

Tequesta:

Cape Florida Light

By CHARLES M. BROOKFIELD

Along the southeast Florida coast no more cheery or pleasing sight gladdened the heart of the passing mariner of 1826 than the new lighthouse and little dwelling at Cape Florida. Beyond the glistening beach of Key Biscayne the white tower rose sixty-five feet against a bright green backdrop of luxuriant tropical foliage. Who could foresee that this peaceful scene would be the setting for events of violence, suffering and tragedy?

At night the tower's gleaming white eye followed the mariner as he passed the dangerous Florida Reef, keeping watch to the limit of its visibility. When in distress or seeking shelter from violent gales the light's friendly eye guided him into Cape Florida Channel to safe anchorage in the lee of Key Biscayne. From the beginning of navigation in the New World, vessels had entered the Cape channel to find water and wood on the nearby main. Monendez in 1567 must have passed within the Cape when he brought the first Jesuit missionary, Brother Villareal, to Biscayne Bay.

Two centuries later, during the English occupation, Bernard Romans, assistant to His Majesty's Surveyor General, in recommending "stations for cruisers within the Florida Reef", wrote:

"The first of these is at Cayo Biscayno, in lat. 25° 35' N. Here we enter within the reef, from the northward you will not find less than three fathoms anywhere within till you come abreast the south end of the Key where there is a small bank of 11 feet only, give the key a good birth, for there is a large flat stretching from it. At the south end of the Key very good water is obtainable by digging at the watering place on the key is also an excellent place for careening of vessels, not exceeding 10 feet draught. All these advantageous circumstances make this an excellent place for cruisers to watch every vessel bound northward. In the year 1773, I came a passage from Mississippi, on board the schooner Liberty, commanded by Capt. John Hunt. We had the misfortune to be over-set at sea, and I conducted the wreck into this place, when having lost our

boats and caboose, with every other thing from off the deck, we nailed together three half hogsheads, in which a man and a boy went ashore

“At this place there is a vast abundance and variety of fish, both in creeks and outside at sea, particularly groopers are in great plenty, king-fish, Spanish mackerel and Barrows are also often caught towing; and if you have one or two good hunters aboard, you may always be provided with plenty of venison, turkies and bear meat. There are deer on the key and sometimes bear; in winter duck and teal abound in the creeks; turtle is very plenty; no fish is poisonous on the Florida shore, not even the amber-fish; but on the Bahama side, precaution is necessary; and the loggerhead turtle is never rank of taste here.”

But neither the religious Spaniard nor the aggressive Briton left any trace of his former presence on Florida's southeast coast. It remained for the New World's "Infant Republic" to erect the first substantial structure. The Congress of the United States on May 7, 1822 appropriated \$8,000 for building a lighthouse on Cape Florida. In April, 1824 an additional \$16,000 was added by Congress for the same purpose. Collector Dearborn, of Boston contracted with Samuel B. Lincoln "for a tower sixty-five feet high with solid walls of brick, five feet thick at the base, graduated to two feet at the top." Noah Humphreys, of Hingham, was appointed to oversee the materials and work. He certified the lighthouse and dwellings as finished according to contract December 17, 1825. The three acre site deeded by Mr. Waters S. Davis, Sr. was a gift to the government.

For more than ten years the faithful keepers of the light lived, with their families, a lonely but peaceful life at the Cape punctuated by periodic cruises to Key West, their only contact with civilization. But in 1835 the outbreak of the Second Seminole War brought terror to the scattered settlers of the southeast coast. The Cooley (one source has it "Colee") family on the north side of New River were the first to be massacred. Two families on the south side of the river escaped southward spreading the alarm to the mouth of the Miami River, where William English, of South Carolina, employed about twenty-five hands on his farm. R. Duke, with his family, lived about three miles up the river. His son, Capt. John H. Duke, survived the Indian attack and recorded the details:

“After midnight in December 1836, we were called up by two negro men from the farm below, giving the alarm that the Indians were massacreing the people in the neighborhood. Everybody left their homes in boats and canoes for the Biscayne (Cape Florida) light-house. On arrival there a

guard was formed and kept until vessels could be obtained to carry the families to Key West. Two men, one white by the name of Thompson, one colored, name I don't know, volunteered to keep the light going until assistance could be sent there."

These two heroes, one white, the other a nameless, aged negro, did not have long to wait—the first for indescribable suffering and torture, the second for death. This story is best told by assistant keeper John W. B. Thompson, himself, in a letter:

"On the twenty-third of July, 1836, about 4 P.M., as I was going from the kitchen to the dwelling house, I discovered a large body of Indians within twenty yards of me, back of the kitchen. I ran for the Lighthouse, and called out to the old negro man that was with me to run, for the Indians were near. At that moment they discharged a volley of rifle balls, which cut my clothes and hat and perforated the door in many places. We got in, and as I was turning the key the savages had hold of the door. I stationed the negro at the door, with orders to let me know if they attempted to break in. I then took my three muskets, which were loaded with ball and buckshot, and went to the second window. Seeing a large body of them opposite the dwelling house, I discharged my muskets in succession among them, which put them in some confusion; they then, for the second time, began their horrid yells, and in a minute no sash of glass was left at the window, for they vented their rage at that spot. I fired at them from some of the other windows, and from the top of the house; in fact, I fired whenever I could get an Indian for a mark. I kept them from the house until dark. They then poured in a heavy fire at all the windows and lantern; that was the time they set fire to the door and window even with the ground. The window was boarded up with plank and filled with stone inside; but the flames spread fast, being fed with yellow pine wood. Their balls had perforated the tin tanks of oil, consisting of two hundred and twenty-five gallons. My bedding, clothing, and in fact everything I had was soaked in oil. I stopped at the door until driven away by the flames.

"I then took a keg of gunpowder, my balls and one musket to the top of the house, then went below and began to cut away the stairs about halfway up from the bottom. I had difficulty in getting the old negro up the space I had already cut; but the flames now drove me from my labor, and I retreated to the top of the house. I covered over the scuttle that leads to the lantern, which kept the fire from me for sometime. At last the awful moment arrived; the cracking flames burst around me.

“The savages at the same time began their hellish yells. My poor negro looked at me with tears in his eyes, but he could not speak. We went out of the lantern and down on the edge of the platform, two feet wide. The lantern was now full of flame, the lamps and glasses bursting and flying in all directions, my clothes on fire, and to move from the place where I was would be instant death from their rifles. My flesh was roasting, and to put an end to my horrible suffering I got up and threw the keg of gunpowder down the scuttle—instantly it exploded and shook the tower from top to bottom. It had not the desired effect of blowing me into eternity, but it threw down the stairs and all the woodenwork near the top of the house; it damped the fire for a moment, but it soon blazed as fierce as ever. The negro man said he was wounded, which was the last word he spoke. By this time I had received some wounds myself; and finding no chance for my life, for I was roasting alive, I took the determination to jump off. I got up, went inside the iron railing, recommending my soul to God, and was on the point of going ahead foremost on the rock below when something dictated to me to return and lie down again. I did so, and in two minutes the fire fell to the bottom of the house. It is a remarkable circumstance that not one ball struck me when I stood up outside the railing although they were flying all around me like hailstones. I found the old negro man dead, being shot in several places, and literally roasted. A few minutes after the fire fell a stiff breeze sprung up from the southward, which was a great blessing to me. I had to lie where I was, for I could not walk, having received six rifle balls, three in each foot.

“The Indians, thinking me dead, left the lighthouse and set fire to the dwelling place, kitchen and other outhouses, and began to carry off their plunder to the beach. They took all the empty barrels, the drawers of the bureaus, and in fact everything that would act as a vessel to hold anything. My provisions were in the lighthouse, except a barrel of flour, which they took off. The next morning they hauled out of the lighthouse, by means of a pole, the tin that composed the oil tanks, no doubt to make grates to manufacture the coonty root into what we call arrow root. After loading my little sloop, about 10 or 12 went into her; the rest took to the beach to meet at the other end of the island. This happened, as I judge, about 2:00 a.m. My eyes, being much affected, prevented me from knowing their actual force, but I judge there were from 40 to 50, perhaps more. I was now almost as bad off as before; a burning fever on me, my feet shot to pieces, no clothes to cover me, nothing to eat or drink, a hot sun overhead, a dead man by my

side, no friend near or any to expect, and placed between 70 and 80 feet from the earth and no chance of getting down. My situation was truly horrible. About 12 o'clock I thought I could perceive a vessel not far off. I took a piece of the old negro's trousers that had escaped the flames by being wet with blood and made a signal. Some time in the afternoon I saw two boats with my sloop in tow coming to the landing. I had no doubt but they were Indians, having seen my signal; but it proved to be the boats of the United States schooner *Motto*, Captain Armstrong, with a detachment of seamen and marines under the command of Lieutenant Lloyd, of the sloop-of-war *Concord*. They had retaken my sloop, after the Indians had stripped her of her sails and rigging, and everything of consequence belonging to her.

"They informed me they heard my explosion 12 miles off, and ran down to my assistance, but did not expect to find me alive. These gentlemen did all in their power to relieve me, but, night coming on, they returned on board the *Motto*, after assuring me of their assistance in the morning. Next morning, Monday, July 5, three boats landed, among them Captain Cole, of the schooner *Pee Dee*, from New York. They made a kite during the night to get a line to me, but without effect, they then fired twine from their muskets, made fast to a ramrod, which I received, and hauled up a tailblock and made fast round an iron stanchion, rove the twine through the block, and they below, by that means, rove a two-inch rope and hoisted up two men, who soon landed me on terra firma. I must state here that the Indians had made a ladder by lashing pieces of wood across the lightning rod, near 40 feet from the ground, as if to have my scalp, nolens volens. This happened on the fourth. After I got on board the *Motto* every man from the captain to the cook tried to alleviate my sufferings. On the seventh I was received in the military hospital, through the politeness of Lieutenant Alvord of the fourth Regiment of United States Infantry. He has done everything to make my situation as comfortable as possible. I must not omit here to return my thanks to the citizens of Key West, generally, for their sympathy and kind offers of anything I would wish that it was in their power to bestow. Before I left Key West two balls were extracted, and one remains in my right leg, but since I am under the care of Dr. Ramsey, who has paid every attention to me, he will know best whether to extract it or not. These lines are written to let my friends know that I am still in the land of living, and am now in Charleston, S. C., where every attention is paid me. Although a cripple, I can eat my allowance and walk without the use of a cane."

Skulduggery and collusion were brought to light by the partial destruction of the light-house. When the collector at Key West visited Cape Florida after the Indian attack, he found the walls of the tower to be hollow from the base upwards instead of solid as called for in the contract. Apparently no charges were placed against those responsible.

The destruction of the light was a great handicap to the rapidly growing commerce of the young Republic. Soon, too soon, the government attempted reconstruction and repair. General Jesup having accepted the surrender of most of the Seminole Chiefs, the war was believed to be at an end. Accordingly, under date of June 20, 1837, Winslow Lewis, of Boston, received a letter from Mr. Pleasonton, the Fifth Auditor of the Treasury, inquiring "on what terms and within what period, he would undertake to repair or rebuild the light-house at Cape Florida; suggesting at the same time, that the interest of commerce and navigation required the work to be done as speedily as possible."

Lewis's terms were accepted within ten days of the inquiry "in consideration of the importance to navigation of having the lighthouse lighted in the shortest time."

In July a fully equipped vessel sailed from Boston. Aboard were a superintendent, all necessary workmen and materials. Touching at Key West, the vessel took on board Mr. Dubose, keeper of the former light, who was to superintend repairs for the Government, and take charge upon completion.

While at Key West Deputy Collector Gordon advised Lewis's agent that in his opinion the lighthouse could not be repaired at this time due to the resumption of hostilities by the Indians; that even if the workmen succeeded in their undertaking the Indians would destroy the building immediately. But, nevertheless, the vessel proceeded to Cape Florida only to find "that hostile Indians were in entire possession of the adjacent country" and had recently murdered Captain Walton, Commander of the light vessel at Carysfort Reef. Dubose protested against any attempt to begin work and declared he would not remain as keeper if the lighthouse were repaired but would leave with the workmen. Faced with this situation, Knowlton, Lewis' agent, believed it to the advantage of the Government to abandon the attempt at repairs. He returned with the vessel to Boston.

Lewis presented a claim for expenses to Congress. The Committee of Claims considered his account, totaling \$1,781.68, not extravagant, and recommended the introduction of a bill to reimburse him. In the Report, the

Committee observed: "It is evident that the loss of the claimant was occasioned by his laudable alacrity in attempting to execute the contract on his part. Had he been less prompt . . . the resumption of hostilities by the savages would have been known at Boston before the sailing of the vessel, and the loss which he sustained consequently avoided."

From 1838 to 1842 the war scarred light tower at Cape Florida was an important landmark and rendezvous for the nine vessels of the U. S. Navy's Florida Squadron. Under John T. McLaughlin, Lieut. Com'g., the Squadron included the "Campbell" and "Otsego" of the Revenue Cutter Service, now the U. S. Coast Guard. Attached to this force were 140 canoes used for expeditions into the Everglades. Among officers of the Squadron who took part in the Okeechobee Expedition, was Passed Midshipman George H. Preble, later Rear Admiral Preble of Civil War fame. Marines from the Squadron garrisoned Fort Dallas on the Miami River across the Bay.

At the Cape itself, Lieut. Col. William S. Harney based his 2nd Dragoons, the famous 2nd Cavalry. Here Harney organized his successful Everglades Expedition that destroyed the power of Chief Chekika, dreaded leader of the Caloosahatchee and Indian Key massacres.

Congress had appropriated \$10,000 by March 3, 1837, and included \$13,000 more August 10, 1846, to rebuild the lighthouse tower. The work was finally completed and the light in operation in 1846. R. Duke was appointed keeper.

But marine architects were now designing faster ships—clippers carrying a great press of sail, and of deeper draught. It was necessary, for their safe navigation, to lay a course at a greater distance to clear the shoals of the Florida Reef. Aids to navigation must be seen from further off shore. In 1855 the old light tower was elevated and "fitted with the most approved illuminating apparatus." This is the present tower—95 feet from the base to the center of the lantern.

Destroyed in 1861, the lighting apparatus was replaced and in operation in 1867.

At the completion of the steel light on Fowey Rock, historic Cape Florida Light was discontinued June 16, 1878. The friendly, guiding eye gleamed no more. The tower and property were sold in 1915 to Mr. James Deering of Chicago, Illinois.

Romans, Bernard—*A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida, etc.* New York, 1775.

House of Representatives—Act approved May 7, 1822.

House of Representatives—Act Approved April 2, 1824.

- House of Representatives—Act of March 10, 1837.
 House of Representatives—Report No. 373—25th Congress, Second Session, January 12, 1838.
- Records Public Information Division, U. S. Coast Guard, Washington, D. C.
- Hollingsworth, Tracy—*History of Dade County*—Miami, 1936.
- McNicoll, Robert E.—*The Caloosa Village Tequesta*—Tequesta, Journal of Historical Association of Southern Florida, March, 1941.
- Duke, John H.—*Statement*—Pensacola, Dec. 27, 1891 (from U.S.C.G. records).
- Munroe and Gilpin—*The Commodore's Story*—New York, 1930.
- Sprague, John T.—*Origin, Progress and Conclusion of the Florida War*—New York, 1848.
- Rodenbough, Theo. F.—*From Everglade to Canyon*—New York, 1875.
- Griswold, Oliver—*Wm. Selby Harney, Indian Fighter*—Paper presented at Annual Meeting, Florida Historical Society, Miami, April 9, 1949.