

# Notes on South Florida Place Names: Norris Cut<sup>1</sup>

By Roland Chardon\*

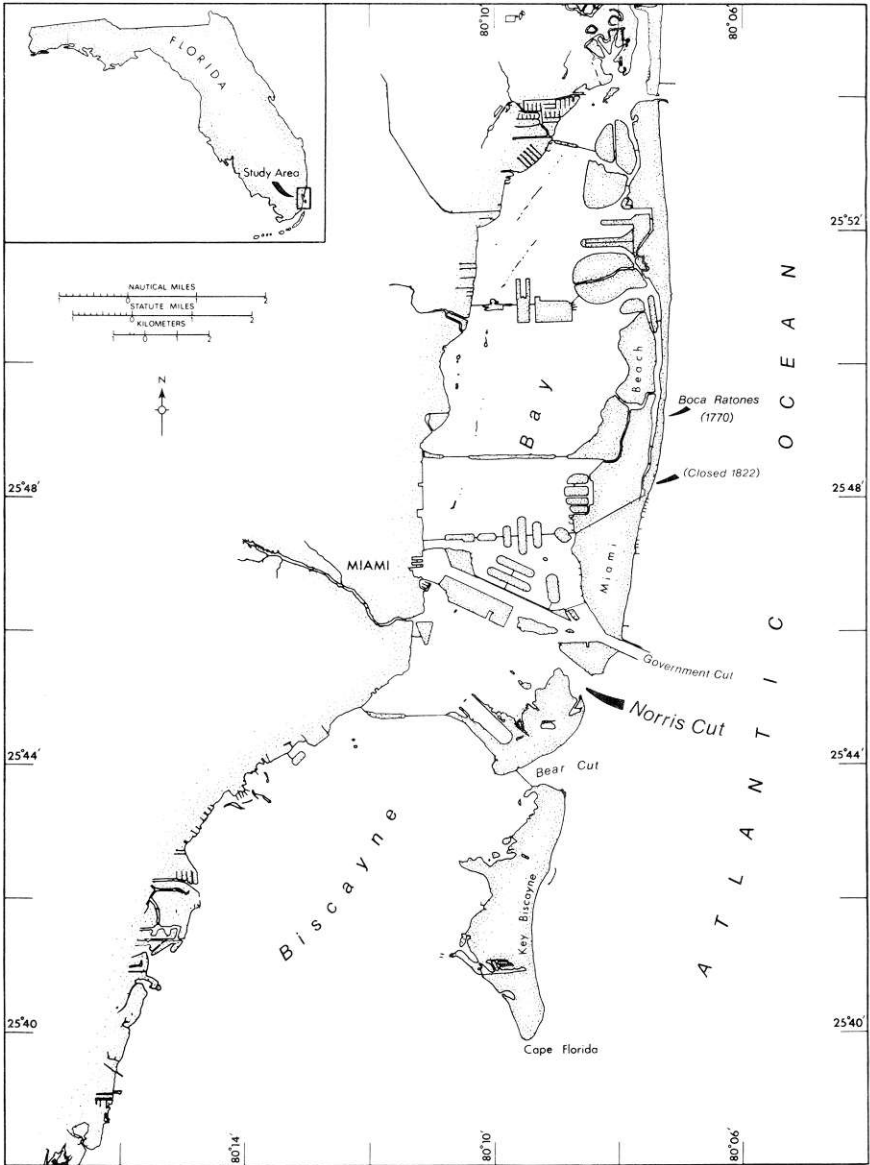
South Florida is liberally sprinkled with exotic place names. They recall past scenes ranging from spots of haunting natural beauty to the most ordinary of geographical features. Visions are evoked of the struggles and imprints of humans as they settled on the land or were wrecked on reefs, and of the sweeps of history which caught the region changing hands frequently among Indians, Spaniards, Englishmen, and Americans. Captiva Island and Immokalee in the west, the Everglades and Cape Sable in the center, and Fort Lauderdale, Perrine, and Black Caesar's Creek in the east all have a special meaning to those who know about them.

If Norris Cut sounds a little drab in comparison with these and other, more artful place names, at least it is not without its historic and cultural interest. For this presently rather obscure tidal inlet (illustration) got its name not, as might be expected, due to someone's exploratory, pioneering, or building activities, but because of the way varying local pronunciations were eventually resolved into one written place name. The naming of Norris Cut thus reflects both specific cultural influences in the Biscayne Bay area at the time the inlet was formed, as well as what can happen linguistically when outsiders transcribe a piece of folk terminology onto a map.

Historical maps persuasively suggest that Norris Cut was created sometime between 1829 and 1838 A.D. due to natural causes,<sup>2</sup> and quite possibly by the South Florida Hurricane of September 14-16, 1835.<sup>3</sup> As settlement expanded along upper Biscayne Bay in the latter 1800s, boats coming from the north and heading for the Miami River often entered the Bay through Norris Cut. Once Government Cut was opened in 1905, however, it became the preferred entry route, and, though Norris Cut has

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Location of Norris Cut today. Also shown are Government Cut and Bear Cut, as well as where Boca Raton opened into the Atlantic Ocean in 1770, and the outlet of Boca Raton when it closed in 1822.

been considerably widened and part of its channel deepened by human activity in the 20th century, it is rarely used as a water passage today.

Just how or when Norris Cut received its name is not known with

certainty. This may be partly because, due to an error, Boca Ratones (or Rattones) was the first name given the Cut in the mid-1800s, soon after its creation. And part of the mystery may be due to the various other names for Norris Cut which have been recorded in several documents. During the 19th century, Norris Cut was also called Narrows Cut, Narrow Cut, Narres's Cut, and Norez Cut. As it happens, the first recorded instance of the name "Norris Cut" is on a U.S. Coast Survey map of northern Biscayne Bay, drawn in 1867.<sup>4</sup> Since then, this is the name which has been consistently used on official nautical charts to this day.

On the Coast Survey's first reconnaissance chart of southeastern Florida, however, Norris Cut was called "Narrows Cut."<sup>5</sup> This sketch map, drawn in 1849, carries the same place name in a contemporary Coast Survey report, which reads:<sup>6</sup>

The mainland of Florida, above said cape [i.e., Cape Florida], runs down into a sharp point, from the head of Key Biscayne bay to Narrows cut, which separates it from Virginia Key, the most northern of the Florida islands.

But the U.S. Coast Survey was not the first to identify Norris Cut as Narrows Cut, for this latter name had already been given to a Biscayne Bay inlet north of Bear Cut, on the 1841 and 1845 editions of Blunt's famous charts.<sup>7</sup> In 1852, the U.S. Coast Survey also identified the Cut as "Narrow Cut,"<sup>8</sup> and either Narrow, or, more generally, Narrows Cut was used for Norris Cut by several people writing for years afterward.<sup>9</sup>

That the name "Norris" may have evolved from "Norez" is possibly implied in a report, written in 1883, relating Coast Survey activities along the coast. The official surveyor writes:<sup>10</sup>

On Monday the 19th we left Biscayne Bay going out through Norris Cut (originally Norez Cut) and shortly after noon we reached New River Inlet. . . .

And even later, a traveller, describing Biscayne Bay in 1894, gave Norris Cut the name Narres's Cut, saying:<sup>11</sup>

The eastern boundaries of the bay are the narrow spur of the mainland which ends at Narres's Cut and Virginia Key, and Key Biscayne lying just below in the same line, . . .

We therefore have no less than six recorded names applied to Norris Cut; there may have been more. It is of course difficult to say when each

of these names (or variations) was first introduced for the new inlet, but the sequence by which each appears to have been first recorded is:

Boca Raton	1839
Narrows Cut	1841 (Blunt); 1849 (U.S. Coast Survey)
Narrow Cut	1852
Norris Cut	1867
Norez Cut	1883 (but specifically referring to earlier years)
Narres's Cut	1894

I have seen no document which explains the naming of Norris Cut, though several suggestions for its toponymic origin have been offered by interested Miami area residents, during informal discussions with this writer. One is that the Cut may have been named for an individual, presumably a Mr. Norris, who might either have lived in the Biscayne Bay area, or first reported the inlet to others. The cut was once identified as Norris' Cut on an 1883 Coast and Geodetic map,<sup>12</sup> but I cannot find references to such a person for the 1860s, the general period in which Norris Cut is recorded for the first time.<sup>13</sup>

A second suggestion has been that Norris may have developed as a corruption of a Spanish "Nariz Cut," implying that the Spaniards were the first to give the inlet a name. One reason for this may lie in the references to Norez Cut and Narres's Cut already noted. These would, to those who do not know Spanish well, appear similar to "Nariz" and, with other obviously Spanish place names common in the area, provide a plausible rationale for a Spanish origin for "Norris."

It is true that a Spanish name — Boca Raton — was the first name I have seen given to Norris Cut, in 1839.<sup>14</sup> The practice of so naming the Cut persisted for some years, but it was largely limited to military maps or others derived from them.<sup>15</sup> However, calling Norris Cut "Boca Raton" very probably resulted from a confusion between two geographically quite distinct tidal inlets several miles apart. Further, when one of the inlets (Boca Raton) existed, the other (Norris Cut) did not. And after Norris Cut was formed in the 1830s, the old inlet at Boca Raton was almost always closed. It is a somewhat confusing story, but can be sorted out by careful inspection of the maps of the times.

This inspection shows that Boca Raton, legitimately named by Spanish navigators and sometimes known by the English as White River Inlet, at one time connected northern Biscayne Bay with the ocean. The location of Boca Raton, however, was some miles north of present Norris Cut; in the 1770s, for example, Boca Raton entered the Atlantic Ocean somewhere near present 46th Street in Miami Beach (illustra-

tion).<sup>16</sup> Due to prevailing currents, Boca Ratones moved progressively south, until sand accumulation closed it off by 1822, at about 25th Street (illustration);<sup>17</sup> today, Indian Creek is what remains of Boca Ratones. Not until several years later (between 1829 and 1838) was Norris Cut formed as a separate natural feature, almost 3½ miles south of and totally distinct from Boca Ratones. The two inlets should not, therefore, be associated with each other in a physical sense.

On the other hand, placing the name Boca Ratones where Norris Cut is located, as the military cartographers of the times did, is an understandable error, since Boca Ratones had closed and Norris Cut was open. But it was an error just the same, and Norris Cut was not called Boca Ratones for very long, nor by many people. In any case, the name Norris Cut could not have evolved linguistically from Boca Ratones, and in fact no one makes that claim. As we have seen, what is often suggested is that Norris is a corruption of “Nariz.” In Spanish, “nariz” means “nose,” and Norris Cut does, with some imagination, appear to look like a nose on some of the maps of the latter half of the 1800s.

But, spelling and cartographic similarities notwithstanding, the evidence against a Spanish origin for the name Norris Cut is considerably stronger than the evidence for it. First, the inlet was created several years after Florida had been transferred from Spain to the United States in 1821. It does not seem likely that a new Spanish name would have been given to a natural feature which appeared “ex post facto,” as it were, and especially in a foreign region already being settled by English-speaking people. As noted above, a Spanish name was initially given to Norris Cut, but that name was Boca Ratones (or Rattones), in recognition of the prior existence of the original Boca Ratones during Spanish times. Thus, had a Spanish place name been retained for Norris Cut, it almost certainly would have been Boca Ratones.

A second argument against a close linguistic connection between Norris and Nariz concerns syllable stress. In the English word “Norris,” the stress is heavier on the first syllable (Nórris), whereas the opposite occurs in the Spanish word “nariz” (naríz). These syllabic stress differences make it quite unlikely that “Nariz” could have been a possible source for “Norris.”

A third reason why Norris Cut is probably not of Spanish derivation focuses on the accompanying use of the term “Cut” in the place name. “Nariz Cut” sounds strange indeed, and even if an uncharacteristic (for the Spaniards) name like Nariz had been given to an inlet, the full place name would have included the word “Boca.” There is, however, no suggestion that Norris Cut was ever named Boca Nariz. “Cut,” in this

connotation, is an English Caribbean term used to describe certain narrow water passages – in particular tidal inlets (such as, for example, Bear Cut, between Virginia Key and Key Biscayne). This implies that Bahamian seamen or wreckers, who for perhaps a century had been frequenting this part of Florida, introduced the word “cut” to apply to the narrow inlet at Norris Cut. Again, this raises the possibility that Norris Cut was named for a presently unknown Bahamian, and this may be so; but, as has been mentioned, no such person is recorded and, as we shall see, another simple explanation can also be advanced.

In view of all this, and given the added factors of American and Bahamian settlement on the mainland opposite Norris Cut and an American lighthouse on Key Biscayne,<sup>18</sup> it seems one should look for a non-Spanish, and probably American or Bahamian, origin for the naming of Norris Cut. And indeed, a more likely alternative is that Norris Cut is a modification, not of a Spanish Nariz Cut, but of Narrows Cut, and there is documentary and linguistic evidence to support this view.

The first English name for Norris Cut was Narrows Cut, identified on the 1841 and 1845 Blunt charts and on the first U.S. Coast Survey map – a preliminary reconnaissance map – of south Florida.<sup>19</sup> The application of the name ‘Narrows’ to some tidal inlets crossing the long barrier beaches along the east coast of Florida was not unknown, and certainly Norris Cut was narrow at the time. But there may be an additional reason why this particular opening was named Narrows Cut.

Before Boca Ratones closed in 1822, and prior to the creation of Norris Cut a few years later, the land on which Miami Beach is presently located was one long, narrow island, ending at Bear Cut to the south.<sup>20</sup> This island was very accurately surveyed in the 1760s by William Gerard DeBrahm, a British surveyor who appropriately enough gave it the name of “Narrow Island.”<sup>21</sup> Since Gauld’s *Observations* (footnote 21), and therefore DeBrahm’s place name, were available to at least some people sailing along the coast, it is quite possible that Narrows Cut was a logical name to give to the new inlet, based on the Narrow Island through which the inlet had been created. It is, however, equally possible that Narrows Cut, like so many others, was named due to its narrowness.

In either case, an American, Bahamian, or even a Britisher could have coined the name. At present I happen to lean toward a Bahamian origin, partly because Bahamian settlers lived around Biscayne Bay, partly because of the association of “Narrows” with “Cut,” partly because the first use of the name Narrows Cut is on an 1841 chart derived from British surveys (cf. footnote 7), and partly because American army

cartographers at first used “Boca Ratones” to identify the Cut in 1839 (implying that “Narrows Cut” was not an American innovation).

Regardless of how Narrows Cut was initially named, this was the official name first given to Norris Cut by the U.S. Coast Survey in 1849, and it was used frequently in later descriptions of the inlet.<sup>22</sup> There is also no doubt that, for some reason, the name had been changed, on later Coast Survey maps, to Norris Cut—officially retained to the present day. The question then becomes: Why and how was Narrows Cut changed to Norris Cut? The answer is not yet known, but I suggest a linguistic modification, whereby “Narrows” was orally pronounced, by certain English-speaking groups around Biscayne Bay, so that “Norris” was heard by others, even though the meaning was still “Narrows.”

The most numerous and dominant settlers in the Biscayne Bay area in the early and mid-1800s apparently came from the Bahamas, or from Bahamian-descended people from the keys.<sup>23</sup> Later, possibly in the 1850s and certainly in the 1870s, others came from sections of the United States, such as Tennessee and Georgia, sometimes described as “Upland South” culture areas.<sup>24</sup> Both groups, as well as those coming from elsewhere, pronounce the word “narrows” somewhat differently from each other. For example, my own experiences, and those with whom I’ve discussed the question, indicate that people from the “Upland South” tend to pronounce “narrows” in such a way that someone like myself, coming from the northeastern United States, would transcribe the word as “nares” (nárez, phonetically).

Even more interestingly, many English-speaking Caribbean peoples, including many from the Bahamas and probably the Florida Keys, tended to pronounce “narrows” almost as “norruz” or “norez” (nárez, phonetically). This, according to Dr. F. G. Cassidy, noted authority on American English and folk etymology, is because the sounds of “o” in “hot” and “a” in “hat” are identical: a vowel in between the two.<sup>25</sup> Thus, “Narrows Cut,” pronounced by Bahamian folk people, comes very close to being heard as “Norris Cut” by someone not from that culture. In this way, I suggest that the words “Narrows Cut,” originally and correctly transcribed by the Blunts in 1841, and by the U.S. Coast Surveyors in 1849, either on the basis of their understanding that “norruz” meant “narrows,” or for some other reason, were retranscribed by later U.S. Coast Surveyors, working in the field in the 1860s and without benefit of the 1849 chart. These latter surveyors heard “Norris Cut,” and wrote it thus to conform more closely with local pronunciation at that time, as they understood it.

In later years, the Upland South added its contribution to the pronunciation of “narrows.” I do not know just when the first rendering of “Narrows Cut” as “Narres’s Cut” occurred, but it seems to have taken place later than “Norris Cut” – perhaps as late as the 1880s, for I have not yet found any reference to “Narres’s Cut” prior to the early 1890s.

Following the hypothesis suggested, the original Narrows Cut was recognized as the true name of the inlet by all three human groups involved – that is, by Bahamians, Upland South folk, and Northerners. But Narrows Cut was pronounced differently by each group, and the variations were heard and dutifully recorded by several Northern writers. In this way Narrows Cut became variously Norez Cut (Bahamian pronunciation), Norris Cut (also Bahamian), and Narres’s Cut (Upland South), depending on who talked to whom.

Indeed, Dr. Cassidy says that these pronunciations are in fact closer than they appear, to those who later try to reconstruct their sounds from printed words, as I am doing here.<sup>26</sup> There could, for that matter, have been many other variations in pronunciation of “Narrows,” which in turn might have been transcribed differently. But the three transcriptions outlined here seem to have “stuck,” at least for some years. Noted accordingly (mostly by Northerners) in the various written records naming the Cut, the divergence continued through the latter half of the 19th century and into the 20th. Ultimately, the place name Norris Cut emerged, partly because this became its official name on charts and maps, and partly because the 19th century settlers were soon culturally overwhelmed by the great 20th century influx of Miami immigrants, unaware of the original “Narrows Cut,” and exposed to the official “Norris Cut.”

In summary, while it is not yet possible to prove how Norris Cut got its name, it is highly unlikely to have been a corruption of a Spanish “Nariz Cut,” nor to have been named after an individual. Norris Cut presently appears rather to have derived from a transformation by surveyors of a Bahamian oral rendition of Narrows Cut, pronounced very much like Norris Cut to outsiders, and so transcribed. The surveyors’ local contacts for their transformation may have been Bahamian settlers on the shores of Biscayne Bay, or Bahamian seamen who visited the area during or shortly after the Cut was formed, or the Keeper of the Cape Florida Light House at the time the 1867 detailed Coast Survey was made.<sup>27</sup> What is somewhat surprising is that the U.S. Coast Survey itself, having left Norris Cut unnamed on its maps and charts for 18 years after 1849, did not check back to its own initial place name of Narrows Cut. But, whatever the reason, once the name Norris Cut was officially



adopted by the Coast Survey, and thus also by Miami residents who looked at the Coast Survey maps in later years, Narrows Cut permanently became Norris Cut. In truth, however, it remains Narrows Cut—only now it is spelled differently.

## NOTES

1. The author expresses grateful appreciation to Dr. F. G. Cassidy, Professor of English at the University of Wisconsin (Madison), for his help and critical evaluation. I am also indebted to Drs. Jay Edwards and Miles Richardson, Department of Geography and Anthropology, Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge), for their assistance and comments, as well as for the phonetic spellings, provided by Dr. Edwards, identified in this paper.

2. Chardon, R., 1977, "Cartographic analysis of coastal change: natural and urban," in H. J. Walker, ed., *Research techniques in coastal environments*. Geoscience and Man Series, vol. 18 (Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge) (in press).

3. Chardon, R., 1976, "The Formation of Norris Cut," Ms.

4. U.S. Coast Survey, 1867, "Head of Key Biscayne Bay, Florida." Surveyed June, 1867, by C. T. Iardella. Register No. 1049. Ms. topographic map, Archives of the National Ocean Survey, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Rockville, Maryland.

See also: *Report of the Superintendent of the U.S. Coast Survey, showing the progress of the Survey during the year 1867*. House of Representatives, Executive Document No. 275, 40th Congress, 2nd Session (Government Printing Office, Washington, 1869), p. 31. In this report, Norris Cut, due to a typographical error, is misspelled "Morris Cut." On the map, however, it is correctly spelled.

5. "Sketch F, showing the progress in Section no. VI, U.S. Coast Survey, in 1849 & 50: Reconnaissance of Florida Keys, Biscayne Bay & Card's Sound," accompanying the *Report of the Superintendent of the Coast Survey for the years 1849-50*. U.S. Senate, Exec. Doc. No. 5, 31st Congress, 1st Session.

6. "Extract from the report of assistant F. G. Gerdes to the U.S. Coast Survey Superintendent, on the reconnaissance of the Florida Keys &c. II. The Florida Keys," p. 107, Appendix 23, *Report of the Superintendent of the Coast Survey, showing the progress of that work during the year ending November, 1850*. U.S. Senate, Exec. Doc. No. 7, 31st Cong., 2nd Sess.

7. "Blunt's new chart of the West Indies, and Gulf of Mexico from the Spanish, English, French, & Danish surveys," corrected to 1841 (E. & G. W. Blunt, New York, 1841). Also, "Chart of the Gulf of Mexico, West Indies, and Spanish Main" (E. & G. W. Blunt, New York, 1845).

The "Narrows Cut" identified on these two Blunt charts is actually misplaced. It is located where the former Boca Raton had existed in the late 1700s and early 1800s (see p. 54 below). But there is no doubt that the Narrows Cut referred to applied to the then recently created Norris Cut. Both the 1841 and the 1845 Blunt charts also erred with respect to the location of Fort Dallas, which was placed a few miles north of the Miami River on these two charts (to bring the fort in line opposite Norris Cut), instead of on the river's north bank. What concerns us specifically here, however, is the Blunt charts' designation for the only inlet shown opening into Biscayne Bay north of Bear Cut.

8. *Report of the Superintendent of the Coast Survey, showing the progress of the Survey during the year 1852*. Sen. Exec. Doc. No. 58, 32nd Cong., 2nd Sess. (Robert Clarke, Washington, 1853), p. 10.

9. Henshall, James A., 1884, *Camping and cruising in Florida* (Robert Clarke & Co., Cincinnati), p. 168. He also writes, on p. 104 (while describing Biscayne Bay): "The bay is entered through channels running between the keys, the principal ones being Bear Cut and Narrows Cut, opposite Miami, . . ." Henshall's map of the Peninsula of Florida (frontispiece) shows Narrows Cut where Norris cut is presently located.

See also Hugh M. Smith, 1895, who refers to "... Norris or Narrow Cut, . . ." on p. 170 of his "Notes on Biscayne Bay, Florida, with reference to its adaptability as the site of a marine hatching and experiment station," Appendix 2, *Report of the U.S. Commissioner of Fish and Fisheries for 1895* (Washington).

See also Henry J. Wagner, 1949, "Early pioneers of South Florida," *Tequesta* 9, p. 69.

10. Letter O. H. Tittman to J. E. Hilgard, Superintendent of the U.S. Coast Survey, March 29, 1883. National Archives and Records Service (NARS), Record Group (RG) 23: Records of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, Washington.

11. Dodge, Charles Richard, 1894. "Subtropical Florida," *Scribner's* 15(3), p. 360.

12. U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, 1883, "Additional Soundings off Miami River, Key Biscayne Bay, Florida." Register No. 1545. NARS, RG 23.

13. There is no record of a person named Norris living in the Biscayne Bay area in the middle of the 19th century (Arva Moore Parks, 1976, personal communication). Nor is anyone named Norris mentioned in Thelma Peters, 1976, *Lemon City: Pioneering on Biscayne Bay, 1850-1925* (Banyan Books, Inc., Miami). Concerning the possibility that a Mr. Norris might have been a Bahamian, the author checked the Nassau (Bahamas) telephone directory to see how many Norrises would be listed there; only one was listed. While certainly not conclusive, this indicates that there is very little evidence for the existence of a man named Norris anywhere near Norris Cut when it was first so named.

14. Mackay, Capt. John, and Lieut. J. E. Blake, 1839, "Map of the Seat of War in Florida," NARS, RG 77: Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers.

15. Several maps drawn in the 1850s, including the famous "Ives Map," show Norris Cut as Boca Ratonnes or Rattones (*e.g.* Lieut. J. C. Ives, 1856, "Military Map of the Peninsula of Florida south of Tampa Bay," in U.S. Senate Doc. No. 89, 62nd Cong., 1st Sess.). Even the U.S. Coast Survey, on one of its general coastal charts, once named Norris Cut "Boca Rattones" ("Atlantic Coast of the United States (in four sheets); Sheet No. IV; Mosquito Inlet to Key West; 1863." Sketch 21, accompanying the *Report . . . of the Coast Survey . . . during the year 1863*). Also, the 1852 edition of Blunt's 1845 "Chart of the Gulf of Mexico . . ." (*op. cit.*) shows Norris Cut correctly located, but it is called "Boca Ratonnes."

16. Chardon, R., 1975, "Northern Biscayne Bay in 1776," *Tequesta* 35, pp. 51-54.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

18. Parks, Arva Moore, 1975, "Miami in 1876," *Tequesta* 35, pp. 91-92.

19. See footnotes 5 and 7 above.

20. Chardon, R., 1975, "Northern Biscayne Bay in 1776," *Tequesta* 35, pp. 51-53.

21. Gauld, George, 1796. *Observations on the Florida Keys, Reefs and Gulf; . . .* printed for W. Faden (London), p. 18.

22. See footnotes 5, 7, and 9 above.

23. Parks, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 110-111; see also George E. Merrick, 1941, "Pre-Flagler influences on the Lower Florida East Coast," *Tequesta* 1: 1-10.

24. Merrick, *op. cit.*, pp. 6 and 10. On the other hand, Arva Parks, after careful analysis, has so far found no documentation for Upland South, or "Cracker," settlers until the 1870s (Parks, 1976, personal communication). Similarly, in the area of upper Biscayne Bay, no Upland South settlers are identified until at least the mid-1870s—a time

when descendants of Bahamians were relatively numerous (Thelma Peters, 1976, *Lemon City, op. cit.*, pp. 1-51 *passim*). Henry J. Wagner states that many homesteaders apparently "lived on sowbelly and grits" (Wagner, 1949, "Early pioneers of South Florida," *Tequesta* 9, p. 61); however, this diet could point to either a Bahamian or Upland South cultural origin.

25. F. G. Cassidy, 1976, personal communication. See also F. G. Cassidy and R. B. LePage (editors), 1967, *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (University Press, Cambridge), p. xlix.

26. F. G. Cassidy, 1976, personal communication.

27. It is interesting to note that there were different Keepers of the Cape Florida Lighthouse when Coast Surveyors made their initial Key Biscayne surveys in 1849-50 and 1855, to establish a triangulation base line. But in the years 1866-68, Temple Pent, a Bahamian, was Keeper of the Light (Parks, 1975, "Miami in 1876," *Tequesta* 35, p. 135). It was in 1867 that the first detailed survey of northern Biscayne Bay was made by the U.S. Coast Survey. In its records, as we have seen, Norris Cut was "Narrows Cut" in 1849, but "Norris Cut" in 1867. The connection may be coincidental, but it is also provocative.