

## The Perrines at Indian Key, Florida, 1838-1840

From: "Incidents in the Life of Hester Perrine Walker", a daughter  
of Dr. Henry Perrine, dated January 28, 1885.

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The original of the manuscript by Hester Perrine Walker, daughter of Dr. Henry Perrine of Indian Key fame, is in the library of the Florida Historical Society at St. Augustine. A typewritten transcript of the original is in the files of the editor of the Historical Association of Southern Florida's *Tequesta*. Only those portions of "Incidents in the Life of Hester Perrine Walker" relating to the life of the Perrines on Indian Key are here reproduced. A somewhat similar treatment of the material in the Perrine narrative appeared in the Florida Historical Society *Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 1, July 1926, under the title, "Massacre at Indian Key, August 7, 1840, and the Death of Dr. Henry Perrine", with notes by Mr. Julien C. Yonge, editor of the *Quarterly*. For a fuller account of Dr. Perrine's plant introduction work in Florida, see: T. Ralph Robinson, "Henry Perrine, Pioneer Horticulturist of Florida", in *Tequesta*, Number Two, 1942.



My grandfather's three sons having determined soon after their marriage to seek a home in Illinois, which was then the El Dorado of the far West, he resigned his pastoral charge in Palmyra and offered his services to the Home Missionary society to serve in Illinois, as there was then no self-sustaining church in all of Southern Illinois in 1818. He remained there five years and then returned to New York state where he died.

My mother was but sixteen when they moved to Illinois, and as the state was filling with Eastern men, she became a great belle. She had many offers of marriage and was married to my father, Dr. Henry Perrine, in 1822—"a gentleman of talent and culture" who was appointed consul of Campeachy [Campeche, Yucatan] by President John Quincy Adams, and remained there twelve years.

Dr. Perrine was an enthusiastic and able botanist, and during his residence abroad undertook a work of great promise to our country, viz: the introduction and acclimation of valuable exotics into tropical Florida, and he received from Congress a township of land for that purpose.

My father was born in New York City, his father was a hardware merchant and manufacturer and a descendant of an old French Huguenot family.

My sister, Sarah, was born March, 1823. I was born July 21, 1824, and my brother Henry in March, 1827. Sarah and I were born in Illinois, and Henry in Sodus, N. Y. I was but a year old when the family determined to return to New York state. My grandfather received a call to preach in Sodus, which he accepted, and we removed there in the fall of 1825, and remained there five years.

It was about this time that my father received his appointment as consul to Campeachy, and we were left at my grandfather's as mother's health was delicate and she could not venture upon the long voyage, which was then only made in sailing vessels.

Soon after his arrival there he sent us a parrot, an unknown bird then in our part of the world. Of course she was the wonder and delight of all the children around. We thought to give her a fine cage by having it painted red. She gnawed off the paint from the wires, and in a few days died in convulsions, between each one calling at the top of her voice "Dr. Perrine! Dr. Perrine!"

When I was six years old, my grandfather retired and removed to Palmyra, Wayne County, New York, where he remained for the last eight years of his life, supplying vacant pulpits as needed, much beloved by the people wherever he had preached.

My brother Henry having been born, my father obtained leave of absence from his duties and returned with the intention of taking his family back with him. I remember our surprise upon waking in the morning to find him, and upon a table at the head of one bed such a number of curious and beautiful things he had brought us of Mexican workmanship.

He then decided to take us all to New Jersey to spend the summer, as his mother and brother lived there. This was in 1832. In that summer came the first cholera epidemic, and it raged fearfully among the laborers on the canal that was building. We were in Princeton.

My father made up his mind that the epidemic would reach Mexico in about six weeks from the time of the period set for his return to his duties, and it did. Feeling that the scourge would be more violent there than in the United States, he felt it would be too great a risk to take his family and decided again to leave them behind and return and resign after settling up all of the unfinished business. We returned again to Palmyra where we remained until 1838.

My father having resigned his position and been for some months engaged in his survey in South Florida, and his efforts to awaken interest in the people of Florida to the culture of tropical fruits, and also in presenting his reports

to Congress (these reports are found in the reports of the 25th Congress, 1838) and they for his services granting him a township of land to be located in South Florida, we prepared to remove there.

There were but few vessels running to Southern ports, and for three long months we waited in New York for a sailing vessel that would land us at Indian Key.

Believing the Seminole War closed, we had expected to go upon the land at once, and Joel R. Poinsett, the then Secretary of War, had promised to make it a military post so there need be no fear of Indians. While in New York my father received a letter from the Sec. saying, "The war had again broken out and it would not be prudent to go onto the land."

Then my father decided to go to Indian Key and remain there until we could go onto his land, as there was already established there one of his depots of plants sent from Yucatan, and under the care of Mr. Charles Howe. We sailed from New York the first week in December, 1838, and landed at Indian Key on Christmas morning! As soon as our vessel came to anchor, Mr. Howe came on board and in his boat we were landed.

I cannot forget our delight on first seeing this beautiful little island of only 12 acres. It was truly a "Gem of the Ocean." The trees were many of them covered with morning glories of all colors, while the waving palms, tamarinds, papaws, guavas, seaside grape trees and many others too numerous to mention made it seem to us like fairy land, coming as we did from the midst of snow and ice.

Our twenty months of life there was a very peculiar one. We were shut out from all social life with the exception of the family of Mr. Howe. We might have had a great deal of society from the officers of the Navy and Army who frequented the island, but as my sister and I were only school girls, my father did not allow us to come into the parlor when they called, and in reply to the question, "Are we not to see your daughters, sir?" my father would reply, "They are only school girls, sir, and are engaged in their school room." They would sometimes come in their boats under our windows and serenade us, which would make my father furious.

For amusements we used sometimes to fish, learned to use a rifle and pistols, and often went over to "Lower Matacumba" with father when he spent the day there attending to his plants. We would take our lunch and send the men back with our boat, and at sundown they would return for us.

Only three days before the Indians came to Indian Key, father and I went over, and he did but little work, and then telling me that "he had found a place where it would be pleasant for us to take our lunch," took me

about a mile down the beach and then turning into the forest, soon brought me to a spot where he parted the branches and there was a "fairy grotto." In the center was a small, sparkling spring perhaps ten or fifteen feet across; various cacti, in bloom and fruit, with other flowers upon the banks; the overarching trees interlacing their boughs, while innumerable air plants in full bloom added brilliancy to the scene, the sun scarcely penetrating.

Of our entire life on the island, I cannot write, but will tell some few amusing and interesting occurrences. One of these was the arrival of General Harney with a vessel loaded with soldiers on their way to the Caloosahatchie river where they were going to establish a post, and locate the Seminoles on their reservation, as another truce and treaty had been made with the treacherous creatures.

I do not remember how many days had elapsed when one evening we saw, far off toward the mainland, a small boat apparently hurrying in our direction. General Harney and one man stepped ashore. They and five others having been the sole survivors of that terrible "massacre of the Caloosahatchie."

Soon after our arrival at Indian Key, Judge Marvin, afterwards governor of Florida, and Stephen Mallory, afterwards Confederate Secretary of the Navy, came up in a sailing vessel "to pay their respects to the doctor and his family."

At one time we saw a very rare sight. Three great waterspouts coming from the southeast, directly towards Indian Key and moving with great velocity. A big gun was loaded, to fire into and break them before they could reach us; when their course was diverted and they broke near the lower end of Lower Maticumba. Had they broken upon Indian Key, we should all have been destroyed.

One evening, just before dark, our attention was attracted by two large dark forms moving rapidly through our water and as they arrived directly in front of our house, the pursuer, which proved to have been a shark sixteen feet long, overtook his game, which proved to be a young sperm whale, and catching its tail in his great mouth, bit it off.

We had given the alarm and a boat was at once in pursuit, and harpooned the whale and brought it ashore. The shark was captured the next morning, and from his liver they obtained fifteen gallons of oil.

We had no church, but every Sabbath evening we would go over to Mr. Howe's and spend the evening singing, to their delight and that of the slaves who used to gather about the doors and windows.

Thus in a pleasant and primitive way we passed nearly two years, when my sister was taken very ill. For two weeks we had despaired of her life,

when on the 6th of August, 1840, she began to rally and at night said, "Let father lie in the hammock in the hall, and Mother, you and Hester go to bed in your room, and put out the light, and I believe I can sleep."

Our house had a broad hall running through the center with two bedrooms on each side in the second story, while in the third there were two finished rooms, and stairs leading up into the cupola, which was entered by a heavy trap door. One room in the third story was used by Father as his study, and one as the library and school room.

The first floor had a long parlor on the east side and on the west, at the foot of the stairs was a small room leading into the cellar by a heavy trap door, and back of that the pantry, and at the west side also was our dining room.

The front of the house rested upon the land while the house itself was built over the sea, upon a stone wall, and around that was another wall, leaving a moat around the house on three sides.

There were two piazzas, an upper and lower one, upon the north side of the house overhanging the sea, opening onto a long wharf where we used to go to get into our boats when we went sailing.

Thinking that it would be better for Sarah if we did as she requested, I retired with Mother, and as the night was warm, we took off our night dresses and put them under our pillows, having the protection of the mosquito netting around our bed.

The going down of the moon is the only knowledge we have of the hour of the massacre, and this was about two o'clock in the morning. A sailor who lived upon the island, being very restless, thought he would take his gun and stroll around the island, thinking he might come across some ducks. As he was on the east side, he suddenly came upon the Indians, 200 in number, creeping carefully along by Capt. Houseman's garden; their evident intention being to surround the occupied houses before being discovered. Had they accomplished this, not a soul would have been spared to tell the tale. Realizing the situation at once, the sailor raised his gun and fired among them, giving at the same time an alarming war whoop. The Indians separated at once and made a rush for the two largest houses on the island, Capt. Houseman's and ours.

When Mr. Howe built the house we occupied, he enclosed the narrow passage leading from the wharf to the cellar with stone, and left open the end under the wharf; as also the end of the wharf; and kept a boat in this stone passageway, so that in case the Indians should come, they might escape that way. As time passed, and the near island of Tea Table Key was made

a naval station, all thoughts of danger passed away. Then Mr. Howe had filled the end of the wharf and separated the wharf from this narrow passage also, by palmetto posts driven down, still allowing the tides to wash in and out of our cellar, which we utilized for sea bathing. The pen under the wharf was used to confine turtles, and the trap was the entrance to this turtle crawl and the trap door leading down to our cellar.

Mother and I occupied the southeast bedroom, Sarah was sick in the northeast bedroom. Father lay in the hammock in the hall, while Henry had taken his bed and laid it in the corner of this hall as being cooler, with the door open at one end and the window at the other.

We were aroused from our sleep by the terrific war whoop, simultaneously with the crack of rifles and the falling of the glass from our broken windows. I saw this terrific crowd of Indians dancing and whooping like demons by the flash of their rifles.

My father told us to go down into the bath room, and "he would see what he could do." With a martyr's heroism, he went out upon the piazza, and called to them in Spanish, "I am a physician and will go with you to heal your people."

Upon this they gave a great shout and left the house. Father came down then and closed the trap door, telling us to "go into the narrow passageway, for if we remained in the cellar, the Indians might see us through the openings." He then drew a heavy chest of seeds over the door, concealing every trace of its existence.

He had scarcely accomplished this when the Indians returned and with their tomahawks commenced battering down the door and breaking in the windows, having apparently given up their intention of sparing him. Father fled to the cupola, we think, hoping that he might be able from there to see help coming from the Naval depot, and that, as the door was a heavy one, he might be able to hold out until relief came. For a few moments as they swarmed up the stairs after him, there was a horrid silence, only broken by the blows of their tomahawks upon the door, then a crash, one wild shriek, a rifle shot, and all was still.

They then came down and commenced pillaging our house. (There were probably runaway negroes among them, for when they got inside, we distinctly heard one say, "They are all hid, old man upstairs," and then they ran up.) As they went into our pantry for a short space there was again silence, as they consumed the good things there. After their repast was over, they would take first one pile of dishes and then another, and throw them

upon the floor, breaking them to pieces, and they would dance and whoop. So they broke everything in the house before they set fire to it.

There was no wind and it burned slowly. Soon after daylight the smoke began to come slowly into our hiding place. The tide had risen until there was only room for our heads between the water and the boards, but when it was low there was perhaps a foot in depth. Remember that this hiding place was only four feet wide, four feet high and ten feet long. Then the bank sloped gradually until at the end of the wharf it was about ten or twelve feet, up to the trap door. On the end of this wharf about six cords of wood were piled waiting for the wrecking vessels to take it off. Toward ten o'clock (as we thought) the smoke became so annoying that we were obliged to throw water over our heads to be able to breathe.

The Indians heard us, and coming down to the trap door, lifted it and looked down, their shadow upon the water being distinctly visible to us. Had they turned their heads in the slightest they would have seen us, but seeing the numbers of turtles splashing around, they must have supposed the noise they heard was from them.

The smoke and steam became unendurable. The piazza fell in and the flames communicated to the boards over our heads, but we kept them subdued for a while by throwing water upon them, but when the wharf beyond us and the cords of wood upon it were all in flames, our lives were in immediate danger.

My brother had been kept from screaming aloud by my mother's firm pressure of her hands over his mouth, but he finally broke from her with the exclamation, "I will go, for I had rather be killed by the Indians than to be burned to death." He then struggled between the narrow passages by the palmetto posts, and passing down to the trap door, made a spring and lifting himself into the opening, jumped down into the water and made for the land. Our suspense was intense and we waited with baited breath for the rifle shot that would announce his death. When no sound was heard and we realized that for some time we had not seen a boat pass and we hoped that the Indians had gone.

We could no longer stay in our hiding place. We could not pass through the narrow space that my brother did, and with her hands my mother dug away the marl from the foot of one of the posts until she could drop it down and thus we passed through and under the burning wharf, and the coals fell upon us. When we reached the trap door, Mother helped me to reach to the top, then lifting my sick sister, I dragged her up and helped her down to the

other side, then reached my hands down and thus helped Mother to get up. We then jumped down and taking my sister by her arm, Mother on one side and I on the other, we started for the land.

At that moment we espied at the side of the wharf a ship's launch moored. It was about 200 or 300 feet away. We also saw my brother standing in front of Houseman's store and his attention being attracted, we beckoned him to go down on the wharf and get into the boat, and we waded through the water which was then nearly up to our waist.

About three miles from us there lay at anchor a schooner that had come loaded with canoes for the proposed expedition into the Everglades. We of course steered for this vessel. Mother had an Indian paddle, my brother a "setting pole" and I an oar.

Small spots on the horizon warned the Indians that the wreckers from Key Tavernier and the three naval schooners were on their way to our relief. They set fire to the other houses and made all speed to Upper Maticumba.

We drifted with the tide until the captain's boat overtook us, and as they drew near, for the first time, we began to realize our nearly naked condition. Sarah had on her nightgown, while mother and I having taken ours off on account of the warm night, had on but one garment. Henry was entirely naked, having taken his shirt off and tied it to a pole as a signal of distress to any passing vessel. Quickly Mother took a mosquito bar that was in the boat and tearing it in two wrapped its folds about us just as the captain and his two negro sailors caught hold of our boat and took us in their arms and carefully put us in their boat, the negroes begging us not to cry, saying, "Oh, don't cry, missus; don't cry; you are safe now, missus; you are safe now."

We soon reached the schooner's side and there found to our great delight that nearly all of the inhabitants had escaped. There had been 70 souls on the island, and of these there were but 13 missing. The Indians, by attacking the two larger houses first, had given the others a chance to get to their boats, and of course all had steered for this schooner.

About midnight there was a terrific thunderstorm, and we imagined we heard guns and Indian shouts, but the blessed daylight showed us the three naval vessels and many of the wreckers' vessels at anchor near us.

The inhabitants returned to the island, as two or three houses had been saved from the flames and some soldiers were put there as guard.

A circular letter had been given my father when he went to Indian Key by the Secretary of War, Joel R. Poinsett, directing the officers of the Army and Navy "to afford to Dr. Perrine and his family any assistance in their power at any time that was consistent with their duty to their country."



Therefore Commodore McLaughlin offered to take us directly to New York, but Mother, desirous that the expedition into the Everglades should not be delayed by us, and knowing that a government steamer was at Miami, told him that she would only ask him to take us there and let us take that steamer to St. Augustine.

Mr. Howe went back to Indian Key and in his garden found some dresses that had been scattered, and mother and I each secured a dress, a pair of high heeled shoes with large buckles upon them and which the Indians had thrown away from their plunder fell to my share.

On Thursday we had escaped, and on Saturday Mother gave her assent to going on board the Commodore's vessel. Just at sunset he came with his gig. Sarah was lowered into it, lying upon her cot and covered entirely with a sheet. We all followed and were swiftly borne to "The Flirt."

The day before we went on board, Lieut. Rogers took my brother and me over to Indian Key, as I hoped I might be able to rescue some memento that the Indians might have dropped, but I found nothing but a few watersoaked books, which are now treasured mementos.

Mr. Howe had had the marl raked and there found all that was left of father's remains—a thigh bone, a few ribs and a portion of the skull. These he wrapped in a paper and laid them in my hands. I desired him to have them suitably enclosed in a box and buried under the broad spreading leaves of one of father's own *Agave Sibilanas* at our garden on Lower Maticumba, as being the most suitable place for their resting place.

Sabbath morning the wind being favorable we set sail for Cape Florida and arrived there that night. We anchored in Biscayne bay and we were there a week. The soldiers' wives at Fort Dallas gave us each a dress.

When the U.S. steamer was ready to sail, Lieut., afterwards Gen. G. W. Sherman, who was in command at Cape Florida, detailed Dr. Worrall, a surgeon in the Army, to accompany us North. After leaving Biscayne, Dr. Worrall handed mother a letter from the officers of the Navy and another from those of the Army stationed at Fort Dallas, each of which contained a sum of money to aid us in our extremity.

Our first landing was at Mosquito Inlet. I do not remember the exact time it took us to reach St. Augustine, but I think it was about thirty-six hours. Not supposing it possible that they had heard of the destruction of Indian Key, we were surprised, but found that a schooner, short of water, had landed at Key West and there learned our story. With great hospitality, the citizens had met and appointed a delegation to meet us and tender to us the hospitalities of the city. Not only clothing but a liberal purse was donated to us

by this generous people. Three days we remained there, and then took steamer for Savannah. From Charleston we took steamer for Wilmington, N. C., where we found the first railroad and from there went on to Portsmouth, Va. There we took steamer up Chesapeake bay to Baltimore. At Philadelphia, my father's brother, Gen. John A. Perrine, met us.

Not during all our journey would anyone receive a penny for any service rendered, and twice, when we had paid our fare from some point, when they found out who we were, it was returned with many apologies.

It was known in Palmyra that we expected to arrive on Saturday, and many of our old friends went down to welcome us. My grand father had been a man widely known and beloved, and my father's consulship and enterprise that had been so widely known, through the congressional action, had brought us as a family into wide knowledge, and our escape was made the subject to comment in nearly if not all the newspapers of the Union.

After a few weeks visit with relatives and friends, Sarah and I were sent to Canandaigua to finish our education, while Mother, accompanied by her brother, Eleager M. Townsend, went on to Washington to get Congress to pass an act by which the title to the land granted to my father might be secured to her and her children. In this she was successful, and received much attention from influential people. Indian and Civil War prevented occupation of the land, but at this late date (Feb. 1885) we hope that for her grandchildren there may be good in store from it.