

# Two Opinions of Key West in 1834

CHARLTON W. TEBEAU, *Editor*

This might very well be sub-titled "A Lesson in Historical Writing". The first account is written by one who obviously disliked the city, very likely by a service man who was unhappy at being assigned to duty there. Historians may wonder if this was Key West or an expression of his disgust with his own situation. In like manner, the reply signed by two officers of the United States army may be looked upon as a defense of their administration of the post. They make no mention of the non-military aspects of the critical remarks signed simply T. P. The historical problem: What was the Key West military installation really like in 1834?

Both of the articles appeared in the *Military and Naval Magazine of the United States*, Volume III, 1834. The first was in March, pp. 19-20; and the second in June, p. 308.

*The Military and Naval Magazine of the United States.*

Volume III. March, 1834. PP. 19-20.

## KEY WEST.

To the Editor of the *Military and Naval Magazine*.

SIR:—Key West having been lately re-garrisoned by a company of Infantry, it may not be uninteresting to your military readers to be presented with a short account relating to its history. Key West is one of a number of Islands known by the appellation of "Florida Keys." It is situated in latitude  $24^{\circ} 8' N$ , and in longitude  $82^{\circ} 6' W$ . Its length (from E. to W.) is about  $4\frac{1}{2}$  miles, and varying from one half to a mile in breadth. Its population, comprising all classes of inhabitants, is about 250. There are but few houses in the town, and these are principally situated on the beach. The inhabitants are frequently placed in unpleasant circumstances arising from an occasional failure in the supply of water; they depend entirely upon the quantity of rain-water which they can collect, and it is obvious that in a season of drought, where little rain falls, their distress arising from a scarcity

of this necessary element must be great. In these seasons of privation, the nearest supply is obtained from Havana, but this city being situated at a considerable distance from Key West, the price demanded for water brought thence, is of course considerably augmented. It is true, that in the centre of this Island there are several springs of water, but these are of such a brackish quality as to be rendered totally unfit for culinary purposes.

The only importance of this island consists in its harbor; it has no commerce, neither as yet has the labor of the husbandman brought its soil into cultivation: its general aspect is the same as when it was first brought into existence, excepting where the habitations of man have supplanted the vigorous growth of the forest, or have redeemed the sandy shore from its pristine nakedness. Here are a United States Court, a Custom House, and two Lighthouses, though I should not imagine that the duties received at the Custom House are more than sufficient to defray the expenses of its officers, together with those on attendance at the Light-houses. Its dues are derived from wrecked cargoes of foreign vessels, which are brought into the harbor and there disposed of, either by public sale, or by private composition with the owners, and the consequence is that every person resident on the island is engaged in one out of only two occupations; he is either a Government officer, or he is a wrecker. The ownership of this Island is claimed conjointly by four individuals: about three years since, after a time in which the shipping suffered heavy damages and loss, and when the coffers of the Custom House were unusually laden, it was represented to the Government that unless a company of United States troops were sent to the island as a protection, it was to be feared that the funds of the said Custom House would fall a prey to the lawless hands of piratical intruders. At great expense, and at some inconvenience, a command was in consequence established at Key West, though their utility in such a spot is more than doubtful. The island itself is engirt with a protection of far more avail than can be derived from companies or regiments of soldiers; and, while the dangerous reefs by which it is surrounded continue in existence, it is but at a very small point where danger may be apprehended from any invasion. And at this point, viz: the channel of the harbor, surely much more effective precautions might be provided by shipping, than are furnished by one company of soldiers, stationed more than a mile from the only pass likely to be disputed. The Government have expended about \$40,000 upon this post, though its present conveniences would not betoken an expenditure of one twentieth part of that sum. There is a large frame building erected, covered in only by a roof,

and intended as quarters for the officers, but no workman has for a length of time back, plied his busy tool upon the edifice, and now it is fast going to rottenness and decay. Should it ever reach a period of completion, it is extremely probable that the first storm which may range among these desolate isles, will lay it prostrate with the ground, and reduce it to total ruin. As it exists at present, it would be difficult to assign its appropriate place among the orders of Architecture; in the Eastern States they would "guess" it was intended for a meeting house, by reason of a sanctified looking steeple erected on its roof. Besides this unfinished edifice, there are three or four miserable buildings, in which the officers and men are quartered; therein to be devoured by cockroaches, sand-flies, mosquitoes, and chigoes. These latter insects are by no means of a nature or quality to be trifled with, as the feet of many persons, citizens alike with soldiers, can testify. The climate is so hot, even at this period of the year, (January 14th,) that summer clothing is not one whit too cool. The troops are obliged to retire to rest with the going down of the sun, and ensconce themselves with all haste under the protection of mosquito bars; or, failing in this, they have to wage unceasing war with those insect tribes, whose aggressions are so troublesome, and whose arms are so potent — potent in that they possess the power to destroy comfort and to chase away sleep from the eyes of their victims. These are annoyances, together with one of a different species, but not one iota more agreeable in its effects, and which consists in the immoderate and exorbitant price demanded alike for articles of necessity and luxury. Talk of protection, indeed! An uninterested person would suppose that, instead of being the protectors of others, the troops themselves have a right to demand protection from them, suffering as they do from a combination of so many hardships.

Yours,

T. P.

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KEY WEST.

SIR:—In the March number of your Magazine, you have admitted a communication over the signature of "T. P." purporting to be an "*account relating*" to the history of Key West, which is calculated to mislead your

“military readers.” The writer has not well gathered his materials, for a travelling journalist, as his statements show; and if he be a *military resident*, he is most certainly an indifferent observer, and has not taken a very judicious step towards *relieving himself* from all the “*potent hardships*,” which have combined “to destroy his comfort.”

The Government has not expended “*forty thousand dollars*” upon the post at Key West; and it is possible, that if *twenty times* that sum had been expended, the “*conveniences would not betoken*,” in the estimation of T. P., a better proportion, than what he has already assigned.

The “large frame building erected” (and he, might have added, upon a brick and stone basement, of 7 feet height) was built according to instructions from the proper Department, and “*should it ever reach a period of completion*,” will be as comfortable as any barracks in the United States; and “*it is extremely probable, that the first storm which may range among*” those “*desolate isles*,” will leave it *upright*, notwithstanding it is so “fast going to rottenness and decay,” although its *style* of “*architecture*,” may not be understood or appreciated by every body from “*down east*.” The observatory which T. P.’s fruitful imagination likens unto “*a sanctified looking steeple*,” should lead him to pleasant reflections, from association, if he could not perceive its utility in a military point of view, for purposes of reconnoissance: — “*Besides this unfinished edifice, there are*” seven (instead of “*three or four*”) other “*buildings*,” in which “*officers and men*,” have been quartered for twelve months, without being “*devoured by cock-roaches, sand-flies, mosquitos and chigoes*,” having the all sufficient “*protection of mosquito bars*” and a good police.

During a residence of two years and three months at Key West, we have not experienced the necessity of retiring “*to rest with the going down of the sun*;” on the contrary, the troops did not “*ensconce themselves under the protection of mosquito bars*,” until 9 o’clock P.M., for the reason, that the men required more time for *recreation*, than the regulations permitted, — to obtain which, tattoo was deferred for thirty minutes, during that part of the year which requires that it should be beaten at half past 8 o’clock; — nor were we subjected to “*annoyance*” from “*sand-flies and chigoes*,” to the extent implied by your correspondent, at Key West, but at other places at the south, we have found them, as well as a *variety of other insects*, somewhat troublesome: and lastly, it has been within the knowledge of the undersigned, that

the troops on one occasion, at least, were useful in extending "*protection*" to the inhabitants of the island: and we did not "*suppose*" that any "*uninterested person,*" could think "*the troops themselves*" had "*a right to demand protection from them;*" we thought them better soldiers, than to so seem.

Respectfully yours,

J. M. GLASELL, Major U. S. A.

F. D. NEWCOMB, Lt. A. Q. M. U. S. A.

P. S. — Please request such papers as have noticed T. P's production, to give this a passing glance, and oblige the writer.

J. M. G.

F. D. N.

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