

# Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal

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## Key West's Search for Fresh Water

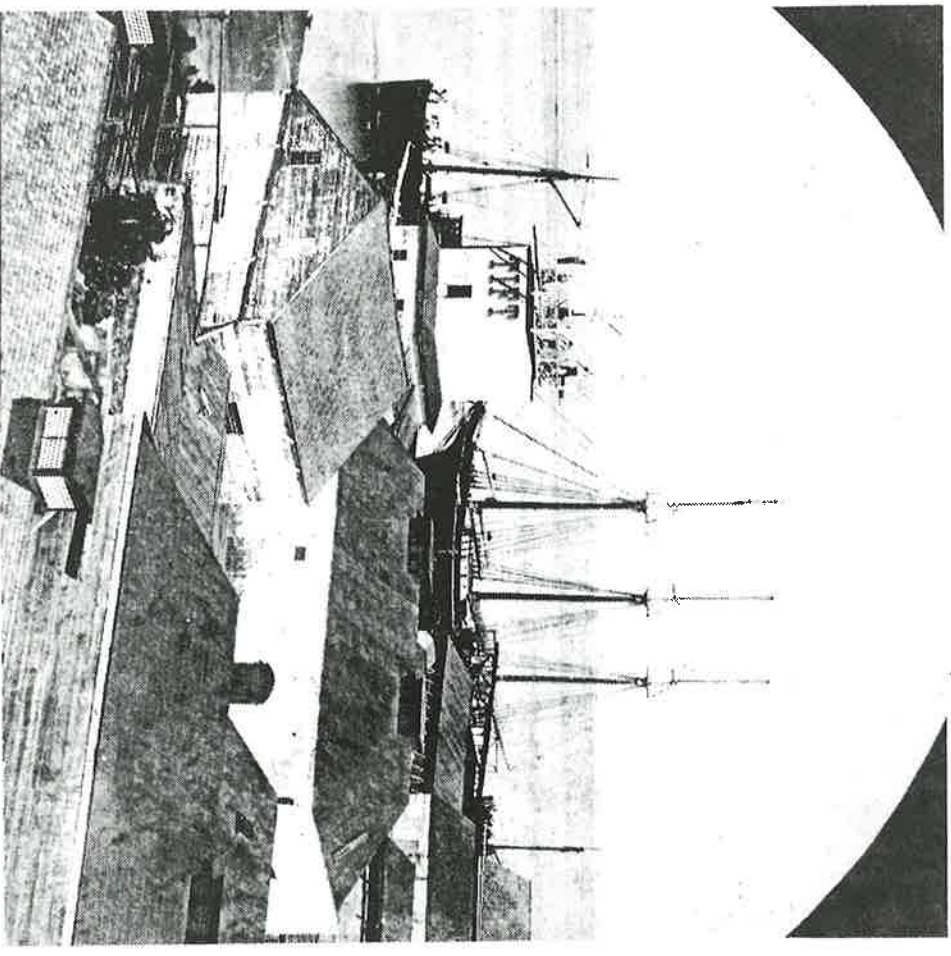
### Part Two

By Carston R. Heinlein

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The early settlers of Key West were brave and spirited people, who had to be to overcome hardship and misfortune. In 1846 there were no more than eight hundred people living on the island. Most of them had experienced the hurricanes of 1835 and 44 which were minimal compared to the hurricane that bore down on the defenseless small island from the south on October the 11th of that year. They were unprepared for the rapid approach and intensity of the wind and waves.

The central barometric pressure was a low of 27.06 as the storm passed over Havana, Cuba, heading north. The Saffir-Simpson scale devised more than a century later in 1970 to measure the severity of a hurricane, states that a barometric pressure of 27.17 or below would have winds of 155 miles per hour and more and a storm surge of 15 feet above sea level or a category five hurricane. We have no reason to believe the storm lost any of its strength or diminished in any way crossing the Straits of Florida and the Gulf Stream. The eye grazed the east part of the town giving Key West the strongest part of the storm. The storm surge generated a coastal rise in the sea level that moved across the island as a large dome of water. "Trees were uprooted, fences blown down, houses unroofed. All families residing in that part of the city northwest of Eaton Street abandoned their homes and sought refuge on the higher parts of the island in the neighborhood of Southard and Simonton Streets which was thickly wooded." (Brown, Key West the Old and New) The elevation there is eleven feet above sea level. The island was nearly devastated, all but five of six



*Tift's ship chandlery and lookout tower. In the center with the inverted roof is a large cistern used to provide water to ships. Photo credit: Florida State Archives.*

homes were destroyed or washed to sea including the residence of Mr. William Curry, warehouses, wharfs and boats damaged or completely destroyed, three churches gone, even the lighthouse on Whitehead Point, built with the best bricks and mortar was washed away without a trace of its existence, taking the lives of seven people, only the lighthouse keeper

Mrs. Mabrity escaped. Not only did the inhabitants, or survivors lose their homes and possessions but their personal drinking water supply. It would take months to rebuild their houses and rain water collection system, clean and "desalt" their cisterns and wait for the next good rain

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