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E. Ashby Hammond



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WILLIAM ADEE WHITEHEAD, 1810-1884

Early resident, surveyor, and collector of customs of Key West.
(Photograph from an engraving in the *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, 2nd Series, Vol. VIII, No. 4, 1885)

NOTES ON THE MEDICAL HISTORY OF KEY WEST, 1822-1832

by E. ASHBY HAMMOND *

THE YEARS 1818 to 1823 were unquiet times in the northern Caribbean. The Latin nations of the area were either stabilizing their newly gained independence or preparing for further expressions of defiance against their Iberian overlords. In any event there was neither time nor the resources for organizing a military patrol of the waters extending from Venezuela to Tampa Bay, from Yucatan to Puerto Rico. Piracy was virtually unrestrained, and wrecking, considered by some observers to have been an only slightly more honorable enterprise, went unregulated. Shortly after John W. Simonton had acquired the island, then known as Cayo Hueso, and Lieutenant Matthew C. Perry had planted the American flag there in March 1822, Congress was importuned to establish Key West as a port of entry and to provide such military support as might be necessary to protect it from the forays of outlaws and pirates. In a memorial to Congress, Simonton set the tone for innumerable subsequent publicity releases by praising the quality of the harbor, the healthful climate, and the excellence of the fresh spring water abounding there.¹ President James Monroe was persuaded to consider the feasibility of fortifying the island, and, on February 1, 1823, Commodore David Porter was assigned the command of the West Indian Squadron, with instructions to "suppress piracy and protect American citizens and commerce in the West Indies and the Gulf of Mexico, and to establish a naval base for supplying the vessels of the squadron."²

The depot was established at Key West, and before mid-May 1823, a detachment of marines was landed. Key West had become the center of operations for the West Indian Squadron. The logistics of the establishment required that the naval person-

* This paper was read at the annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society, Key West, May 6, 1967.

1. Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Florida*, 26 Vols. (Washington, 1934-1962), XXII, 352-53, 411-12.
2. *Ibid.*, 705 fn.; *American State Papers*, Class VI, *Naval Affairs* (Washington, 1832-1861), II, 144-45, 203-04, 381-82.

nel be billeted aboard their ships while the marines provided themselves with hurriedly-constructed sheds and storehouses which assured them little comfort and scarcely any protection from either insects or the elements.³ Commercial activity at Key West was probably set in motion more or less simultaneously with the military occupation which made the island safe for business. Throughout much of the island's early history problems of public health and medicine were matters of mutual concern to the military and civilians.

The medical history of Key West throughout the nineteenth century centers on the alarming incidence of a variety of fevers which had a disagreeable way of recurring each year as soon as the summer season drew on. Yellow fever was the most deadly and the most feared, but fevers of the malarial type, usually designated as either intermittent or remittent, or sometimes merely as bilious, were a perennial pest. Though not so dramatic as the yellow variety, these other fevers in the long run probably took more lives and left more people incapacitated than did yellow fever. In addition, the common ailments were ever present; tuberculosis, dysentery, "stomach trouble," cholera, child-bed fever, and chronic intemperance all took their toll.

From the beginning of the American occupation the navy department revealed grave concern about the salubrity of the island. As he took command of the squadron, Commodore Porter was cautioned by Secretary of the Navy Smith Thompson: "You will be particularly watchful to preserve the health of the officers and crews under your command, and to guard, in every possible manner against the unhealthiness of the climate, not permitting any intercourse with the shore where yellow fever prevails, except in cases of absolute necessity. Wishing you good health and a successful cruise."⁴ The half-expected calamity was not long in falling. Patrol duties took the sailors and marines regularly out of Key West and into the numerous coves and harbors of the West Indies

3. *Ibid.*, I, *passim*. Commodore Porter, having proceeded from Norfolk, Virginia, to St. Domingo, arrived in Key West on April 3, 1823. *Ibid.*, I, 1119. Among the early buildings was a two-story frame structure designated as a hospital. Although the earliest buildings were constructed on a site now known as Mallory Square, the hospital was apparently located in Jackson Square, at approximately the location of the present Monroe County Court House. The well-known Marine Hospital, in use until 1943, was not constructed until 1844.

4. *Ibid.*, II, 204.

where the pirate might be in hiding. It was inevitable that some men should become the feeding grounds of the then unrecognized *Aedes Aegypti*, many years later to be identified as the yellow fever vector. The periodic returns of these men to their Key West base were bound sooner or later to bring them home during the period of incubation of the virulent microbe, with epidemic results. Before the summer of 1823 was half spent, yellow fever posed a dangerous threat.

The disenchantment with Key West came quickly. On May 11, 1823, Porter requested the navy department to send him more men and more ships, ending his dispatch with the doleful plea: "Thrown, as we are, on a barren and desolate island, that does not even supply water, I hope our situation may be made as free from sufferings as the Department can, without inconvenience to the public interest make it."⁵ In late July the yellow fever struck. For a few weeks Porter and his men seem to have borne the attack with equanimity, but on August 31, the commodore wrote to Washington: "It is with deepest regret I have to inform you the yellow fever has lately made its appearance among us to an alarming degree, and has carried off several I beg leave to refer you to the enclosed medical reports, and to say that we are badly off for medical assistance."⁶

Porter had allocated his medical staff, inadequate though it was, so as to provide the best possible medical coverage. Dr. Thomas Williamson, assumed by many students of Key West history to have been the first physician to reside on the island, was assigned to the hospital of the marines on shore, while Dr. Richard C. Edgar, who was himself to become a victim of fever before the summer was over, was in charge of the sick men of the harbor, i.e. the sick navy men. In addition, one surgeon's mate was assigned to every two vessels. Small wonder then, with both surgeons falling ill early in June, that porter wrote imploring the assignment of six additional medical officers to the Key West Squadron.

By early September dispatches to Washington showed the Key West situation to be worsening. The fever was extremely malignant. Several had died; Porter and twenty-one of his officers and men were sick, but hopes were good for the commodore's re-

5. *Ibid.*, I, 1110.

6. *Ibid.*, 1116.

covery.⁷ A second report, describing conditions as of September 8, shocked Secretary of the Navy Samuel L. Southard into action. It told of several more deaths and of the undiminished fury of the fever. All surgeons were sick, and four surgeons' mates constituted the entire medical staff of the station.⁸

In his report to President Monroe, Secretary Southard summarized such information as he had been able to obtain. He did not believe the fever had originated on the island; in every instance, he thought, it could be traced to other places. But whatever its origin, the destruction of valuable lives was equally lamentable. He regretted that exaggerated accounts of the epidemic were finding their way into public print, creating painful anxiety among the friends of those who were there. It was Southard's plan to order immediately two or three surgeons and surgeons' mates to Key West. He also was considering the advisability of sending the fleet northward, but he was quick to proclaim that under no circumstances would the island be abandoned. He dispatched Commodore John Rodgers, a ranking navy captain and president of the United States Naval Board, to make a thorough investigation of the origin, causes, and progress of the disease, the nature and situation of the island in reference to health, and the state and probable health of the station. Rodgers was empowered to take whatever action he deemed proper. Accompanying the captain were three of the navy's eminent surgeons: Thomas Harris, Bailey Washington, and Richard K. Hoffman.⁹

While these preparations were under way, Commodore Porter managed to leave his sick bed, and, having done so, lost no time in moving his ships northward. Rodgers' ship and Porter's little fleet, unknown to each other, had passed somewhere between Key West and Hampton Roads. If Porter felt that his decision to leave his post in Key West was rash or unwarranted, his letter of October 27 to Secretary Southard revealed it not at all. He said simply that his departure was prompted by reasons of health. As for the fever, in contrast with the opinion of others, he was convinced that it had been of local origin: that it had originated in the decomposition of vegetable substances after the heavy rains and during the intense heat. Porter wrote: "My experience convinces me that from the

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 1117.

middle of July to the middle of October the lee side of Thompson's Island is an unfit residence for man; for the rest of the year no place in the tropics can be more healthy. Those who have resided on the weather side of the island have at all times been exempt from the sickness with which those of the leeward have been afflicted." He concluded on a bitter note: "The disease, in its commencement, was completely under the control of medicine; but I regret to say that several perished without receiving any medical aid whatever; and without even seeing a physician. The whole of the medical men, with scarcely an exception were, from their great fatigue and exposure, taken down with the disease, and we were left to perish for want of that assistance which we thought ourselves entitled to."¹⁰

The surgeons who came with Commodore Rodgers to Key West proceeded with their medical survey about as scientifically as their knowledge and resources would permit. After ascertaining the physical characteristics of the island and noting the lack of pure water, they then made observations which were to be repeated with only minor variations by nearly every commentator on the health of Key West for the next three or four decades.¹¹ It was the presence of vegetable and animal matter decomposing in the undrained ponds during the rainy season which produced a miasma. In addition, the gales and retiring tides deposited on the shores a quantity of seaweed which underwent rapid decomposition and thus contributed to vitiate the atmosphere. To the effects of effluvia and miasmata they added: sudden exposure of northern constitutions to a tropical climate; great fatigue and exposure by day and night among the boat crews, and lack of comfortable quarters for those encamped on the island; irregular and frequently intemperate habits; lack of fresh and wholesome provisions; the continued annoyance of mosquitoes and sandflies which deprived the men of their rest; and finally, the depressing passions arising from apprehension awakened by the prevailing epidemic, and by the obvious want of comfort of those who were afflicted. On the matter of mosquitoes and sandflies, it was noted that "so insupportable indeed became these troublesome insects that the men were

10. *Ibid.*, 1118.

11. *Ibid.*, 1119. The surgeons' report was published as an appendix to Walter C. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida* (Newark, 1876), 82-83.

frequently obliged to retire to the beach, where they walked the greater part of the night. Others, we have been informed by the officers of the station, would row off in their boats some distance from shore, and thus expose themselves to the heavy dews or drenching rains peculiar to the climate." Originating as it did before the advent of microbiology, this was, nevertheless, a sound and sensible report. The surgeons were unable, however, to ascertain the precise number of deaths because of the absence of the medical officers who had been in charge of the hospital.¹²

On his departure, Porter had left the post in the hands of the marine contingent. The chief medical officer was Dr. Thomas Williamson, surgeon of the station from April 8 until October 31, 1823. It was he who had supplied the Washington medical experts with much of their information, as is implied in the following passage: "It appears from the report of Dr. Williamson that there are fifty-nine persons now sick at the hospitals on the island. We have visited these establishments and have found patients sinking under the influence of debility, despondency and the ravages of disease."¹³

For the care of those whose fate it was to be left behind on the island the Washington doctors recommended: "That the large brig now in the harbor, which has been already designated as a hospital, should be suitably fitted up for the reception of those who may hereafter be attacked. By anchoring the vessel to the windward side of the island, the sick will inhale a pure atmosphere, will be protected in comfortable quarters, and being without the reach of annoying insects, will enjoy such repose and tranquility as are essential to the treatment of their disease." Their investigation finished, the doctors headed back to Washington.¹⁴

12. *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, I, 1120.

13. The reference to "hospitals" raises a point of interest and confusion. There is little doubt that, under the exigencies created by the epidemic, some of the smaller houses of the marine base were converted into temporary quarters for the sick. They could scarcely be called hospitals.

14. *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, I, 1120. Orders for fitting out the brig for a hospital had actually been issued by Commodore Porter to Lieutenant Commander Francis H. Gregory on September 16, 1823 (*ibid.*, II, 261): "You will take the brig, fitting [her] for a hospital, and moor her carefully and securely at the upper part and on the east side of the harbor. You will use for this purpose one of the chain cables and anchors on shore (she has a chain and anchor on board), after which you will please to finish her by laying her birth deck and laying a tier of cribs above and below on each side

On November 19, Commodore Porter made his own recommendations to the secretary of the navy: "By thinning the woods, and draining off the heavy rains of the month of June (thereby promoting a free circulation of air, evaporation and dispersion of the water, rendered stagnant by the excessive heat of June, and which causes the rapid decomposition of the vegetable matter with which the island abounds) the months of August, September, and October might be made sufficiently healthy for the residence of man; but at present the poisonous effluvium, arising from these causes, is almost certain destruction to whoever breathes it."¹⁵

The pestilence of 1823 having passed, Secretary Southard was optimistic about the future of Key West. In his annual report to the President, submitted early in December, he reviewed the disaster, but concluded that the station must be maintained, the medical recommendations must be carried out, and intercourse with unhealthy places must be avoided. If these steps were taken, the health of all could surely be preserved.¹⁶ Porter, on the other hand, disclosed much concern about returning to Key West in 1824, but return he did in late winter. By the end of May, however, he ruefully informed his Washington superiors that the fever had already appeared, that the squadron was deplorably short of medical men, and that he had no recourse but to return his men to the North by the middle of June.¹⁷ This provoked a sharp response from Washington. Was the commodore not aware that a very considerable portion of the total medical staff of the navy had been assigned to Key West? "You have had five surgeons and seventeen surgeons' mates under your command over the past ten months. Your medical assistance ought not to have been so reduced as you state it to be at present."¹⁸ Porter's next move was to leave Key West forthwith, and only after arriving in Washington did he bother to inform the navy secretary. He had left, he said, in a desperate attempt to preserve his health and that of his men.

amidships, and finishing off with rough boards a snug cabin for the commander and surgeon, and closing her in all around on the outside with the same, leaving sufficient openings for ventilators, and for hoisting things in by fore and main yards; then all the new work must be whitewashed." I have discovered no evidence that this order was ever carried out.

15. *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, I, 1120.

16. *Ibid.*, 1094.

17. *Ibid.*, II, 232.

18. *Ibid.*, 218.

About sixty men remained on the island, but he regretted that he had only a single surgeon's mate to leave with them for the sickly season, although he felt reasonably sure that the general health of the island would be better, thanks to the improvements he had brought about.¹⁹

There is little immediate purpose in providing a chronicle of the sickly season of 1824. The secretary of the navy summarized the situation in his annual report of December 1 to the President. It was not so bad as last year, but there was still much suffering and many had died. Some improvements had been made, and others were proposed. If the means were provided the island could be made comparatively comfortable and healthy before next summer and fall.²⁰

As for civilian health during the two major epidemics, knowledge is very elusive. The town was not incorporated until 1828, and statistics are rare. No newspaper was published in Key West until 1829. Though governmental records are fairly plentiful as they relate to the military, civilians were generally overlooked in the dispatches. It is certain that civilians numbered less than the military, and that there was a steady trickle of transients to and from the island. It is doubtful that before 1827, the civilian population ever numbered more than 300. Wreckers from Nassau, Indian Key, and elsewhere seldom stayed long enough to be counted. The records fail to indicate whether a civilian physician was in residence at Key West before 1828. The random notices that appeared in the St. Augustine and Pensacola papers cannot be relied upon to provide a medical picture of the island. It seems fair to assume that many civilians fell victim of the fevers, and that the mortality was high, but due to differences in their modes of living, probably not so great as among the military.

Key West citizens bore their illnesses as best they could, and in the absence of physicians, nursed each other and employed such folk remedies as were available. There were few women on the island, and in the early years the tender loving care of the womanly hand was rare. Mrs. Ellen Mallory, one of the earliest of the women-settlers, arrived in December 1823, as matron of the

19. *Ibid.*, 232.

20. *Ibid.*, 1, 1004.

military hospital.²¹ Dr. A. W. Diddle correctly surmises that "previous to the arrival of civilian physicians [which Dr. Diddle erroneously ascribes to the year 1831] consultation was either unobtainable or assistance was tendered by army or navy surgeons stationed on the isle." Most likely these medical officers lent a hand whenever possible, but a medical staff, inadequate even for the needs of the military, as appears to have been the case in 1823 and 1824, may hardly be presumed to have had time for civilian cases.²²

Two seasons of yellow fever had done great damage to Key West as a place for human habitation, not to mention commercial enterprise. By early 1825 the navy was laying plans to remove the base of its West Indian operations to the more salutary environs of Pensacola, in spite of Pensacola's own deadly yellow fever siege of 1822, when it was reported that out of 1,500 to 2,000 people, between 200 and 300 had died.²³ By April 1826 the last marine had been removed from Key West.

In 1825 the health of Key West was improved. This was due in some measure to the removal of military personnel and the reduced frequency of contact with the other Caribbean shores. Contemporary observers, however, ascribed it to the improvements in clearing and drainage. The ill-famed pond, which lay immediately behind the town [its entrance was made between Front and Greene streets, whence it spread over a wider area, across Duval Street, which was supplied with a footlog, as far as the corner of Whitehead and Caroline streets] had been opened by drainage canals to the ebb and flow of the sea. A brief notice in the *East Florida Herald* of St. Augustine, September 21, 1825, gave the favorable intelligence that the health of Key West was improved, one of the few felicitous notices which that paper ever accorded to

21. House Document No. 792, 29th Cong., 1st Sess., p. 28 (a series of public testimony, including a statement by Mrs. Mallory in which she gives the date of her arrival). This information is also given in *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine* (January 1852), 52, reprinted in *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VIII (July 1929), 51. Joseph T. Durkin in his *Stephen R. Mallory: Confederate Navy Chief* (Chapel Hill, 1954), 11, states that the Mallory family settled in Key West in 1820.

22. A. W. Diddle, "The History of Civilian Medical Care in Key West Up to 1945," *Journal of the Florida Medical Association*, XXXIII (January 1947), 383-89.

23. Nathaniel A. Ware and Samuel R. Overton to the secretary of state. October 21, 1822, Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXII, 552.

Key West.²⁴ But the damage was done. Key West had a bad name, and for several years it was impossible to convince the world outside that the island was anything but a remote graveyard - a veritable Golgotha. According to a dubious report in the *East Florida Herald*, the population of Key West was reduced to a mere ten persons by early 1826.²⁵

Desperation prompted the proprietors of Key West, men such as John Simonton and Pardon C. Greene, to attempt to recruit settlers early in 1826. A vessel arrived in St. Augustine bringing commissioners who were authorized to entice "an unlimited number of persons to make settlement there [Key West], representing it as a land flowing with milk and honey." Some thirty or forty were persuaded to go. On April 4 the *Herald*, not without some satisfaction, reported that those adventurers were straggling back, "... instead of a land flowing with milk and honey, they now behold a land of disease and death." "Four persons . . . have returned . . . with an evil report of it," the *Herald* noted. "One died on his passage to this city, and all the others who have been so fortunate as to escape have been very ill with the fever but [are] now convalescent. The last advices from Key West inform us that there were twenty-four cases of the fever, and those who have been so foolish as to take their lives in their hands and journey to that Golgotha . . . will return at the first opportunity."²⁶

The year 1826 witnessed the low point of Key West's fortunes, but by the end of the year the fever had again run its course. The following year saw a gradual recovery and restoration of confidence, at least among the hardy and the desperate. In the matter of health, 1827 and 1828 were good years. On March 13, 1829, Dr. Henry S. Waterhouse, one of Key West's earliest physicians, informed a friend in Philadelphia that "during the entire three years past Key West has been as little afflicted with sickness as any other town or village in the country containing an equal number of inhabitants and receiving a like number of sojourners and casual visitors."²⁷

The convictions of Dr. Waterhouse were repeated in a letter written by Dr. Robert S. Lacey, another early Key West doctor, on March 16, 1829: "I have resided on this island for near twelve

24. St. Augustine *East Florida Herald*, September 21, 1825.

25. *Ibid.*, May 23, 1826.

26. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1826.

27. *Key West Register*, March 19, 1829.

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months, and during the whole period but two cases of disease of any importance have occurred. The one of yellow fever, the other of bilious remittent. Nearly all my practice was confined to chronic cases of disease, and these exclusively amongst seamen and that class of population The preceding year, [1827] I am informed, passed off without a death resulting from the former prevailing epidemics, and with fewer cases than existed during the summer of 1828.”²⁸

The prevailing fear which beset many prospective settlers of Key West in the late 1820s, cognizant as they were of the reputation of the place, is typified by the confession of Dr. Waterhouse in the letter just cited: “I cannot soon forget the fear, the trembling apprehension with which in August last [1828] I landed in this place.” But apprehensive or not, a goodly number of settlers trickled in between 1827 and 1830. By early 1828 the population was tabulated at 421, of which 100 were transient turtlers and fishermen.²⁹ The official United States census of 1830, the first to include Key West, showed 517 inhabitants in Monroe County, and approximately ninety percent of these lived in Key West.

Two successive dry summers and extensive drainage and clearing of the undergrowth on the island, combined with other circumstances, produced for Key West an interlude of good health. With the abatement of fever, however, predatory and lawless elements returned to plague the unfortunate island. In January 1828, Joseph M. White, Florida’s congressional delegate, appealed to the war department for the establishment of an army post at Key West for the purpose of restoring law and order. The department showed some interest, but first it decided to make a health survey of the island to determine why the former naval station had been so unhealthy. Colonel George M. Brooke, commander of United States troops at Tampa Bay, was made responsible for the survey. The investigating group, which went to Key West in March 1829, included Dr. Edward McComb, chief medical officer at Fort Brooke, Tampa Bay, who was charged with reporting on matters of health.³⁰

28. *Ibid.*, March 26, 1829.

29. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 1956. These figures include 216 white males (permanent), 49 white females (permanent), 100 white males (transient), 21 free colored males, 18 free colored females, and 17 slaves (sex unstated).

30. Edward McComb to George M. Brooke, January 10, 1829, *ibid.*, XXIV, 133-34.

McComb sought out the two doctors of the island, both of whom gave Key West a clean bill of health.³¹ They did recommend further drainage and more cisterns for a purer water supply. As for the disasters of 1823 and 1824, these were attributable, they thought, though neither had been present, to exposure to inclement weather, a sudden change of climate, and the frequent and excessive use of wine and rum. The physicians did not overlook the "filthy and disgusting pond immediately in the rear of the station," and called for measures to remedy that situation. As for the consumption of alcohol, the doctors recalled that there had been "a lack of police to prevent men from excessive use of ardent spirits sold to them by hucksters; and after becoming intoxicated, laying [*sic*] out during the night and hiding themselves in the underbrush where it was impossible to find them, and when taken sick, the hospital too small either for the necessary room or proper ventilation." The army did not make its move to Key West until early in 1831, when Major James M. Glassell of the Fourth United States Infantry Regiment established a post northeast of the harbor.³¹

Ah, but Key West was a healthy place in 1829, no healthier place in southeastern America! The army need have no fear! The optimism reflected by the physicians was rudely demolished in the late summer of 1829, by the reappearance of yellow fever in epidemic proportions. It was a deadly attack, though perhaps not so severe as a Key West correspondent, writing to the *Magnolia Advertiser* on October 30, would have his readers believe: "The miseries and sufferings, and all the appalling horrors attendant upon Pestilence and Death, have perhaps never been equalled . . . Of between 150 and 160 inhabitants who remained to spend the summermonths . . . upwards of 70 have fallen victims of the dreadful malady. But one solitary individual in the place (F. A. Browne, Esq.) has entirely escaped.

"The scene of wretchedness and woe, which everywhere prevailed, no language has power to describe-nor can imagination conceive the horrors, without having participated in its dreadful realities. Isolated as this place is from any cultivated portion of the country, with no resources within itself for support, at the season

31. *American State Papers*, Class V, *Military Affairs*, IV, 202, 206-07.

of the year when few or no vessels pass, a general scarcity prevailed, not only of fresh provisions, but of almost every comfort and convenience, which the feeble and exhausted system requires to nourish and sustain its sinking frame. Half-grown chickens sold from \$1.50 to \$2.00 each. Etc., etc.”³²

Throughout the calamity of 1829, the *Key West Register* made no mention of yellow fever. The only indication of trouble imparted by the paper is the inference we may draw from the advertisement of Dr. George Weems, a sojourner in Key West, in the issue of August 13, at about the time the fever was at its worst: “Through the solicitations of many of the inhabitants of Key West, and in consequence of the many cases of disease now prevailing here, I have been induced to remain on the island a short time: and I beg leave to tender my professional services to the residents and visitors.”³³ But the Tallahassee, Pensacola, and St. Augustine newspapers on the other hand, gave the pestilence such coverage as rumor and occasional dispatch would warrant. They showed not the slightest reluctance in publicizing the misery of the unfortunate town.

The yellow fever epidemic of 1829 was the last serious outbreak to beset Key West for more than a quarter of a century. The damage to the island’s reputation was considerable, though hardly irreparable. The town had been incorporated in 1828, and its government was empowered to take measures to preserve the public health. There is no evidence, however, that the town council paid much attention to these problems. Dr. Waterhouse addressed a memorial to the council in April 1829, reminding its members of their responsibility in matters of health. He urged the appointment of a health officer, as had been done in some other Florida towns, and he called to the council’s attention the need for further drainage of the noxious pond, which he believed was the most dangerous place on the island.³⁴ But the people of Key West waited until 1832 to make their first official move toward public

32. *Magnolia Advertiser*, October 30, 1821. A more realistic statistic compiled a few years later by William A. Whitehead established the number of deaths from all causes at Key West in 1829, at forty-nine. Whitehead’s statistics are included in Maloney, *Historical Sketch of Key West, Florida*, 47-48.

33. *Key West Register*, August 13, 1829. See also subsequent issues through September 3, 1829. The issues from this date to the end of the year have been lost.

34. *Key West Gazette*, July 18, 1832.

health regulation. Florida's legislative council gave Key West a new charter on February 2, 1832, to become effective April 1. It empowered the mayor and aldermen to enact and enforce regulations for the quarantine of vessels and for the preservation of the health of the city, and to appoint a health officer.³⁵ Within a week Dr. Benjamin B. Strobel was named health officer and port physician. On July 24, the city established quarantine regulations, authorizing the health officer to board each vessel entering port to inspect it and its crew; in case of infectious disease, he could quarantine vessel and crew as long as he deemed necessary. Any vessel violating the health officer's order would be fined \$300. A quarantine ground was designated west of Mangrove Key in the upper part of the Key West harbor.³⁶ Thus, ten years after its founding, Key West got its first public health laws.

Meanwhile, the army, after two years of surveying and planning, made its entry into Key West on January 2, 1831, with the arrival of a detachment of troops from the Fourth Infantry Regiment at Fort Brooke, Tampa Bay. There is no reason to believe that the event had any medical significance whatsoever, beyond the addition of a few men to the ranks of the consumers of ardent spirits. Pardon C. Greene, one of the island's most influential merchants, complained that the soldiers were undisciplined, a complaint which prompted Washington to investigate the command of Major James M. Glassell, commandant of the post. But Mr. Greene was himself somewhat undisciplined, with a Negro mistress from Nassau and periodic fits of intoxication, which according to the major, occurred every afternoon. Thus little came of the investigation.³⁷ A medical officer had been brought from Fort Brooke in the person of Acting Surgeon O. P. Mills, but he was almost immediately replaced by Dr. Strobel of Key West.³⁸ It was a common practice at the time for the military to fill its medical posts with civilian doctors.

The first record of a civilian physician at Key West before 1828, relates to Robert A. Lacey. In a list of executive appointments made by Acting Governor William M. McCarty on August

35. *Ibid.*, March 14, 1832.

36. *Ibid.*, July 25, 1832.

37. Major J. M. Glassell to the adjutant general, December 14, 1832, Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIV, 761-63.

38. *Key West Gazette*, March 28, 1831.

8, 1827, Dr. Lacey was named Monroe County auctioneer and county notary public.³⁹ This certainly suggests that Lacey was already a resident in 1827, yet in a letter to Dr. McComb, written on March 16, 1829, he stated: "I have been on this island near twelve months." This would seem to establish the time of his arrival as about April 1828.⁴⁰ In addition to his practice of medicine and carrying out his duties as county auctioneer, Lacey figured in the well-publicized duel between Charles E. Hawkins and William Allison McRea, fought on February 9, 1829. He was McRea's second.⁴¹ He ran unsuccessfully for Florida's legislative council in the summer of 1829,⁴² and then apparently he moved to Tallahassee late in December 1829.⁴³ He was without doubt one of the two doctors to perform an autopsy on the body of Captain John Morrison in June 1829, which showed that death had been caused by a ruptured aorta.⁴⁴ A chance reference identifies Dr. Lacey as a citizen of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in 1836.⁴⁵

Lacey's chief contemporary at Key West was Dr. Henry S. Waterhouse, who arrived only a short time after Lacey.⁴⁶ Ill-health, probably tuberculosis, had forced him to leave his native Vermont. That he began practicing medicine soon after his arrival in Key West was indicated by the fact that in March 1829, after rumors had spread that there were cases of smallpox in Havana, he procured from the government hospital in Havana a supply of "pure, fresh vaccine or Cow Pock Matter." The *Key West Register* dutifully informed its readers that the doctor "intends devoting Saturday the 21st of March to the inoculation of all those who may choose to call upon him for that purpose."⁴⁷ William A. Whitehead, who surveyed and mapped Key West in 1829, described Dr. Waterhouse as a learned man and a reader, who owned the largest collection of books on the island.⁴⁸ He was the first postmaster of

39. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIII, 927, 1007.

40. *Key West Register*, March 26, 1829.

41. *Ibid.*, February 12, 1829.

42. *Ibid.*, June 4, 11, 1829.

43. Carter, *Territorial Papers*, XXIV, 365.

44. *Key West Register*, June 11, 1829.

45. *Key West Inquirer*, January 9, 1836. The name of the *Key West Enquirer* was changed to *Key West Inquirer* on December 19, 1835, at the beginning of its second year of publication.

46. *Key West Register*, March 19, 1829.

47. *Ibid.*

48. William Adeel Whitehead, early resident of Key West and eminent civic leader, left the island in 1836. In his latter years, while a citizen

Key West, holding the position from 1829 to 1833. He was very active in its civic life, holding posts in the town government and speaking out courageously on public issues.⁴⁹ He left Key West for Indian Key late in 1833, and in January 1835, he was drowned while fishing off the key with his young son.⁵⁰

A Dr. Weems came to Key West, but he lingered there only briefly. Dr. Benjamin Beard Strobel, probably the most learned and best trained of all the early Key West physicians, arrived in mid-September 1829⁵¹ from his native Charleston. He was especially active in the civic affairs of the town, serving on the council, helping to organize the first church and school, and waging a personal campaign against what he thought were the forces of evil on the island. He was publisher of the *Key West Gazette* and seems to have handled the major medical practice of the town. It was apparently Strobel's relentless attack on what he deemed were the reprehensible aspects of the wrecking business which kept him constantly at odds with certain notorious business elements. He gave up his newspaper and his medical practice in September 1832, preparatory to leaving Key West, and returned briefly to Charleston. But he was back on the island again within a few months, joining an exploring party along the lower west coast of Florida. Back in Key West in March 1833, he accepted the challenge to a duel issued by David C. Pinkham, proceeded to wound Pinkham mortally, and then, according to Mr. Whitehead, he hurriedly left Key West with friends aboard a coast guard cutter.

The last physician to reside in Key West during this early period was Alexander Hamilton Day, who arrived late in 1831 from his native Louisiana in search of a more agreeable climate.

of New Jersey, he wrote his "Reminiscences of Key West," which were published serially in a Key West newspaper in 1876. The entire series was somehow preserved even though only one issue of the newspaper has survived, and it may be seen at the University of Miami Library. The work was edited by Dr. Thelma Peters and published as "William Adee Whitehead's Reminiscences of Key West," in *Tequesta*, XXV (1965), 3-42. Much of chapter four, 13-16, is devoted to Dr. Waterhouse.

49. Mrs. T. O. Bruce to author, March 9, 1965. Mrs. Bruce, a resident of Key West, has established the fact that Dr. Waterhouse was town treasurer in 1828.

50. *Key West Enquirer*, January 24, 1835.

51. See *Charleston Courier*, May 10, 1837, for an account of Dr. Strobel's arrival in Key West in September 1829. The *Key West Gazette*, of which he was co-publisher and later publisher, provides much information on Strobel's activities in the city during 1831 and 1832.

Undoubtedly the presence of his brother-in-law, Lieutenant F. D. Newcomb at the army post in Key West, determined his choice of the island as his home.⁵² Shortly after arriving, Day became clerk of the Superior Court, Southern Judicial District of Florida,⁵³ and in May 1832, he was chosen a city alderman.⁵⁴ Later in the year he replaced Strobel as Key West health officer and port physician.⁵⁵ His medical services were commended to the citizens of the island by Dr. Strobel whose office, located in the store of P. J. Fontaine, he took over.⁵⁶ Day served Key West two years as clerk of court and physician. He died in Washington, Kentucky, while in search of spring waters which he hoped in vain would restore his health.

These early Key West physicians were certainly not eminent medical men, but they were all humanitarians willing to do what they could to relieve suffering and to render death a little less terrifying. Only briefly in each instance did they figure in the development of the island community, but their contributions were considerable. They appear to have been numbered always among those trying to establish decency and order in the town.

As the 1830s drew on, confidence in the safety of Key West slowly returned, and new settlers began drifting in. Medical statistics for the years 1830-1834 reveal that the mortality rate was probably normal for a town whose population included many visitors already suffering from serious ailments at the time of their arrival. In 1830, for example, there were only fourteen deaths on the island, as compared with forty-nine in the previous year of epidemic, while deaths in 1831, 1832, and 1833, numbered twenty-one, twenty-two, and twenty-seven respectively. The causes of death ran the gamut, with consumption taking a higher toll than any other except fevers and intemperance, if the latter may be considered a disease. The claims for the salubrity of Key West, now advanced by so many who knew the island, at last seemed justified. The *Key West Enquirer* of October 3, 1835, was able to boast: "The summer has passed away, and our island has fully preserved its credit as a place of health. . . . Since January 1st, a

52. For obituary notice of Dr. Day containing biographical facts, see *Key West Enquirer*, December 13, 1834.

53. *Key West Gazette*, April 11, 1832.

54. *Ibid.*, May 9, 1832.

55. *Ibid.*, September 8, 1832.

56. *Ibid.*, August 29, 1832.

period of nine months, there have been, including all transient persons, only nine deaths upon the Island, exclusive of U. S. soldiers—a result which places it among the most healthy towns and cities on the globe.”

Still the ugly rumors could not be laid to rest. In the late summer of 1835, a Charleston newspaper informed its readers: “We are sorry to announce that Capt. Randolph fell a victim to *the fever* at that place [Key West]. The Key is still healthy, although we have lost two valuable officers there within a few weeks.” This story provoked a lament from the *Key West Enquirer*: “The above are extracts from information which is now extensively circulating throughout the country, confirming all the thousand and one calumnies that have circulated, died, and again revived to prejudice the minds of persons in the north against the climate of our Island. Why, oh why, do they do this?”⁵⁷

The conclusion of Dr. Strobel, drawn up after his departure from the island and presented in what would appear to have been reliable perspective, provides what is perhaps a proper closing note. He wrote from Charleston in 1833: “There are two classes of persons who have materially injured the reputation of Key West for health—its friends, and its enemies. Its friends, by concealing the truth, and its enemies, by exaggerating it. While the former have represented it as a terrestrial Paradise, the latter have made it a Golgotha; both have erred, ‘in medium stat virtutes,’ the truth lies between extremes. There can be no doubt that in ordinary seasons Key West may be considered a healthy place, whilst on the other hand it has its sickly seasons.”⁵⁸

57. *Key West Enquirer*, October 10, 1835.

58. *Charleston Mercury*, July 12, 1833. See also *Charleston Courier*, May 13, 1837.