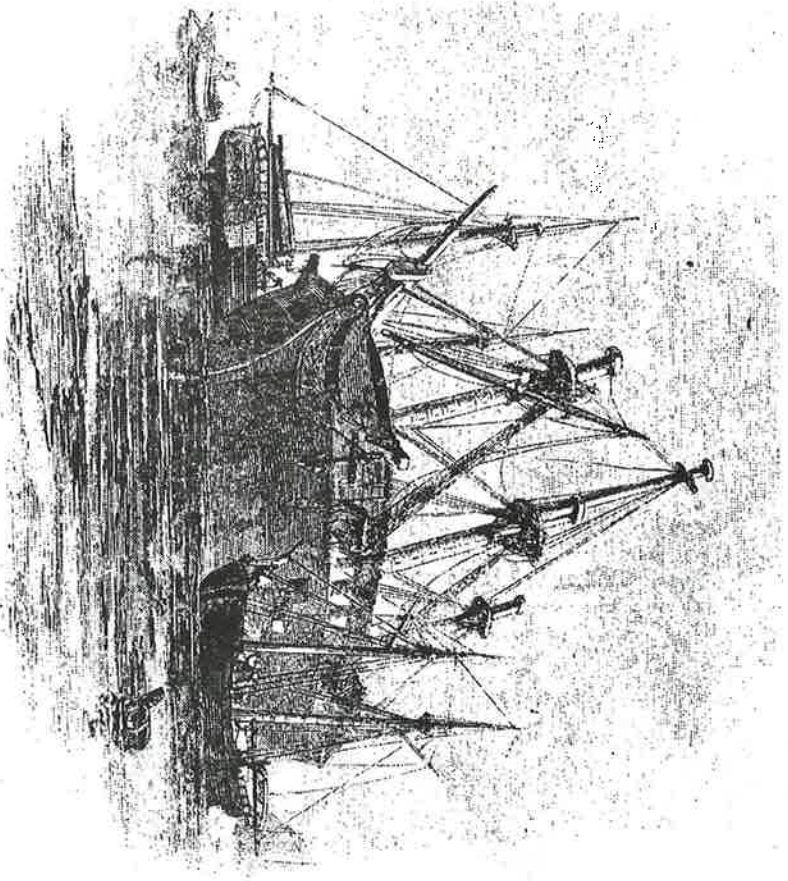
SALVAGE OPERATIONS

Wrecking Legends

Romanticized stories of Florida Keys wrecking begin with the cry "Wreck ashore!" followed by scenes of seamen dashing to the waterfront to board their vessels for a race to the site of the wreck. The fact is, Keys wreckers did not sit around in port waiting to hear news of a wreck ashore. They spent most of their time on station in areas where the incidence of wrecks was high. According to wrecking court records from 1828 to 1861, eighty-five percent of all wrecks were discovered by wrecking vessels while cruising or at anchor along the reef.

How often the cry "Wreck ashore!" was heard in Key West is debatable. If first news of a wreck was brought to Key West by a passing ship, and particularly if the wreck was a large ship requiring many wreckers to offload it, then the news would quickly circulate around town. But this was seldom the situation.

It is also true that there were lookout towers over merchants' warehouses, but few wrecks occurred within sight of Key West. In fact, out of 315 wreck sightings in pre-Civil War admiralty court records, only three were sighted from Key West. The towers were built as much for sighting incoming vessels in order to prepare to receive them or to send a boat to meet them as for sighting wrecks on the reef. The



WRECKERS AT WORK.

Wreckers at work (Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Vol. 18, 1858/59). Photo credit: Monroe County Library.

arriving vessel might bring word of sighting a wreck up the reef or it might be a vessel that had been wrecked and was in need of repairs. It is also difficult to believe that a lookout sighting a wreck off Key West would run around town broadcasting the news. It is much more likely that he would quietly pass the information to his boss, a merchant and presumably the owner of several wrecking vessels, one of which might be ready to get underway and be the first to the wreck.

Another untrue wrecking legend is the story of unscrupulous men hoping to cause a wreck by placing false lights on shore. This simply wasn't done because it wouldn't work. Mariners are not "attracted" to lights. Quite the contrary, the sight of a light warns them that they may be standing into danger. Furthermore, for lights to be seen any distance at sea in the era of oil lanterns, they had to be specially designed and constructed, great in size

(Continued on page 10)