

Diary of an Unidentified Land Official, 1855

Key West to Miami

Edited by Wright Langley
and Arva Moore Parks

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, Wright Langley, Director of the Historic Key West Preservation Board found a brief, longhand, 1855–56 diary among the William Henry Wills Papers in the Southern Historical Collection, Library of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The unknown diarist wrote of his visit to Key West, the Florida Keys, Miami and Tampa, and recorded his impressions of the people he met and the events he observed. Realizing the importance of the account, Mr. Langley contacted Miami historian, Arva Moore Parks, and Tampa historian, Gary Mormino, to aid in the editing of the diary. The Tampa section will be published in the 1984 *Tequesta*.

Unfortunately, the author remains unidentified. Yet from his account we know that he was tall, proud, fastidious, poor but educated and came from a cold climate—possibly from Great Britain. He disliked the military establishment, was religious, liked to read and wrote well.

The author found Key West an exciting seaport in 1855. Shouts of “Wreck Ashore” echoed along the waterfront—a ship had gone aground on the nearby reef. Transplanted Bahamians sailed to save lives and remove the valuable cargo which they brought to Key West for disposition by the Federal Court that regulated the wrecking trade.

Between 1848 and 1859 at least 618 ships were salvaged from the Florida Reef—wrecking was the major industry of the island. In between

salvaging wrecked vessels the crews fished, turtled and harvested sponge from the rich ocean bottom.

For most of Key West's history, the military was also a part of island life. In 1855, the yet unfinished Fort Taylor dominated the waterfront and naval vessels made Key West a frequent port of call.

The year 1855 was also the peak year for salt production — an enterprise brought over from the Bahamas. Saltwater trapped in ponds produced highly valuable salt as the sun evaporated the moisture. Production ranged from 40,000 bushels to 75,000 bushels in 1855.

By 1860 Key West had grown to the largest and wealthiest city in Florida with a population that had increased from 517 in 1830 to 2913 just three decades later. It was truly South Florida's gateway city, the first stop for those wishing to go on to Miami.

There hardly was a Miami in 1855. The Miami post office was still a year away and scarcely twenty-five people called Miami home. In fact, only eleven heads of households were recorded in the 1850 Census and six of these were of foreign birth.

The author of the diary arrived in Miami only 25 days after the Army re-activated Fort Dallas after a five years absence. Florida's frontier settlers, including those in Miami, had been pressuring the Government to deal with what they called the "Indian menace" by either removing the Indians to the West, or exterminating them.

The acknowledged leader of the small Miami settlement was former New Yorker, George Washington Ferguson, who had lived in the area for ten years and had attained some wealth from the large scale manufacture of comptie starch. In 1855, the five electors unanimously elected him their representative to the Legislature.

The author of the diary met most of the people who lived on or near the Miami River. It is interesting to note, however, that within ten years everyone except John Adams would be gone. Indian problems and the Civil War ultimately drove the settlers who had options to other places. Ferguson moved permanently to Key West where he attained both wealth and position and lived out the rest of his life in comfort.

DIARY OF AN UNIDENTIFIED LAND OFFICIAL, 1855

Key West to Miami

January 22. Morning and wind coming from Norwest. I walked out early and the first news I heard was the steamship *Isabel* had gone ashore last night near the lighthouse. The wreckers were going helter-skelter in every direction as it was seen from the steeple that a ship was in distress. Such a catastrophe appears to be the main spring of action among these people. They live by it, and it is the first thing at sunrise and the last at sunset for them to look out for a wreck. Salvage is what prompts them to go forward with such zeal. Philanthropy or a spirit of benevolence has nothing whatever to do with it.

The mail was received by the *Isabel*¹ and every one seems interested in it except those who are in pursuit of salvage on the steamer. The mail does not come here but twice a month which is not often enough for a man who has been accustomed to its daily visitations. Visitors suffer very much on account of the isolated condition of the place as regard to mail.

Doctor Baradargue called to see me again this morning. He seems to be determined to leave here and go to some place where he will not be subjected to the caprices of . . . this people. The *Isabel* got off about 12 o'clock and I hear she is not injured in the least — will go on to Havana tomorrow morning. Received an invitation to a Ball, to be given by the officers of the Man of War *Princeton* by the citizens tomorrow evening.

After dinner I walked out to look at the town. It is situated on the North end of the island which is oblong. The streets are narrow and the buildings have an old antiquated appearance. Some residences are beautiful and the grounds about them well laid out and set in evergreens, flowers and rose bushes. The principal shade is the cocoa which is planted in groves and circles around the residences and is upon the whole a luxuriant and beautiful tree. The fruit is upon them now in various stages of growth and the yield appears to be heavy. Large bunches come out together near the top from which the leaves spring and it presents to the eyes of the beholder a distinct species having peculiar characteristics. There are other evergreens growing on the island and many different kinds highly cultivated. Among them the oleander ranks first in my estimation. The rose in full bloom and various other flowers together with the appearance of vegetables on the table causes me to feel like I am in the midst of summer, and yet I know it is January. What a change would my mother and sisters experience if they could only be here now a few days: where they [are] another rose has lost all of its lovely characteristics — its leaves and roses gone. The

trees [have lost] their foliage and all is dreary and cold; while here there is every evidence to ones senses of the presence of summer, in fact it is summer and is always so. Frost, snow and ice never can chill vegetation here and cause it to put on its robes of mourning and thus fall to the ground.

Police regulations must be very defective here. Several fights occurred today and yesterday among the sailors who have been permitted to come ashore. One man was severely beaten for stealing this morning and I should not be surprised at any time to hear of more mischief in that line and perhaps burning the city will be resorted to. Several grog shops appear to be liberally encouraged and almost every store has a supply in bottles which can be vended without a license. With much provisions for the manufacture of the degraded sot—the vogue. The seaman's . . . the . . . and . . . with sufficient material to operate on can anyone wonder at any outrages that may be perpetrated in the town. Stayed in my room close all the evening to avoid the chilling wind from the north. Conversed some with Mr. Ferguson about Miami which he describes as an interesting country. He is the most sensible man I've seen since I came to this place. Has lived 10 years on the coast in great seclusion surrounded only by a few laborers and his family. Says the thermometer averages 72 degrees in winter and 76 in summer. The change has been sudden and severe in the weather. Yesterday it was too hot today it is too cold.

January 23. Morning clear and cool and calm. Summer breeze from Noreast. The heavy gales subsided during the night and now vessels go to sea with safety and several sail vessels left early in the morning. After breakfast I walked among the stores to look for shoes and bought two pair of shoes, one for every day and one for special occasions and an Italian scarf. The whole cost me \$7.75 which is about 40 per cent more than it ought to have been. My poverty . . . conditions and resources were all presented to my mind when I was buying, but I could not decide to dress in accordance with my limited means. Pride has something to do with my decisions and I fear I have too much of it remaining. Gentlemen ought to appear decent on all occasions and when one's profession carries him as mine does into respectable circles it is expected he should appear dressed in accordance with his profession and not his means. Such vices have operated on me for sometimes and I have often felt bad when I was not dressed as one should be. While I was out a ticket of admission to the ball was handed me which I suppose will be given to the door keeper. After dinner I walked out to the wharf and met with Doctor Badaraque who seemed to be always glad to see me. While there a government vessel bound for Tortugas, where the government is building a fort, hoisted sail

and went out most beautifully. We then took a walk along several streets on the island, earnestly engaged in conversation about the power and influence exercised by Mr. Adams² (the Episcopalian minister of the place) in his behalf. He honestly believes Mr. Adams has done all he can for him, which may be true, but I assured him he could not do anything to remove the prejudices of the Holy Alliance, as it is called, against him based as it was on his infirmities. I told him the wealthy people of this island belonged to his church and they are generally more unfeeling and unjust than the middle class. The first rich has . . . to be influenced by interest and never suffer their sympathies or sense of justice to interfere with them, in the least, in their conduct toward their fellow man, while on the other hand, the middle class is interested so often by high and holy notions, they lose sight in part of self and go forward to the support of a fellow being and will administer all the consolation in their power in the time of affliction. We walked and talked till night—saw many pretty things and many very tasty residences. Some of the grounds have been laid off in circles, semi-circles, triangles and quadrangles with little walks as hard and clean looking as a floor. The houses are set in flowers, roses, evergreens and shrubs and the whole shaded by cocoa trees. I returned to my room and saw in the street a great . . . between the men of the *Princeton* and some of the citizens. Some of them were taken to the Calaboose and the remainder left drinking and carousing about the streets. They are like wild men running here and there to see where they can get the most liquor. All of them appear to be young Irishmen and seem to think “this is a free country”: Some of them are still beating the drum and making a noise after it. I was much amused at an Irish sailor’s prayers when he left the island this morning. “The Lord be praised and I am leaving this place now, and I hope I shall never see it any more.” Suppose he had been an . . . and was in some way unfortunate. The ball opens at 9 o’clock and I have made up my mind to stay away.

24th. Morning clear and very pleasant. Wind E. Walked out after breakfast and went to a wharf, where I found a sickly looking old man fishing. He was all patience and seemed to be determined to wait till it suited the fish to bite. Sometimes they bite rapidly when the tide and wind is right but now they refused to take hold of the hook and the piece of turtle’s liver on it. I left the old man and returned to my room where I amused myself reading a trashy novel *Lamp Lighter*. It was evidently written by some religious person who thinks it is just and proper to continue a holy thing with an unholy aim in the shape of romance to maidens. The holy are more acceptable to the mind of the reader. But this is a sad mistake and should not be encouraged by Christian Churches. Religion and politics,

romance and religion should be kept for us separate because in this country they are discordant materials and cannot be intermixed without injuring both. Gertrude True Flint and Emily Graham are good characters and then there is Willie Sullivan too good to appear natural—all of them guided by Heavenly light along the true path. The book is not well written and deficient in description of scenes, etc.

In the evening I walked out again and saw a vessel discharging just in from New York. From there I sauntered along the coast, looked at some of the Coral rock on which this island is said to be based and finally reached an eminence where I could see the sunset. It was then almost 10 minutes high and the nearer it approached the water the more distinct did its ring become till at length it touched and then went slowly down leaving half, one quarter and then a ball the ring never being lost was all that was left. That soon left and then the reflection on the clouds was most beautiful. My feelings became very romantic while I gazed on the scene and I almost imagined myself really happy. The sun now gone shone on those I love but a few short hours before had lighted up this pathway and would soon return to them again. I strolled further on and saw more pretty flowers which always exercise an influence over me. They soften the asperities of my nature and in every way render me more comfortable. The sailors and Man of War's men are drunk carousing and producing a general disturbance. Understand the ball went off well last night and the officers have determined to give the citizens a ball next week. Am told wine and eggs sell very high namely eggs \$1.25 per dozen.

25th. Morning pleasant and clear. Wind So. After breakfast I walked down to see the mail boat which runs between this place and the Miami River, on the east side of the peninsula. I found it a small schooner and without any accommodations for a sick man, which caused me to think strongly of declining my trip to Miami on her. I ascertained she would start about 2 o'clock and went back to my room. She is called *Charles and Edward* after sons of the deputy collector, Mr. Howe.³ I staid about the house all morning after my walk and was deeply pained by being asked by my landlord to see his child, which was suffering most intensely from convulsions. He informed me that the disorder is common on the island and children rarely ever live through them. It was an aggravated form of the disease in which part of the functions were suspended for several minutes, during the convulsion and the convulsions were without the intervals usual in our country. The poor child was lying on the lap of its nurse apparently dead, when I went in, which condition lasted several minutes, then a cold sweat came out, it revived, looked to be alive again a

few short minutes and passed again into the same convulsive condition. Doctor Jones,⁴ its medical attendant, intended using chloroform as a final resort which must fail in affecting a cure because it is too far gone and congestion is too extensive.

After dinner I packed my trunk paid my bill and sent my trunk to the vessel. The Capt. seemed to be indisposed to start and argued many objections to it which were combatted by Mr. Ferguson and after some short talk from him he hoisted sail about 1/2 past 4 and we were driven by the breeze away from the wharf at a rapid rate. The *Isabel* ran in just as we started. As soon as everything got steady all hands went down below and changed clothes which changed the appearance of the crowd very much. They were fixed then for seafaring life and entered upon its duties with a degree of smartness. About dark the *Isabel* passed us again on her way to Charleston and now we were getting away from the city at a rapid rate and each man looked around for the night to usher in her difficulties. I found we had 5 passengers on board one of whom detained us some time to go up town to get his kitten which caused me to have very little patience with him. Supper came on, which was a rough one made up of tea, bread and some boiled beef, ham and butter and a due proportion of dirt. At bed time the two sailors commenced singing some hymns which I enjoyed very much. They sang an old one "O for a Closer Walk with God" which seemed to be better than it ever was before. The Captain carried the bass and the other two the tenor; and upon the whole the music was capital improved perhaps by the circumstance — roaring of the sea. About 10 o'clock the Captain cast anchor and I went down below to get some sleep. My fellow passengers had been generous with me. They had taken the floor and left me one of the bunks which was hard wood on which the flag of U.S. was spread, then a hearth rug and blanket. This was my bed and I prepared myself to use it by buttoning on my overcoat close around me and then lying down just so for the night. Some of the passengers were already snoring and there I laid tossed about by the vessel till a late hour before sleep forced itself on me.

26th. About light Mr. Ferguson rose and took the liberty of starting the Capt. and his hands. The anchor was raised, sails hoisted and we were driven by a good breeze rapidly through the water. The morning was fair — wind S.W. the Capt. took course outside of the Keys which was very rough and before breakfast hour I was quite seasick. He threw out a large hook for Kingfish which he said caught them as the vessel went along. The little islands or Keys are very near each other the most of them small and not suited to cultivations. Am informed they extend along the coast one

hundred fifty miles. My seasickness was too great for breakfast to be endured in my sight or even thought of. At 11 o'clock the Capt. ran between two Keys and passed in between the Keys and the mainland where the water was smooth and the vessel glided along without much motion. Before dinner my seasickness was all gone and I felt as though I could eat; but oh, that man who cooked was so filthy in preparing it I could hardly look at it. He stirred the hominy with a stick of wood, washed the dishes with his black hand, wiped the knives and forks with a black dish cloth and smoked a short chalk pipe, as long as a man's finger, all the time he was cooking. The dinner was announced and each man came to his place out on deck. The table was a huge board spread on the cabin lengthwise and each side had two plates. Soup was first served made of boiled beef and rice. Boiled beef was then passed around — butter and bread and pepper sauce. Some of the passengers made a hearty meal not withstanding the filth, etc. During the evening I read *Quinten Matays* an old novel I found on board. It was a good thing to kill the tedium of the afternoon and I stuck to it close till we arrived at Indian Key. A boat came alongside and all hands went ashore to walk around the island for exercise. It has been cleared up a long time and was once the place of a bloody tragedy. The Indians murdered nearly every man and woman and child on it, pillaged the stores and burnt the houses. Only one or two escaped⁵ to tell the sad tale and since then the place had never been inhabited by more than one or two families. It was once quite a flourishing village and a depot for the wreckers, now it has two young men connected with the Coast Survey⁶ who have been stationed there to take the height of the tides every 1/2 hour during the day. The state of the barometer, the thermometer and hydrometer is reported in connection with the tides and the whole is expected to have a bearing on navigation around the reefs. Suppose they must lead a lonesome life though sails may be seen every hour in the 24 going north or south and the smaller class of vessels stop in the harbor, particularly sponge getters and wreckers. Had forgotten we passed a wreck during the day which excited our Capt. very much and caused him to bear towards it and to calculate the salvage, etc. It proved to be a vessel loaded with salt and it had been gotten off before we saw her. The wreckers had discovered and claimed her early in the morning and here one may say that man's avarice is turned to a good account. It causes wreckers to lie all along the coast near the reefs ready to go to the assistance of the distressed: but they had as well be a total as a partial wreck. Salvage commissions costs, etc., takes nearly all the cargo. Our little craft laid in the harbor all night and the wind blew very hard.

27th. Morning very cold — think it rained some last night. Wind N.W.

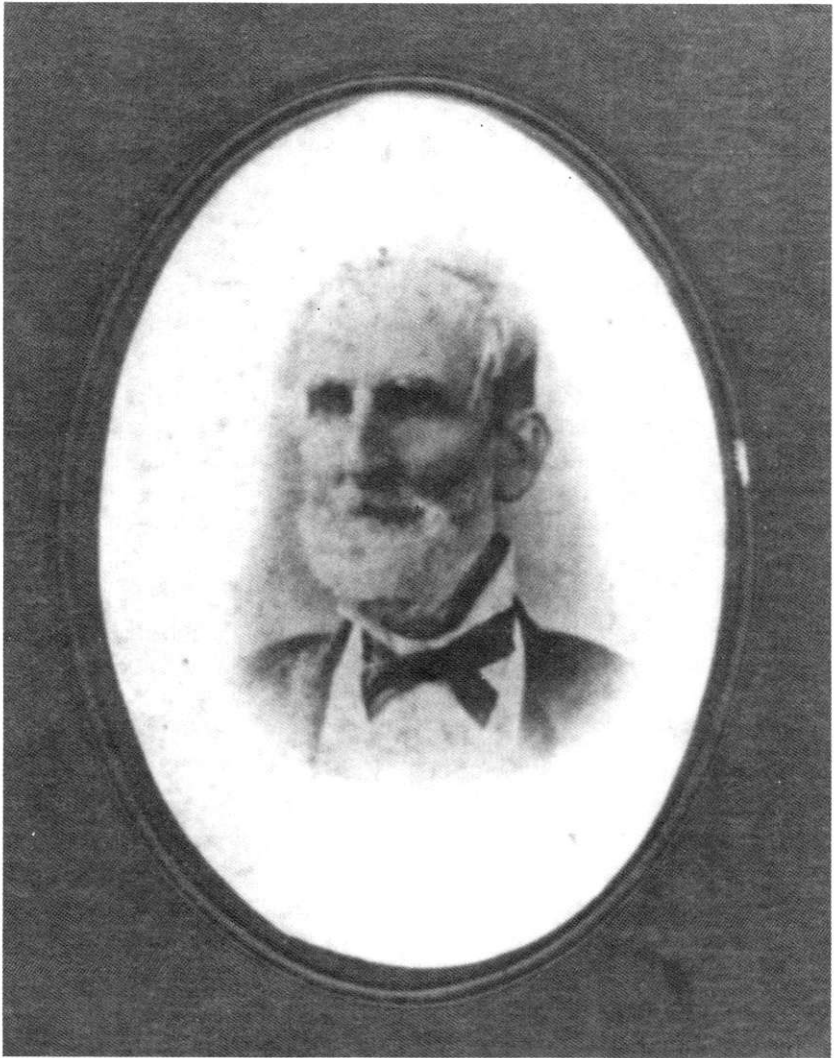
We raised sail and anchor about eight and passed outside the Keys again about two o'clock. Near Key Largo found the vessel in a calm which continued till near midnight. No one knows how disagreeable a calm is till he tries it. Learned that the island [Key Largo] is about 30 miles long, has some good land on it and one settlement — Believe it would be a good place for sea island cotton. The Capt. concluded he would try and run all night and didn't stop till about 3 o'clock in the morning. Anchored then in Caesar's Creek.

28th. Morning clear and cold. Wind N.W. Another calm about 10 o'clock. The breeze blew up afresh from the S.W. and we sailed along at a rapid rate until the vessel ran into Biscayne Bay which is beautiful and thro it to the mouth of the river where the soldiers were stationed.⁷ Uncle Sam's officers came aboard to get their mail and our men . . . and very much about the boat to go ashore. They are all Bahamians and Methodists and do not like to do any sort of work on the Sabbath. Am told a large number reside in Key West and that most of them were in the Methodist Church and that they were the descendants of Tories who ran from the Carolinas during the War of the Revolution. The river is very narrow and has about 4 ft. of water at its mouth. On one side is the military post formerly settled by Mr. English⁸ and the other side is an old residence formerly occupied by Mr. Duke⁹ of Tampa. On the right bank going in there are a large number of cocconut trees and the tents of the troops are scattered over about 3 acres of ground a part of which has been cultivated in limes. Am told several old places along the coast have an abundance of limes growing and some bananas and sugar cane.

Mr. Ferguson got a boat and some . . . to row his goods to his place and he and I were soon off. The water soon became deep, the river wider and the banks lower. The growth along the banks is the most singular one I ever met with. Have seen it before but not so perfect as it is here. It is a tree from 10 to 20 feet high with limbs like any other tree from which are sent down a great number of feelers, they are called so here, or braces which take hold on the bottom and grow in size as the tree advances. 'Tis by these feelers the tree is supported but the strange and unaccountable feature about the tree is the disposition of the limbs given off from the main limbs to turn to feelers. Or if they turn up to assume all the characters of a limb. The feelers have no leaves nor short twigs coming out from them whilst the limbs coming out are on opposite sides of the same stem have leaves, flowers and bear fruit. In a short time we landed at Mr. Ferguson's Cumpty [sic] Mill which is built of palmettoes interwoven between a slender frame work and situated on the west bank of the stream. There are several little

houses around his mill and on the hill side above covered with palmetto leaf. The front of the house has a fine garden full of Irish potatoes and other vegetables in the most luxuriant state of growth.¹⁰ He carried me up to his house and introduced me to his family composed of his wife and six children—four girls and two boys—all healthy, fine looking children.¹¹ In fact the girls are pretty and rosy—very rosy ladies and upon the whole it appears to be the most interesting family I've met in East Florida.

29th. The morning calm and pleasant enough for summer clothes. I walked before breakfast and found abundance of Coral Rock in every direction through the woods in some places so abundant the earth could not be seen. It is a singular rock [which] resembles in places large sponges very coarse—in others looks like honey combs and in others has a indistinct outline like an animal. Around the house it is so thick soil can scarcely be obtained for cultivation. Mr. Ferguson has filled it up so as to make terraces around the hill and thus prevent the soil from washing off. He has done an immense deal of unprofitable work on his lot of ground, enough to have fenced and reduced 80 acres of common land free of stones to cultivate. He has enclosed at least 6 acres of this stony hammock land which must have cost him at least \$600.00 and his crops on it are not worth more than a good interest on the money. His great industry deserves a better reward but one cannot feel much for a man who works so hard when a little sober reflection would teach him it would turn out badly. He needs someone to direct his energies but thus he is so self conceited one cannot tell him anything he did not know before, or had not thought of some thing better. His house and his mill for grinding arrowroot show clearly what kind of mind he has. On the side of the stream he has built a two story house for his mill which is weather bound and covered with palmetto leaves and adjoining he has another for a store house built of the same material. In the first his machinery, constructed after his own ideas, is placed, which exhibits originality and some mechanical skill. A master wheel, 7 feet across propelled by the weight of a small horse on top of it, to which he is carried and haltered by a small inclined plane from the hillside, drives his corn mill the rollers which crush the root—the buckets which elevate the water and empties it into a cylinder in which the root is washed, and several other small pieces of machinery difficult to describe. The whole appears to have been constructed in great haste and is rough and wants durability.¹² In the other house he has boxes for receiving the arrowroot and starch when it is ground and now he is removing all these things to make a temporary place for a few goods he bought to sell to the soldiers. His dwelling is equally singular. It has one large room in the centre and around it several



Courtesy of Elsie Ferguson Arnold

George Washington Ferguson

sheds and porches built of palmetto. The kitchen stands just in the rear of the dwelling—it is made of wood covered with shingles and has a chimney—the only fire place on the premises. A smoke house, barn and stables and shed and a fowl house are all built after the fashion of the mill. The fowl house is enclosed by a good fence and they are kept in one place. A hog house has also been erected at much expense as though it was necessary to

protect the hogs from snows, sleet, etc. All of the ground around the house is laid off in squares and has walks made of rock leading in every direction through it. Irish potatoes seem to be the principal crop though he has turnips, radishes, bananas, sweet potatoes, cocoas and plantains growing on it. Onions, potatoes, sweet, do not appear to do well in the climate and from what I hear oranges and beans seem very uncertain. Limes and lemons do very well. Everything I've seen about the premises cause me to feel sorry for the man who has done so much labor for such a poor profit and to feel curious to know more about him.¹³ During the day, Mr. Ferguson was busily engaged opening and fixing up his goods. I walked out morning and evening and saw some hammock land which is too mucky for any use and some prairies too poor for cultivation with a singular soil which looks and feels much like soap. In the evening I killed a large bald eagle and the good old dame stript it of its feathers to preserve for use. The daughters, who had been engaged all day in housekeeping appeared in the evening as neat as they did on Sunday and I find them quite interesting. After supper we gathered around one table on which two oil lamps were burning part sewing and part reading the late papers.

30th. Morning clear. Wind east which I am told is the prevailing one here in the summer. Mr. Ferguson went to work among his potatoes and I took a long walk. Mr. Bissell¹⁴ of Ohio called about 11 o'clock and they went off to look at some land. Lieut. Morris¹⁵ called in the morning which caused the ladies to get on their Sundays in quick time. The appearance of an officer appears to create quite a sensation in this quiet family. Wonder if the ladies feel flattered by this attention. Will see more in a few days. In the evening I wrote some letters and while engaged at it heard another excitement among the ladies and in a short time heard some officers come in and then a general merry laugh and that went on till they left. Did not see any of them and do not desire their acquaintance. Am told they manifest some curiosity about the tall gentleman, but I am determined not to gratify them by becoming acquainted with them. Do not believe in making or cultivating the acquaintance of any man or set of men unless I can associate with them on terms of equality which is impossible with the arrogant, self conceited, military men of the regular Army. They are generally dictatorial and over bearing in their intercourse which may be the result of habit. Hope it is. After my letter was closed I walked again but was driven back by the clouds which looked very much like rain. A large number of letters were put up and sent off by mail which leaves here North and South once a month. Key West South and Indian River North. Indian River mail is carried on foot along the sea beach.¹⁶

31st. It rained some during the night and now it is raining in torrents. Wind blowing a perfect gale from the noreast and thundér heard for such cold weather. Breakfast was very late, and the rain increased, the wind too, and the house commenced leaking, particularly the palmetto part. About 10 it held up raining and Mr. Ferguson went out to plant some cabbage plants. Early . . . do best. After 12 the wind blew a perfect gale all the evening and it rained and turned very cold. I could not help feeling for the tent holders at the mouth of the river and think of the dangers of the reefs during such a gale, vessels couldn't keep off them if they are near, for they couldn't live an hour among them. I felt the want of a fireplace all the evening and was compelled to wrap up to keep warm. It cleared off at night but the wind continued to blow. The Ferguson ladies drew around the fire light and commence their sewing which was continued till bed time. Mr. Ferguson and I chatted about the railroad to Fernandina and the geography of Fla. The wind whistled around the house as it does in our country in March and nearly as cold.

Feb. 1st. Clear and cold wind noreast. Caught cold and find my cough troublesome. Walked out with gun and went into Mr. Marshall's¹⁷ hammock where I saw some very rich alluvial soil but no game. Don't believe there is anything larger than doves to shoot in this country. Returned about 11 o'clock. In the evening it clouded up again which caused me to walk around the house in the hammocks and pine woods. The hammock growth differs very much from any I've seen. Very little live oak — no magnolias. The air plant grows in great abundance in the oak and other trees. During the afternoon several officers called on the young ladies and their arrival created quite a sensation in the family. When they left I heard the young ladies giving an account of what they said in turn to their mother which seemed to be very pleasing to all parties. Hope they will not have anything to keep secret from their mother. After supper I ascertained the family has not been living here but two years out of the ten and that they looked forward to a removal with much pleasure. The females say they can't stand such seclusions. About night the wind ceased.

Feb. 2nd. Morning clear and cold — wind in same quarter said to be unusual season in this country. The family took the boat and went down to the mouth and I took my gun and walked out but didn't find anything to shoot. I saw good lands and was in sight of Mr. Marshall's house who lived above the forks of the river. His house is a wide palmetto structure and he lives there as a bachelor. In afternoon Mr. Ferguson mounted his little ponies and away we went to the everglades. The country is so rocky I found it difficult for the ponies to get along. We passed several little improvements

which had been deserted by the former occupants and length stopped at Mr. John Adams'¹⁸ on the margin of the everglades. The gentlemen were engaged grinding the cumpty root on a hand mill, which appeared to be severe labor. Their houses are like all the rest, built of palmetto, and their garden is without a fence. They carried me into the garden place where I found a good variety of vegetables growing and the most luxuriant pumpkin vines I ever saw, which, I am told bear a better pumpkin than common and more of them. One of the gentlemen invited me into his kitchen which had all the appearances of a bachelor life about it. The pork was hanging on a nail over the fireplace, dish rags thrown about and everything else was helter-skelter over the rooms. There are three brothers living together as bachelors and they seem by hard work to get on tolerable well. They are from Germany and speak poor English. One of them was educated for a minister. I found they were doing a poor business in making cumpty and that it yields now a greater amount of yellow refuse than usual which is attributed to the excessive drought. Am told however, that 200 pounds can be made a week which is worth \$12. This will do well for a week's work of one hand if they could continue all the year but in the summer they must suspend operations. We rode off towards the everglades and were soon in full view of them. My conceptions of the everglades were not correct and I was completely surprised to see such beauty and extent of scenery as open upon my eyes when I reached them. They are like an immense sea with green grass growing over the surface of the water and islands covered with hammock growth here and there as far as the eyes can see. The whole field of vision then is filled by a large prairie with islands of different sizes and shapes. At least it appears to be a prairie high and dry till you go into it. Then it is found to be covered with water and here and there deep enough to navigate with small boats. Some boats have gone into them 50 miles and might have gone further. The soil is said to be rich but I noticed in some places that it was very poor and has a white sandy foundation. Around the outside it is dry and sometimes nearly all the water dries off, but during the rainy season it is overflowing and the water is very deep which rises in the summer. Am told the islands are fertile and well adapted to cocoa trees and other tropical fruits. The poor Indians have them in possession and have succeeded in making their support off of them but active preparations are going on to dispossess them of these little spots. Where will they go then — time must show. After riding for some time I discovered the general appearance was the same that the only variety in the scenery is in the shape of the islands which caused me to propose our return. We traveled over the same road back and at sunset were at home

again. Mr. Duke and Dr. Barron¹⁹ [sic] were on a visit to the ladies and I received an introduction to the Doctor who is a grand looking man, though his face is disfigured by his beard. After supper all hands wrapped up and seated around the table commenced those usual evening tasks. The old woman says she must have a stove.

3rd. Morning clear and calm. Wind rose about 9 o'clock and blew from the Norwest. After breakfast we ran over to see Doctor Barron who is a Virginian by birth. Found him in his garden at work with an old cloth cap and very ragged pants made of cotton and a shirt of the same kind. He apologized for his disahabille when he received us into his house. Mrs. Barron came in a short time who I found to be a German lady of some beauty, grace and dignity. Suppose she is an educated woman from what I heard and saw. The Doctor and I soon got into a conversation about his country. He said he thought settlements were 200 years in advance of the country that certain great changes were going on and advancements made every year towards the stage of perfection it must ultimately attain. That it was of recent formation no one could doubt and consequently before it can be perfected certain great natural changes have to take place. The heavy coating of vegetable matter found in the hammocks now in the condition of peat going as low down as the rocks. The character of the rocks and the disintegration constantly going on in there, he mentioned as evidences of the rapid advance going on in the country towards that perfection it must attain. He believes that peninsular Fla. is the top of a mountain. That the upheaving of the earth first formed it, then it was submerged, received its coral covering, was again upheaved by some central submarine force which is still going on and that ultimately it must become higher. That it is a mountain he says is proved by the soundings made by the Coast Survey and which go down the sides gradually till the water becomes an immeasurable depth in the Gulf and Gulf Stream, then gradually goes off into plains towards the island of Cuba. He says there are abundant evidences of great heat in the earth around him that he has collected a number of facts to prove it. Can show a great many evidences all around him which he found since he came to the place. One of them he showed me near his door, which is nothing more than a vein of crystalized lime rock in which he says the heat has been greater than in the rock around it. The everglades he says were formed by a submarine volcano. That he can find a thousand evidences of it around the margin of them and doubts not that the process is still going on. We then walked to see his grounds and first went to his punch bowl, as he calls it, which is a large basin dug out underneath the bluff of rock on which the house is located. It is filled by water from the

rock and supplies a large quantity. I drank some of it but did not like it, it is too full of lime. The situation is the most romantic one I've seen and was evidently selected by this singular man on that account. It is a high bluff of coral rock some 20 feet above the bay which serves a view of the large bay, its islands and coast and by the aid of glass a part of the Gulf Stream. Am told it was originally settled by a Mr. Taylor²⁰ who cultivated successfully sea island cotton for several years. It was not occupied when he settled it and now a good deal of it is grown up in limes and sour oranges. He has no one to help him work and consequently the place is not adorned and beautified by art. Saw a few rose bushes are growing about in the holes of the rock and they are heaving down under the heavy burden of beautiful roses — rich in colour and fresh and fragrant — more so than common. Saw a few geraniums are doing well and look greener than is usual in our country. From the house we went to the garden where the Doctor was engaged digging potatoes when we rode up, lemons, bananas, limes, cabbage and potatoes are growing in the garden and everything seems to be growing in a fissure or in holes in the rock. The Doctor showed me how he got the potatoes out of the holes and assured me he frequently turned out more than he could put back in the hole. This may seem untrue, but I saw it and was satisfied.

Around the house seems to be all rock (Coral) with a level surface. Thought disintegration has produced holes, cavities, fissures in the rock in which there is a small quantity of very rich earth where potatoes and every other plant appears to find the proper nutrients. In some instances these holes are round and two feet in diameter which yield a large number of potatoes. Am told 150 bushels can be raised to the acre in this rock. All the rock in the country is of the same character and looks more like coarse sponges than anything else I know in nature. It lies in places below the surface and in others in a level and forms the surface and in others it juts out above like stumps in new land.

I left this singular place and its more singular inhabitants feeling truly sorry for Mrs. Barron whose life of seclusion appears to be weighing on her mind and spirits so heavily. One can see written in legible character in her face. This is truly an example of love, self sacrificing for the promotion of her husband's happiness and comfort. I fear, however, she does not get the reward she is entitled to. Her husband is a hypochondriac, a misanthrope and very whimsical — at least I think so; and to be confined to such a man without seeing any other face for a year is sufficient to cause a social being and person with keen sensibilities and faculties for society to shudder at its contemplation much less. We got back at 12 o'clock.

NOTES

1. The *Isabel*, owned by Messrs. Mordecai & Co., of Charleston was an eleven hundred ton steamer that traveled between Charleston and Key West from 1848 until the beginning of the Civil War. Jefferson B. Browne, in *Key West the Old and The New*, 1912, p. 80-81, described the *Isabel's* impact on the community.

"The arrival of the *Isabel* in port was an important event. When she was sighted the fact was made known by the ringing of a bell on a tower at the agent's wharf. She frequently arrived at night and when that occurred nearly everybody sat up to await her arrival and hear from distant relatives and friends, from whom they had been cut off for two weeks. No family waited alone; those who did not have friends to eat midnight supper with them, went out to the homes of others, and the occasions were ones of jollification and social gathering. Happy, happy days, when all lived together in unity! When the *Isabel* neared the wharf, the entire adult population would congregate there to get the first news of the outside world, and greet returning relatives and friends."

2. Rev. C. C. Adams was assigned to the Key West Church in October, 1846. While he was in route he learned that a hurricane had blown the church away! After arriving in Key West the Rev. Adams decided to rebuild the church and left in January, 1847, to obtain funds for the new building. He returned in December with \$3,300. A new frame church was erected and the first service was held on July 30, 1848.

3. Charles Howe moved to Key West after the destruction of Indian Key in 1840 and was the collector of the port for many years. His sons, Charles and Edward, became large landowners and successful businessmen.

4. In 1855, Dr. S.F. Jones, a local physician, was employed as a physician at Fort Taylor at a monthly salary of \$150.

5. On August 7, 1840, Seminole Indians attacked Indian Key, destroyed thirty-eight structures and killed seven of the forty-five inhabitants, including Dr. Henry Perrine, noted horticulturalist.

6. The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey had been actively involved in charting the coast, the Keys and the Great Florida Reef since 1849.

7. Fort Dallas was re-activated on January 3, 1855, with 168 men. Previous occupations included 1838-42 and 1849-50.

8. William F. English built a stone home and slave quarters on the north bank of the Miami River in the 1840's and platted the "Village of Miami" on the south bank. He left Miami in 1849 and leased his property and unfinished buildings to the Army. He never returned.

9. Reason Duke was an early resident of South Florida and keeper of the Cape Florida Lighthouse between 1846-1852. He built a two story house on the point of the south bank of the Miami River where the family resided.

10. The Ferguson house, or what locals called "Fergusons's Landing," was located on the site of the Haley Sofge and Robert King High Towers, 800 N.W. 13 Avenue.

11. The Ferguson family consisted of George, 43; his wife, Hannah, 40; sons George, 11, and Samuel, 7; daughters Georginna, 19, Cornelia, 17, Josephine, 13, and Ida, 3.

12. The comptie mill described in this diary was George W. Ferguson's second mill. He built his first mill in 1845 near the "falls" of the Miami River, just west of N.W. 27th Avenue. When Ferguson discovered that the land had been claimed by someone else, he moved his operation to the 40 acre N.W. 12th Avenue site, which he purchased from the government for \$1.25 an acre. In 1860 he sold it to George Lewis and moved to Key West. Union sailors burned the house and store during the Civil War because George Lewis was a well known blockade runner for the Confederacy.

13. Apparently the writer was not cognizant of the fact that George W. Ferguson reported a profit of \$24,000 on his comptie operations in the 1850 Manufacturing Census.

He employed 25 men and produced 300,000 pounds of comptive starch which he sold all over the United States.

14. Theodore Bissell represented Dade County in the legislature between 1858-1860.

15. 1st Lieutenant Lewis O. Morris was second in command at Fort Dallas.

16. The "barefoot mailman" was instituted during the Second Seminole War (1838-42) as a means of communication between Fort Dallas and Fort Capron. The practice continued until 1892. George W. Ferguson was the postmaster in 1858 and the post office was in his store.

17. George Marshall resided in Miami as early as 1828. He applied for an Armed Occupation Act Grant in 1843 at the forks of the Miami River. It was patented to him in 1849. He left Miami suddenly in 1861 after killing a young member of the Wagner family during a drunken spree in front of Lewis' (formerly Ferguson's) store. He was never heard of again.

18. The Adams brothers, John, Nicholas and Poline, lived south of the south fork of the Miami River on the rim of the Everglades. John Adams was the "barefoot mailman" in 1855.

19. Dr. Charles S. Baron, a medical doctor, was keeper of the Cape Florida Lighthouse from 1855-1859. Between 1851-61, his family lived on the "Punch Bowl" property, which is located between Rickenbacker Causeway and Vizcaya. After he moved to Key West in 1861, he continued to claim ownership of the property in the name of his wife, Wilhelmina. He was well known in Key West and served as Judge of the Probate Court and as U.S. Commissioner. In 1897 Mary Brickell successfully sued his estate to clear title to the land that she bought in 1871 from the heirs of William F. English.

20. The first owner of record was Jonathan Lewis who received title to the land from the United States Government in 1824. The Taylor reference is intriguing, however, because an Ephriam P. Taylor was another early resident in the area along with Temple Pent who unsuccessfully claimed the same property.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Browne, Jefferson B. *Key West: The Old and The New*. A facsimile reproduction of the 1912 edition. Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1973.

Hudson, F.M. Beginnings in Dade County, *Tequesta*, I (1943) pp. 1-35.

Langley, Joan and Wright. *Key West: Images of the Past*. Key West, Florida: Belland & Swift, 1982.

Parks, Arva Moore. "Key Biscayne Base Marker — 1855." *Tequesta*, XXXIII(1973), pp. 3-16.

Parks, Arva Moore. "Miami in 1876." *Tequesta*, XXXV(1975), pp. 89-139.

Parks, Arva Moore. *Miami: the Magic City*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: Continental Heritage Press, 1981.

Richards, Mrs. Adam (nee Rose Wagner) "Reminiscences on the Early Days of Miami." *The Miami News*, Series began October 1, 1903, (clippings).

Straight, William M. M.D. (unpublished material on medical history of Florida.)

Windhorn, Stan and Wright Langley. *Yesterday's Key West*. Miami, Florida: E.A. Seemann, 1973.

National Archives:

Armed Occupation Grants

Record Group 23: Records of the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

Record Group 94: Post Returns, "Fort Dallas." Microcopy 617, Roll 284.

Record Group 26: "Cape Florida Lighthouse"

Tract Book, Florida. TW 53S Range 41 and 42E.

Florida Archives:

Election Returns, Dade County, 1855.

Government Documents:

U.S. Department of Commerce, Census of the United States, 1850, 1860, Dade and Monroe County Florida.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Dade County, Florida Manufacturing Schedule.

This Page Blank in Original
Source Document