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KEY WEST AND SALVAGE IN 1850

[From the beginning there was wide difference of opinion and sharp controversy in regard to wrecking, the principal occupation of the people of a town which for a time was the largest in Florida. The nature of the business (for it came to be an extensive and well-regulated business) and human nature rendered any agreement between owner and salvor difficult if not impossible; hence, after 1828, every case was automatically taken before the district court which was established at Key West in that year almost wholly for the adjudication of these admiralty cases, and owners and masters of the wrecking vessels were licensed by that court. The following account of the business at the middle of the last century is reprinted largely from a contemporaneous article on the subject appearing in *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*. As that is one of a series on *Commercial Cities of the United States*, its author probably was on the staff of that periodical, so it is believed to be accurate and unbiassed; and internal evidence also indicates its trustworthiness.

The wreckers were repeatedly accused of various crimes: piracy, concealment of salvaged goods, deception in regard to channels and reefs, opposition to the building of lighthouses, conspiracy with the lighthouse keepers, and lesser crimes down to heartlessness. Little evidence in support of these accusations is now to be found - at least after the Superior Court was established; and especially after the wreckers were regularly licensed the evidence indicates strict regulation and fair dealing.

Excerpts follow also from another contemporaneous article on the subject appearing in 1859 in *Harper's Magazine*. See also: Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West, The Old and The New* (St. Augustine, 1912), pp. 162-167; and *ibid.* pp. 207-210, is a related *Memorial to Congress* by John N. Simonton; and *ibid.* p. 224, is a *List of Vessels Employed on the Reef in 1835*: twenty vessels, aggregate tonnage 103,795 (evidently an error). Some account of wrecking on the keys before the cession to the United States is given in Vignoles, *Observations Upon the Floridas* (N. Y. 1823), p. 125. In the *St. Augustine Examiner*, March 24, 1860, is a statement of vessels wrecked on the Florida reefs and arrivals in distress at Key West by months during the year 1859, a total of 66 vessels valued at \$3,035,400, with salvage

and expenses \$292,019, and amount brought at auction \$245,262. In regard to the Territorial wrecker law, see Rerick, *Memoirs of Florida* Vol. II., p. 72; this act was approved July 4, 1823. Numerous references may be found in Florida newspapers of the period.

The source of highest authority is a legal text-book: *A Treatise on the Law of Wreck and Salvage* by William Marvin, Judge of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of Florida. (Boston; Little, Brown and Company, 1858) 375 p. Throughout the work are allusions to salvage on the Florida reefs; and of especial interest is a section - *Salvage Services by Florida Wreckers* (pp. 211-221), with abstracts of award of salvage in fourteen selected cases brought before this court. There appears (p. 2) a table (showing by years, 1848-1857, "the number and value of vessels and cargoes, wrecked or in distress, carried into Key West during the last ten years, and the salvage and expenses thereon. The column of expenses includes salvage, wharfage, storage, duties, repairs, refitting, and all other charges." The totals for the ten years are: vessels 499; value \$16,266,427; salvage \$1,153,919; total expenses \$2,125,334.]

KEY WEST, FLORIDA ¹

This position, recently become so important as the *Key* of the United States to the Florida Pass and the Gulf of Mexico, is little known to the outer world, except as a wrecking station; and is consequently and unjustly associated only with scenes of disaster, distress, and *quasi* piracy. The object of the present paper, is to remove these false impressions, by a brief outline of the history of the island, and a summary sketch of its present character and condition.

Cayo Yuesson, or **Bone Key**, was so called from the great masses of human bones which were found upon it, on the discovery of the Island by the Spaniards. The accumulation on such a spot of such a quantity of human relics as to give a name to the Island, has not been sufficiently accounted for. Whether, in the remote ages of aboriginal history, it was an isolated

¹ From *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, January, 1852, p. 52.

and over populous island city, a half-way mart between Cuba and the continent—a Palmyra in the desert of waters, where the canoe caravans of our unknown predecessors, met for refreshment, or barter;—or whether, as remote from either shore, it was selected as the common cemetery of the nations both of the islands and of the main land, it is fruitless to conjecture. The tradition, among the modern Indians, is, that the tribes of the main land, in conflict with those of the Reef, drove them, by a series of conquests, from island to island, and rock and rock, till they reached this, their last and most important hold. Here they made a desperate stand, congregating all their hosts, men, women and children, from all their deserted and desolate isles. A terrible battle ensued. The islanders were overpowered, and utterly exterminated. Large numbers of the invaders also fell in the conflict. Many more fell victims to a pestilence, occasioned by the sudden putrefaction of so many unburied corpses, while the few that escaped were compelled to flee for their lives, leaving the bones of friends and foes to bleach together on the deserted and sunburnt rock.

There may be some foundation for this story. Indeed it is difficult to account for the facts in any other way than by supposing the island to have been suddenly desolated by war, or pestilence, or both united. It was evidently, for a considerable time, the residence of an important tribe of Indians. They have left behind them the traces of their presence, and evidences of their progress in some of the arts. Several mounds have been opened, which were found to be filled with bones. The figures were all arranged in a sitting posture, and decked with ornaments of gold and silver. Glass beads were also found among them, showing that some of the burials were of comparatively recent origin.

The English name, **Key West**, is a corruption of **Cayo Yuession**. The unoccupied parts of the island are covered with a low stunted growth of wood peculiar to that region. Dogwood, Maderia wood, mangrove, and some other species, are found in considerable abundance, and turned to some account, as timber, for various purposes. The Maderia wood is particularly valuable, when found of sufficient size, being hard and durable, and capable of resisting the ravages of the worms. The prickly pear and the geranium, grow wild, in such luxuriance as the scantiness of the soil will admit. The cocoa nut, the orange and the guava, also thrive well in any spot where there is depth of earth to sustain them. This, however, is so rare and so thin, that a garden is the most expensive luxury in the place.

Cayo Yuession was granted by the Spanish Crown to John P. Salas. From him it was purchased, in Dec. 1821, by Col. Simonton, who now resides there. He took possession, in person, on the 22d January, 1822, and erected a small house, the first that was built on the island, in April following. One year after, in April 1823, a Custom House was established there, by the United States Government, and it was made a station for the squadron commissioned for the suppression of piracy in the Gulf of Mexico. The squadron arrived in April, and rendered very important services, in accomplishing the object for which it was sent. In 1827, the season proved a very sickly one. Fever and dysentery prevailed to an alarming extent, and the station was removed in November of that year. It is difficult to account for the sickness of that season. There has been nothing like it since. It is regarded, by those who have tried it, as one of the healthiest places in the world.

In 1832, Key West was made a military station, a very pleasant spot was selected for barracks, which were not completed till 1845. The buildings are large, airy, and commodious, and furnished with all the conveniences which the place and the climate afford. They are placed on three sides of a large quadrangle, the open side being toward the sea. If nature had furnished soil enough for a respectable growth of shade trees, or even for the cocoa nut and orange, her liberality would doubtless be often blessed, both by officers and soldiers, particularly during the intense heat of the summer months.

The first white female that settled on the island, was Mrs. Mallory, the worthy mother of the present worthy United States Senator from Florida. She took up her abode there in the year 1823, and was, for some considerable time, without a single companion of her own sex. As the pioneer matron of the place, she was presented with a choice lot of land, on which she has erected a house, which she now occupies, as a boarding house, dispensing to the stranger, with liberal hand, and at a moderate price, the hospitalities of the place.

The first white child born on the island was John Halleck, who was born in August, 1829. He is now a printer in the City of Washington. The second was William Pinckney, born Sept., 1829. He is a clerk in one of the largest mercantile houses in Key West.

From these small and recent beginnings, Key West has grown to be an important and a prosperous place. From the solitary house, erected by Col. Simonton in 1823, has sprung a flourishing and well ordered city of about 3000 inhabitants. It is now the largest town in Florida. The City is well laid out, with streets fifty feet wide, at right angles to each other, and is under a judicious and efficient administration. There

is not a more quiet, orderly town in the United States. Alexander Patterson, Esq. is its present Mayor.

The city contains, at this time, (1851,) 650 houses, 26 stores, 10 warehouses, 4 look-out cupolas, 11 wharves, and 4 churches. The churches are Episcopal, Methodist, Baptist, and Roman Catholic. The buildings are small, but very neat. They will accommodate from 150 to 250 worshippers. There is a Sabbath School attached to each. The services of the Sabbath are well attended. The Episcopal church numbers fifty communicants, and seventy Sabbath scholars. About five hundred persons attached to the congregation. The Methodist Church numbers 100 communicants and 115 scholars. Congregation 700. The Baptist 82 communicants and 22 scholars. Congregation 300. There are four private schools in the city, and one county school. The private schools average about thirty scholars each. The county school has an average attendance of about sixty scholars. This is far below what it should be, showing a want of a just appreciation of the inestimable benefits of education. Perhaps, however, we ought in justice to observe that the occupations of a considerable portion of the inhabitants are of such a nature as to keep them much away from home. The boys, as soon as they are able to work, are occupied with fishing, sponging, other similar employments, and soon denied the advantages of a regular school.

The county school is not, like our public schools at the north, open to all. It is free only to *fatherless* children. This provision is a singular and an unfortunate one. Though the orphan has a rich mother, he is admitted to the school without charge; while the motherless child of an indigent father must pay one dollar a month tuition. This rule seems to reverse the natural order of things. A motherless child is

much more likely to be neglected, in his education and morals, at the forming period of life, than a fatherless one. There are but 17 county scholars in this school. If it were thrown open to all who need its advantages, it would probably number 150 to 200, and would be a source of blessing to the rising generation, which cannot be estimated in dollars.

The tonnage of Key West is not very considerable, but it is very active and profitable. It consists of-

27 wreckers, averaging 57 tons	1,539
8 coasters and fishermen, averaging 90 tons....	720
Total tonnage.....	2,259

The Harbor is capacious, safe, and easy of access. It may be entered by several different channels, the principal one being at the N. W. angle of the island. Ships of 22 feet draft can enter there with safety.

The principal business of Key West is derived from the salvages, commissions, and other perquisites of wrecking. This is a business peculiar to the reefs, and demands a particular elucidation. It is not, as many suppose, and as it was, to some extent, before it was regulated by law and well administered by the courts, a species of relentless piracy. It is a legitimate business, conducted under established and equitable rules, and for the mutual benefit of the wrecker, the wrecked, and the underwriter. The persons engaged in it are men of character, standing, and wealth ; men of generous sentiments, and kindly feelings, who risk much and work hard for what they get, and who throw into their calling as much of regard for the rights, interests and property of the sufferers whom they relieve, as is exhibited in any other department of mercantile business. That there are occasional exceptions to this general rule, cannot be denied. A single instance, of recent occurrence, will serve to

show that wreckers are not always pirates, nor always chargeable with heartless rapacity, in the pursuit of the hardy profession. A vessel, with a few passengers, having struck upon the reef, made the usual signals of distress, and waited for help. Impatient of delay, and fearing the ship would go to pieces before relief came, the passengers and some of the crew took to the boat, with a view to finding a safe place of landing. When the wrecker came down, the captain was informed of this fact. He immediately left the vessel, and went in search of the wanderers among the intricate passes of the keys. Another wrecker came down, and pursued the same course, showing more anxiety to save life, than to secure the advantages of an attempt to save the vessel and cargo. A third came down, and, feeling that the deserters were sufficiently cared for, went to work, to rescue the vessel, and remove the cargo. So much was this act of heroic benevolence appreciated, that, when the award of salvage was made up, those who first arrived at the wreck, and left it in search of the passengers and crew, received the same share as they would have done if they had proceeded, in the usual way, to discharge the wreck and get her off ; while their comrades, who came last to the spot, received only the share which would appropriately belong to the third in the race.

The rule in this respect is, that he who first boards the wreck has undisputed control of her, till she is delivered into the hands of the court. He determines who, if any, shall aid him in the rescue, and in what order they shall come in for their shares. He also decides to whom the wrecked vessel shall be consigned, unless the master of the wreck has a choice in the case. The whole matter is then left for the adjudication of the court. The amount of salvage is there determined, each party engaged in the rescue receiving his share of

the award, according to the previous arrangements of the skipper who first boarded the wreck.

The amount of the award averages about one-tenth of the value of the property saved. Commissions, expenses, &c. swell this to about one-sixth. The average amount of wrecked property brought into Key West, is not far from 1,200,000 dollars per annum, of which there is left behind, for the benefit of the place, about \$200,000. This, being divided among the captain, crew, and owners of the wreckers, commission merchants, lawyers, auctioneers, wharf-owners, s h i p - wrights, carpenters, and store-keepers, is pretty widely diffused, and goes into general circulation. It is the principal reliance of all the business men, mechanics, and laborers of the place.

There is a large amount of auction business done here, employing twelve auctioneers, and paying more auction duties than all the residue of the State. It is established by law, that everything saved from wrecks shall be sold at auction.

The following reports prepared by Capt. Hoyt, the intelligent and vigilant agent of the underwriters, at Key West, will show, in brief, the results of the wrecking business, for the last two years:

KEY WEST, January 1st, 1850

The past year in this latitude has been favorable for shipping, there having been but few severe storms and no hurricane. Notwithstanding this, forty-six vessels have been ashore on the reef or compelled to put into this port.

The value of vessels and cargoes wrecked and in distress is nearly	\$1,305,000
The amount of salvage	127,870
Total salvage and expenses on the 46 vessels	219,160

With but one or two exceptions, the wrecking business for the past year has been conducted with good faith, and it affords me great pleasure to inform you that arrangements have been made and entered into by the merchants during the past month

to remove one of the most prolific sources of demoralization connected with it.

STATISTICS FOR THE FIVE YEARS ENDING JANUARY 1ST, 1850.

	Vessels.	Value.	Salvage.	Total expenses.
1845.....	29	\$ 725,000	\$ 92,691	\$169,064
1846.....	26	731,000	69,600	105,700
1847	37	1,624,000	109,000	213,500
1848.....	41	1,282,000	125,800	200,060
1849.	46	1,305,000	127,870	219,160

The last three years show a gradual annual increase, but it is not probably greater than the proportional increase of Commerce within the same period. The number of vessels engaged in the wrecking business does not vary much from my last report. Various causes are now in operation, which must lead to the diminution of the wrecking business. When the coast survey and the thorough lighting of the Florida Reef, both of which are now progressing, shall be completed, the two prominent causes of wrecks will be removed.

The three light-ships on this coast are faithfully kept, but the power of their lights is by no means what it ought to be. The light ship stationed near Sand Key is old, and the light they attempt to show is miserable. Several vessels have been lost, and much valuable cargo, by the neglect of Government to build a light-house on Sand Key, to replace the one destroyed by the hurricane of 1846. The lights of Cape Florida and Key West are both very good. The materials are on the spot, and the operatives at work erecting the iron pile light-house on Carysfort Reef. It is to be placed on the extreme outer edge of the reef, within one quarter of a mile of the Gulf stream; is to be fitted with a powerful light 127 feet high, and can be seen 25 miles from the mast head of a ship.

The population of the island has considerably increased within the past year. It cannot now be much short of 2,500. It depends entirely upon wrecking, fishing, and the manufacturing of salt, for its support. It has two schools, and Episcopal, Roman Catholic, Methodist and Baptist congregations and churches each having its own clergyman. There is certainly a great improvement going on in the moral and social condition of the inhabitants, and they will bear comparison in these respects with any marine town in our country of its size. The Hon. Judge Marvin, through whose court a large amount of

property annually passes, has presided on the bench for several years, dealing even-handed justice to all, and has given satisfaction to all parties interested.

KEY WEST, *December* 31st, 1850.

ELWOOD WALTER, Esq., Secretary Board of Underwriters,
New-York:

DEAR SIR:-I would respectfully submit to my employers my usual report, and a condensed report for the past six years, with such brief remarks upon the passing affairs of this part of the United States as will be interesting to commercial men.

The number of vessels that have put into this port in distress, and been ashore on the reef in the past year, is thirty.

Estimated value of vessels and cargoes	\$929,000
Amount of salvage	122,831
Amount of expenses	77,169
Total.....	\$1,129,000

CONDENSED REPORT FOR SIX YEARS

Number of vessels under the head of marine disasters that have been reported by me.....	209
Value of vessels and cargoes, (low estimate)	\$6,602,000
Amount of salvage	647,775
Amount of expenses	259,637
Total	\$7,509,412

Nothing has occurred out of the usual course of events since my last report. The Coast Survey progresses slowly. The Light on Carysford Reef will not be finished for some time. Government is building a light-house on Sand Key, near this place. Fort Taylor is now safe from hurricanes, as the foundation is finished, and it is now being filled up. The Government works at the Tortugas are progressing. The health of this place has been good during the year, with the exception of the month of August, when more than half the population were sick. There are, in my opinion, more vessels and men in the wrecking business than are necessary. The population of the island is increasing, and unless business should increase, there must soon be a large number of unemployed persons.

Respectfully, your obedient servant,
JOHN C. HOYT.

If the Key-Westerners are not entitled to the reputation of pirates, they are among the most remarkable and successful *spongers* in the country. The reefs abound in sponges, and large numbers of the people are now engaged in collecting them. It is quite a profitable branch of business, so much so, that most of the fishermen have abandoned their craft for this new and more lucrative employment. On this account, though the waters abound in many desirable species, a fresh fish is a great rarity at Key West, and they who keep Lent conscientiously must practice the abstinence of an anchorite. The gathering of sponges, at the present rates of sale, will pay 40 to 50 dollars per month to the hands employed. It is supposed that the amount of shipments in this article is not less than 50,000 dollars per annum. The sponges, when taken from the rock, are full of life, and are left, for a considerable time on the rocks, putrefying in the sun. They are cleansed with no little labor, brought to town, and spread out, by the acre, to dry. They are then packed and pressed in bales, shipped to New York, and there sold mostly for the French market, where they are largely used in the manufacture of felt for hats.

A large portion of the population of Key West consists of emigrants from the Bahama Islands. They are called Couch Men, or Couchs, chiefly from their skill in diving, and the part of the city they occupy is familiarly designated as Couch town. They are a hardy, industrious, economical, honest race, all getting their living from the water, wrecking, sponging, turtling, fishing, diving, &c. In the latter, they are very expert, and have been known to find the bottom in seventy feet of water.

Many of the leading merchants are from New England. The society of the place is excellent. The people are very social and hospitable. The ladies are

intelligent, accomplished and refined ; and no man of taste could fail to enjoy a winter sojourn in the island. Among the young men, there is a Temperance Association, which is large and prosperous, and promises to be of great benefit to the morals and happiness of the place.

In the United States District Court, which has cognizance of all the cases of wrecks and disasters, Judge Marvin presides, with great ability and universal acceptance. William R. Hackley is District Attorney, and worthy of a better place. In the State Circuit Court, Judge Lancaster at present occupies the bench, a gentleman of liberal views, large intelligence, and courteous manners—one of your old school gentlemen lawyers. The Jail, a substantial stone building, about 30 feet square, is almost tenantless—the office of keeper quite a sinecure.

Senator Mallory, who, though a decided Democrat, was elected, last winter, by a Whig Legislature, solely because they thought he could be relied upon to support the constitution against the madness of Southern agitators, is a man of mark. Self-educated, and self-made, he has, by industry, perseverance, and an indomitable energy of character, risen to his present high position, which it is not doubted he will maintain, with honor to himself and dignity and advantage to the State. He is a man of great industry, and said to be possessed of unusual powers of memory.

The first light-house was erected in 1823. It was near the shore, and was carried away, with the house adjoining it, in the great flood of 1846. The entire family of the keeper, consisting of fourteen persons, perished in the ruins, of which scarcely a trace remained on the following day. A new and very substantial one was erected in 1847, standing some distance from the shore, and on the highest spot of

ground in the island. It can be seen 16 miles at sea. There is a light-ship anchored on the reef, at the western entrance to the harbor, about 9 miles' distance, and a substantial iron light-house is now in the process of erection on Sand Key, about 11 miles S. S. W.

The Marine Hospital is a fine airy building, 100 feet by 45, erected under the superintendence of Col. Simonton, in 1844. It stands close on the shore. . . .

At the eastern part of the island, there is a natural salt pond, covering 340 acres, which, with slight arrangements to control and regulate the influx of the water, by means of a canal, 40 feet wide, has proved quite profitable. It was nearly destroyed by the flood in 1846, but has been restored to a better condition than before. Its present enterprising proprietor, Mr. Howe, is doing well with the business. He makes an average of 30,000 bushels of salt, which is worth 20 cents on the spot.

The communication between this little island and the great world, is irregular and unfrequent. The only regular direct communication, is with Charleston and Havana, by means of the steamer Isabel, which touches, leaving the mail on her outward passage, and taking it on her return. This gives them a mail once in two weeks. By this means, also, they are regularly supplied with vegetables, fruit, &c., &c. Besides this, there are occasional vessels, small craft, from St. Mark's, Mobile, New Orleans, &c., but so seldom and irregular, that one may often wait two or three months for a passage.

Transient vessels would touch there more frequently in passing, but for the exorbitant rates of pilotage now charged under a recent enactment. These charges are five dollars a foot for United States vessels. For merchantmen, four dollars a foot for

vessels drawing over 16 feet—three and a half, if over 12 feet—and three if less than 12 feet.

Allusion has been made several times to the hurricane and flood of 1846. It took place on the 10th of October, and was very destructive. The water, driven in by the violence of the wind, rose over the wharves, flooded the streets, and covered almost the entire city to the depth of several feet. From noon of Sunday till about daylight on Monday morning, it stood three feet over the floors of most of the buildings in Duval and the adjacent streets. The wind blew a hurricane all the time, and the usurping waters surges to and fro with terrific and destructive violence. Many buildings were unroofed, and many more were entirely thrown down. The Light-House has already been spoken of. The Custom House, and the Episcopal Church, both built of stone, shared the same fate. Boards and timber were blown about like shingles. Nearly all the cocoa nut and orange trees on the island were rooted up and destroyed. A large box, containing muskets, which was in the fort, was found, the next day, on Tiffit's Wharf, nearly half a mile distant. A grind-stone, from near the same place, was found on another wharf, and heavy timber from the wharves was piled up in different places, making the streets nearly impassable. Wrecks and parts of wrecks were found all over the island. The grave-yard which was on the southern shore, was wholly uncovered, and bones, and skeletons, and coffins, dashed about, and scattered far and wide. After the storm subsided, one coffin was found standing upright against the bole of a tree, the lid open and the ghastly tenant looking out upon the scene of desolation around, as if in mingled wonder and anger that its rest had been so rudely disturbed.

* * *

.....²It may be interesting to trace some of the features of the system of wrecking. The great risk to commerce in the dangerous navigation of the Florida Keys—frequent wrecks and heavy losses of property in vessels and cargoes—prompted the establishment of the scheme. It was too great an interest to leave to the possibilities of a precarious and partial relief. The system of wrecking, therefore, was established, consisting of the issue, by the Court of Admiralty, of wrecking “licenses” which are ever subject to the authority and control and revocation, for reasons, of that court. The penalties of any abuse of privilege or other dishonesty in the prosecution of the business of wrecking, involve not only a recall of the license, but also a forfeiture of compensation in salvage fees, and, in extreme cases, of the privilege of a license temporarily or forever.

Licenses may be held by parties engaged in the coasting and inter-island trades; and among these are such as are employed in supplying the markets of Cuba with fish caught along the Florida reefs.....

The percentage for salvage varies according to circumstances. It may appear extravagantly high in all cases. But a large compensation is essential, as an inducement to the wrecker to undergo hazard and exposure and toil in his business. The experiment had been made by the Board of Underwriters in New York of fitting out a wrecking schooner of their own, and sending her to Key West in the hope of a gain to their

² From *Wrecking on the Florida Keys*, illustrated (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, April, 1859, p. 577) by C. Nordhoff. The author, who says he was a passenger in the ship *America* which was wrecked on Dry Tortugas, records the master's belief that the light on that island was purposely dimmed to lure his vessel upon the reef, and states that a conspiracy was shown in court between a wrecker and the lighthouse keeper to delay the arrival of other wrecking vessels so that the first would be able to salvage the more valuable portion of the cargo alone.

interest. But the experiment signally failed. The wrecking service is one which cannot be maintained by ordinary rates of wages and compensation. The underwriters' vessel consequently remained idle, or laggardly at best, in port, while the independent wreckers were braving the storms and hardships of a most trying business.

When it is considered how much of the wrecker's time is unemployed, how greatly hazardous his service, and often how small the amount and value of goods saved, surprise will be much less on account of the high salvage rates which go to sustain the entire corps and scheme of wrecking.