

Requesta:

William Adece Whitehead's Reminiscences of Key West

Edited by THELMA PETERS

William Adece Whitehead, a young civil engineer, went to Key West from New Jersey in 1828 to be with his brother John, a property owner and merchant in the little island city. With a multiplicity of talents and a lively interest in his surroundings William entered wholeheartedly into the life of the community. In 1829 he was employed to make an official survey of the island, and the following year, still under age, he was appointed collector of customs, a position he held until he moved away from Florida in 1838, at which time he was also serving as mayor. In 1835, to a request for information about Key West from a gentleman in St. Augustine, he responded with a four-thousand-word descriptive, historical, and economic report.¹ His pencil sketches of the town are almost as detailed as photographs and remain the best pictorial record we have of early Key West.²

After he left Florida Whitehead engaged in business in New York City and in Newark, New Jersey, and seemingly prospered. But he was more than a business man, he was always something of a scholar. He became a charter member of a historical society in New Jersey and steadily pursued the study and writing of local history. For thirty years he also made meteorological observations which he reported at intervals to a New York news-

¹ Whitehead's report to the "gentleman in St. Augustine" is given in its entirety in Rembert W. Patrick, editor: "William Adece Whitehead's Description of Key West," *Requesta*, XII (1952), 61-72.

² Two of Whitehead's pencil sketches of Key West are reproduced in Jefferson B. Browne: *Key West The Old and The New*, The Record Company, St. Augustine, 1912.

paper and to the Smithsonian Institution.³ Though he never returned to Florida he never lost interest in Key West. When his son and his brother John returned from a visit to the island in 1864 he must have enjoyed listening to an account of their experiences. He must have been pleased knowing that his family name of Whitehead, his own given name and the given names of his sisters and brother, Caroline, Margaret, Emma, and Thomas were all perpetuated as street names in Key West.

When the first published history of Key West, *A Sketch of the History of Key West* by Walter C. Maloney, made its appearance in the Fall of 1876 Whitehead immediately acquired a copy. The year that Whitehead left Key West was the year Maloney arrived there. Whether the two men met is not known but they surely corresponded. Whitehead's memories of his youth were stirred by Maloney's *Sketch* and he began to write his reminiscences. These were printed serially in a Key West newspaper, *Key of the Gulf*, in 1877. Whitehead had his copy of Maloney rebound so as to include thirty blank pages on which he pasted the clippings of the Reminiscences. This unique personal volume, Maloney and Whitehead in one binding with Whitehead's wispy signature on the fly leaf, eventually became a part of the Mark Boyd Collection and is now owned by the Library of the University of Miami.

Fires, hurricanes, and insects have long ago destroyed most nineteenth century Key West newspapers. It is fortunate Whitehead preserved the clippings. No one else seems to have done so.

Only the first of the Reminiscences has the author's initials. All of them are written in third person and the author refers to himself either as Mr. Whitehead or as the Collector of Customs. That he kept a detailed Journal we know for he quotes from it at length in Reminiscences Eleven and Twelve. The availability of the Journal would account for the clarity and accuracy of the Reminiscences. These are no fuzzy musings of an old man but an intelligent, lively, and often humorous, blending of historical fact and personal anecdote, and are sure to delight Florida historians.

³ Browne (above) has a short biographical sketch of Whitehead, page 200, Appendix D. He says that Whitehead presented a fine portrait of himself to the City of Key West shortly before his death, further proof that Whitehead never lost interest in the island city which he had pioneered.