

# Bradish W. Johnson, *Master Wrecker*

1846-1914

by VINCENT GILPIN

*Mr. Gilpin, long interested in the history of Southern Florida and known to all of us here as co-author with the late Ralph M. Munroe of The Commodore's Story, has carried on his investigation of the old-time wreckers at Key West for many years; as a result he gives us this story, full of human interest and interesting biographical detail.*

UNTIL Florida entered the United States in 1818 the keys were unknown wilderness islets, scarce visited save by those who landed from ships wrecked on the great coral reef which borders them. The only "business" which touched them was wrecking—salvage work on these ships carried on by Cubans and Bahamans. In 1822 Key West was bought by four gentlemen of wealth and culture, who attracted settlers of unusual quality for a pioneer town; it grew rapidly, around new military and naval posts, developing fisheries, including sponges and turtles, and later many cigar factories. But wrecking was its prime industry: everyone took part, whatever his daily business, and it remained the chief source of excitement and profit throughout the 19th century.

The business was well organized, each vessel being licensed and supervised, and its rewards determined by the courts. There was no coast guard in early days, and the wreckers had an important function in life-saving, efforts to that end being recognized by larger salvage. It was a strenuous and dangerous business, demanding a wild race to the stranded ship, whatever the weather or time of day, and unremitting, heart-breaking toil to save the ship, or if that were impossible, the cargo. The wrecking schooners were sturdy little craft, hard driven by determined men; none other could have dared the roaring reef in a black northeaster, but calm or storm, day or night, were all the same to the wreckers when the cry echoed about town, "Wreck ashore!"

The '50s brought the height of the business. In that decade five hundred ships went on the reef, valued at over sixteen millions, and bringing to the town well over a million in salvage, beside a half million in repairs and port charges. The biggest single salvage bill in this time

was \$47,971, on the cargo of the ship *America*, lost on the Tortugas, much of which had to be recovered by divers. These awards were divided among the salvage vessels in accordance with their tonnage; each vessel's share was divided equally between owner and crew, and the men shared alike, save for added shares to the officers. On this basis each share on the *America* was \$150. This was a grand prize; on the other hand, the wreckers sometimes put in days and nights of toil with small reward.

Much has been said about dishonesty in wrecking, from false beacons to lure ships onto the reef, down to petty thievery from cargo. Most of this was undeserved, and may have been a "hangover" from old English romance. The Key West wreckers were emphatically *not* criminals; the job offered endless chances for sharp practise, and naturally some of them would sail pretty close to the wind—there are tricks in all trades—but by and large wrecking at Key West was a useful and honorable business.

The outstanding figure of recent years in this most picturesque occupation, true "gentleman adventurer," master wrecker of the Florida Reef, was Bradish W. Johnson, better known in Key West, the town of nicknames, as "Hog" Johnson. For years I heard tales of him, and his name is still familiar to older shipping men of Florida, but it was only recently that I could follow up his story on his own ground.

Armed with the names of a few who might have knowledge of him, I sallied forth on a bicycle, which is a favorite means of transport on the quiet streets of the "Island City," streets named for members of settlers' families and shaded by strange tropical trees. Thus I quested up and down, back and forth, until every street was familiar, and my notebook was almost a city directory.

It was great fun, but just a bit elusive; perhaps one could not expect detailed memories of so long ago. Even so, many stories progressed well until they approached some spicy point which might involve conflict with the law; there they would bog down in failing memory—and it became evident that the rule of reticence on questionable procedure, however customary or harmless, was still binding. But the story slowly emerged.

Bradish Johnson came of an old and wealthy Long Island family. His father, John Dean Johnson, inherited a large fortune, and was a noted sportsman; he owned thirteen yachts, of which the most famous was the so-called slave-yacht *Wanderer*, built by him when Commodore of the New York Yacht Club. She was a 98-foot schooner, the last word in seaworthiness, beauty and equipment; after he sold her she had a spectacular career as a slaver, and is still preserved as a relic. In Washington recently Bradish's sister-in-law, Mrs. Eugene W. Johnson, showed me

one of her set of twenty-four silver goblets. The vessel was paid for in notes which were lost, and it is said that final settlement was made in slaves. At the wreck of the bark *Elizabeth* on Fire Island, when Margaret Fuller Ossoli was drowned, J. D. Johnson dashed to the rescue at the height of the gale, with a volunteer crew in another schooner, *Twilight*, and saved a number of passengers. His wife was Helen Wederstrandt of New Orleans, descendant of Edward Lloyd of Wye House on the Eastern Shore, the "first American yachtsman."

With this background it was natural that Bradish Johnson should love the sea. He was born November 9, 1846, his parents having settled in Washington; he was educated at St. Johns College, Annapolis, and entered the Naval Academy in 1863, appointed from Louisiana through his mother's relatives, prominent sugar-planters. He soon became warrant officer, but he was definitely an individualist, and before his course was completed the prospect of a life governed by the meticulous elaboration of naval discipline became so distasteful that he resigned in March, 1866. It was not ceremony, but the sea, that called him, and held his steadfast allegiance.

For a time he was mate on a steamer running between New York and San Francisco (around the Horn, of course) and then went into partnership with his brother Theodore in the coasting trade, operating sailing vessels of all sizes. Theodore was threatened with tuberculosis, and they soon decided that he ought to live at sea. The business was closed out, and the brother shipped to San Francisco, bought a schooner and spent three years on board, largely hunting seal and sea-otter, in the Behring Sea (the family was well supplied with furs!). This was pretty strenuous in itself, and involved dodging two navies, but there were plenty of incidental high-lights in their adventures. Among other things, they carried cargos of arms to Porfirio Diaz, then struggling for power, and were rewarded, in addition to large profits, by his friendship, the gift of high office, and especially by one concession which nearly ended the game!

This was the right to recover \$5,000,000 in gold, shipped from San Francisco in 1850, in the *Golden Gate*, and sunk off the bar at Port Angel, two miles off the beach. The wreck could be seen in calm weather, but no one had been able to recover the treasure. It was an assignment after the heart of Bradish Johnson, and he organized an expedition at once, with the help of Felix Diaz, brother of the dictator.

At Port Angel Theodore was left in charge of the schooner, while Bradish took a party inland, and Felix, with a few men, stayed in the

village. This proved tragic for the latter, for the village was not in sympathy with the Diaz regime; a band of insurgents suddenly appeared, siezed him and his men, stood them against a wall and shot them!

They then lay in wait for Bradish's party; it duly fell into their hands, and was led to the fatal wall to await the formation of a sufficient firing squad. The sun was hot, and they were thirsty; when a woman passed, selling a cool drink, Bradish tossed her a silver coin. The startled woman gave him the drink, but returned the coin, crossing herself, and exclaiming, "I can't take pay from a dead man!"

Meanwhile Theodore was busy. Felix's fate made him marshal his resources, but the scant remaining crew, armed only with sealing guns, was no material for a landing party. He was not an American for nothing, however, and he immediately rigged up a dummy ten-pounder, and had it trained on the village by the time Bradish was taken. A message that the village would be destroyed unless his party were released did the trick, and Bradish was soon on board again! They abandoned the treasure—even the Johnsons were not ready for combined salvage and war—and the "dead man" sent the coin to his mother in Washington, who had it made into a ring.

The Pacific adventure ended in Kona, on Hawaii, for Theodore's malady developed, he died there, and Bradish brought his body home to Washington. He later returned to San Francisco (perhaps thinking of the \$5,000,000) and speculated in gold mines until all the remaining profits of the coasting business were disbursed.

He next got a post under Admiral Perry, and in 1882 they went to Key West to build a light-house pier. The little Island City evidently struck the right spot in Bradish's heart—no doubt Hawaii had prepared him to love its tropical climate, and he had found his place. He settled down, married "Miss Irene," daughter of one of the chief families, the Bethels, originally from Nassau, and set out to win a place in the close corporation of the town's leading citizens, all interested, more or less directly, in wrecking.

Undoubtedly, in the opinion of the fraternity, there were enough wreckers in Key West already. That did not bother Johnson; he had technical training which stood him in good stead, practical ingenuity which could not be stumped, broad experience of the sea, powerful physique, indomitable courage, and a staggering audacity which loved to take incredible chances.

Give a man like this such a colorful opportunity for adventure and profit as Key West offered in 1882, and almost anything may happen;

actually, almost everything did! His versatility and determination not only forced his acceptance by the wrecking ring, but quickly made him one of three or four acknowledged leaders, an important figure in the complex alliances, rivalries, jealousies and friendships which made up the texture of Key West life.

In all the stories of wrecking days one is struck by the almost boyish spirit of the group, which, however keen, was basically friendly. Every trick and subterfuge might be pushed to the limit to get the prizes of the game, but there was little vindictiveness, many a joke by the way, and the losers contented themselves with a good explosion of profanity, and the resolve to win next time.

So Johnson, after forcing himself in, and taking much of the best business for twenty-five years (whence his nick-name "Hog") is now remembered simply as a fine seaman, a smart man, a sober, friendly associate and neighbor, prompt pay to his employees, faithful and generous in friendship. I talked with twenty people who knew and worked with him; they called him water-dog, A-1 sailor, shrewd old gentleman, good wrecking master, decent, and sometimes Bluebeard. Only the last needs explanation; it means simply "pirate"—a common gibe in the mouth of a defeated rival. I visited the home of an army man married to the charming daughter of Peter T. Knight, clerk of court, United States marshal (and of course wrecker), in which his quizzical habit of calling all wreckers pirates is a recurrent prickle to domestic tranquility!

The Johnson home was at the west end of the island, with the shop and ways which were as much a part of a wrecker's home as a barn is of a farm. Here he built a 35-ton schooner named *Irene* for his wife, which was long used in wrecking and finally sold to a gulf-coast fisherman. Here centered his varying enterprises for many years, and here he finally built a large and comfortable home, only to lose it shortly after, when the government took over the neighborhood as a naval station. He lived the life of a cultured gentleman, enriched by books and music—"Miss Irene" was a pianist, and her neice, Jenny Bethel, had a good voice. Fine furniture, fine clothes, rare decorations and ornaments from the seven seas (it was the day of ornament!) made the setting for generous hospitality to many friends. It was a strange contrast to his business hours, spent in the most strenuous and perilous activities, possible only to a dare-devil lover of the long chance.

He soon left government work for the Baker Wrecking Company. Captain Ben Baker was the leading wrecker of the '60s and '70s, of whom Browne's history says: "Tall, gaunt, shrill-voiced, hook-nosed and

hawk-eyed, he was master-wrecker at nearly every wreck upon the Reef." Incidentally, he was the first to plant pineapples on the keys, for forty years an important crop, and from his homestead there Plantation Key was named. Through this connection Bradish Johnson renewed his contact with Diaz in Mexico, which was to bring him more commissions.

Eventually Merritt & Chapman of New York wanted a foothold in Key West, and bought the Baker Wrecking Company. Johnson then formed the Key West Wrecking Company, with Peter T. Knight, W. H. Williams and Alfred Atchison (known as "Bubba Smart") who were the coming leaders of the profession. That these partners gladly followed Johnson shows the place he had already made for himself, and the company took the cream of the business for the next fifteen years. In that period an average of two or three ships went on the rocks every month, and each of them brought ten to twenty thousand dollars to the company. Johnson's share maintained his home lavishly, but there was little look to the future; easy come, easy go was the word, and when a few weeks passed without business there was frequent occasion for the decision, "We'll just let that go till the next wreck!"

But wrecking, exciting though it might be, by no means satisfied Hog Johnson's devouring urge to adventure. Any job, contract, commission or speculation which came his way was grist to his mill, so long as it did not run counter to his personal code of ethics; he was said to have no more respect for laws which seemed unjust than a red-bloded schoolboy has for trespass notices.

Cuba was in the turmoil which led to the Spanish war, and the famous tug *Three Friends* was running her regular cargoes of arms to the insurgents.<sup>1</sup> She was owned by Napoleon Broward (later governor of Florida) and commanded by his brother Montcalm, and Johnson had many mutually profitable contacts with the brothers. Arms and ammunition were not, of course, loaded in harbor; they were consigned in odd lots to the owners of small craft, who made rendezvous with the *Three Friends* well out of range of observers (often offshore in the Gulf Stream) and here Bradish Johnson was just the man for them. Naturally this business is not on record; nevertheless "everybody knows" that many of the tug's cargoes reached her by way of the obviously harmless wrecking craft which Johnson kept moving on a multitude of errands.

The *Three Friends* needed coal as well as cargoes, and here chance helped, when a Mexican gunboat, on her way north for repairs, went

1. See Ruby Leach Carson, "Florida, Promoter of Cuban Liberty," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XIX, 270-92 (January, 1941).

ashore on the Hen and Chickens, and sank. The underwriters put her up for sale as she lay; Broward bought her, and consulted Johnson about raising her. The Key West Wrecking Company took the contract, and set leisurely to work, with the understanding that there was *no hurry about raising her!* A small fleet of tugs, derricks and barges was assembled, including huge lighters of coal—enough coal, as one observer remarked, to run a liner all summer. Now, the Hen and Chickens is a lonely reef, and no one knows just what went on there. Evidently the company had a difficult task; they made little progress, and they burned much coal. The summer passed, and the fall—while the big coal barges lay where the *Three Friends* could comfortably fill her bunkers, of a dark night, with no questions asked. The wrecked gunboat was finally repaired, renamed *Biscayne*, and is said to be still afloat and going strong.

Another adventurous craft was the *Tendejah*, originally built in New York for the Menendez Line, presented to Spain as a Coast Guard boat (mainly to prevent arms-running), sunk in the Spanish war, bought, raised and rebuilt by Johnson, taken to Belize, and sold as a gunboat.

The war with Spain was a Roman holiday for Key West. About four hundred vessels were captured and taken there for adjudication, and the town hummed with prize-money. An enormous fleet of tugs, lighters and other wrecking vessels collected, and when the excitement died down, some of it was removed, and some lay idle. One fine new lighter, worth \$5000, was sent down from Jacksonville, but was not needed; finally she was laid up in Boca Chica for over a year, and then was found to be full of water. No one knew just what was wrong, but in the light of the event, it is reasonable to suppose that the neglected decks had dried out in the fierce summer sun, and the torrential thunder-squalls had done the rest. Incidentally, as some time, one bottom plank was knocked off, but this detail escaped notice at first.

The owner commissioned the Key West Wrecking Company to pump her out and haul her into shoal water for examination. Accordingly Johnson's powerful wrecking pumps went to work, but could not make any impression on the water. After a day, with the lighter as full as ever, Johnson reported to the owner, suggesting that the worms must have ruined her bottom. There was still too much rich business going on to be very fussy about a mere lighter, and few questions were asked. There was the lighter, her decks and topsides sound, her bottom apparently gone. There was Johnson, whose business was dealing in everything, including lumber. It was natural for him to make a nominal offer—\$200

—for the materials in the lighter. The owner accepted, finished up his business, and returned to Jacksonville.

But at this juncture the missing bottom plank was discovered! It was replaced, the water pumped out, and behold, a perfectly good \$5000 lighter. Later on the original owner popped up again in Key West, recognized his lighter, and bent a penetrating eye on Johnson, who could only say, "Yes, there she is. The planking wasn't nearly as bad as we thought, and we repaired her." There was, apparently no adequate rejoinder!

This is a yarn as it stands, but certain details are often added. It is said that the missing plank was surreptitiously removed by Johnson himself, which is out of character with the code of either Johnson or the wreckers in general. This code winked at many kinds of sharp dealing, but it did not countenance actual lying, in which it much resembled the old-time horse-trading code of New England. It is further said that the \$200 offer was not made directly, but through a friend, who actually paid only \$50 for her, and that when the owner reappeared the following dialogue took place:

Owner: "Say, that looks like my lighter!"

Johnson: "So it is; she wasn't as bad as we thought, so I took her over and repaired her."

Owner (a bit sour): "*Well!* You pumped her out, and reported her unsound—and now you own her. But *here's* the chap I sold her to (pointing to intermediary) — how come? And between you I sold my good lighter for . . ."

Friend (hastily, plucking at his coattails and taking him aside): "Sh-sh! Say \$200, and I'll give you another \$50!"

No wonder, perhaps, that even their friends called them pirates; and yet one gets no impression of sordid cheats and liars, but rather of a contest of wit, accepted by all, and carried out without prejudice. There was the matter of salvage bills, for example — the claims for services rendered, made out by each skipper for presentation to court. A little misstatement as to tonnage or crew might well slip in, so rival skippers sometimes made out their bills, compared them, sealed them, and then *exchanged them*, each presenting the other's bill! Whence it has been said that they not only did not trust each other, but not even themselves!

Individual wrecks in which Johnson had a share are endless in number and variety. There was the ship *Gutenberg*, loaded with cotton, which drove onto the Tortugas in a heavy northwester. Bales covered the tumultous Gulf Stream for miles, and were fished up by a fleet of wreck-



ers, while many more were dived out of her hold. Then she broke up; the remaining bales, now water-logged, sank nearby, and a large part of them was subsequently recovered.

Another good dividend from cotton came from a Mallory boat which jettisoned hundreds of bales, and so lightened, got off with the tide. "Captain Dick" Lowe, a spare, gray-haired colored man, told me about her while he peddled grunts and porgies to housekeepers, at two for a nickel, out of the well of his ancient sailboat. Many a long day he had worked with Johnson, and many adventures he remembered. While he scaled the fish he told me how he tried to sieze a bale, and was pulled overboard; he clung to the cotton while the sloop sailed a mile, and finally returned to pick him up. "I never thought of the sharks," said he, "but another man, Swan, was lost, and later on we picked up his clothes, in rags."

One "good" (i.e., profitable) lumber wreck was that of a turret-ship, or whale-back, carrying heavy deck-loads held only by chains. They just cut the chains and picked up the timber. Later, when Miami was starting, Johnson recovered so much heavy lumber from one sailing-ship that he bought a saw-mill in Jacksonville, set it up on the Miami River and lived there for two years, turning out house-material for the new town.

Sometimes veritable hulks made good ventures. There was the *Clinton*, an ancient side-wheeler, so decrepit that you could "stand below and look outside—" so said Willy Wickers, when I visited him at his boatyard at the foot of Simonton Street, where he had done many jobs for Johnson. "Don't tell anybody," was the word for this adventure, while he and Johnson, with Bruce Saunders, colored diver, and "a couple of hobos," patched a few of the worst holes, and towed her to Jacksonville. There they found a tramp steamer bound for New York, and dickered for a "lift." She travelled much too fast for the crumbling old bones behind her, but the *Clinton* arrived at last, and was sold for junk, at a good profit.

One voyage of the schooner *Irene* showed the variety of life to an active Key Wester. In a dull season, when the pineapples on the keys were ready to ship, Johnson made up a party, and loaded pineapples from Rock Harbor to Elliott's Key. The cargo was completed on a Saturday in a calm—just air enough to work the boat out into the Stream. That night, however, a fresh southeaster struck in, putting her rail under, and there it stayed until they made landfall on Barnegat Light, on Thursday evening. At New York, Johnson sold the pineapples, and loaded coal for Maine; thence he brought ice back to New

York, and there took general cargo for Key West, topped it off with a deck-load of kerosene in ten-gallon cases. The spring doldrums were now on, and they were a long time working down into the Straits; as they finally came abreast of Carysfort Light, they met a two-day calm during which the Stream swept them quietly back to Brunswick, Georgia—as not seldom happened to sail craft. In all they were thirty-two days getting back to Key West, as against their five-day voyage north!

There were always pickings, and odd jobs. Much Florida beef, on the hoof, was shipped to Cuba at this time, usually in schooners, and the calms of summer often made trouble for them. It paid to take a tug across the Stream, and many a cargo of bawling cattle Johnson towed to the Morro at Havana. One unusual task was removing a ship's propeller, bent on a rock, and mounting her spare, all twelve feet under water. A small charge of dynamite loosened the old screw, and divers had no difficulty in keying on the new one; thus a few men, in a day or so, obviated the need for a long tow to Jacksonville, and heavy docking charges—a good example of the ingenuity which brought Johnson to the lead in wrecking.

An important part of the wrecking business was a warehouse. With Johnson this developed into a gigantic collection of tools, machinery, parts, materials, general merchandise, and an almost incredible mass of odds and ends. As Peter Roberts told me, "He was called 'Hog' because he was into everything. People say 'I wouldn't do this, or that,' and then when somebody comes along and does it, they call him Hog. He would pick up anything on the street—an old bolt, a brick—and take it to his shop. You could get *anything* there—anything at all."

With this magpie trait, one wrecking side-line was especially attractive to Johnson—speculation in abandoned hulks, from which wreckers had already taken all they thought valuable, after which they might lie untouched for many years. He had equipment and ingenuity to recover machinery and fittings which others could not handle, but still more fascinating, apparently, was the chance of finding hidden valuables in secret lockers, or in odd corners of the ship's timbers—a common means of safeguarding cash, jewelry, and such items. A good diver, in shoal water, with modern equipment unhurried by rivalry, could go through a ship with a fine-toothed comb, and there were always some prizes. John West did a lot of this for him, and told me about it one warm night, in his home in Coral Gables—a huge and rugged person, whom years could not rob of vigor, nor of the tang and savor of many adventures.

Small-boat voyages were also part of the game; one was in a ship's long-boat, to the Isle of Pines.

"And what was that for?"

"Oh, he carried a load of stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"That was a secret!"

On another occasion, attending a wreck-sale at Nassau, he completed his business before the friend on whose boat he had come, so he borrowed a dory and sailed it back home, across the Gulf Stream and down the Reef—a longer and harder route than the Miami-Nassau race, where crack yachts get the safe-conduct of a coast-guard cutter.

The last really "good" wreck was that of the steamer *Alicia*, of Bilbao, on Ajax Reef, in 1906. She had a rich general cargo for Havana—silks, laces, wines and liquors, household furnishings, pianos, utensils, provisions, etc., etc.—a huge general emporium. Within a few hours the fleet surrounded her, a motley flock of sail craft, many quite small. We chanced to be lying nearby, and spent the day with them, on the shining green water that rolled lazily over the Reef from the purple Gulf Stream. The ship lay on the edge of the coral, with no sign of injury save a slight heel, but she was bilged and water-logged. On deck two crews of fifty each manned great tackles, their faces alight with joy, their mellow voices ringing out, adrip with glory, as the grand old chanties rolled across the waves, timing their pull on the cargo-nets. How their eyes gleamed as each load swung out on deck, and followed every item on its way to the schooners alongside! How they laughed and joked in the intervals! How the joy of life fairly lighted up the scene! It was the fun of wrecking at its best.

There was only one fault to find with *Alicia* as a wreck; after the dry cargo was removed, the flooded portion proved unworkable, because some hundreds of tons of rice had fermented, and the "skin divers" could not enter. Most of such work was done by naked negroes, who could work under water for about two minutes; diving armor and compressed air were comparatively rare. Two large holes were blasted in the sides of the ship in the hope that tide would flow through and clean out the foaming, malodorous mess, but much heavy cargo had to be abandoned.

Johnson worked on *Alicia*, of course. He never saw a richer cargo; there was nothing approaching her afterward. I talked with John Lopez, clerk for Curry's big supply house since 1887, who knew Johnson well throughout his Key West life. He, too, turned a good penny from *Alicia*, taking over a quantity of linen and cotton goods, and making his home

into a shop for a couple of years. It was a great wreck, and well remembered by many still living.

Johnson's last important job was towing; an English cable-boat needed heavier ways than Key West could offer, and had to go to Havana. They met bad weather, in which she was too heavy for Johnson's little tug; fortunately they were convoyed, as a matter of international courtesy, by the light-house tender, under Captain Cosgrove, and the tender completed the job.

So the heart went out of wrecking. Gleanings, odd jobs, and the business of his warehouse with its incredible masses of nautical plunder, filled Johnson's time. He had grown stout, hirsute, and somewhat slovenly—his readiness to leap into any task at any moment did not encourage personal neatness. And so we find him in April, 1914, busy at his ways, hauling out a schooner. John West, diver and long-time helper, was working with him, and protested when Johnson leaped into the water to heave and pull: "Take it easy, now! Don't strain yourself!" He paid no attention, of course—what did he know of caution? But the warning was justified, for a few minutes later he fell, in the water. They carried him ashore, but he never spoke again—and so he died as he would have wished, with his boots on, and in the sea he loved.

He was a great wrecker—in one way at least the greatest in Key West, for to him it was the business of life, while to all the rest it was incidental, secondary to their regular work. Action, contest, the spice of danger, the long chance, the triumph of audacity, made life worth while to him, and as long as wrecking yarns are told in Key West, his name will fall from many a tongue.