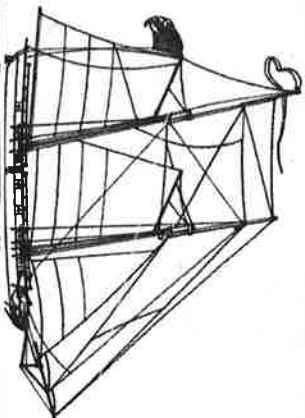


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Woodcutters and Charcoal Burners - Forgotten Pioneers

By John Viele.

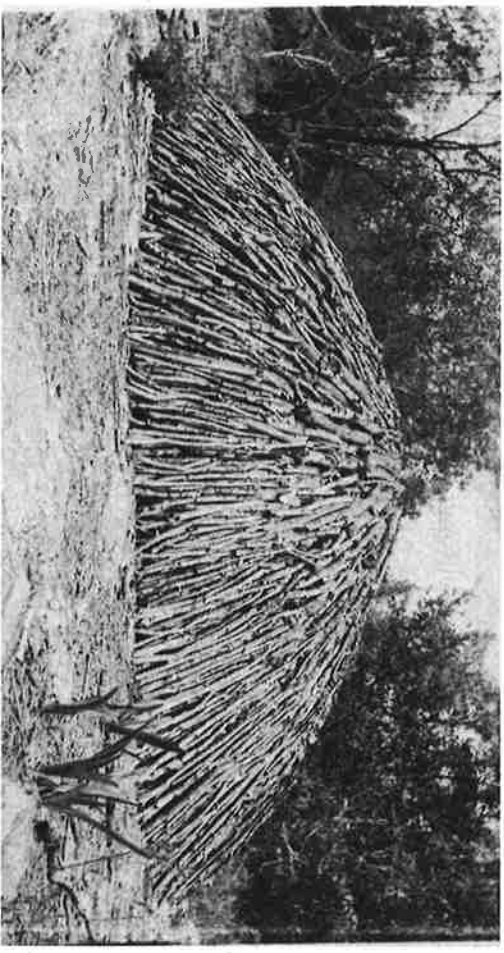
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For over one hundred years, a handful of forgotten men labored in the dense, mosquito-infested woods of the lower and middle Keys to keep the housewives of Key West supplied with wood and charcoal for their stoves. The majority of these woodcutters and charcoal burners were black Bahamian immigrants, who usually lived alone or with one or two other woodmen in crude driftwood shacks.

As the population of Key West grew, the supply of suitable stovewood on the island was soon exhausted. One of the first suppliers of wood to Key West was Henry Geiger of Boca Chica. Henry employed a 63-year old black man named Robert Allen to cut the wood which he sold for \$3.50 a cord in Key West in the 1850s.

The best-burning wood was buttonwood, a dense, hard wood from trees that grow near the shoreline on most of the Keys. A Keys traveler in the late 1800s reported that, "A log of buttonwood,



A Charcoal Kiln on Sugarloaf Key in May 1939 that was approximately 25 feet in diameter and 12 feet high with a yield over 200 sacks of charcoal. Photo credit: Stetson Kennedy.

when set on fire at one end, will burn to ashes before the fire goes out and generate an intense heat." Buttonwood was also used to make charcoal and, according to some sources, makes the best charcoal of any wood in the world.

The first charcoal burner for which there is any record was a man by the name of George Wilson, who was the sole inhabitant of Big Pine Key at the time of the 1870 census.

Unlike most of his successors, George was a white man. The 1870 census also listed two woodcutters, both located on Sugarloaf Key.

As might be expected because of the growing Key West population,

the 1880 census showed a significant increase in lower Keys charcoal burners and woodcutters. There were 13 charcoal burners, all but three of whom were black men, and six white woodcutters. The 1900 census reported only seven charcoal burners and no woodcutters, but ten years later there were 24 "woodmen" living between Cudjoe Key and No Name Key and nine men who were both spongers and charcoal burners in the middle Keys.

The process of making charcoal was a long, arduous, and lonely one. While buttonwood was the

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