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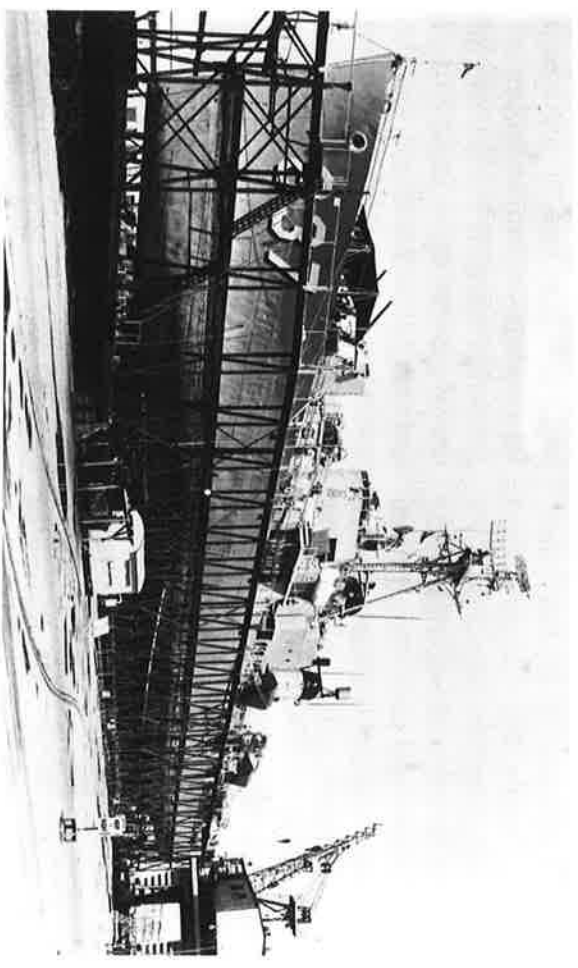
The Ways of Key West

By Thomas Neil Knowles

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"This railway was the first important public venture by private citizens in Key West." So wrote Judge Jefferson Browne in 1912 in his definitive history of the Island City. He was not referring to Flagler's Florida East Coast Railway Extension, but to a railway constructed in 1853; a marine railway that ran from dry land into the water. That Browne would record such an accolade 59 years after the event underscores how enduring the impact of these facilities proved to be. From the construction of the first marine railway during the heyday of wrecking to the dramatic destruction of the largest ways on the island over a hundred years later, the ways of Key West played a vital role in local commercial development and national military preparedness. Without marine railways, Key West could not have developed as vigorously as it did during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The salvaging of wrecks on the reefs along the Florida Straits transformed Key West from a frontier outpost to the wealthiest city per capita in the United States. In 1838, Charles Walker, an attorney



The USS Sarsfield (DD-837) fills the cradle of Ways No. 1. For many years Joe Ladd's father operated the large, track-mounted crane on the right. According to Carston Heinlein, cannon balls from Fort Taylor were used to offset the weight of the boom and balance the crane on its pedestal. They were encased in concrete in a steel box mounted on the end of the crane's cab that is facing the camera. Photo credit: Carston Heinlein.

residing on the island for health reasons, wrote to his aunt, "You will naturally enquire how we live, and the reply is very simple, in, by and through wrecks-If we are not directly interested in the business our support wholly comes from it. Stop that and we cease to live."

Wrecking required fast boats since salvage rights were awarded to the first boat to arrive at the site of a wreck. It was critical that the wrecker's hulls be well maintained to have the structural strength to

plow through rough seas and smooth bottoms free of marine growths to reduce drag and maximize speed. To do this, the hull below the waterline had to be periodically exposed for cleaning and repairs. In locations where there is a substantial fall of the tide, boats could be taken into shallow water and as the tide went out the craft would slowly heel over coming to rest on its side. At Key West, the difference between high tide and low tide averages a mere

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