

The Wreck of *The Three Sisters*

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The wind finally began to wane. The squalls that had buffeted the coast for five days and had turned the sea into an angry adversary had finally passed over the area leaving a trail of fallen trees and floating debris. It was not the destruction brought about by the storm on October 21, 1870 that made the startling change in the scene but the addition of a large brig¹ stuck hard on the sand bar in Bear Cut just off Virginia Key. Bilged and abandoned and listing heavily to one side, *The Three Sisters*, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, had become another victim of the treacherous reef surrounding the South Florida coast.

Across Biscayne Bay on the mainland, the few inhabitants² of what would later become Miami, Florida began to emerge from their palmetto thatched homes. Learning to live with the unpredictable weather, common in the tropics, especially in the fall, was just one of the many problems one had to overcome if he was to survive on Biscayne Bay in 1870. Although a week of bad weather was no happy experience for the people, the calm after the storm usually meant more than just sunshine and happy dispositions. The return of good weather signaled the beginning of the inevitable trip to Key Biscayne to see what had been deposited on the beach by the fickle sea. Because of its location, Key Biscayne acted somewhat like a giant net to snag goods that floated free from the frequent wrecks on the reef a short distance away. It was not uncommon for settlers to find useful items strewn along this seaside supermarket for beachcombers. But a whole ship, stranded on a close in sand bar in full view of the mainland and abandoned by her crew, happened only once or maybe twice in a lifetime. The scene was set for a drama without parallel in the early history of Miami.

It was no surprise that Dr. J. V. Harris, latest in the series of owners of the Old Fort Dallas property, was the first one on the mainland to sight the *Three Sisters*. From the porch of his two story home³

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¹A brig is a two masted sailing vessel square rigged on both masts.

²The census of 1870 was taken in August of that year. At that time there were eighty-five inhabitants recorded in all of Dade County which at that time included twice as much area as it does today. Of this number there were 32 adult males.

³His home had been completed by the soldiers stationed at Ft. Dallas during the Second Seminole War for use as officers quarters. It had been started by Richard Fitzpatrick in the 1830's, but left unfinished when the Indian threat began. Its most famous inhabitant was Julia Tuttle, who made it her home in 1891.

near the mouth of the Miami River, was an unobstructed view of Virginia Key. The islands in the bay that block the present view are the work of men many decades later. Harris, joined by Harrison Drew and Luke Nicholson, was anxious to be first aboard. Although he had only lived in South Florida for a year he had learned the efficacy of "first come first served" in the determination of who was to be the "wreckmaster." Because of this, Harris was unwilling to leave the area to return to the mainland for supplies. Discovering that the hold was filled with lumber, he could not risk allowing someone else to get first chance at such a prize. Drew and Nicholson therefore returned to the mainland alone to bring supplies and left Harris onboard the *Three Sisters* to protect their claim.

Shortly after the two men returned to the Miami River and had collected the necessary supplies, they realized to their horror that the weather was changing rapidly. A new squall was blowing in from the northeast causing the bay to become too choppy and the wind too brisk to hazard returning to the grounded brig and the now threatened Harris.

It was not until four days later that the weather had moderated enough to allow the men to return to the unfortunate Harris. Not knowing what to expect, they were relieved to discover Harris alive but in a state of semiconsciousness, mumbling incoherently about the imaginary captain and his ship. But, being young and healthy, Harris survived this rather unusual experience and remained undaunted in his determination to get his share of the spoils.

During the four days that Dr. Harris was stranded, the word of his predicament began to spread from one end of the bay to the other. Soon almost everyone knew that a ship was aground in Bear Cut. With the coming of clear weather the residents, singularly and in parties, climbed aboard the nearest thing afloat that would get them to the scene. In the days of no sawmill, there was no greater prize, save gold, than lumber. And there was enough lumber aboard the *Three Sisters* to double the number of dwellings in the vicinity!⁴

After arriving at the sand bar the men lashed enough boards together to make several rafts and then loaded the rafts with as much lumber as possible short of sinking. It was then relatively simple to float or tow the rafts home, planning all the time the amount needed to build such and such a house, if all went well. Before the brig was stripped, no less than twenty-one residents floated their prize home.

From the "Hunting Grounds" near Cutler and Richmond Road,

⁴According to the census there were twenty-one dwellings in the entire county.

came forty-one year old John Addison, former scout in the Second Seminole War, and resident since 1865. Addison, his wife Mary and his two dogs, Rock and Butler, lived on one of the finest homesteads on the bay; Addison being one of the few homesteaders to raise livestock.⁵ He had recently been elected a County Commissioner in the newly reorganized county.⁶

Joining Addison was his closest "neighbor," forty-two year old Isiah Hall, who lived with his wife and six children at "Hall's Creek" just south of the wading beach at Matheson Hammock. Hall had settled there in 1858 and had become, by this time, a well known pilot and guide. He had been elected Representative to the State Legislature in 1868. While uneducated, he was respected by his peers for his strong sense of right and wrong.

Francis "Jake" Infinger, current Sheriff and Tax Collector of Dade County and former County Commissioner, arrived on the scene from his home near the present Cocoplum area. Infinger and his wife and stepchildren⁷ along with the Halls and Addison made up the entire white population of South Dade. A few years later, Addison met his death from a rattlesnake bite, another hazard of early pioneer life.

Just north of Infinger was the area later to be known as Coconut Grove. Edmund Besly had homesteaded in the Grove in 1868 and had lived in the area since the 1830's. "Alligator Besly" had lived through and had been a part of many events in the history of the young settlement. But this time he would have to remain behind because of infirmities brought about by his advanced age. Besley's neighbor, Edward Pent, who along with his brother John Pent was squatting on the land they would later homestead,⁸ was the Grove's representative at the "rafting party." Ned Pent was one of the most delightful "characters" living on the bay. He was one of a few who at this point in time boasted of having "grown up" in the area. His father, the late Temple Pent, had been in the vicinity since the 1820's.⁹ Ned Pent was as expert a pilot as his father before him

⁵Even though it is not named on present charts, a dangerous shoal in the bay off of Addison's property is known locally as Addison's Shoal.

⁶The county had been reorganized in 1868 for the first time since 1859. This meant that an election had been held for county officials and representatives in the legislature.

⁷His stepdaughter Martha Snipes later married John Thomas Peacock, early settler in Coconut Grove, and another early sheriff of Dade County.

⁸In 1883 John Pent homesteaded 160 acres north of Grand Avenue in Coconut Grove. He failed to "prove it up" or complete the time, so his brother Edward applied for the same quarter-section and the patent in 1894.

⁹"Old Squire" Pent, as he was known, had tried to claim a Spanish land grant in 1821 between the Polly and Johnathan Lewis donations. He served as a representative in the Territorial Legislature and was keeper of the Cape Florida lighthouse between 1852 and 1853 and again from 1866 until his death in 1868.

had been, as well as one of the most well known carpenters and "barefoot mailmen" on the bay.

From his vantage point atop the Cape Florida lighthouse it was easy for John Frow, lighthouse keeper, to see the many boats arriving in the vicinity. The lay of the keys undoubtedly blocked the actual wreck from his view or Frow instead of Harris would most likely have been the first on the scene. Like Pent, Frow was a life-long resident of Biscayne Bay. He followed his father Simeon Frow's¹⁰ footsteps in the lighthouse service. Besides his job as lighthouse keeper, he was also a county commissioner. A few years later he purchased the Besly homestead and joined the Pent family in the Grove.

Frow's assistant, Sam Jenkins, and Jenkins' brothers, Washington and Joseph, followed Frow to the scene of ever increasing activity around the *Three Sisters*. A few years later Washington Jenkins became Sheriff of Dade County and moved to Fort Lauderdale where he was appointed House of Refuge keeper. Sam joined the ranks of County Commissioners and Joe, who at this time was still a teenager, was appointed Inspector of Elections.

Charles E. Barnes, thirty-three, lived on the south bank of the river directly across from Harris' dock. He was undoubtedly one of the first on the scene because of his proximity to Harris. Like Harris he had been on the bay only a short time. Barnes had the distinction of owning and operating the only store on the bay. He also ran a schooner to Key West and was Postmaster of the small settlement.¹¹

From up the Miami River at Wagner's Creek near N.W. 12th Avenue and the River, came William Wagner and his son William, Jr. Wagner, Sr. was a former soldier who first saw Dade County while stationed at Fort Dallas during the Second Seminole War. He had been a resident for almost fifteen years and built the first church in the area at his home.

On Musa Isle, near Wagner, lived sixty year old John Holman. He was another of the more colorful characters in the area. He was a native of Hanover, Germany, and like Wagner a veteran of the Second Seminole War. "Long John," as he was known, was one of the earliest "barefoot mailmen" in the area.

¹⁰Simeon Frow, a native of Majorca, was keeper at Cape Florida from 1859 until it was darkened during the Civil War.

¹¹The post office in the Miami area changed about as often as the weather. The name had been changed from Miami to Biscayne in June, 1870 so at this time Barnes was actually postmaster of Biscayne, Florida. Barnes served as postmaster for only four months because Lt. Governor Gleason had it moved to his home in the Miami Shores area where it remained until 1874 when it was returned to the Ft. Dallas area and rechristened "Maama"!

There were also several homesteaders north of the Miami River in 1870. Most were also involved in the salvage of the *Three Sister's* cargo. In the vicinity of what would later become Buena Vista, (N.E. 36th Street), lived County Commissioner Dan Clark. Clark had come to the bay from England before the Civil War. He had one of the earliest homesteads in the whole county. He was affectionately called the "pig man" because of the pigs he raised.¹² Living with him at this time was fellow Englishman William H. Benest, another of Dade's early Sheriffs and State Representatives.¹³ Living in a shack near them was "Aunt Lizzie" Freeman, a seventy year old former slave who cooked for the bachelor Clark.

Immediately west of Clark lived Octavius Aimer (Symor), a black man from South Carolina, and his large family. He homesteaded in 1870 and was probably the first black man to do so.¹⁴

Further up the bay near Little River lived Michael Sayers (Zahr) and his son George. They had come to the area from France prior to the Civil War. "French Mike" had become a popular figure in the settlement after he had run the blockade during the Civil War to bring supplies to the few remaining families. His large home, amidst a grove of coconut trees, became a voting precinct for the southern end of the county. Both Sayers later served as County Commissioners. Living with them at the time was William Rigby, a seaman from the Bahamas who joined in the trip south to Virginia Key to aid in the salvage.

After several days, the brig *Three Sisters* lay empty with all the lumber removed. Mysteriously she was set ablaze and burned to the waterline. No one knew for sure who set the fire but many believed it to be the work of Doctor Harris, who not only was the first to board her but the last to leave her. Thus nothing remained of the brig *Three Sisters*, late of Nova Scotia, except her priceless cargo, a part of which was stored in about every dwelling in the county.

Those involved in the great lumber haul were obviously aware of the strict rules set down by the Federal Government regarding shipwrecks. "Wrecking" was a licensed and well regulated profession. The fact that someone burned the ship indicates that there was an understand-

¹²Clark homesteaded in 1867. A legend is told that Clark, not able to read or write, often signed documents with the footprint of his trusty dog Genevieve. His signature became the best known in South Florida!

¹³Many years later, Benest as an old man was found dead in Brickell Hammock. Many believed that he became confused and was unable to find his way out. This anecdote gives some idea of the density of the Brickell Hammock. A little of the hammock remains at Simpson Park and Vizcaya, with scattered patches between.

¹⁴His homestead was west of Clark's between 20th and 36th Street. On the census he is listed as a mulatto but counted as one of the thirteen "colored" in the county in 1870.

ing of the need to destroy all evidence of her existence in the area. The participants obviously believed that for once their isolation would be to their advantage. Surely no one in far away Key West would know or care about the incident. At least this is what they believed until early December when William Allen, Assistant U.S. Marshal, armed with a court order made his appearance.

On November 28th, John Jay Philbrick, acting consul for the Port of Key West, had filed a libel for restitution in the District Court of the United States, Southern District of Florida. In it he named J. V. Harris, William Wagner, Charles E. Barnes, Daniel Clark, William Benest, Samuel Jenkins, Washington H. Jenkins, Joseph Jenkins, Francis Infinger, John A. Addison, William Rigby, Michael Sayers, George Sayers, Isiah Hall, William Wagner, Jr. and John Holman as parties to what he alleged was illegal seizure of the cargo. The court had ordered the lumber attached and the alleged participants in the salvage were required to show cause why they should not be held liable for restitution.

Allen searched the area and attached all the lumber he could find. Some buildings had already been constructed out of the lumber and some of the lumber was hidden too well to be found. Allen recovered ninety-five thousand feet out of an alleged one hundred twenty-five thousand feet listed on the manifest. While this was a sizable amount, it left thirty-five thousand feet unaccounted for. There is no way to know how much remained on the bay, but obviously it was a great deal. To the original list of sixteen cited by the court, he added Octavius Aimer, Luke Nicholson, John Frow, Edward Pent, Harrison Drew and William Wagner, Sr.

On February 23, 1871, the twenty-one men named, through their attorney, filed their answer to the Libel.

While admitting that they did take out the lumber "with much time, exposure and arduous labor" they agreed that "they knew that their labor and exposure in resqueing (sic) this lumber from impending total loss gave them a greater vested interest in it than other parties possessed and they desired to appeal to an admiralty tribunal to award them salvage; but no such tribunal existed in this district and they felt under no obligation to charter vessels to freight the lumber to Key West, a course that would only accumulate needless expense. That they did not and do not possess boats or vessels to bring the lumber to Key West, but they did preserve it and kept it safely except a small quantity used by some of the respondents and of which a strict account will be given. They ask the court to dismiss the said Libel and to decree to them a certain portion. . ."

The laws regulating salvage were quite explicit. The most basic regulation was that all salvage came under the direct jurisdiction of the Court, and the Court alone could decide the amount of compensation to be awarded for recovery of the goods. This regulation included ordinary citizens such as the men from Biscayne Bay who discovered derelict or abandoned property at sea, as well as professional "wreckers" who made a living from the wrecking trade. All persons had to make a formal claim and come to the court with "clean hands" or with full disclosure of the circumstances and goods involved. It looked like the boys from the bay were in trouble!

The hearing was set for the Spring Term of May 1871, but many of those summoned either out of ignorance, believing once the lumber was attached it was all settled, or fear, did not come to Court. The residents had led a *laissez faire* existence for so long it was difficult to understand or to believe that the great bastion of civilization, the U.S. District Court, meeting in Key West, would really insist that the maverick inhabitants of Dade County come to Key West for trial. To further complicate proceedings and delay the trial, the presiding judge died. It was not until the spring of 1872 that the trial was finally held. By this time it is safe to assume that many of the twenty-one had left the area permanently.

But in the spring of 1872 William Allen again made his appearance on the bay and "rounded up" the libelees and persuaded them, many against their will, to come with him to Key West. He provided free transportation as added incentive to assure the delivery of the recalcitrant defendants to Key West.

Unfortunately the transcript of the testimony at the trial was not recorded in the court records. But from the final decision, rendered January 3, 1873, one is able to piece together the final disposition of the case.

All of the petitioners except one had their claims for salvage dismissed because of "fraud and misconduct . . . alleged and proved by testimony." Only Charles E. Barnes was granted salvage in the case.¹⁵ One can only guess why he was singled out from the others. Perhaps he was the "informer," a position that not only would give him "clean hands" but also most likely a bounty. He did own a schooner and could have transported the lumber. Unfortunately, Barnes would have little oppor-

¹⁵Three other men, Samuel Baker, Henry Baker and John R. Sawyer, were awarded salvage totaling \$37.53. None were mentioned in the Libel or were listed in the Dade County Census of 1870.

tunity to spend the \$57.42 he was awarded because within six months he died of yellow fever.

The biggest winner in the case was the U.S. Government which received over a thousand dollars in duty because the *Three Sisters* was a foreign vessel. William Allen, Marshal, was awarded \$630.88 for expenses. Obviously, this was a very large sum of money for 1870 and indicates the difficulty Allen had in carrying out the court orders in far off Miami. The owners of the brig were awarded the residue of \$351.71 after all claims were paid.

An eye witness told that three of the men, William Wagner, Sr., Isiah Hall and Sam Jenkins, spent two months in the Munroe County jail and were fined one hundred fifty dollars. No record of this can be found and because the trial was a civil matter and not a criminal one it seems that if this were true, the most likely offense would have been contempt of court. Regardless of the reason for incarceration, William Wagner was known to have said that two months of grits, black strap called syrup and dirty water called coffee were enough for him. He would never again, after that time, trouble himself with any more wrecks.

The wreck of the *Three Sisters* and the subsequent trial involving as it did most of the residents, county officials, and assorted "passers-through," was probably the biggest event of the decade. The story was told to visitors with a sense of pride and braggadocio because even though the citizens lost in Key West, the *Three Sisters House* had survived as a monument to their labor. Something had been salvaged after all.

The first clue to the "House of the Three Sisters" is found in the *Commodore's Story* by Ralph Middleton Munroe. Munroe first visited the area in 1877 and found "Old Johnny Frow" living in a house built from lumber taken from the *Three Sisters*. The house was typical of the small dwellings built by the pioneers. It had one room that was about fifteen by twenty. It was of board and batten construction and originally most likely had a palmetto thatched roof. It had no fireplace, making it necessary to do cooking outside over an open fire. The site of this house was on the former Besly homestead in Coconut Grove. Frow had just purchased the entire 160 acres from the widow Besly for one hundred dollars. This included most of the business district of Coconut Grove and a mile and a half of waterfront. Although Frow had been involved in the salvage operation, it is unlikely that he actually built the house for himself but moved into the already existing dwelling, built probably

in 1870 of lumber from the wreck.¹⁶ Frow did not remain owner of the house for long because he almost immediately began selling portions of his property to others — becoming the first sub-divider in the Grove.

Around 1882, Charles and Isabella Peacock, who arrived from England in 1875, purchased thirty-one acres of land from John Frow. This included the area from immediately south of the Coconut Grove Park to Mary Street and Grand Avenue. They lived in the then unoccupied House of the Three Sisters while their own home, "Bay View House," was being built. The Bay View House, later known as the Peacock Inn, became the first hotel and tourist center in the Miami area. The hotel was so successful that by 1886 the House of the Three Sisters was renovated and a porch and rough stone fireplace added to it so the overflow crowd from the inn could be accommodated.

The same year Ralph Munroe purchased forty-two acres from Frow immediately south of the Peacock property. Somehow the House of the Three Sisters ended up on his land where it remained from that time on. This was probably the original site of the house because there was also a coral rock well dug there.

At first Munroe used the House of the Three Sisters as a guest cottage for numerous visitors who came to "The Barnacle," the home Munroe built in 1891. In 1903 a "co-operative kitchen" was organized to fulfill the void left by the closing of the Peacock Inn the year before. A kitchen was added to the original one room and the many winter visitors who had previously taken their meals at the inn were served at the House of the Three Sisters. From this enterprise came the idea of Camp Biscayne, a rustic camp opened by Munroe the following year across from Charles Avenue on the bay front. For the next decade and a half the Grove again had a drawing card for sophisticated northern visitors.

From the story of the *Three Sisters* it is possible to see a little of what life was like on the frontier of South Florida before the railroad came. The wreck was the focal point of the first community endeavor on the bay of which we have a record. The House of the Three Sisters witnessed the beginning of Coconut Grove, the most influential pre-railroad settlement on the bay, and housed its most important early settlers and visitors. It was one of the oldest dwellings in the area to survive until modern times. In its last days it was being used as a store house

¹⁶The Besly home was built sometime between 1870 and 1872. Dr. Harris was the agent in charge. Harris also put Dr. Horace P. Porter in it as a tenant in late 1872. A post office was opened in Coconut Grove in January of 1873 with Porter as postmaster. It could therefore be said with some certainty that the Three Sisters House was probably the Grove's first post office.

by Ralph Munroe's son Wirth, who lived at "The Barnacle." It was not until the late 1950's that dry rot, resurrection ferns, and termites wrote the final chapter and ending to the story of the *Three Sisters*.

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