Tequesta:

Robert E. Lee and the Civil War*

By Bruce Catton

We are now beginning to observe the centennial anniversary of the American Civil War. This anniversary has a peculiarly poignant meaning in the South, if for no better reason than the fact that most of the fighting took place on Southern soil, but it is just as significant in the North. The Civil War, after all, was the most costly war our country ever engaged in; it took more than 600,000 lives — more lives, indeed, than were lost in all our other wars put together — and its cost is shared by the two sections of the country, a remembrance and a responsibility that can never be forgotten. The victory and the defeat, the blame and the suffering, are things shared by all of us. We approach this centennial with humility and with an undying reverence for the valor and the dedication of the men and women on both sides of the Mason and Dixon line who met the challenge of the 1860's.

I suppose the first question that occurs to any thoughtful American who looks back on that tragic chapter in our history is simply this: Why do we celebrate this affair? Why keep alive its memories, which are so grim? What do we gain by recalling those four years in which brother fought against brother, in which neither side gained all that it had hoped to gain and in which so many young lives and so many ancient dreams went down into the darkness together?

Let us begin by getting straight on one thing. We have nothing to celebrate. This is not a college football game or a heavyweight prize-fight that we are talking about; we are not worried about Who Won, or about what the final score was. Instead of celebrating something, we are performing a rite of commemoration. The heroism that leads men to die for an ideal — the quiet bravery that leads women to send sons and husbands off to

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fight for no material gain whatever — these qualities know neither victory nor defeat, and in looking back across a century at the Civil War era we are not thinking in terms of victory or defeat. We are simply doing our part to commemorate the most significant and moving single episode in American history — the time in which, at almost incalculable cost, a great nation at last came to birth.

So do not be bothered by this question of celebration. It is not a celebration we are talking about. It is a commemoration — a tribute which this generation is bound to pay to a great generation that lived one hundred years ago: a generation that lived hard and suffered much, enduring an incomprehensible agony in order that our own generation might enjoy the happy life and the broad horizons which are the birthright of every living American.

Before we get into the detail about precisely what it is that we are commemorating, we might give a little thought to the particular part which the state of Florida played. And just here I think one of the most fascinating parts of the whole business deals with a might-have-been — with a singular episode which came within a hair's breadth of making Florida, rather than South Carolina, the state in which the bitter antagonism of the late pre-war years finally brought about the beginning of a four-years' war.

The Civil War almost began in Florida — to be precise, at Fort Pickens, a masonry work which in 1861 was mounted at the western end of Santa Rosa island, at the entrance to the harbor of Pensacola. Fort Pickens rather than Fort Sumter could have been the place where the whole business came to a showdown. It would have been so if Secretary of State William H. Seward, instead of President Lincoln, could have had his way. In the spring of 1861 the Northern government in Washington and the Southern government in Montgomery, Alabama, were following collision courses; one government was prepared to fight rather than to admit that the Federal Union could be dissolved, and the other government was prepared to fight rather than to admit that the states of the Southern Confederacy were not free and independent. By the month of April, both governments were committed. There would be a war unless one government or the other backed down, and neither one was going to yield one inch. The only question, by that time, was where the clash would take place. As things worked out the clash occurred at Fort Sumter. It very nearly occurred at Fort Pickens instead.

The Federal government had a garrison in Fort Sumter, which lay inside the entrance to Charleston harbor. South Carolina had seceded from the old

Union and had joined the Confederacy, and as long as the United States flag flew over that fort, Southern independence was not quite a visible, accomplished and accepted fact. And so Fort Sumter became the great symbol of the conflict between the two governments.

But Florida had also seceded from the old Union, and the Federal government had a garrison in Fort Pickens. This was just as much a denial of Confederate independence as Fort Sumter was; as long as the United States flag flew over Fort Pickens, the Confederacy's claim to independence was imperfect. Florida was just as much out of the Union as South Carolina; Fort Pickens was just as visible a denial of Southern independence as Fort Sumter. I think we can profitably spend a few minutes examining the Fort Pickens situation.

The problem at Fort Sumter (as far as President Lincoln was concerned) was that the Fort lay inside the harbor. South Carolina guns commanded the entrance. To put supplies or reinforcements into Fort Sumter, Lincoln would have to pass the South Carolina batteries, which would assuredly open fire the moment the attempt to pass was made. But Fort Pickens was a little different. To begin with, a Federal warship, with troops and supplies aboard, lay at anchor near the fort, able to land men and food and ammunition at a moment's notice. In addition, Fort Pickens was at the entrance to the harbor. Florida and the other Southern states had mounted guns to bear on Fort Pickens, but these guns did not command the harbor entrance. It was quite possible for the Federal government to reinforce Fort Pickens to its heart's content; neither Florida nor the Southern Confederacy itself could prevent it. Fort Sumter, in other words, was isolated, and Fort Pickens was not.

When Abraham Lincoln became president he announced his intention to "hold, occupy and possess" all Federal forts which had not already been taken over by the Confederacy. There were only two forts of any real significance — Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens. The showdown could take place in either one. The big difference was that Fort Pickens was accessible and Fort Sumter was not. Should both forts be held, or just one? If just one, which one?

A majority of Lincoln's cabinet, in the week after his inauguration, felt that Fort Sumter should be given up. The situation there was critical. Major Robert Anderson, who commanded the little garrison in Fort Sumter, reported that he would have to surrender within a few weeks unless he could get more supplies. His bacon and hardtack were just about gone, and unless

he got more his men would be starved out. To give him more, the government would have to run the gauntlet of the guns at the mouth of Charleston harbor.

So it was argued — and by no one more strongly than by Secretary Seward — that Fort Sumter should be evacuated. If the Northern government wanted to demonstrate to the world that it was not giving way to the demands of the Confederacy (said Seward) let it reinforce Fort Pickens, which it could do without difficulty. Let the showdown take place in Florida rather than in South Carolina. And so, early in the month of April, orders were sent down to the Federal warship which lay at the mouth of Pensacola harbor to land the troops and the barrels of food which it had aboard.

This was an important step. If the Federal government showed to all the world that it was going to hold this Florida fort even at the cost of war, it could then abandon Fort Sumter without appearing to confess that the Confederacy was in fact a separate nation which could demand and obtain the surrender of a United States fort. It could take its stand, in other words, in a place where it had a chance to win — Fort Pickens — rather than at Fort Sumter, where it was bound to lose. For a brief time, a few weeks after Lincoln took office, it seemed that Fort Pickens would be the spot where the big test would come.

But, as so often happens with military people in a time of crisis, things got fouled up. The orders that came down to the warship in Pensacola harbor came late, and when they came they were addressed to the captain of the warship but were signed by the commanding general of the Army, Winfield Scott. The naval captain who read them quite naturally decided that he would obey no orders from Generals; he would heed only orders from the Secretary of the Navy, the one cabinet officer who legally had authority over him. He refused to land men and supplies; and although it was a week or so before Washington knew it, the move that would have obviated the necessity to make a stand at Fort Sumter was not made.

I will not bother you with the technical details, which are somewhat involved. It is enough to say that for Seward's plan to work, the public, visible reinforcement of Fort Pickens would have had to take place before it was necessary to evacuate or re-provision Fort Sumter, and because of a rather complicated mix-up this did not happen. In the end, the Lincoln administration concluded that it would have to make its stand at Fort Sumter, and Fort Pickens took a secondary place. Reinforcements were sent to Fort

Sumter, the South Carolina gunners commanded by General Beauregard bombarded and forced the surrender of the Fort, and the war was begun. But it could very easily have begun — a week later, a month later: who knows? — at Fort Pickens. Only an accident kept Florida rather than South Carolina from being the state where the shooting started.

As a matter of entirely unimportant fact, it is just possible that the first shots were actually fired in Florida. On January 8, 1861, when the Federal garrison at Pensacola, commanded by Lieutenant Adam Slemmer, still occupied old Fort Barrancas, on the mainland, a sentry on duty one night saw, or thought he saw, a group of men approaching the fort with evil intent. He fired his musket, and some of his fellow soldiers also fired — whether at Florida militiamen, at misguided amateurs, or simply at shadows it is hard to know at this distance — and if an attempt to seize the fort was in fact being made that night, it evaporated and nothing more was heard of it. But infantry weapons were fired, three or four months before the firing on Fort Sumter, on Florida soil, in the dead of night. If Florida now wishes to make something of this claim that the war's first shots were fired in this state, I am sure this is an affair to be settled with the good people of South Carolina.

In any case, regardless of the specific time and place, the war did at last begin. The bombardment and subsequent surrender of Fort Sumter touched off the American Civil War — the greatest time of testing the American people were ever called upon to endure. And now, a century later, we are beginning to commemorate the events of that terrible conflict.

Why are we doing this? What is there about that war that cost us so much which compels us to go back to it a century later? Do we not risk stirring up old bitternesses and animosities which a hundred years of peace have at last laid to rest?

I do not think we risk any such thing. The Civil War indeed was a tragic experience — and that is precisely why it is worth studying and commemorating. We learn from it what we always learn from the study of a great and moving tragedy. Somehow the truth about what we are and what we mean is bound up in the story of those four haunted years. The precise formulation of this truth may elude us but the truth itself is there, unmistakably expressed in the immense story of meanness and heroism, of wisdom and folly, the story of a great nation struggling to enact its most significant tragedy.

Tragedy, to be sure, is not quite in key with what we consider the American spirit. Our story is the success story. It has been from the beginning. We live by it. We conquered a continent, we defied the kings and the powers of Europe, we won our independence, we made democracy work when nobody believed that it would work, we became the richest and happiest people in all the world — and deeply embedded in our unspoken faith is the belief that the future is very largely in our keeping. All of that is not a tragic story; it is just the reverse. It has moments of trial, moments of doubt, moments of great sacrifice, to be sure, but the happy ending is built into it. That is what we are conditioned to. Things are always going to come out right in the end.

But here, in the middle of it, there is a different note — the story whose happy ending somehow dropped out, the story in which things did not automatically come out all right for everybody when the final paragraph was reached. This is a tragedy, a story of heartbreak and loss, of suffering and death, about which a century of study has led us to no firm conclusions. This is no blithe success story we are engaged with; this is the *Hamlet* or *King Lear* of the American past, the abiding reminder that victory and defeat are no more than opposite sides of the same coin, the unforgettable experience which teaches something basic about life which we might not know otherwise. And it is this tragedy which will not let us rest.

Think of this tragedy, for the moment, in terms of a symbol — in terms of Robert E. Lee, the great soldier from Virginia.

Lee was a self-contained gentleman, a quiet aristocrat, who lived his life by a serene code and who listened always to the voice of duty. One day he found himself compelled to make a choice. It was a hard choice to make; at the moment of making it Lee commented that he did not believe in slavery, doubted the right of secession, and was not altogether certain that if the right did exist this was the moment to exercise it. Yet he was fated, somehow, to make the choice which he did make — to abide by the deep inner loyalty which he felt to his own state, even though the nation he served so long was calling him; and although we may now, if we wish, say that he was mistaken, we can have nothing but everlasting respect for the motives that ruled him and for the spirit in which he made his decision. And so Lee did what he had to do, occupied the center of a great stage for four years, saw everything he had fought for defeated and lost, and then lived out a few final years in the quiet college town of Lexington, Virginia.

Lee was a tragic figure in the most profound sense of the word. Not even Shakespeare ever called on himself to cope with a more tragic story than Lee's. Yet we do not, in any excess of condescension "feel sorry" for Lee. He lived his life to the full, used his great gifts to the limit in a cause to which he had devoted his soul, and if he did not find final success and happiness he did attain greatness. His story is tragic in the classical sense because he was called on to contend with an overmastering fate — to be an instrument used by a force greater than himself, with the very qualities that made him great leading him at last to an achievement he had not contemplated.

Yet the real tragedy of the Civil War goes deeper than the story of the principal actors. It has to do with the people themselves — the great mass of Americans, of North and of South alike, who had to play their parts in the incomprehensible drama of bloodshed and suffering for four weary years, meeting a challange that nobody had warned them about, paying with the last full measure of devotion for a national experience whose real significance we are still trying to determine.

Let us think of them for a moment. In the United States in 1861 there were approximately 31 million people — men and women and children, Northerners and Southerners, black and white together. Of these more than 600,000 lost their lives. I know of no way to get an accurate total for the number that was wounded, but it was immense. The heartache and misery that descended on the people who knew and loved those who died or were maimed are simply beyond human computation, but it is hardly going too far to say that there was not a home in America which did not become intimate with grief and anguish during those four years.

It all began so gaily. I will not bother to recite the old story of the music and the flags and the cheers with which the war itself was greeted. We are all familiar with it, we known how the young recruits marched brightly away, so very sure that they were bound out on a great romantic adventure — an adventure which led them to cruel reality, to pain and hardship and death, rubbing off all the romance, leaving the flags stained and tattered, bringing the lilting marching tunes down to sad songs like "Lorena" and "Tenting Tonight." The young men who went off to fight in our Civil War were ground down by the pitiless abrasive of conflict as cruelly as any soldiers who ever fought. They paid for that episode, and they paid for . . . exactly what? Can any of us say, with certainty? We

only know that as we follow their path we are following the great tragic hour in American history.

For it was with these people as it was with those who led them: they had to contend with fate itself, sacrificing themselves utterly so that something wholly beyond their comprehension might take place; people who believed in the happy ending taking their part in a human narrative which carried them through grief and pain to the farthest limit of disillusionment.

When we reflect on all of this we are bound to wonder — why do we look back on that experience with such fixed attention? What is there here that we feel this need to commemorate, to examine with such care, to enshrine in books and poems and dramas? Is it not, after all, something better forgotten?

The trouble is that we cannot forget it. It is built into us. It is a national memory that can never be ignored; and the point to make, once more, is that we remember it and return to it and live with it precisely because it is such a deep tragic story.

For there is a very strange thing about great tragedy. It does not leave one depressed, disheartened and discouraged. Its final note is not one of denial or despair. No man arises from *Hamlet* feeling that the final answer to the drama he has just witnessed is one of frustration and futility. On the contrary, it is exactly through the great tragedies that we get our most significant and uplifting experiences. For although tragedy does show man contending in vain against fate, fighting a battle in which he must lose, it also shows us that he has something magnificent and unconquerable in him; and it is that magnificence of the human spirit — that conviction that it is the unconquerable something which finally matters — which at last stays with us. There is something in man that triumphs even in the hour of disaster, something which even fate itself cannot defeat.

We cannot sharply define the knowledge that comes to us from re-living this great tragedy of ours, but we do know that it is priceless. It teaches us something we would not otherwise know about the terms on which human life is lived and on which, at times, it must be surrendered. It gets us away from easy, thoughtless optimism, to be sure, but it gives us something deeper; the realization that these Hamlets and Lears, these high privates in blue and gray, won something for all of us even while they were losing everything for themselves. To know that there are values beyond values in this world is the beginning of maturity.

Perhaps it is wrong to say that the Civil War divided this country. The war came because the country was already divided; and actually, in a strange and mystical way, the Civil War now unites us — unites us by the sharing of a great and unique experience. It has given to all of us, North and South together, a moving and incomprehensible memory. It remains always upon our conscience, just below the surface. It touches everything we do; it helps to condition every emotional attitude we take. It has led us, as a people, a great distance along the road to that maturity of wisdom which is above all other things necessary for a great democracy.

At the very end of the war, in his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln summed up the war's mysterious, haunting quality better than anyone else has ever done. Remember his words:

". . . Neither party expected for the war the magnitude nor the duration that it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself might cease. Each looked for an easier triumph and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God. And each invokes His aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered. The prayer of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes."

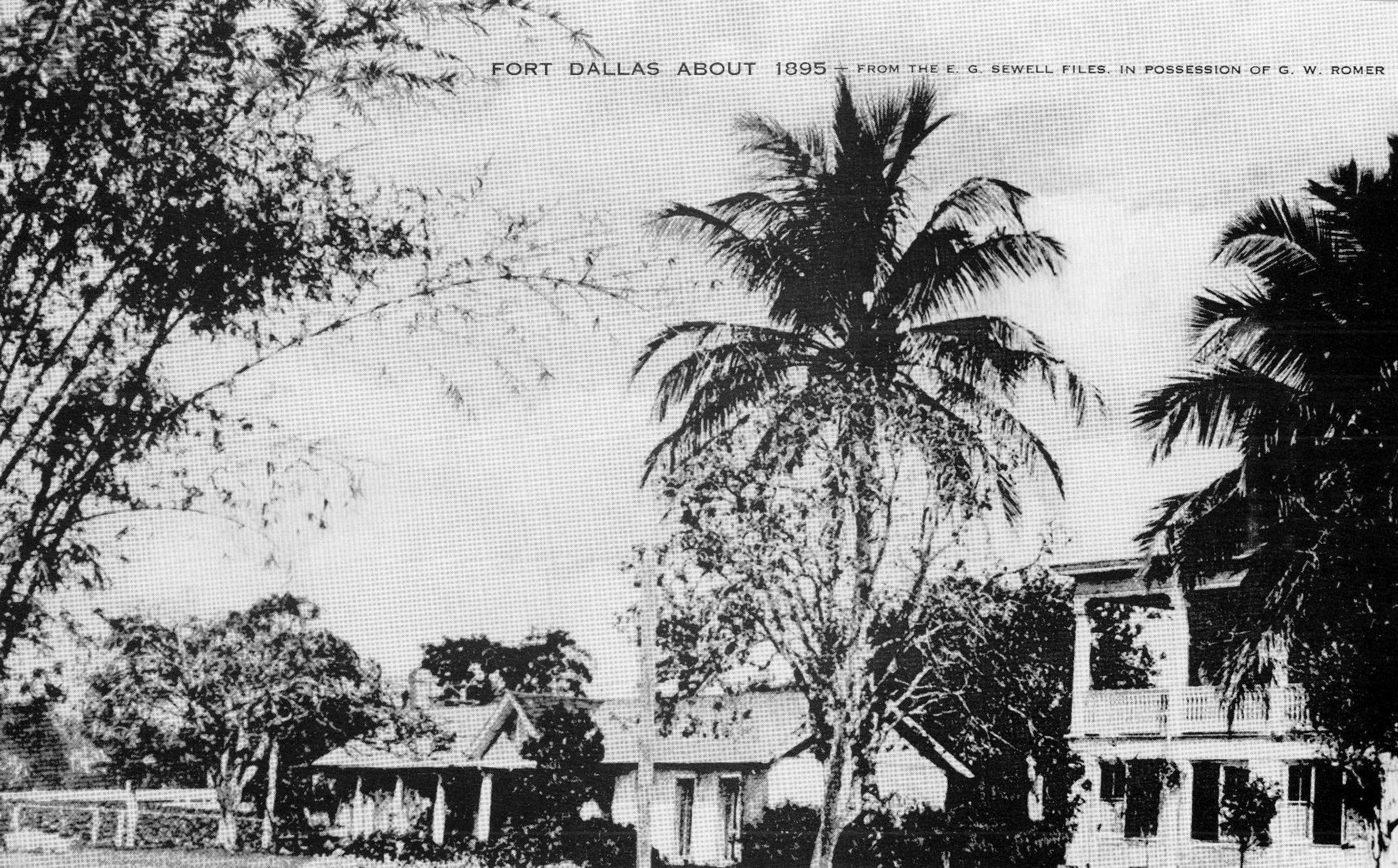
That, I think, is what we reach for, when we continue to examine this greatest of all experiences in our national history. The Almighty has His own purposes; are we, when we continue to examine the Civil War, doing everything much less than search for some clue to His purposes? I think that is what we are really after, and it is worth all of the effort we can give it.

In the events of the war we see the spirit of man contending against the infinite — the spirit of man, buoyed up by the belief that there is more to this life of ours than anything that can easily be weighed or measured, the spirit that believes that man best saves his life by losing it for something larger than himself, the spirit that in the final agony must confess: The Almighty has His own purposes . . . and we, as His children, are bound to serve them at whatever cost.

We did gain something in that war; something more, even, than the demonstration that men of both sides who died on those storm-swept fields were men of uncommon valor and fidelity. We gained homely things; a new understanding of human unity and brotherhood, a new realization that when

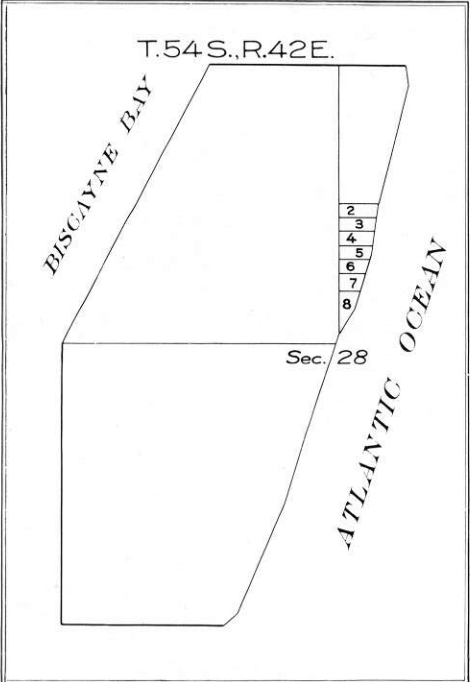
men make war it is war itself, and not the visible foe under the other flag, which is the real enemy. And we gained with all of this a broader base for our citizenship and our country: a base on which we can yet build a nation worthy of the dreams of all the generations of Americans.

As we enter the four years of commemoration of that war, I hope you will always see the whole struggle in human terms. Always before us, as we look into the past, there are the great ranks of the nameless men who marched out of mystery and into mystery, out of life and into death, a century ago. They are worth looking at; and as we look I suggest that we listen closely. For those men who lived so long ago, and who struggled so greatly against something greater than themselves, were part of an undying procession, men who marched bravely on the undiscovered road to tomorrow. And as they marched, they marched to the sound of trumpets.



FORT DALLAS ABOUT 1895 — FROM THE E. G. SEWELL FILES, IN POSSESSION OF G. W. ROMER

PLAT OF TRACTS



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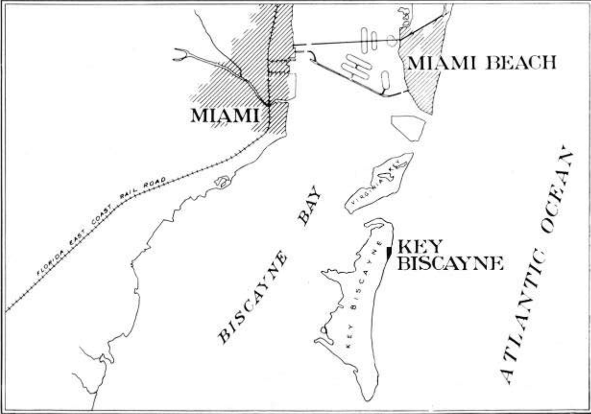

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