

Sketches of the Florida Keys, 1829-1833

Edited, with an Introduction by

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When Dr. Benjamin Beard Strobel left his native Charleston on September 5, 1829 to start a new life in Key West¹, Florida, he was just under twenty-six years of age. Equipped with a degree from the Medical College of South Carolina and holding a diploma dated April 4, 1826,² he had perfected his medical skills and attained a measure of professional maturity by two years of practice in his home city. Just why he chose to abandon his Charleston practice and his professional associations for the uncertainties of Florida's farthest outpost is never made clear. Perhaps there were domestic pressures; he had left the Lutheran Church upon his marriage to Mary Jane Stewart, a Presbyterian, in June, 1827.³ Perhaps he had aroused the hostility of his colleagues in the Medical Society of South Carolina, to which he had been admitted on August 1 of the same year. The Minutes of the Society show him to have been outspoken and frequently "on his feet." It is more probable, however, that he was drawn by the love of adventure, a conjecture supported by his later activities. Only after he had returned to Charleston in 1833 did he write vaguely: "Circumstances not necessary for me now to detail determined me to leave Charleston in the year 1829. I was some time in doubt as to what course I should steer when, having heard that there was a prospect of doing something in my profession at Key West, I determined at once to go there."⁴

¹ In the columns of the *Charleston Courier* of May 2, 1837 Strobel gave an account of his voyage from Charleston to Key West aboard the schooner, *Jane*, in September, 1829. In the "shipping news" of the *Courier* of September 7 the sailing of the *Jane* on September 5 is recorded. A storm off Edisto Island forced the vessel to put in at Savannah for extensive repairs. Here she remained until September 12 when the voyage was resumed. (*Ibid.*, Sept. 11, 1829) She probably arrived in Key West about September 20.

² The Medical College of South Carolina had opened in the fall of 1824 and graduated its first class in the following spring. Prior to enrolling at this institution, however, Strobel had attended the Medical school of the University of Pennsylvania for a term, 1825-5. Letter, Frances R. Houston, Secretary, Medical Alumni Society, Univ. of Pennsylvania, to E. A. Hammond, May 15, 1964.

³ The marriage took place on June 28. Entry in Schirmer Diary, Vol. II, for June 28. This is an unpublished document, which may be seen in the Library of the South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

⁴ *Charleston Courier*, May 2, 1937.

Strobel's arrival in Key West occurred during one of the deadliest yellow fever epidemics ever to strike the island. The demand for his services was therefore immediate and urgent. Presumably he returned to Charleston at the earliest opportunity to purchase additional supplies. His professional card, first printed in the *Key West Register*, October 15, 1829, informed the inhabitants that he was settling permanently in Key West to practice "medicine, surgery, and midwifery." It added, "Dr. S. will return on or about the 1st of December next [1829] with a complete assortment of Drugs and Medicines."⁵

Dr. Strobel maintained his residence in Key West until the fall of 1832, making only occasional visits to Charleston. His interests were manifold. For more than a year he edited the island newspaper, the *Gazette*, but somehow found time to carry on his medical practice, serve on the Town Council, and assist in a number of civic enterprises. With the return of the army contingent early in 1831 he became surgeon to the army post, and in 1832,⁶ when Key West received a new town charter, he became the health and quarantine officer for the town.⁷

Beyond these activities, Dr. Strobel was an eager student of natural history. His scientific observations as well as his skill in collecting specimens of Florida fauna were extremely useful to John J. Audubon and Dr. John Bachman, the latter an eminent Charleston churchman and naturalist.⁸ The correspondence of these two contains frequent references to Dr. Strobel and his assistance in their researches. But his interests encompassed, in addition, the whole human scene, and his commentaries on the people he came to know reveal a keen insight into human behavior.

Strobel's residence in Key West came at a time when the island was attracting to its narrow confines some of the worst and some of the best of human beings. The remoteness of the place and its casual concern for law and order offered encouragement for some whose activities and propensities would

⁵ *Key West Register*, December 31, 1829. No copies of the *Register* from September 3 to December 31 have survived. It was customary for newspapers of the period to indicate at the end of a public notice the date on which it had first appeared; hence the verification for the date, October 15.

⁶ *American State Papers*, Class V, *Military Affairs*, IV, 202, 206-7.

⁷ *Key West Gazette*, March 14, July 25, 1832.

⁸ Upon his first visit to Charleston in the summer of 1831 Audubon had met Bachman pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church. The two men became fast friends and as a consequence co-authored the monumental work *The Viviparous Quadrupeds of North America*, 3 vols., New York, 1846-54.

have placed them just beyond the bounds of decency and respectability.⁹ It was doubtless a refuge for some who were fleeing from justice, and for others whose lives had come to naught elsewhere. Key West had its complement of "characters." On the other hand, many upright, law-abiding people sought their fortunes there, bringing with them social and moral values which generally characterized American communities in the early nineteenth century.

On the eve of his departure from Key West late in 1832, Strobel printed in the final issue of the *Gazette* his farewell to the people he had come to know.¹⁰ He defended his editorial policy as the only proper course for an honest man. He deplored the evil which he had frequently sought to expose. But he gave grateful recognition to those Key Westers "who are determined to enforce the laws of their country, and to protect the unfortunate who may be cast upon our shores." Then, with a touch of sentimentality he paid tribute to certain ones who had been his friends:

The friendship which they have extended, and the kindness and courtesy manifested gives rise to a feeling of regret even at separating from Key West. Regret at separation from Key West!—the much abused, Villainous Key West!—the horde of pirates and robbers! Aye, even so. For here has he [Strobel himself] seen and felt the gentle charities of life; here, when he arrived as a stranger and without friends, he found many who were willing to aid; and here, by the patronage of those friends, has he for three years been enabled to support himself. These are obligations not easily forgotten or cancelled. Much as he rejoices in the anticipation of returning to his native land—of revisiting the domestic fireside, and of rekindling the affections of youth—the subscriber cannot, as the ship recedes from the shore, but feel a regret that he is about to quit that shore forever, and to leave behind him many to whom he has been united by ties of friendship. To err is human:—the subscriber

⁹ Much of the folly of Key West citizens was upsetting to Strobel. His indignation was especially reserved, however, for the scandalous practices of some of the wreckers who used the island as a base of operations. These were the adventuring types who rescued the ships and salvaged the cargoes which had run aground in the treacherous waters of the Florida Reef. But wrecking had become the island's most lucrative enterprise and one could scarcely attack it with impunity. See E. A. Hammond, "Wreckers and Wrecking on the Florida Reef, 1829-1832," *Fla. Hist. Quart.*, XLI, No. 3 (Jan. 1963), 239-273.

¹⁰ One may infer from the temper of this column that Strobel's editorial comments had from time to time aroused the ire of wreckers and their associates. It is also clear that his unwillingness to portray Key West as an unblemished paradise had annoyed many of the settlers.

cannot plead an exemption from the common lot of humanity: he therefore trusts that his friends will deal charitably with his faults. To his enemies, he has no apology to make; they must take him as they have found him.—He requests, however, of all, when he is absent and there is no one here to defend him, that they will bear in mind the following, “Speak of me as I am, nothing EXTENUATE, —Nor set down ought [sic] in malice.¹¹ B. B. Strobel

When Strobel had finally settled himself once more in Charleston in the summer of 1833 he found time to record his recollections and impressions of the Key West he'd left behind. To these he gave the title, “Sketches of Florida,” and then submitted them to a Charleston publisher, expecting to have them brought out in book form. In the summer of 1833, however, he permitted the *Charleston Mercury* to publish certain portions of the manuscript. These appeared anonymously in serial form in June and July of that year.

The book failed to materialize. Some four years later the *Charleston Courier*, in response to the immense public interest in the comparatively unknown territory in which the Second Seminole War was being waged, obtained the Strobel manuscript and published a series of the “Sketches” in May, 1837. This time they bore the author's by-line. But since the manuscript was lost it is impossible to determine just how much the *Courier* left unpublished. We know only that the newspaper presented the material in sixteen installments and in so doing preserved a valuable source for the early history of the Florida Keys.¹² These accounts represent the earliest effort to provide a complete description of Key West and its people.

The “Sketches” from the series, which have been selected for presentation here, contain descriptions of that portion of Strobel's Florida voyage which

¹¹ These lines will be recognized as those uttered by Othello, just before his death. *Othello*, Act V, Scene 2. This was not, as his affairs turned out, Strobel's final farewell to Key West. He was to return in January, 1833 to join an exploring party on its way to Charlotte Harbor area. He came back to Key West where on March 23 he fatally wounded D. C. Pinkham in a duel. He left Key West a few days later never to return. See the *Charleston Courier*, April 10, 1833 for an account of the tragic meeting.

¹² Strobel is known to have made two additional trips to Florida. In 1836 he was Regimental Surgeon to Col. A. H. Brisbane's Regiment of South Carolina Volunteers, which spent the late winter of 1836-7 in central Florida. The *Charleston Courier*, February 11, 1836. See also M. M. Cohen, *Notices of Florida and the Campaigns*, 138 *et passim*. He traveled to St. Augustine to study a yellow fever epidemic which ravaged the town in the fall of 1839. His observations were subsequently recorded in B. B. Strobel, *An Essay on the Subject of the Yellow Fever*, Charleston, 1940. Strobel died in Charleston on March 24, 1849.

began in Savannah, after the ship's repairs had been made,¹³ and continued as far as Indian Key; Strobel's first night in Indian Key; and some accounts of unusual personalities whom he encountered in Key West between 1829 and 1832. They indicate the great variety of persons present among the early inhabitants. Some were undoubtedly the human ingredient which supplied color to an otherwise drab scene. The items are presented, much as Strobel wrote them, with only minimal editorial notations, particularly in the matter of punctuation.

[From Savannah to Indian Key]

Our repairs having been completed, we set sail from Savannah on Saturday the [12th] day of September. We ran down the river that night, and anchored near Tybee light. On Sunday morning we took our departure; and after clearing the land, steering a southerly course, running down inside of the Gulf Stream, with pleasant breezes, until we reached the latitude of Cape Canaveral, when we stood in for the land, and made it a few miles South of the Cape. The coast from Canaveral to Cape Florida, is a bold one; vessels may stand in very near, without risk from rocks or shoals. I have heard skillful navigators say, "that a vessel of considerable draft might be run ashore on any part of the beach, and a landing effected from her bowsprit." This expression must, however, be taken in a figurative sense. I have seen vessels ashore 200 yards from the beach, and would not think it safe to venture nearer than half a mile, as the water does not in all places deepen suddenly. We kept along in sight of land from Canaveral to Cape Florida. When about half way between the two Capes, we encountered the severest squall I ever witnessed. It had been calm and close all day; the sea was perfectly smooth and tranquil—our vessel lay as still and quiet as if at anchor. During the whole day she could not have progressed a mile. The sun appeared to creep tardily on his course, and poured down upon us his hottest and most intense rays. Our vessel being small, our defense from the sun's heat was but slender, and we were literally roasted alive. All day we had been praying for wind no matter from what quarter, so long as it came to cool and refresh us. Long we had waited in anxious expectation, but it came at last. The orb of day, like a globe of fire, was just sinking behind the land, and touching with golden tints its outline, when a heavy black cloud arose, and obscured his setting beams. As his last rays fell upon the borders of the cloud, it appeared as if tinged with fire.

¹³ See note 1 above. The *Charleston Courier*, 11 September 1829, noted that the *Jane* had put in at Savannah for repairs, having sprung her mainmast off Edisto Island.

The cloud continued to rise with astonishing rapidity, and soon overspread the heavens. It appeared to be agitated by some fearful commotion—as its dark masses revolved in quick succession, the angry lightning leaping from their folds. The seabirds testified their instinctive fears, by loud and prolonged screams, as with hurried flight, and with great agitation, they sought the land in search of shelter. The loud thunder rolled in terrific peals. Darkness shut in the land, and covered the face of the waters. Our little bark, left alone on the ocean, continued to struggle bravely onward. Everything was made ready for the coming contest—the men ran to and fro in active bustle—hatches were closed, and sails were handed and clued. The rain now burst upon us in torrents—the drops, lit up by vivid flashes of lightning, sparkled like diamonds in the air. Next came the furious wind, sweeping in majestic foam across the bosom of the mighty deep, whilst our vessel with seeming consciousness, trembled and quivered as the sea rose around her. How fearful is the mighty mass of waters when agitated by the elements.—How angry and fretful the sea when covered with its foaming white crests! What a piteous sight to see the helpless bark tossed upon its bosom, and struggling onward amidst wave and storm; The violence of the wind increased to such a degree, that “all sails were taken in,” and we were compelled to “lay to” (as the sailors have it) under bare poles. Why should they call it “lying to” when a vessel left at the mercy of the elements is pitching, lurching, and rolling in every direction; I, who am not skilled in nautical lore, cannot pretend to say. The gale continued with unabated fury for several hours, after which the winds abated, and the clouds disappeared. We had now, however, the worst of the difficulty to contend with. “A dead calm” ensued, the sea was rolling “mountain high,” whilst there was not a breath of air to steady our vessel. This state of things could not last long. The wind having abated, the sea gradually subsided—a breeze from N.E. set in, and spreading our canvas to its favorable influence, we gladly pursued our way.

On the sixth day out of Savannah, we made Cape Florida Light, which is in latitude 25 47 North, long[itude] 80 42 West. This Light is not erected at Cape Florida as its name would seem to import, but is situated on the S.W. point of Key Biscayne, a small Island about six miles from the Cape.¹⁴ At this point we entered the reef. The Florida reef is a chain of rocks, commencing

¹⁴ Strobel was apparently in error in this instance. On more than one occasion he states that Cape Florida was that portion of the mainland coast lying just south of the Miami River. Yet it was the consensus among the cartographers of the times that the name Cape Florida applied to the southern tip of Key Biscayne. See E. A. Hammond, ed., “Dr. Strobel Reports on Southeast Florida, 1836,” *Tequesta*, XXI (1961), 65-75.

at Key Biscayne, and running in a S. and W. direction to Tortugas, a distance of nearly 200 miles. The water on the reef ranges from 2 to 6 feet. In some places, portions of dry rock may be seen at low tide; whilst at others, channels of considerable depth admit of free ingress and egress to vessels of the largest size. It is upon this reef that so many wrecks occur—and probably will continue to occur to the end of time. The current of the Gulf Stream urges its way between the coasts of Cuba and the Bahamas on the one side, and the Florida shores on the other. The width of the passage through which it passes, being not more than 60 or 80 miles. The chief difficulty to be encountered in the navigation, and probably the fruitful cause of shipwreck, is the uncertainty of the current—whose direction depends much upon the prevalence of certain winds, the direction being sometimes northerly and sometimes southerly. No foresight or precaution on the part of the navigator, can avail much—he has Scylla on one side, and Charybdis on the other. Should he endeavor to avoid the coast of Cuba and Bahama, by steering northerly, he is liable to run foul of the Florida reef, and vice versa. The channel way inside the reef lies between it and the Florida Keys. These, which are also called Mangrove Islands, commence at or near Cape Florida, and running parallel to the reef, accompanies [sic] it through nearly its whole course. The average distance from the Keys to the reef is from four to six miles, though in some places it is greater. We entered the reef, as I have already stated, near Key Biscayne, and ran along with a leading breeze, between the reef on one side and the keys on the other. About 12 o'clock we reached keys Rodrigues¹⁵ and Tavernier. These are two small islands about 15 or 20 miles distant from Indian Key; they are places of lookout for the wreckers. We saw two or three wreckers lying at anchor; the Captains boarded us in their boats, and inquired the news. They in return gave us intelligence of the unhealthiness of Key West. After a short time spent in conversation, they departed, and we proceeded onward.

¹⁵ Rodrigues Key is not indicated on modern maps. Possibly it was the island now known as Plantation Key.

In the course of the afternoon we reached Indian Key,¹⁶ and came to anchor with the determination of remaining a day or two, as there was a prospect of disposing of some of our cargo.¹⁷ Expecting to meet no persons on shore, but the wreckers and turtlers,¹⁸ I landed in my sea clothes, that is to say, without stockings, a coat with elbows out, an old pair of pantaloons, and no waistcoat. I was therefore not a little surprised with the information that a ball would take place that evening. To the ball I was determined to go; it was unfortunately too late to return on board to dress myself. What was to be done? Rather than miss the opportunity, I concluded to go, even as I was. I reached the scene of action about 8 o'clock. The company had already assembled. The ball room was a kind of piazza, or outshot from the main building; it was neither lathed nor plastered, but was well lit up. The company consisted of ten or twelve well dressed, decent looking females, who were either the wives or daughters of the wreckers and turtlers. Some of these had brought their children, clean, chubby-faced, hearty little dogs. There was also present a dozen or more seafaring men, having on their best suits; they were dressed in clean round jackets and pantaloons, white shirts, silk stockings, and pumps. Taken all together, it was quite a family party. Each of the men, having selected his partner, the fiddle struck up, and at it they went with might and main. They danced what they termed "fore and afters." As near as I recollect, the following description may give some idea of the figure. Two couples stood up on the floor, one man in the center fronting his partner, whilst the other couple remained in the rear of them. The couple in the center danced without regard to the length of time, each endeavoring to tire down the other, until they had exhausted their strength or their steps, when they "led off." Both couples now formed the figure of eight, and the second couple took the center of the

¹⁶ Indian Key is often overlooked by modern map makers, although it still lies uninhabited within sight of the present highway through the Keys. It enjoyed a brief importance in the 1820's and 1830's when it was a rendezvous for wreckers. Jacob Houseman, a prominent wrecker, gained the sole proprietorship of the island during this period, constructed permanent homes and other buildings, and contested Key West's preeminence as a center for wrecking activity. The brief glory of Indian Key was terminated by the Indian massacre of its inhabitants on August 7, 1840, an atrocity which took the life of Dr. Henry Perrine, and by the death of Houseman in a wrecking operation in the following year. See "Massacre at Indian Key," narrative of Hester Perrine Walker, *Fla. Hist. Quarterly*, V, 18-42; Walter C. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida*, Facs. Ed., Gainesville, 1968, Introduction by Thelma Peters, xii-xv.

¹⁷ In an earlier installment of the "Sketches" Dr. Strobel had mentioned investing his meager resources in merchandise which he had hoped to sell for gain on arriving in the Keys, *Charleston Courier*, May 2, 1837.

¹⁸ Turtling had quickly become a profitable enterprise among the Keys. It may be recalled that it caught the interest of John J. Audubon, who described it in his *Delineations of American Scenery and Character*, ed. by F. H. Herrick, New York, 1926, 194-5.

room, and danced in their turn. They alternated in this way until one or the other party was wearied out, when they took their seats. The temptation to me was irresistible; poor a figure as I was likely to cut. I resolved to go in for a jig. Hey, for life in all its variety! Who would not be the lion, even of a ball at Indian Key? I led out my partner, made a thousand apologies for appearing in my dishabille, declared that had I anticipated the pleasure of so much company, I should have come better prepared, but as it was I could not resist the temptation. I made myself as agreeable as I knew how, was very gallant and attentive to my partner, and really enjoyed myself very much for a couple of hours. Often will I recur to those hours with satisfaction—a satisfaction derived from having entered into the poor man's amusement, and participated in his feelings. The ball broke up at eleven o'clock, when we returned on board of our vessel.

The Charleston Courier
May 4, 1837

[Early Impressions of Key West]

I arrived at Key West during the sickness of the year 1829. My entree was not, therefore, calculated to impress me favorably, either with the place or its inhabitants. . . . As soon as I had landed, I was introduced to several gentlemen, who were polite and hospitable, and to whose subsequent friendship I owe much. To the honorable character of these gentlemen, I shall always be proud to bear testimony. As good luck would have it, we became acquainted about dinner time. I, of course, received an invitation to dine, which was accepted. We had plenty of fish, turtle, and some young flamingoes, cooked in a style peculiar to Key West. During the meal a talkative young lawyer,¹⁹ who esteemed himself as "wondrous wise," and who was particularly fond of showing his knowledge upon those subjects with which his auditors were unacquainted, as he masticated a portion of the breast of a Flamingo, made the following remark:—"There are many beautiful birds on this coast, and I incline very much to doubt whether they have all been described, even by Puffendorff!" "Puffendorff," said his neighbor on the right, "who is Puffendorff?" "Why Puffendorff," said the young lawyer as he munched away with great dignity and composure, "is the author of a celebrated work on Ornithology, which contains splendid plates of the Birds of America." He had proceeded thus far, when his neighbor on the left burst into a peal of laugh-

¹⁹ If one examines the pages of the Key West newspapers of the period he is impressed with the unusual number of lawyers whose professional cards appear. To identify the one mentioned here is impossible.

ter. "Well," says he, "for my part, until a better is published, I shall be content with Wilson's *Birds of America*²⁰ and I was always under the impression, Mr. Lawyer, that Puffendorf²¹ was a celebrated writer on National Law." The whole table roared at the expense of the sapient limb of the law, and from that day forward, whenever he was present, and a bird of any description flew by, it was customary to exclaim—"I wonder if that fellow has been described by Puffendorff!" This incident taught the lawyer a lesson which he never forgot, that of not venturing beyond his depth, which was exceedingly shallow.

As soon as the business of eating, drinking and smoking was gone through, an occupation, by the by, from which I experienced great pleasure, notwithstanding we had no finger bowls after dinner, I started for a survey. Key West is an Island from four to five miles long, by an average breadth of one mile and a half. It contains from 100 to 150 houses, large and small, several large warehouses, a Court House, Custom House, and Jail. For this last establishment there were not many customers, there being no imprisonment for debt, and the vices of the people being of such a character as is more likely to consign them to the care of a doctor than the custody of a jailor. In business seasons the town contains from five to six hundred inhabitants—in the summer months the number is probably less. The Island is based on limestone rock, and concrete shell, upon which is deposited a thin layer of alluvial soil. The sea beach is composed entirely of finely pulverized shell, broken in many places by portions of projecting rock. The soil of the interior is alluvial, —it is not of very considerable depth. Imbedded in this soil are found innumerable pieces of rock varying in size and shape. Were it not for the existence of this stone in the soil, I do not believe that the island would be capable of supporting the heavy growth of timber, found on various parts of it. Being of a very porous and spongy nature, it absorbs during the rainy season most of the water that falls which it retains and gives off in sufficient quantities to sustain the vegetation which could not otherwise exist, as I have known three months to elapse, during which we had not more than three days' rain. This rock may be applied to many useful purposes of art. It is an excellent and cheap material for walling, as a sufficient quantity may be collected from any given spot, to surround it with a wall four or five feet high. It is a good material for building, being so soft when first taken from the ground, that it may be hewn into blocks with an axe, but on exposure to the

²⁰ This ornithologist is, of course, Alexander Wilson (1766-1813), whose nine-volume work, *American Ornithology*, became something of a classic.

²¹ Samuel Pufendorf (1639-1694) was a German jurist and authority on international law.

sun and atmosphere it becomes very hard and dry. It was employed successfully by Major Glassell²² in building storehouses, etc. for the garrison. Lastly, by the action of fire it may be converted into an excellent stone lime. Key West is well wooded. I could not but be struck at first sight by the peculiarity of its vegetation. I was in fact introduced into a new vegetable world. Among the plants which I had never before seen, I may enumerate several species of Cactus, the Air Plant, Gumbo limbo, Manchenele [? possibly the Manilkara zapotilla], Wild Fig, Pigeon Plumb [sic], Torchwood, etc.

It is possible that attempts may be made hereafter to cultivate this island. I question much whether the produce of the soil would repay the labor of the agriculturist, but I have seen many of the West India fruits successfully cultivated. Limes, Bananas, Plantains [sic], Cocoa-nuts, equal, if not superior to those of the Island of Cuba, have been grown on the coast.

Key West can never become a town of any very considerable importance, having no back country, and no trade, except such as is casually brought there by the occurrence of wrecks. There are on this as well as many adjacent islands, very extensive natural Salt Ponds. A company has been lately formed by Col. John W. Simonton,²³ and incorporated by the Legislative Council of the Territory, for working the Key West Ponds. Having myself seen salt form in considerable quantities in the fissures of the rocks, by solar evaporation unaided by art, I entertain no doubt of the success of the undertaking. In a few years it will probably be a source of wealth to the enterprising proprietor, by whose zeal and activity it has been carried into operation, and add greatly to the commercial importance of the place. The ponds of this island alone are sufficient to supply the whole United States with salt. An act has been passed by Congress extending to the port the debenture privilege. It was hoped on the passage of this law, that merchants would be induced to ship goods entitled to the debenture privilege, and deposit them here to await a favorable opportunity of throwing them into the Havana market. The market of that place is very fluctuating; goods stored at Key West might be sent over in twenty-four hours, so as to meet the demand of the market and command the highest prices. The good effects, however, which were expected to result from the passage of this law have been defeated by certain discriminating duties,

²² Major James M. Glassell was the commanding officer of the army post established in Key West early in 1831. He was an esteemed citizen of Key West, cooperating with civic leaders. He died on Nov. 2, 1838. *Army and Navy Chronicle*, n.s. 8 (1839), p. 192.

²³ Simonton was one of the first Americans to invest in Key West after its transfer from Spain. Brief biographical information on him may be seen in Maloney, *Hist. of Key West*, 69.

which are imposed on Spanish vessels trading to this port. The object of this regulation is to prevent smuggling.

Commodore Porter, in a letter to the Secretary of War, dated 29th December 1829, speaks in very high terms of Key West as a Naval Station. He considers the harbor the best in the United States, south of the Chesapeake; for its easy access and egress at all times, and with all winds, and for the excellent anchorage which it affords, both in the inner and outer harbor, for ships of the largest size. There are several channels leading to the harbor, some affording water for the largest ships, others suited to vessels drawing 10 or 12 feet of water. From its proximity to the Gulf of Mexico, this island in time of war will become a most important position, as a rendezvous for our vessels of war, and as a military station. It commands the outlet of all the trade from Mexico, Jamaica, the Caribbean Sea, the Bay of Honduras, and the Gulf of Mexico. It protects the outlet and the inlet of all the trade of the Gulf of Mexico, the whole western country of Louisiana, and the Floridas. It holds in subjection the trade of Cuba. It is a check to the naval power of whatever nation may possess Cuba. It is to Cuba what Gibraltar is to Ceuta. It is to the Gulf of Mexico what Gibraltar is to the Mediterranean.

Charleston Courier, May 10, 1837.

[Mitchell the Pirate]

The earliest accounts which I have been able to collect of Key West refer to its once having been the abode of Indians. The tribe which had inhabited this Key had been driven by more powerful nations, first from the mainland, then from Key to Key, and finally took their last refuge here. But even here their pursuers were not content to allow them to remain. A decisive battle was fought some hundred and twenty years since in which the Island Indians were completely routed and almost annihilated; a few only escaping in their canoes. These latter crossed the Gulf of Mexico and sought refuge on the island of Cuba, where it is said that some of their descendants are still to be found. The former residence of Indians on this island is proved by the existence of a number of mounds, supposed to have been burial places. One of these was opened and examined in the year 1823. It contained a number of human skeletons, gold and silver ornaments, domestic utensils, arrowheads, etc. It is by the massacre of these Indians that some endeavor to account for the immense quantities of human bones found on every part of the island.* [Strobel's note: The island is called by the Spaniards Cayo Hueso, or Bone Island.*]

Others refer them to other sources. It is said (and I have no doubt of the fact) that the Florida Keys were once inhabited by pirates. Key West was their principal rendezvous, whilst from the various harbors along the coast they watched the great commerce passing and repassing in the gulf, and when a convenient opportunity occurred, they would pounce upon and secure their prey. This they could easily accomplish, even in open boats, of a calm day, the vessels frequently passing in sight of the Keys. No doubt many a noble ship, whose white canvas had borne her through many seas, and weathered many a furious gale, had escaped only to fall into the hands of these ruffians, and whilst she had been given to the flames, the gallant crew had been inhumanly murdered. I have been very solicitous to collect information on this subject. I succeeded in finding only one individual, who from personal observation knew anything about it. He was an old Spaniard,²⁴ upwards of eighty years of age, who keeps a fishery in Charlotte Harbor, and who has been fishing on the coast for upwards of fifty years. This man was not, at best, disposed to be very communicative, but being moreover ignorant of the English language, and my knowledge of Spanish not being very good, we were not able to communicate very freely with each other, and he seemed at a loss to comprehend the motive of my inquiry, and apprehensive of implicating himself. He stated, however, that he recollected distinctly the time when the island was in the possession of pirates, and their having on one occasion captured a large merchant ship, with an immense sum of money in specie on board. The money was buried in various places. The crew and passengers, among whom were several ladies, were taken ashore and murdered, whilst the ship was burnt. These pirates were principally Spaniards, but there were men of all nations among them—they were in the habit of landing their prisoners, and murdering them indiscriminately.

Circumstances which have fallen under my own observation, tend in some degree to confirm this statement. A leather bag containing a considerable sum of money in specie, as well as a Spanish Stiletto, was found buried near the Custom House; these articles had undoubtedly been underground for many years. A certain man by the name of MITCHELL, said to have been

²⁴ This "old Spaniard" was José (or Hosé) Caldez, who had resided on an island (the present-day Useppa) in Charlotte Harbor for many years, probably since the 1780's. He was a person of much interest to many travelers in the area. William A. Whitehead described a visit he made to Caldez' fishing rancho in 1831. See "William Adeé Whitehead's Reminiscences of Key West," ed. by Thelma Peters, *Tequesta*, XXV (1965), 34-5. Also John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida*, New York, 1837, pp. 33, 39. Strobel also described a visit he made to Caldez' rancho in 1833. *Charleston Evening Post*, July 20, 1833.

a brother of the celebrated Pirate of the same name, came to Key West whilst I was there—he gave himself out to be a Sail Maker, and advertised for work. He was a suspicious looking fellow, very thin and tall, being upwards of six feet in height, complexion dark and sallow, his hair long, black, and curly, his eye dark and treacherous.—He seemed to shrink from observation.

It was rumored that this man had come to the place for the purpose of searching for treasures, which had been buried by his brother: I looked upon this as an idle tale until a circumstance occurred, which satisfied me to its truth. I had gone out in the evening to search for a flock of Flamingos, and was returning home late at night, with three which I had shot. It was a dark and gloomy night, the wind whistled through the trees with violence—and the moon penetrating at intervals the thick massive clouds which were floating around her, sent forth a transient gleam of light, which by contrast added to the darkness of the night. I was returning home by a new road, which had been cut through an almost impenetrable forest, when I heard on my left hand, some one digging in the woods. It was a late hour, and a singular occupation for one to be engaged in at that time and in that solitary place. My curiosity being excited, I determined at all hazards to gratify it. My birds were immediately suspended in a tree, and both barrels of my gun loaded with buck shot. I stepped cautiously and silently into the woods, with the determination of ascertaining the object of the person, or persons, so employed. I had not proceeded more than one hundred yards, when the object of my search stood before me. It was this identical MITCHELL, digging around the roots of a gigantic tree. I at once conceived his object, and determined to await the issue.

I crept through the bushes, close enough to observe what was going on, and in order to avoid being myself discovered, lay concealed in the thick shrubbery. A candle was burning in a lantern on the ground, which cast its feeble light on the surrounding gloom. Near the lantern lay a spade, and a pair of horseman's pistols. How I longed at that moment for an artist's pencil to transfer to canvas the scene which was passing before me. MITCHELL was vigorously pursuing his task. Fancy reader if you can, the expression of that dark visage, animated with the avaricious hope of finding gold, as the rays of light flashed across it, as he stopped to examine the ground, his meagre and attenuated form seemingly actuated by the vigor of lusty youth, and then conceive if you can the transition to despair, when after an hour's exertion, he threw down his pick-axe, and exclaimed, "D - - n them. I have been deceived—this cannot be the place."

He now sat down, wiped the perspiration from his brow, took a bottle from his pocket, from which he extracted a large quantity of comfort. After resting for a few moments, he got up, put on his pea-jacket, stowed away his pistols, shouldered his tools, blew out his candle, and started for town. I waited some time to let him get ahead of me, and then followed.

I went out the next day to examine the place. The tree was very large, and a remarkable one—on close inspection I discovered a notch high up on the trunk. The earth and stones were in the same condition as they had been left by MITCHELL.

Although disappointed in this instance, I have no doubt that he must subsequently have found money somewhere; for the next account I heard of him was in Charleston, where he purchased a vessel, and shipped a large crew. Whether he was merely going in search of the treasures, or whether he intended to commence business as a “practicing sea attorney” on his own account, did not appear. Owing to some suspicious circumstances which came to light the Collector of Charleston, as I was informed, refused to grant him a clearance.

Charleston Courier, May 12, 1837

[The Baron]

It has been said by someone that “a liar is worse than a thief; for, against the inroads of the latter you may oppose bolts and bars; but what bar shall obstruct or how will you close the mouth of the former.” In regard to a certain class this may be strictly true, but fortunately for society, in a vast number of cases, “the bane and antidote” go together—the evil cures itself. The man who deals habitually in the marvellous will hardly be believed, even when he speaks the truth; so far, then, society has the remedy. But alas! for the poor unfortunate wretch, who acquires such a habit of embellishing, and of giving poetical coloring to the most ordinary occurrences of life, as to render his statements doubtful to others; whilst from a frequent repetition of things incredible, he appears to lose sight of propriety, and appears to be unconscious of having departed from the boundaries of truth. Such an individual often acquires full faith in matters, from their nature impossible, and is heard asseverating with an oath to things as facts, which no man in his sober senses can believe. One of the most remarkable instances of this kind that I ever met with was an individual with whom I became acquainted in Florida, and who received from the people the appellation of Baron. The Baron was a

small man with a large pair of black whiskers, and a fine set of teeth, which were always well displayed; his mouth being large, and constantly on the grin. He was a man of travel and of observation; had crossed the Atlantic, visited London and Paris, had been intimately acquainted with Baron Dupuytren,²⁵ and had attended the King's levee; who then had so good a right to be thoroughly acquainted with all things that inhabit the earth, air or water, as the Baron? So extensive were his acquirements that you could broach no subject of which he was not master. Think not, gentle reader, that these acquirements were derived in the dull plodding, ordinary way, from books. No, the Baron had studied men, beasts, birds and trees, in all quarters of the globe by actual observation. He had seen a tree, the wonder of the world, which exhibited one day green leaves, the next red, the third white, and the fourth blue. In short, you could mention nothing which he had not seen, and tell no anecdote which he could not equal, and in all of his narrations, he seems to have adopted the words of the Poet for his motto——

“Nulhum teteget quod non ornaret.”²⁶

Such a character would not fail to attract notice, and to astonish the vulgar citizens, the canaille of Key West. He seldom wanted hearers, and upon the credulity he made some heavy demands, as will appear by the following anecdotes.

It was not to be expected that so distinguished an individual should escape being noticed by or introduced to all of the great men who visited that section of the country. Consequently, on the arrival of Mr. Audubon²⁷ he was introduced to the Baron. The Baron at once proffered his services to that distinguished individual, and engaged to take him to a part of Florida where he could discover at least five hundred [At this point Strobel appended a note explaining that “there are only 480 species described as inhabiting the United States.”] “new species of birds—nay more,” if he wanted FLAMINGOS he would show him a place, if he would accompany him in a boat, where they could be taken from the trees at night “like hens from a roost!” Never shall

²⁵ Baron Guillaume Dupuytren (1777-1835), renowned French surgeon, at one time royal surgeon to King Charles X.

²⁶ Or more correctly, *nullum quod tetegit non ornavit* (there was nothing he touched that he did not adorn). This quotation is from Dr. Samuel Johnson's epitaph to Oliver Goldsmith.

²⁷ Audubon visited Key West in May, 1832. Strobel among others lent assistance in procuring specimens. See E. A. Hammond, ed., “Dr. Strobel's Account of John J. Audubon,” *The Auk*, Vol. 80, No. 4 (Oct., 1963), 462-466.

I forget the air of complaisance, the great earnestness, with which Mr. Audubon listened to the Baron, nor the peculiar smile which passed over his countenance when he finished.

One day after dinner, as a number of gentlemen were sitting around the table, a file of newspapers was brought in. Each selected a paper, and one of them read aloud the anecdote of a Frenchman, who had been executed for tickling to death three wives. The Baron listened attentively until the story was ended, when he rose majestically in his place, and declared "that when he was in Paris, he saw a man beheaded for tickling nine wives to death."

The Baron, it will be recollected had been intimately acquainted with Dupuytren, the celebrated French Surgeon. A doctor on one occasion mentioned having an amputation of the hip joint performed; the Baron instantly declared "that he had seen Dupuytren perform on eight individuals at one of the Paris hospitals in one morning." A physician was conversing in the presence of the Baron on gunshot wounds and the singular direction sometimes taken by the balls. He also related several remarkable cases of recovery from severe wounds recorded by Baron Larrey²⁸ in his campaign to Moscow; when he concluded, the Baron gave the following history of a case, which from its singularity, deserves to be recorded in the annals of surgery.

A marine on board a seventy-four or frigate (I forgot which), was walking the deck with his unsheathed bayonet in his hand; he approached the main hatch, and while looking down, over-balanced and fell into the hold. The bayonet entered his right side, passed through his heart, and came out in the left arm pit. The man was placed under the care of a surgeon, who withdrew the bayonet, and strange to tell, the man recovered and lived for several years after the accident. When he died, his body was examined and a scar was discovered in his heart where the bayonet had perforated.

A gentleman making some researches in natural history once asked the Baron, as he had lived for some time in Florida, if he knew anything of an animal called by the naturalists "Lemantin" [i.e., *lamantin*], and by the Spaniards, Manate" [or manatee]. "Oh, yes!" repeated the Baron, "they are very curious. I have seen them very often; they swim on their backs, instead of the belly. They are very large, one of them will make four hundred barrels of beef." "Four hundred! You certainly mean four?" "No, by G-d, I mean four hundred." "Did you ever see the skin of one of these animals?" "Oh, yes,

²⁸ This was probably Jean-Dominique Larrey (1766-1842), a distinguished military surgeon.

I have seen many; they are shaped like a seal." And how large, Sir?" "Let me see, about—yes, about as big,—as five ox hides." "But my dear Sir, five ox hides would not cover four hundred barrels of beef." "Oh—er—ah (scratching his head) but—it was only a part of the skin I saw; a round piece out of the back." The Baron had once camped out in some of his excursions; he of course had his tent pitched in an open space. While so circumstanced he states he encountered a tremendous gale of wind, which getting under his tent, tore it from its moorings and bore it aloft to a neighboring wood, and it was deposited on the top of a tree. Several days were occupied in recovering it; as the forest was so thickly studded with trees that he was compelled to cut down about three hundred before they could get at it. Some of my readers may suppose that the Baron was a quizz, and disposed to make himself merry at the expense of his hearers. But such was not the case; he related these stories and numerous others, with an earnestness and sincerity, which was calculated to convey an impression, that *he* at least had full faith in the truth of what he stated; and if anyone dared to express doubt, he would affirm it with a tremendous oath.

But alas! Poor Baron, oath and all, it would not do—he had a set of unbelievers to deal with. The fact is there are no fools at Key West, a man who can live there must have his wits about him, or to use a phrase common among the people, "he must know Jacob Roach." Unfortunately for the Baron he had no other way of employing his time than in the invention and relation of these tales. But hold, I am too fast, he had one other occupation, which was to mount an observatory five or six times a day, and look out with a spy glass and many was the sail which he reported in sight; and many the wreck coming in which never arrived. But this source of amusement failed at last and became an old story, for whenever it was rumored that a sail was in sight, the first question was, who told you so? Should the answer be the "Baron," oh! it was of course set down as an airy vision, a vessel created by his fertile brain. I have heard great surprise expressed that the Baron never discovered the flying Dutchman cruising about in those parts.

Charleston Courier, May 16, 1837

[The Major]

The MAJOR was at one time a particular friend of the Baron's. He may be considered as a child of fortune, though the French would have designated him an unfortunate child (*un enfant infortuné*). He was by birth a French-

man—and by his own shewing had been at the seige of Moscow and subsequently aid to Gen. Lillemanale.²⁹ The Major, therefore, had seen some service—and as a matter of course, had encountered his share

“Of moving accident, by flood and field,³⁰
Of hair breadth ’scapes i’ the imminent
Deadly breach.”

Unfortunately, however, he had no golden chain, and the only testimonial which he bore of his achievement, was a scarified leg, which he exhibited with great pride, and which had been shattered by the explosion of a bomb shell. Added to these considerations the Major was a tall, fine looking man, with a sharp eye, large whiskers and no small portion of *l'air militaire*. It is true that he was not overburdened with many changes of linen, but to make up for his deficiency in this particular, he had a trunk full of cards and letters from the first men in the country. He was affable and pleasing in his manners—and taken altogether, was a gay, plausible, insinuating fellow. The recital of his woes could not fail to excite the compassion of every one; and his frank and open manners gained him confidence. Under these circumstances the Major was graciously received by some of the most respectable families, who appeared

“To love him for the dangers he had passed.”³¹

Well aware that poverty would be no recommendation with the good citizens of Key West, the Major took care to represent that he was by no means a poor man: on the contrary, he had very large expectations from his friends, and once possessed an ample fortune. By a vessel which sailed for New Orleans, he ordered a large shipment of goods, with which he intended to commence business. The Major now became quite the *ton* [Strobel probably meant the fashion] and his company was much sought after. He could tell a good story, sing a good song, and abounded in fine sentiments about love, honor, friendship and chivalry. No party was therefore without him: and he embraced every opportunity to show himself off to advantage. On one occasion the Baron and the Major opened a ball with a waltz *a la mode de Paris*. The vulgar citizens who had never seen anything of the kind, stood around idle spectators of the scene, mute in wonder and astonishment. After the dance

²⁹ Probably le comte René Charles Elizabeth Ligniville (1757-1813), French general who served under Napoleon.

³⁰ These lines are from *Othello*, Act I, Scene 3.

came the song; at this the Major was adept, and favored us with Berenger's³² latest, which was loudly encored. So far the game had succeeded to admiration, but there was yet one difficulty to be surmounted. In order to keep up these appearances of the fine gentleman, money must be had. Fortunately for gentlemen of the Major's complexion, there is in every community a class of persons, who are disposed to ape the manners of high life, to catch the crumbs of etiquette, which fall from the great man's table—vulgar dogs who are only fit to labor for the support of gentlemen who were created as

“Soft easy cushions upon which
Rogues and Knaves may fatten.”³³

The Lion of the day smiled upon them and they were happy. He honored them with his custom, and they bowed low to the ground, in token of their gratitude for favors which he had conferred. The Major knew his men, and gratified them by accepting the use of a few ounces of their gold. The Major might now be considered as one in “the full tide of successful experiment.”³⁴ Invitations to breakfast, dine and sup, flowed in with a rapidity inconceivable; fine clothes, money, segars, claret, in short, everything which his heart could desire, were at his command. Passing the Major's house one night about ten o'clock as he was standing under his door, he very kindly invited me in; and being disposed to study this original somewhat in detail, I entered. Let me describe his habitation. In anticipation of the arrival of his cargo, the Major had hired a small shop; I was admitted by a large folding door through the center of the building. After entering, I passed between two counters, one on either side of the door, to the upper end of the room, where stood a table. The store was shelved all round but contained nothing. Against the back door were hung a pair of boots, a pair of horseman's pistols, a broad sword, and two engravings, representing officers of the French cavalry mounting for the field. Behind the counter was a small cot, upon which I suppose the Major reposed at night. A boy was despatched for segars; meanwhile, the Major exhibited a number of little knick-knacks, which he always carried about with him, such for instance as a sword which he had taken from a Russian Gren-

³¹ Strobel's adaptation of “She loved me for the dangers I had passed,” *Othello*, Act I, Scene 3.

³² Pierre Jean de Béranger (1780-1857), popular French poet and songwriter.

³³ Strobel's variation on a line by Thomas Otway (*Venus Preserved*, Act I, Scene 1), which reads, “Honest men are the soft easy cushions on which knaves repose and fatten.”

³⁴ From Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address.

adier in single combat; a pair of Horseman's Pistols presented him by a French count, whose life he had saved in battle, a diamond Ring, a gift or "*gage d'amour*" from a certain dutchess[sic], &c. &c &c. The boy having returned with segars, the Major offered me a chair without a back, whilst he who was accustomed to privations, seated himself on another which had only three legs. The table containing one or two books, the candle, and two bottles of claret lay between us—I lit my segar and whilst I sent forth a volley of smoke, which wreathed in fantastic cords about the Major's head, requested him to favor me with a narrative of his adventures. Many were the "deadly fights" in which he had taken part, and many the feats of valor, which he had performed. I shall record only one or two of his anecdotes as specimens of the rest.

"On one occasion, Sir, I was then only a simple Lieutenant of Cavalry, we were ordered to charge the enemy's line, which consisted of Infantry, drawn up in close array and flanked by Artillery. The trumpet sounded the charge, and onward we dashed, helter skelter, neck or nothing. When we had approached within fifty yards of the enemy's line, he opened upon us a tremendous fire of grape from his cannon. At the very first discharge our Trumpeter, who was riding at the head of the Regiment, received a grape shot in his belly. The ball took him obliquely so as not to pass through him, but laid open his abdomen, to such an extent that his entrails fell out on the pommel of his saddle. It will readily be perceived that it staggered him for a moment, but the Trumpeter, nothing daunted, pulled off his helmet, gathered his bowels into the crown, and kept them up by pressing against his abdomen; in another instant he clapped the trumpet to his mouth and blew a tremendous blast, whilst his horse, goaded by the spur, bore him in the thickest of the enemy's ranks." Speaking of the courage of his men the Major mentioned the following among many other traits of bravery.

"We were lying out in camp, the enemy, who was near us, was throwing shells night and day; many of them fell directly in front of our tent. It was a common thing for the men on a wager of a half pint of wine, to take the saddle blankets in their hands, rush forward, and throwing themselves over the shells, fall upon their bellies and extinguish the fuse."

The Major continued to enjoy his prosperity for about two months, and might have done so to the present day but for a few untoward events. "Alas! Alack!"

"The clearest sky is subject to a shower."

The shipment of goods did not arrive at the expected time, and just as the Major's friends began to get weary of accommodating him with money, and sick of the hope, too long deferred, of getting it back, two gentlemen from New Orleans arrived at Key West, who pronounced him "an imposter and a notorious swindler." And now the truth flashed like lightning upon the astonished eyes of the prudent citizens of the place. Each one was anxious for the recovery of his money, and orders and notes by far outnumbering former cards and invitations, collected on the Major's table. But no doubloons went back in return. The Major was now deserted by the gay butterflies who had sported in his sunbeams.

"Each coward son of peace fled far
From the neglected son of war."

He quit the busy active scene of public life, and went into dignified retirement for the remainder of the time he was in Key West. He afterwards went to Havana where I understand he succeeded in purchasing and shipping a cargo of segars on credit.

Charleston Courier, May 17, 1837