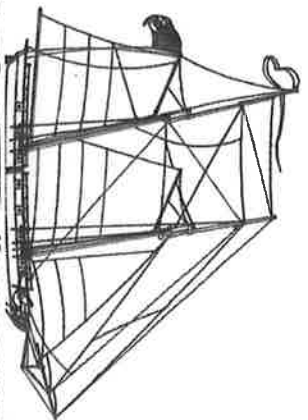


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Understanding the Key West Hurricane of 1846

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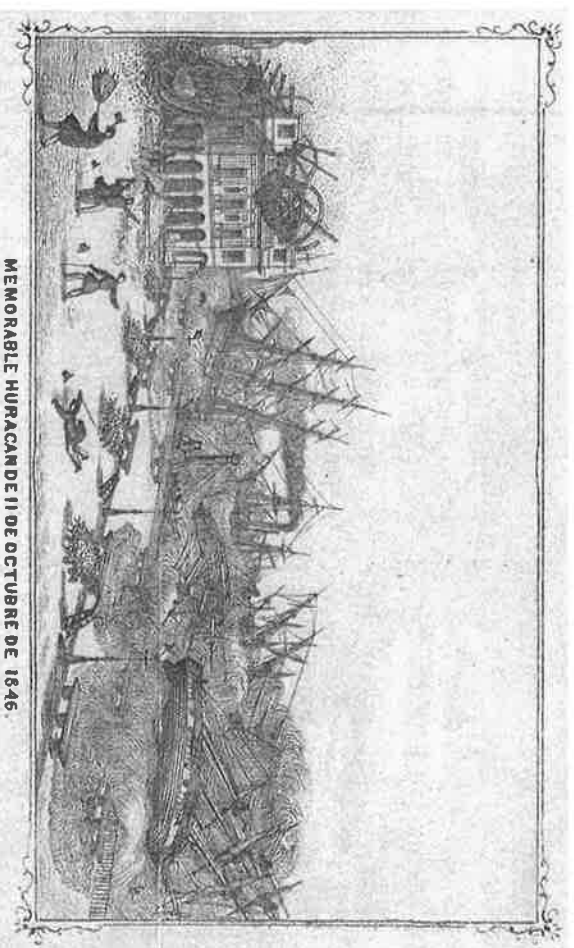
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Introduction

Key West is no stranger to hurricanes. Located near the heart of the Atlantic-Caribbean hurricane zone, the small, low-lying speck of land, situated along the northern edge of the Florida Straits, is frequently visited by tropical weather systems. These large cyclonic storms are simply a part of the island's natural weather-pattern.

Hurricanes have been known in the Florida Keys for centuries. Colonial shipping interests were especially vulnerable to them, and tales of maritime disaster account for much of what we know about early storms in the Keys. In 1622, a hurricane that passed just to the west of Key West wreaked havoc on the 1622 *Tierra Firme* fleet, sinking eight of 28 vessels (Lyon, 1989). In 1733, the Spanish fleet from Mexico was destroyed by a hurricane that struck as they passed the middle and upper Florida Keys (Smith, 1997). In more recent years, as weather data collection was systematized, the frequency of these tropical weather systems has been more accurately measured. Between 1852 and 2009, sixty tropical storms



The Memorable [Havana] Hurricane of October 11, 1846. Mapa Historico Pintoresco Moderno de la Isla de Cuba, Hamburg: 1853. Photo credit: Murray Hudson Maps.

or hurricanes have come within 50 nautical miles (57.5 statute miles) of Key West (NOAA, 2010). Based on these figures, Key West has just over a 38% chance of a significant tropical weather system passing quite closely in any given year.

Modern Key West was first settled in 1822, after it became a remote island outpost of the United States, and its earliest days as a fledgling community were not except from the effects of hurricanes. The earliest documented hurricane to strike the island town happened in September of 1827. The storm was strong enough to force the small

fleet of military vessels stationed in the port to flee, and it left at least 12 other vessels wrecked along the reef (Anonymous, 1827 a; Anonymous, 1827 b). Eight years later, in 1835, another hurricane moved westward along the islands, striking the Upper Keys on the 15th of September, and then Key West on the 16th, but most of its damage was to shipping interests along the northern part of the island chain (Anonymous, 1835).

On September 5th, 1842, after having first hit Havana the day

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