

Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal

VOL. 13, NO. 1

FALL 2002

OFFICIAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE KEY WEST MARITIME HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Evidence for the African Cemetery at Higgs Beach, Key West, Florida

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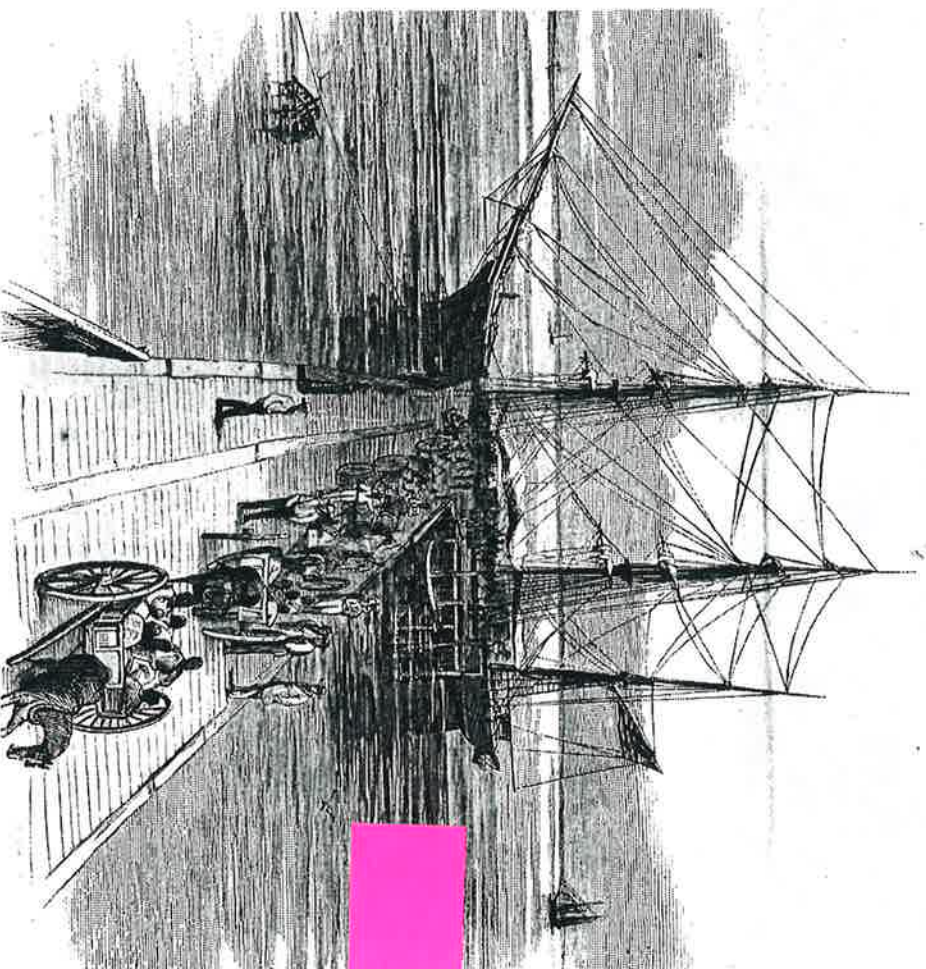
Abstract

For a period of nearly three months during the spring and summer of 1860, Key West, Florida served as the home for some 1432 African refugees. These people had been brought to the island on three slave ships bound for Cuba, but captured by the US Navy in its effort to eradicate the illegal slave trade. Of these people, many were sick and weakened by the harsh, crowded shipboard conditions they had endured during their voyage from the coast of Western Africa. Documents relating to these events show that from May 1st to July 19th, 1860, 295 Africans died at Key West. They were buried in unmarked graves along the southern shore of the island.

Based on this historical record, a theoretical location for their cemetery was determined. Archaeological techniques that could test the theory of the location of the graves, without disturbing their integrity, were researched. Ground-penetrating radar (GPR) offered the best solution. From June 14-16, 2002, a GPR survey was conducted at Higgs Beach, Key West.

The Africans in Key West

During the spring and summer of 1860 the US Navy Steamers *Mohawk*, *Wyan-*



The American bark William unloading captured Africans at the pier in Key West. Photo credit: Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper of Saturday, June 23, 1860.

dotte, and *Crusader* captured the American-owned slave ships *Wildfire*, *William*, and *Bogota* at various points near the Cuban coast. The ships were destined for the slave markets on that island nation, where their human cargo would be sold to provide labor for the thriving sugar indus-

try. Key West, being the nearest US port, and one with which the Navy vessels were quite familiar, was where the hundreds of Africans held aboard each slaver were brought to find refuge. They were deliv-

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