

Sailing Craft of the Florida Keys

by John Viele

From the time of the first white settlement in 1822 until the completion of the Overseas Railroad in 1912, Key West was an isolated island community totally dependent on the sea for communication with the outside world. Until the rise of the cigar industry in the late 1800s, nearly all of the inhabitants were also dependent on the sea, either directly or indirectly, for their livelihoods.

Key West's deep-water harbor and its position astride a major shipping lane also made it an important stop-over port for passing vessels in need of water, supplies, medical aid, or repairs. Until the early 1900s, Key West was the only port south of Jacksonville and Pensacola capable of providing such services to deep-draft vessels.

All of these factors lead to the development of a small but important boatbuilding and ship-repair industry beginning in the early 1830s. Unlike shipbuilding ports in the north which built large oceangoing ships, Key West-built vessels were, with one notable exception, medium and small size sloops and schooners designed primarily for use in coastal and inshore waters.

Spurred by the need for vessels for the wrecking and fishing fleets and, later, the sponging fleet, Key West soon became the leading boatbuilding port in Florida. In 1884, 34 percent of all Florida-built commercial sailing craft were Key West-built vessels. The next closest competitor, Pensacola, accounted for only 18 percent.¹ Key West-built sailing craft continued to outnumber those constructed in other Florida ports through 1920.² Key West shipwrights had two other claims to fame. They built the first sailing vessel to be registered in the Territory of Florida,³ and they launched the only clipper ship to be built by native craftsmen south of the Chesapeake Bay.⁴

The design of Keys-built sailing craft was primarily deter-

mined by their intended employment as wreckers, fishermen, spongers, freight carriers, etc. However, there were other significant influences such as the backgrounds of their designers/builders, the nature of Keys waters and the climate.

New England and Bahamian mariners had been coming to the Keys to fish and salvage wrecks for many years before Key West was settled. New Englanders were among the early settlers and Bahamians immigrated to the Keys in large numbers after they were excluded from salvaging wrecks in the Keys by an act of congress in 1825.

The New England influence showed in the design of both wrecking and deep-sea fishing vessels. These were relatively deep-draft, sharp-lined vessels built for speed and ability to operate in heavy weather.

The Bahamian influence was evident in the smaller vessels which fished, sponged, or carried freight in inshore waters. Bahamian design features included large leg-of-mutton mainsails,⁵ shallow drafts, wide beams, and heart-shaped transoms.⁶

The shoal waters of the Keys lead to the use of centerboards, which could be raised, in place of fixed keels. The mild weather allowed galleys in the form of cookhouses or cookboxes (another Bahamian feature) to be installed topside instead of below-decks. The moderate winds permitted greater sail areas and simpler rigs for reducing sail in a blow.

The man most responsible for the birth and rapid growth of Key West boatbuilding was a Bahamian named John Bartlum. Bartlum came to Key West from Green Turtle Cay in the early 1830s as a young wrecking captain, but soon turned to building sailing vessels.⁷ According to his biography,⁸ he never served a day as an apprentice, but learned his shipwright skills from books and practical application. Of one of his first vessels, a 10-ton sloop, the *Mary McIntosh*, built in 1835, the *Key West Enquirer* had this to say: "a beautiful boat built on our own 'little isle.' She is said to be the first boat of her size which has been built here, being about 32 feet keel. The model is handsome and does honor to the gentlemen who built her. The builders is [sic] Mr. Curry and Mr. Bartlum."⁹

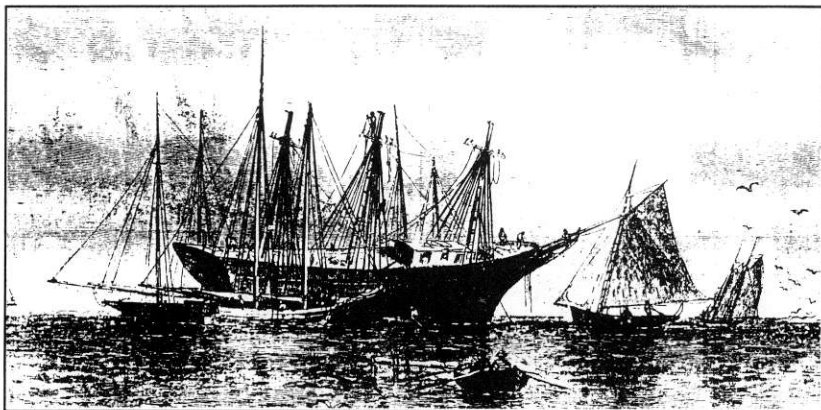
It is likely that William Curry, a prominent Key West businessman who became Florida's first millionaire,¹⁰ was more

involved in the financing than the actual construction of the *Mary McIntosh*. In any event, the partnership between the two men continued. When the firm of Bowne and Curry was organized in 1845, John Bartlum was engaged as master shipwright.¹¹

The first vessel Bartlum built for the firm, the *G.L. Bowne*, was a 120-ton schooner designed to serve as a pilot vessel and a wrecker.¹² Typical pilot-wreckers were built for speed. They showed long, slender lines and were able to carry a large amount of sail in order to be first alongside an incoming ship or a wreck. They were also good sea boats, able to maneuver alongside a wreck in heavy seas. According to the diary of a local attorney, William Hackley, the *Bowne* "was built of native wood, principally wild tamarind, with pitch pine planking, and during construction, laid on the building ways 'Conch¹³ fashion,' bow out."¹⁴

The launching of the *Bowne* in 1848 began a decade of schooner construction in Key West which was never again equaled. The following year, Bartlum completed another pilot-wrecker, the 134-ton *Euphemia*.¹⁵ She proved to be such a fast sailer that she was purchased by a slave trader who calculated she would be able to outsail the naval patrol vessels attempting to catch slavers.¹⁶

Between 1848 and 1860, at least ten large schooners of



Wrecking schooners and a sloop engaged in salvage operations are shown in this sketch, "Wreckers on the Florida Keys," by S.G.W. Benjamin published in *Harpers Weekly*, Oct. 19, 1878.

over 100 tons were launched at Key West.¹⁷ Of these, Bartlum is known to have built at least five. When his 149-ton schooner *Gipsy* visited Nassau in 1858, the local newspaper commented that she was “one of the most beautiful specimens of mechanism we have ever seen afloat in our harbor and has splendid accommodations for passengers.”¹⁸

The largest schooner built in Key West was the 90-foot, 171-ton, pilot-wrecker, the *Florida*.¹⁹ Built by Bartlum and launched in 1853, she soon aroused the envy of the other wreckers because of her great speed. During one race, she collided with the schooner *Dart*, doing considerable damage to her rival.²⁰ Her brief career came to an end in 1857. While alongside a wreck, a lantern was knocked down setting fire to the bales of salvaged cotton stacked on her deck and she burned to the waterline.²¹

The 1850s were also the clipper ship era. The profits to be made from these greyhounds of the sea were so great that Bowne and Curry, confident of their master shipwright’s skills, directed him to build one. Named for the Florida senator from Key West who was later to become the Secretary of the Confederate Navy, the *Stephen R. Mallory* was begun in late 1854 and launched on August 17th, 1856.²² At 959 tons, 164 feet, with a 35-foot beam, she was a medium clipper, designed to carry a third to a half more cargo than the narrow-beamed, sharp-lined “extreme” clippers.²³ As a result of the use of native mahogany in her construction, she became known as the “mahogany clipper,” reportedly the only one in the world.²⁴

Considering that her builders had no previous experience in building a ship of her size and type, the successful completion of the *Mallory* was a truly remarkable achievement. The only other clipper ship built in the deep south, in South Carolina, was built by shipwrights imported from Maine.²⁵

The *Mallory* made two trips around Cape Horn under the American flag. In a North Atlantic gale in October of 1859 she was rolled on her beam ends and her ballast shifted. The crew was forced to cut away her masts to save her from capsizing. A passing vessel offered assistance but the *Mallory’s* captain refused and brought his ship safely into port at Key West under jury rig.²⁶ During the Civil War, she was used to transport

Federal troops and cargoes from captured prizes.²⁷ Probably because of the high wartime insurance rates, she was sold to British owners in 1863 and renamed the *Ansel*.²⁸ Under the British flag, she made another voyage to the Pacific, touching at San Francisco and Manila.²⁹ In 1870, fourteen years after her launching, the Key West clipper sank off the Irish coast with the loss of her captain and 12 crew members including two women.³⁰

Following the Civil War, as a result of lighthouses on the reef, accurate navigation charts, and the more widespread use of steam propulsion, wrecking declined in importance and vessels were no longer built specifically for that purpose. There was, however, a continuing demand for smaller vessels for the fishing, turtling and sponging fleets. At Key West in 1880, there were about 100 vessels of from five to 25 tons engaged in sponging, about 25 deep-sea fishing vessels in the 35 to 50-ton range, and about 300 small sponging or fishing vessels under five tons. At the time, it was the largest working vessel fleet in Florida.³¹ Regardless of their employment, every sailing craft of any size had a wrecking license and engaged in that business whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Hampered by the shortage of local wood and the need to import manufactured items, Key West boatyards never grew large enough to build all the vessels needed in the local fleets. For example, at the turn of the century, Keys-built vessels made up less than half of the working sailing craft registered out of Key West.³²

Despite the shortage, native woods continued to be used in construction as much as possible. The most important of these was a type of mahogany called "Madeira" by the Conchs, which once grew abundantly in the Keys. Madeira was a light, tough, long-lasting wood which was practically impervious to rot or teredo worms and was used principally for framing.³³ Other native boat-building woods were Jamaican dogwood, mastic, and wild tamarind. Keys-built boats, because of the use of these native woods, were strong and long lasting. A life of 30 years was not unusual³⁴ and there are records of Keys sailing vessels still in use 50 to 80 years after their construction.³⁵

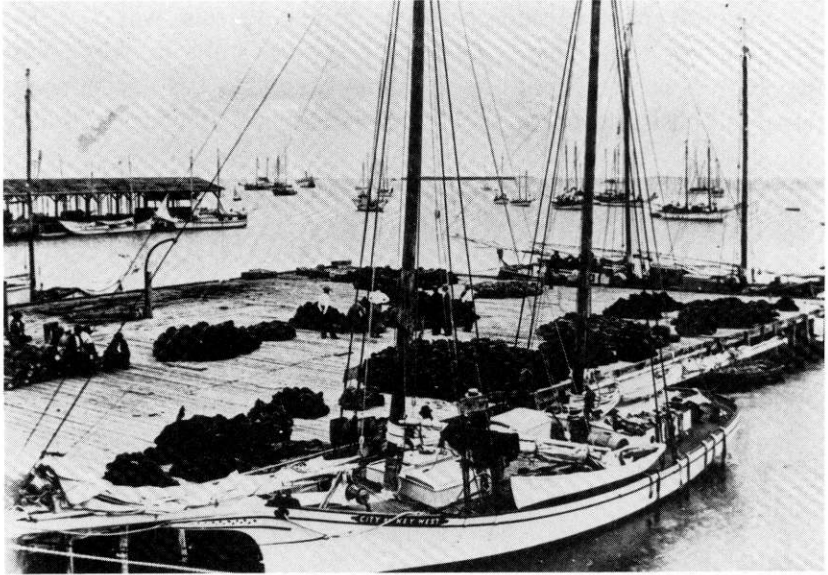
A good example of the strength and durability of native Keys craft was the *Louisa*, a 43-foot schooner with native-

mahogany framing, built in Key West in 1870. During a hurricane in 1874, she was anchored off Key Vaca (site of present-day Marathon). A huge wind-driven wave snapped her anchor lines, picked the vessel up and hurled it on to the shore. When the wave receded, the *Louisa* was left high and dry, held upright in the forks of two dogwood trees, with only minor damage. After the storm, the owner constructed ways under the 18-ton vessel, cut her free from the embrace of the dogwood trees, and relaunched her. She was never rebuilt and, in 1936, sixty-six years after her launching, she was still in sound condition and still working as a sponging vessel.³⁶

There were two classes of Keys fishing vessels. The larger ones, used for off-shore fishing and supplying the Havana market, were called smacks and tended to follow New England designs. The 61-foot, 43-ton, schooner, *City of Havana* built in Key West in 1877, was typical of the larger smacks. She was modeled after smack schooners built at Noank, Connecticut. The entire amidships section was occupied by a large live well to hold the catch. The well extended from the keel to the main deck and from beam to beam. Holes in the bottom of the well allowed sea water to flow in and out to keep the fish alive until sold. With a flush deck, clipper lines and a fairly deep draft, she was a fast sailer.³⁷

The smaller fishing craft, called smackees, were manned by one or two men and operated in nearby waters catching fish for the Key West market. Ranging in length from 14 to 28 feet, the smackees were shallow draft, sloop-rigged vessels. Smackees also had built-in live wells amidships to keep the catch alive. The *Jeff Brown*, a 25-foot, shoal-draft, skeg-keel sloop with a leg-of-mutton mainsail was representative of the type. Topside arrangements included a U-shaped cockpit for the helmsman, and a small cuddy cabin forward of the live well.³⁸

Sponge vessels differed from fishing vessels in several respects. They were shallow draft, wide beamed and had no need for a live well. The larger spongers were centerboard schooners and carried a crew of seven to 13 men. The smaller spongers were sloop-rigged with a centerboard or skeg keel and carried from two to five men.³⁹ Since sponge hooking could not be performed when the wind was up, the vessels carried a large sail area which could be used to get them to the sponge



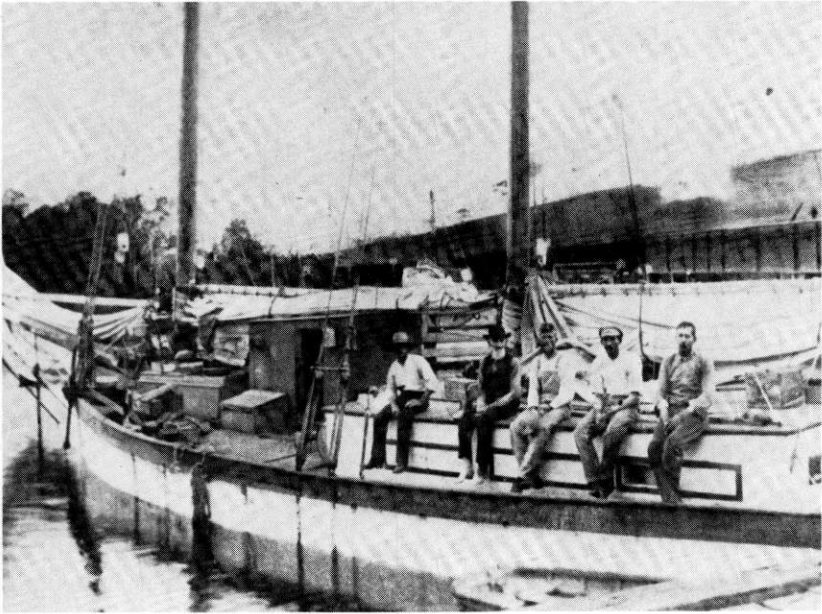
City of Key West 41-foot sponge schooner built in Key West in 1884. (Photo by Don Pinder, courtesy of Monroe County Public Library.)

grounds and home again in a hurry.

Typical of the sponge schooners was the *City of Key West* built in her namesake port in 1884. She was 41 feet in length, 13 tons burden, and with her centerboard up, drew only 3½ feet of water.⁴⁰ With a crew of seven, she would carry three sponge dinghies (one for each two men less the cook) either nested on deck or towed astern. Instead of bunks, several men slept together on top of wide lockers in the cabin.

As the outlying Keys became more populated and as farming (particularly pineapple growing in the upper Keys) became an important industry, there was a demand for vessels designed to carry mail, passengers, and freight along the Keys and to Biscayne Bay. In the 1880s, there were about 25 such vessels of which at least 10 were built in Key West or the Keys.⁴¹ Before the railroad, these vessels were the lifeline of the Keys settlers to Key West and the mainland. Their arrival at a settlement dock was a major event. With the sound of the schooner's conch shell horn, every man, woman and child within earshot would race for the waterfront to hear the latest news, get their mail, or greet a returning member of the family.

Typical of the mail-passenger-freight vessels was the 12-ton, 39-foot, centerboard schooner *Newport*, built in Key West in 1885. A passenger on the *Newport* described her accommodations as consisting of “a small trunk cabin aft in which possibly



The *Newport*, a 39-foot mail-freight-passenger schooner built in Key West in 1885.

four persons could manage to sleep and a large hold with hatches amidships in which [when there was no cargo] mattresses could be placed with fair comfort. There were no conveniences [toilet facilities], food was prepared in a small galley on deck and eaten off the cabin top.”⁴²

But there was another type of Keys cargo carrier, much larger and faster than the inter-Keys freighters. Built along clipper lines, they were designed to deliver Keys produce such as pineapples and tomatoes to northern markets before they spoiled. The 68-foot schooner *Lillie*, built in Key West in 1873, was a particularly fast freight carrier. In 1876, the newspaper *Key to the Gulf* reported, “We learn by dispatch boat that the schooner

Lillie, Captain Russell, was only 6 days on her passage to New York. This speaks well for the sailing qualities of our Key West vessels.”⁴³

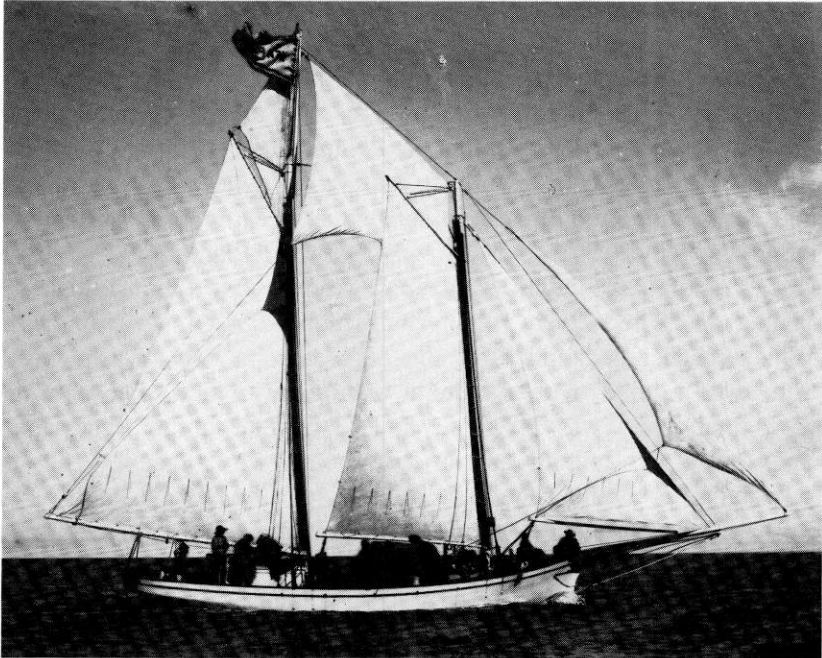
Not all the Keys sailing vessels were built in Key West. In addition to the small sloops built by the early settlers to carry their produce to market in Key West and bring back supplies, a few larger sailing craft were constructed on some of the outlying Keys. The earliest known of these were two schooners, the 13-ton *Lavina* and the 9-ton *Jane Ann*, built on Key Vaca in 1840 and 1841.⁴⁴ From 1868 to 1875, a boatyard on tiny Indian Key was busy launching three schooners and a sloop ranging in size from 10 to 28 tons.⁴⁵ Another small Key, Bamboo (located three-fourths of a mile north of present-day Marathon), was the construction site for two small sloops and a 10-ton schooner between 1882 and 1899.⁴⁶ Key Largo was an active boat-building site around the turn of the century when two sloops and three schooners were built.⁴⁷ Probably the largest sailing vessel constructed outside of Key West was the 49-ton schooner *Mount Vernon* built on Elliott Key, on Biscayne Bay, in 1901.⁴⁸ Schooners of modest size were also built on Rhodes, Umbrella (Windley), Matacumbe, and Big Pine Keys.⁴⁹

In 1903, when sail was still the only means of transport in the Keys, John “Bush” Pinder, a Plantation Key farmer, had the schooner *Island Home* built to carry his pineapples to market and to provide freight and passenger service to other settlements along the Keys. The schooner was built on Plantation Key by a part black, part Indian Bahamian known as “Old Whiskers” Wilkerson. There were no formal plans for construction; Old Whiskers designed and built the 60-foot schooner “by the eye.” She was framed with Madeira mahogany which, because the Keys mahogany was all gone, had to be cut in the Everglades. She had a flat bottom and a centerboard which enabled her to sail right up to the shoal-water docks of the homesteaders. The cargo hold was square in shape to accommodate the maximum amount of cargo and facilitate stowage. Despite these features, she was reported to be a fairly fast sailer.⁵⁰

The completion of the Overseas Railroad in 1912 and the advent of the gasoline marine engine in the early 1900s brought an end to the age of sail in the Keys. Although the *Island*

Home continued to sail along the Keys until 1917, the need for inter-Keys mail, freight, and passenger schooners had disappeared. Sail-driven fishing and sponging craft continued to be seen into the 1930s, but there were few that were not equipped with an auxiliary engine. Whereas between 1900 and 1909, 16 commercial sailing vessels were built in Key West, the next decade saw only five launched, and in the 1920s, only one.⁵¹

The last commercial sailing vessel built in Key West, and, in fact, the last true working coastal schooner built anywhere in the United States, was the 130-foot, cable-laying schooner *Western Union* constructed in 1939. By that time, neither the native craftsmen nor the native woods needed to build such a vessel were available in the Keys. Key West's final contribution to the age of sail was built with imported mahogany and imported shipwrights, both from the Cayman Islands.⁵²



The *Island Home*, a 60-foot mail-freight-passenger schooner built on Plantation Key in 1903, and the last of the inter-Keys schooners.

NOTES

1. *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884).
2. *Ibid.*, 1884 through 1933.
3. Warren M. Dilsaver, "Chap. V - Florida Ships of By-Gone Days," *Florida Merchant Marine Survey* 0944-472 (1938): 2775.
4. William A. Fairburn, *Merchant Sail* (Center Lovell, Maine: Fairburn Marine Educational Foundation Inc., 1945-1955), 2755.
5. A loose-footed sail with the foot nearly as long as the luff and a large wooden headboard instead of a gaff.
6. William R. Johnson, *Bahamian Sailing Craft* (self-published, no date).
7. Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West The Old and The New*, (Gainesville: Facsimile Reproduction of the 1912 Edition, University of Florida Press, 1973), 183.
8. George M. Chapin, *Florida 1513-1913, Past, Present and Future*, (Chicago: The S.J. Clark Publishing Co., 1914), 70.
9. *Key West Enquirer*, March 28, 1855.
10. May Hill Russell, "OIRF Pays Tribute to William Curry," *Key West Citizen*, February 21, 1963.
11. Browne, *Key West The Old and The New*, 183-184.
12. Chapin, *Florida 1513-1913*, 83; Walter C. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida*, (Gainesville: A Facsimile Reproduction of the 1876 Edition, University of Florida Press, 1968), 78.
13. "Conch"—a term for a Keys native of Bahamian ancestry.
14. Diary of William R. Hackley, Key West attorney, Entry for March 31, 1848.
15. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida*, 78.
16. Browne, *Key West The Old and The New*, 184.
17. Certificates of Enrollment and Registration at Key West, 1825-1861, (National Archives, Record Group 41); *Hackley diary*, Sept. 5, 1853; *New York Marine Register 1858*; American Lloyds 1861.
18. *Bahama Herald*, June 30, 1858.
19. Certificate of Registration for schooner *Florida*, Key West, 1853, (National Archives Record Group 41).

20. Hackley diary, August 17, 1854.
21. Ibid., June 28, 1857.
22. Ibid., August 17, 1856.
23. Fairburn, *Merchant Sail*, 2755.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Boston Shipping List, Dec. 10, 1859; Carl C. Cutler, *Greyhounds of the Sea*, (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 1930), 359; *Key of the Gulf*, December 3, 1859.
27. "Ship S.R. Mallory salvage, March 25, 1862," *Admiralty Final Record Book for the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida*, Vol. 6, Jan. 1861-Nov. 1862, Microfilm Copy No. M-1360, Roll 7.; *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of Rebellion*, Series I-Vol.17, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 461.
28. Record of Registers, (National Archives Record Group 41).
29. Boston Shipping List, various dates in 1864 and 1865.
30. Lloyd's Loss Book, 1870; *Lloyd's List*, February 11 and 21, 1870; *Daily Telegraph*, St. John, New Brunswick, Feb. 17, 1870.
31. Henry Hall, "Ship-Building Industry," *Tenth Census of the U.S.*, (Washington, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1884), 38.
32. *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, 1902.
33. Henry Hall, "Ship-Building Industry," 39.
34. Ibid.
35. *Historic American Merchant Marine Survey*, Project No. 6, Works Progress Administration, (Published by Ayer Co., Melvin H. Jackson, Editor, 1984), Vol. II.
36. Ibid., Vol. II, 28.
37. Howard I. Chapelle, *National Watercraft Collection*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press and International Marine Publishing Co., 1976), Second Edition, 213.
38. Ibid., 285.
39. U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries, *Report of the Commissioner for 1885*.

40. Chapelle, *National Watercraft Collection*, 223.
41. Henry Hall, "Ship-Building Industry," 38; *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, 1884 and 1898.
42. Ralph M. Munroe and Vincent Gilpin, *The Commodore's Story*, (Ives Washburn Publisher, 1930), 163.
43. *The Key of the Gulf*, May 13, 1876.
44. Maloney, *Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida*, 79.
45. Ibid.
46. *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, 1902.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. *Historic Merchant Marine Survey*, Vol. II, 191; Nikki Beare, *Pirates, Pineapples, and People*, (Miami Beach: Atlantic Publishing Co., 1961), 85.
51. *Annual List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, 1902 through 1933.
52. "Caribbean Connections, The *Western Union*," Interview with Hebert Elroy Archer, builder of the *Western Union*, *Islands Chronicle*. Vol. II, No. 3, February-March, 1983. Renamed *New Way*, the *Western Union* still sails the seas as a training ship for troubled youth.

