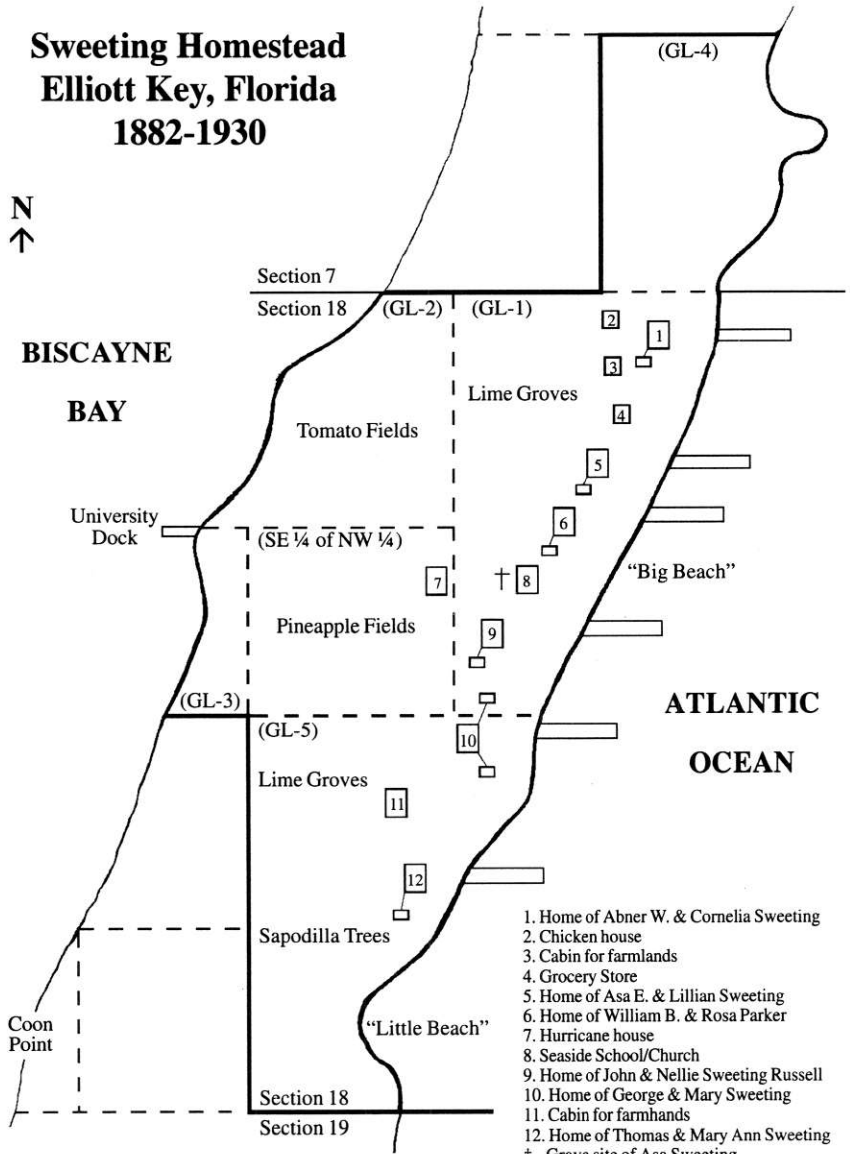


**Sweeting Homestead
Elliott Key, Florida
1882-1930**



Not drawn to scale

- 1. Home of Abner W. & Cornelia Sweeting
- 2. Chicken house
- 3. Cabin for farmlands
- 4. Grocery Store
- 5. Home of Asa E. & Lillian Sweeting
- 6. Home of William B. & Rosa Parker
- 7. Hurricane house
- 8. Seaside School/Church
- 9. Home of John & Nellie Sweeting Russell
- 10. Home of George & Mary Sweeting
- 11. Cabin for farmhands
- 12. Home of Thomas & Mary Ann Sweeting
- † Grave site of Asa Sweeting
- Cisterns
- GL = Government Lot
- "Big Beach" extends along the shore between Buildings 1 and 10

Site plan of the Sweeting Homestead on Elliott Key, Florida, 1882-1930. This site plan is a composite of information recalled by former residents of Homestead. (Courtesy of Peg Niemiec)

The Sweeting Homestead on Elliott Key

by Peg Niemiec

Elliott Key off the Florida coast is a place of exquisite beauty and rich history. The long slender island, eight miles long and one-half mile wide, lies between Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean twenty miles southwest of Miami. Early Indian tribes hunted and fished here, and pirates once roamed the area. In the late nineteenth century, Elliott Key's pristine environment attracted many pioneers. On this coral-reef subtropical island, they found a luxuriant, jungle-like hardwood forest. These adventurers settled this remote frontier while precariously perched on an island racked by tempests. They built thriving pineapple plantations and established a close-knit community. Typical of these pioneers was the Sweeting family, whose small settlement flourished for nearly twenty-five years. Then one tragic day in 1906, a severe hurricane struck and destroyed all they had worked to attain. Undeterred by this misfortune, they continued to live on the island for another twenty-five years.

Two important factors contributed to pioneers settling on the South Florida coastal regions in search of land and livelihood. The Homestead Act of 1862 offered 160 acres to any citizen who agreed to cultivate, improve and live on the land for at least five years. Two years before the Act was passed, Captain Benjamin Baker's experimental patch of pineapples on Plantation Key proved that there was money to be made off the rocky land of the South Florida Keys. The warm subtropical climate provided the plants with frost-free temperatures. The porous coral bedrock retained moisture and provided nutritious phosphate for pineapples. Baker's successful endeavor proved so profitable that the industry grew rapidly. By 1890 it extended into the famous

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east-coast pineapple belt from Fort Pierce to the Florida Keys.¹ Kirk Munroe, an author and well-known resident of Coconut Grove, wrote in 1896, "... there is no better pineapple land in the world, and none from which the fruit obtains so fine a flavor."²

The Sweeting family was representative of English Bahamian settlers who immigrated to Key West. Asa Sweeting and his family sailed from Harbour Island in the Bahamas to Key West in March 1866.³ While in Key West they learned about the opportunities offered by the Homestead Act and the new pineapple industry, and set out in search of land to settle.

In April 1882, Asa, age 64, and his two sons, George, age 36, and Thomas, age 30, sailed north from Key West along the sparsely settled Florida Keys.⁴ They looked for a place that resembled the land they left in the Bahamas, and found it on Elliott Key. After looking the land over, Asa and George sailed to Fort Dallas in Miami to claim 154.4 acres on the island.⁵ After claiming the homestead they returned to Key West, packed their belongings, and sailed with their family to their new home. Later, in 1896 they purchased an additional 85.4 adjacent acres for a total of 239.8 acres.⁶

They built a temporary wood-frame dwelling called the "old house" that measured sixteen by twenty-four feet.⁷ From Key West they hauled timber and other supplies. With no fresh water on the island, barrels of water from springs in Biscayne Bay or water from the mainland were brought to the island. Eventually, a 6,280 gallon cistern was built. It



View of Elliot Key from offshore, ca. 1900. Pioneers settled this desolate frontier where coconut trees looked like an oasis surrounded by the rocky soil and scrub. (HASF, Ralph Munroe Collection, 1977-146-48)

measured twelve by fourteen feet, was five feet deep, had walls one-foot in width made of cement and coral rock, and was covered with a wood-gabled roof. Wooden gutters from the house channeled rainwater into the cistern.⁸

Later, on the ridge facing the Atlantic Ocean, George and Mary Sweeting built a two-story New England colonial style frame house, painted white with dark-green louvered shutters and sash windows. Key West pink roses, white and pink periwinkles, and hibiscus grew in the garden. Clusters of date and coconut palms surrounded the house.⁹ As George and Mary Sweeting's six children reached adulthood and married, some built houses on the homestead. In time, six homes with docks stood on the ridge along the shore. Several other buildings constructed to accommodate their needs included a one-room school house used also for church services, a general store, cabins for the farmhands, and packing houses. A small house nestled in the forest in the center of the island provided a retreat for the family when hurricanes threatened the island.¹⁰

By 1887 thirty acres of land were cultivated and planted in pineapples, key limes and tomatoes.¹¹ Eventually, the family's pineapple fields covered 100 acres.¹² Kirk Munroe eloquently described the pineapple fields on the Florida Keys during harvest time:

In May and June the coloring of these ten, twenty, forty, and sometimes one hundred acre fields is wonderfully beautiful. Scarlet, bronze, orange, green, yellows, and browns are blended in glowing masses, while the whole picture is framed by the encircling forest and arched with cloudless blue. The landscape is oppressively still; for a gale of wind could hardly impart movement to the stiff bayonet-like leaves of the 'pines' and even the great glossy fronds of the bananas, that are set here and there in crowding clusters like dark green islets in a sea of color, stand motionless in the lee of the protecting wind-break.¹³

While harvesting the pineapples, "cutters" wore heavy shoes, entire suits of canvas and stout gloves that protected their hands from the sharp spines of the pineapple leaves. Since harvest time was also mosquito season, the men wore net head coverings to protect themselves from the swarming myriads of the bloodthirsty menacing insects. The



The United States of America,

TO ALL TO WHOM THESE PRESENTS SHALL COME, GREETING:

Homestead Certificate No. 6512 }
Application 10289 }

Whereas there has been deposited in the GENERAL LAND OFFICE of the United States a CERTIFICATE of the Register of the Land Office at Tallahassee Florida

, whereby it appears that, pursuant to the Act of Congress approved 20th May, 1862, "To grant Homesteads to actual settlers on the public domain," and the acts supplemental thereto, the claim of *Trachselma*

and duly consummated in conformity to law for the Lots numbered two three and five of the South east quarter of the north west quarter of section seven in town South of range forty-two east of Tallahassee Meridian in Florida contains one hundred and fifty four acres and fifty four hundredths of an acre *has been established*

Homestead patent for Asa Sweeting, June 29, 1889. (National Archives)

“toters” cut and placed the pineapples in a mat basket woven of palmetto, and carried them to the shore. At low tide the baskets were placed on a large barge which carried them through the shallow water to the moored schooners off shore. The fruit was then sailed to New Orleans and to northern ports as far away as Boston.¹⁴

As the pineapple yield increased, George needed more sailing vessels to ship his fruit. When needed for large yields, he chartered a three-mast schooner to transport his pineapples to Boston and New York.¹⁵ In Key West in 1898, he purchased the *Two Brothers*, a new 36-foot, 12-ton schooner.¹⁶ George hired ship carpenters from Key West to build the hulls for a pair of two-mast schooners on Elliott Key. Madeira mahogany from the island’s dense forest provided material for part of the construction. The carpenters went into the forest, cut the timber with axes, and used roots of large trees to get the type of crooks for the knees and other parts. They completed the hulls of the ships on the island, rigged them with temporary sails, and sailed them to Key West for completion.¹⁷ The *Mt. Vernon*, built on Elliott Key in 1901, weighed 49 tons and measured 65 feet long.¹⁸ It was probably the largest schooner built on the Florida Keys outside of Key West.¹⁹ The *Mt. Pleasant*, built on the island in 1902, weighed 25 tons and measured 50 feet long.²⁰ The *Centennial*, bought in 1910 in Key West, weighed 18 tons and measured 36 feet long.²¹ In 1918, George’s son, Abner, bought the *Vole*, a gas engine boat used for coastal trading and for family trips to the mainland.²²



A pineapple field with thousands of pineapple or “pines,” as the settlers called them. When picked green, the pineapples could usually survive the trip by boat to the northern ports of Boston. (HASF, Ralph Munroe Collection, 1977-146-57). Inset: Detail of a pineapple plant. (HASF 1986-167-2)

During the growing season, businessmen from New York visited the pineapple fields and sometimes bought the entire crop on sight.²³ Before Henry M. Flagler extended his railroad to Miami in 1896, the farmers transported their farm produce only by sea. After 1896 the railroad provided the farmers another means of transporting their produce: shipping it to Miami by schooner, loading it on trains, and carrying it to northern cities. Shipping by railroad had its drawbacks, though, and the growers paid dearly for the convenience it offered. It charged high rates and paid rebates to favored customers growing produce in the West Indies. Because of this unfair practice, the Key's plantation owners complained to the Florida State legislature, who tried to regulate the rates, but without success. Consequently, many of them who were dependent on the railroad to transport their produce went out of business because the high railroad rates increased their costs and reduced their profits.²⁴ Since George Sweeting owned several schooners to transport his produce, he was not dependent on the railroads. Fortunately, he avoided the financial ruin that befell many of his neighbors.²⁵

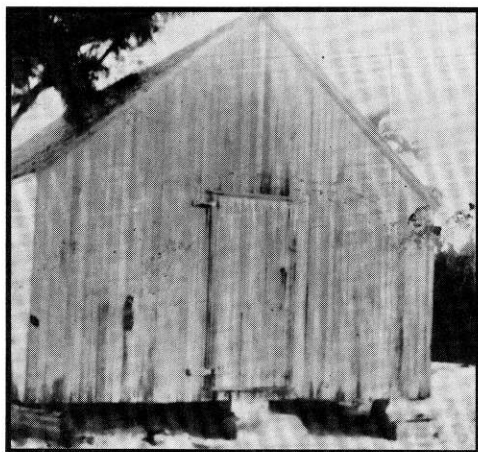
In addition to transporting their farm products to the mainland, the Sweeting men engaged in coastal trading. They transported merchandise and mail, and carried passengers around the southern coast of Florida. George and Mary Sweeting's eldest son, Abner, sailed the *Mt. Vernon* and the *Centennial* between Lemon City, Coconut Grove and Key West, from the early 1890s until he moved to Miami in 1924.²⁶ Sailing vessels were the lifeline to those living in the Florida Keys. Whenever the schooners announced their arrival by blowing their conch-shell horn, everyone who heard ran to the waterfront to pick up mail, get the latest news or greet someone they knew.²⁷ Once, while George Sweeting was sailing his schooner from New York to Key West, actors on the boat performed for people on the docks.²⁸

Many of the Keys settlers rigged and licensed their schooners to salvage distressed ships on the reef. On Thursday, April 20, 1905, Abner Sweeting sailed the *Mt. Vernon* to try to rescue a 1,500-ton Spanish steamship that had crashed into Long Reef about three miles off Elliott Key. The *S.S. Alicia* was headed from the port of Liverpool, England, for Havana, Cuba, when it lost its way. Abner, other salvors, and Calixto Luzarrage, the steamship Master, agreed in writing that for the sum of \$5000 the salvors would float the ship with their schooners within twenty-four hours. As they dropped the port anchor of the steamship out into twenty-six feet of water, a severe squall moved over the area further

grounding the ship. Since it was impossible to extricate the ship from the reef, the men agreed to save the cargo. The salvors unloaded the cargo onto their schooners, sailed it to the port of Key West, and delivered it to the Master Consignee for disposal and sale.²⁹ One of the last wrecks off the Florida coast, the S.S. Alicia still lies on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean off Long Reef.

Even though the Sweetings homesteaded on Elliott Key, they never broke their ties with Key West. Their activities shifted from the homestead to Key West depending on the farm crops and the economics of the time. During most of the nineteenth century, Key West was the wealthiest city per capita in Florida. The town offered cultural activities and was the hub of a bustling maritime center. The family maintained two homes and several businesses in Key West. Between 1870 and 1914 George engaged in several occupations there. U.S. Census records and the Key West city directories list him as a seaman and a farmer. He also owned a coffee-shop, a grocery store and a ship chandler's business.³⁰

Like Key West, Elliott Key flourished, though on a much smaller scale. The island's pineapple plantations expanded, and its families grew larger. The growing number of children needed a school. Consequently, in 1887, the Dade County School Board established School District Number 4 to serve Elliott Key and the adjacent islands. The School Board named Henry Filer as trustee for the District. One half acre of



Seaside School, Building 8 on Site Plan on page 24. (Courtesy Charles Theron Lowe)

land was donated by Robert Thompson, and a frame building was built in the center of the hammock.³¹ Later, another small school house, Seaside School, was constructed near the oceanfront on the Sweeting property. Music for school activities and church services was provided by an organ transported by schooner from Key West. Dade County sent one school teacher each year to Elliott Key to teach all twelve grades. She

boarded with the families, who shared the cost of her salary.³² The 1896 school census for the school district lists the following students and their ages:³³

Franklin Thompson, 16	Nellie B. Sweeting, 8
Arena Thompson, 14	Geneva S. Sweeting, 6
Robert E. Thompson, 11	George E. Demerit, 6
Mamie Thompson, 9	Horace M. Albury, 14
Abner W. Sweeting, 16	Roland S. Albury, 10
Asa C. Sweeting, 14	Flossie B. Albury, 8
Elizabeth Sweeting, 12	Lillian Johnson 12
Ella F. Sweeting, 10	Sealy Sweeting, 12

As the children grew older, some attended schools in Key West. The 1906-07 Key West City Directory lists Nellie and Geneva Sweeting as students.³⁴ Elliott Lowe's 1929 sixth grade report card from Seaside School shows Inez Chipman as teacher and principal.³⁵ Charles Theron Lowe remembers the school teacher boarding with George and Mary Sweeting. School segregation at the time affected a black family who lived on Porgy Key just south of Elliott Key. Israel Lafayette Jones, known as Parson Jones, and his wife, Mozelle, had two sons, King Arthur and Sir Lancelot. Since the boys were not allowed to attend the school on Elliott Key, their parents taught the boys at home until they were fourteen years old, when they were sent to live with an uncle in Jacksonville to attend a black high school. There, the Jones brothers continued their education at a junior college in St. Augustine.³⁶

Young children who lived on the island considered it a paradise. When not in school they enjoyed the beach and the forest. Katherine Sweeting Roberts said:

While growing up on the island, we spent many hours playing with our small boats. In the early evening we hung a lighted kerosene lantern on the front of our dinghy and went out into the shallow water off shore. The light from the lantern lit up the clear water so that we could see the lobster crawfish on the bottom. We picked them up out of the water, placed them in the boat, and took them home to eat. We roamed in the hardwood forest, looked for bird's nests, and caught butterflies and insects.³⁷

Charles Theron Lowe recalls:

There were so many fun things for kids to do on the island. We learned to swim at a very early age and often played our favorite water sport. We turned our skiff upside down in the water, dove in under the boat, and raised our heads in its hollow. Then we would shout, make loud noises, and eat mangoes and key limes under the boat.³⁸

Responsibilities of men and women on Elliott Key were clearly divided. While the pioneer men sailed the schooners, worked the land and built the houses, the pioneer women provided the amenities of a comfortable home and fostered the social life of the community. Mary Sweeting trained at Mrs. Cate's boarding house in Key West to be a "homemaker and proper lady." She used the acquired skills in her homes on Elliott Key and in Key West.³⁹ She was proud to be the wife of George, a prosperous and well-known sea captain. When he returned from his sailing trips, she served him meals at a special table set for him with fine linens in their dining room.⁴⁰

George and Mary Sweeting were described in an article in *The Miami Herald* in 1925 as people of exceptional force and activity and were for many years considered "leaders of the key colony." Mary, 67 years old in 1925, was described as strong and hearty. Because of her forceful character, broad-minded views, deep sympathy and great hospitality and graciousness, she might be called the "queen of the key." Her welcome to everyone was always most cordial. She had six children, twenty-four grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren who gave her great joy.⁴¹

Charles Theron Lowe described how his grandmother, Mary Sweeting, began her day: "She arose in the morning, walked downstairs to the kitchen, threw some wood in the stove, sprinkled it with a little kerosene, lit a small piece of paper and threw it on top of the wood." In about ten minutes after the stove heated, she prepared freshly ground coffee.⁴² At 5:30 A.M. she served coffee and molasses cookies for those who worked in the fields. At 8:00 A.M. the workers came in from the fields and ate a hearty breakfast. Mary served the main meal of the day at 1:00 P.M., a snack in the afternoon and a light meal in the evening around 7:00 P.M. During pineapple harvest time, besides cooking for her large family, Mary planned and supervised meal preparation in her kitchen for the farmhands — as many as forty at one time.



These photographs show the different styles of early houses built on Elliott Key. Above: A typical Elliott Key planter's home, 1890s. The layout of the house included one story and a loft for sleeping called a "jump." A rain barrel was kept outside to catch rain for their drinking water supply. (HASF, Ralph Munroe Collection, 78D) Below: Home of Abner W. Sweeting, Sr., and Cornelia Russell Sweeting, both pictured with seven children. Inset: Full view of their home. (Both photographs courtesy of Katherine Sweeting Roberts)



Every week or ten days a sailboat left Elliott Key for Key West or Miami to take family members shopping and for provisions. When in Key West they stayed in their home on Elizabeth Street. When in Miami they stayed in boarding houses on the Miami River. Food purchased in bulk included 100-pound bags of flour, 25-pound bags of sugar, smoked hams, grits, rice, barrels of salt pork, spices and herbs. The pioneers thrived on the abundant tropical fruits and vegetables grown on the land and seafood off shore.⁴³ Childcare and domestic chores occupied the women's time from dawn to dusk. Each day had its routine. In addition to daily meal preparation and baking bread, other chores included laundry, cleaning and sewing. The women spent at least two days each week on laundry tasks. Three large galvanized tubs stood next to the cistern. Beginning early in the morning the women used buckets of water from the cistern and filled the three tubs. Clothes and bedding were scrubbed in one tub, boiled in another, rinsed in a third, wrung by hand and hung on the line to dry. They heated heavy metal irons on the wood stove and ironed nearly everything laundered, including sheets and pillowcases.⁴⁴ Laundry soap contained fat and lye boiled at a certain time of the month, depending on the lunar cycle. Superstition had it that soap made on the waxing of the moon retained its volume, but if boiled on the waning of the moon, it shrank. Mary Sweeting, as a meticulous housekeeper, scrubbed her wood floors on hands and knees. She used the skin of the turbot fish that was rough like sandpaper, and lime juice, which whitened the floors. The women used Singer and New Home treadle machines for sewing.⁴⁵

At the turn of the century, most married women in their childbearing years gave birth about every two years. Since there were no doctors or midwives on the island, the pregnant women traveled to Key West about a month before giving birth. Before the railroad was extended to Key West in 1912, they sailed directly to Key West, staying at their home on Elizabeth Street where one room was set aside as a birthing room. Katherine Sweeting Roberts, who lived on Elliott Key between 1910 and 1924, remembers her experience when she was a young child. She and her mother sailed to Miami, where they boarded Flagler's overseas railroad train to Key West. In the birthing bedroom her mother, with a doctor in attendance, gave birth to her sister in 1914 and to her brother in 1915. When a doctor was not available, a midwife delivered the babies. A month after each birth Katherine, her mother and the baby made the return trip by train and sailboat to Elliott Key.⁴⁶

When urgent medical care was needed on the island, its absence was felt acutely. George and Mary Sweeting's daughter, Nellie, received severe burns over her body when a gas lantern exploded in her face. Members of the family covered her burns with cellophane, and sailed her for the three hour trip to Miami for medical care.⁴⁷

Sunday — a day of rest — was strictly observed for attending religious services conducted by visiting ministers who came from a nearby Key or from the mainland. Families on the island rotated their hospitality. When there were no ministers attending, some of the older men on the island conducted church services.⁴⁸ Sunday school provided the children with their religious instruction, which was planned and directed by one of the women who served as Sunday School superintendent. The families were of various Protestant denominations, but got along well. After Sunday morning services, the Sweetings gathered in George and Mary Sweeting's parlor, used only on Sunday, where they spent a lively afternoon socializing. They sat in rocking chairs around the room, and in the middle of the room the family Bible lay on an ornate table. A wagon-wheel chandelier hung in the parlor and held six or eight kerosene lamps. Pulleys raised and lowered the chandelier for lighting the lamps.⁴⁹

Social gatherings at various homes, functions at the school house, swimming, boating, fishing and trips to Miami or Key West provided respite from their daily laborious work. Family and friends from Key West and the mainland visited Elliott Key for birthdays, holidays and wedding receptions with lively celebrations and large feasts. On occasion, they sailed a few miles north to Boca Chita Key for community holiday celebrations, picnics and parties.⁵⁰

Despite the comfortable lives the Sweetings and their neighbors had carved out for themselves on the island, the weather was a constant cause for concern. Life's steady tempo came to a halt when hurricanes ravaged the island. Hurricane predictions were primitive at the time since there were no methods of communication. Barometers were helpful for forecasting basic weather conditions, but they did not warn of impending hurricanes. Whenever the air pressure reading on the barometers fell to a certain level, indicating potential stormy weather, the men moved the schooners and other boats to the leeward or bay side of the island and moored them securely to the mangrove trees. The shutters on the homes were closed and the family retreated to the hurricane house. The small house, sparsely furnished, was located on higher

ground in the middle of the island behind Abner and Cornelia's home.⁵¹

The idyllic life on Elliott Key came to an abrupt halt on Thursday, October 1906, when a fierce tropical hurricane blasted the southeast coast of Florida and hit Elliott Key broadside. A *Miami Herald* reporter visited Elliott Key in 1925 and related the following information about the 1906 hurricane. "The storm broke in all its fury at 4:00 A.M. October 19, though at 9 P.M. the previous night all was as calm as on the fairest day." During the night the winds increased. When the Sweetings realized there was a threat, the ocean tide water had risen too high for them to get their boats secured to the bay-side of the island. The Sweeting family retreated to the hurricane house to wait out the storm.

With their boats damaged they were unable to sail to the mainland for provisions, leaving the family marooned for three days without food or water. During this time they ate only coconut meat and drank coconut milk. The storm surge flooded the island, and all the houses were damaged or destroyed. The hurricane lifted George and Mary Sweeting's house off its foundation, and moved it intact fifteen feet away from its original location.⁵² The extended kitchen received structural damage and had to be removed from the main part of the house. The house suffered extensive damage, and was later repaired.⁵³

In addition to the destruction of their homes, the storm surge, which was eight feet high in some places on the island, swept over the family's 100-acre pineapple plantation, wiping out their main livelihood.⁵⁴ The ocean water salted the ground, leaving the soil unsuitable for the pineapple plants.

Others in the South Florida area also were unaware of an approaching storm. The steamboat *St. Lucie* left the terminal dock in Miami Wednesday, October 18, at 7:00 P.M., on her way to Key West, with 100 passengers on board.⁵⁵ According to Captain Bravo, "The barometer had been showing low, but not more so than it had for the last two weeks, and was steady when we left." After the steamboat left the channel, the captain turned the boat over to his first mate, Robert Blair, and directed him to call if necessary. The steamship was seen at 10:00 P.M. near Ragged Key and was well on her way. At 3:00 A.M. Thursday morning, when they reached Featherbed Banks, which is located in Biscayne Bay between Black Point on the mainland and Boca Chita Key, Blair called Captain Bravo, who came immediately on deck. He found a strong gale blowing from the east, and without delay the captain headed the boat for Elliott Key and anchored off the key in seven

feet of water. The winds grew stronger and the waves grew higher. He saw Elliott Key being washed with waves and it appeared that everything on the key was being swept away. At 6:00 A.M., the sea washed over the boat and the captain ordered the engineer to rev up the steam so that they could make a run for it if necessary. At 7:00 A.M., the shutters of the gangways blew out. At 8:30 A.M. they were fighting for their lives. Captain Bravo ordered all passengers to put on life preservers with the help of the officers onboard. Even though the passengers and crew were frightened, the captain reported that he had never seen such brave people.

The lull in the eye of the storm came; the barometer read 28.80, the lowest the captain had ever recorded. He knew that the lull was a prelude to something worse. The other side of the hurricane arrived soon, with the wind blowing from the west in gusts of 120 miles an hour. The boat began to quiver and vibrate. Captain Bravo saw that the *St. Lucie* would not hold together long and ordered out the lifeboats.

Passengers filled three life boats, which were lowered into the pounding surf, following the directions of the captain to try to make a landing on Elliott Key. They headed toward Elliott Key, which was under seven feet of water. The frightened passengers found their way to a partly washed-away building on the island and held on until they were rescued. Those who remained on the steamer huddled on the hurricane deck blinded by the rain. As the wind came out of the northwest, the *St. Lucie* broke into



The *St. Lucie*, pictured here on the Miami River. (HASF x-93-1)

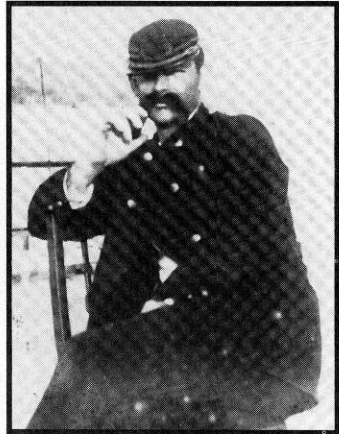
pieces from the force of the wind and waves. Some passengers tried to hold onto the debris and ride it to shore. The ship's hurricane deck flew off and those remaining fell into the mountainous waves of water. Some who were battered by debris died in the treacherous sea. Those who arrived at the shore on Elliott Key held onto the mangrove branches until the water subsided, and were later rescued. Twenty-six of the *St. Lucie* passengers died on Elliott Key.⁵⁶

The Miami newspapers reported another hurricane calamity south of Elliott Key. Construction of Henry M. Flagler's overseas railroad to Key West was in full swing. The *Miami Metropolis* told of the tragedy and bravery of the employees on the railroad extension. Hundreds of men who worked on the project lived in quarterboats near their work sites.⁵⁷ Quarterboat No. 4 was moored near Long Key with 160 men onboard. She broke her seven-inch moorings chain, drifted in the water, hit some rocks and broke into many pieces. One hundred of the men perished in the treacherous waters.⁵⁸ Many others lost their lives on the temporary structures of the railroad extension as the high seas washed over the Keys. Only the permanent structures held through the storm.⁵⁹ Despite this setback, Henry Flagler completed the overseas railroad to Key West in 1912.

For several days after the 1906 hurricane, little had been heard from the inhabitants of the Keys. The islands from Elliott Key to Lower Matecumbe were inundated by the tidal wave which destroyed houses, washed away trees and demolished crops. Every pineapple plantation on Elliott Key was devastated.⁶⁰

In the few hours that the hurricane blasted Elliott Key, the Sweeting family's main livelihood disappeared, but they continued to live on the island. They still possessed their land, their homes, their schooners, their key lime groves, and abundant seafood in the surrounding waters. The schooners continued to sail around the coast transporting key limes, tomatoes, crawfish, merchandise, passengers and mail.

Key limes and tomatoes continued to provide the island planters with abundant crops to sell. By 1925 Elliott Key's most important crop was key limes. Lime groves, ranging in size from one-and-one-half acres to forty acres, covered a total of 150 acres. The annual lime crop for the island was approximately 7,500 barrels, selling wholesale for \$25 a barrel. The price fluctuated between \$5.50 and \$60 a barrel, depending on the demand and size of the crop. No fertilizer was used on the lime trees until 1920, when dieback and decreased yields were noticed.

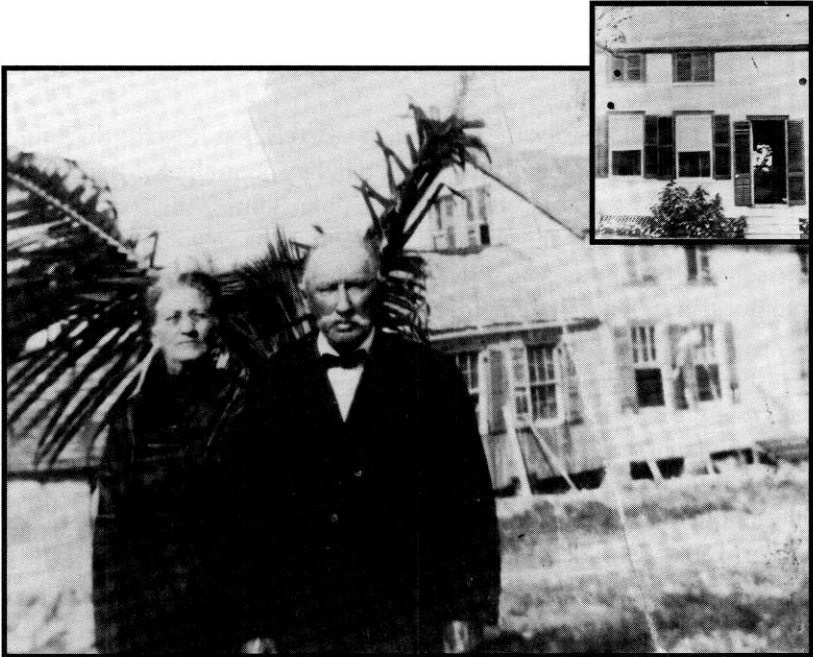


Captain Bravo
(HASF 1974-40-5)

J. S. Rainey, County Agricultural Agent, was consulted. After inspecting the lime groves, he advised using the same fertilizer formula recommended for other citrus fruit trees. He also suggested that the groves be mulched rather than weeded. This led to healthier trees and increased production. Good quality tomatoes grew luxuriantly in the constant sunshine, and derived moisture from rains and from crevices in the rocky soil.⁶¹

By the beginning of the 1930s, the effects of the Great Depression were spreading throughout the country. Produce and seafood prices plummeted, and those who remained on the island could no longer earn a living. By 1932 all the Sweeting family had moved to the mainland.⁶²

The elder Asa Sweeting died on Elliott Key in 1897 at the age of 79 and was buried on the island behind the Seaside schoolhouse.⁶³ On November 23, 1920, George, age 74, died at the Edith Coville Hospital in Miami. His body was sent by train to Key West and buried in a walled-in



George and Mary Sweeting in front of their home after the 1906 hurricane. The house, which was lifted and moved by a water surge, is temporarily supported by planks until repositioned. Inset: Detail of the Sweeting's home before the hurricane. (Both photographs courtesy of Roxie Brooks Newcomber). Opposite: The *Mt. Vernon*, the 65-foot ship used by George Sweeting to transport pineapples to the north, is similar to this 60-foot schooner built in 1903. (HASF, Munroe Collection, 145D)

grave site in Key West's "old cemetery."⁶⁴ In 1924 George and Mary's son, Abner, and his family moved to Miami.⁶⁵ In 1925 Mary Sweeting was still living on the island with two of her children. In 1930, when the last boat left Elliott Key and the children moved to Miami, she reluctantly left Elliott Key and her beloved island home of fifty years.⁶⁶

The original homesteaders sold their property and the new owners built vacation homes. In the 1960s developers planned to build a causeway and bridge to the mainland connecting the islands. Oil companies anticipated building oil refineries in the area. However, environmental factors were carefully considered and plans for development were abandoned.⁶⁷ In 1968 the U.S. Congress established Biscayne National Monument to preserve the ecology of the area, including the living coral reefs off shore and on the northern Florida Keys, among them Elliott Key. In 1980 the Monument became Biscayne National Park.

Walking on the island today, one sees the same subtropical wilderness of exquisite beauty with its jungle-like hardwood forest that greeted the pioneers in the late nineteenth century. Approaching the shore at low tide, the clear turquoise water still breaks on the white sandy beach that the settlers saw when they sailed there looking for land. On the spot where Mary Sweeting planted her garden over 100 years ago, the progeny of her pink and white periwinkles still bloom. The only visible clue that pioneers once lived here is the first cistern that was built for the "old house" on the Sweeting homestead. It stands alone among the cluster of date and coconut palm trees that rustle softly in the warm gentle breeze.



Notes

1. E.D. Vosbury, "Pineapple Culture in Florida," *Farmer's Bulletin*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1926), 3.

2. Kirk Munroe, "Pineapples in the Florida Keys," *Harper's Weekly*, 1896, 825.

3. Passenger List for Port of Key West, Quarter ending March 31, 1866, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

4. Homestead Testimony of Claimant, Asa Sweeting, November 12, 1887, Patent File No. 6512, June 29, 1889, Gainesville (Fla.) U.S. Land Ofc., Record Group 49, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

5. Homestead Application for Asa Sweeting, May 10, 1882, Homestead Application No. 10289, Homestead Patent File 6512, June 29, 1889, Gainesville (Fla.) U.S. Land Ofc., Record Group 49, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

6. Deed of Sale from John Lowe, Jr., and Mary E. Lowe to Asa Sweeting and George Sweeting, July 9, 1896 (Recorded October 10, 1896), Dade County, Fla., Deed and Mortgage Index, Beginning to 1900, A-Z, Reel 1, Deed Book Q-Z, 284-285, Dade County Record Center, Miami, Fla.

7. Homestead Testimony of Claimant, Asa Sweeting, Nov. 12, 1887.

8. Charles Theron Lowe, taped interview with author, May 24, 1993.

9. Charles Theron Lowe, telephone conversation with author, September 7, 1991.

10. Charles Theron Lowe, telephone conversation with author, December 28, 1993.

11. Homestead Testimony of Claimant, Asa Sweeting, Nov. 12, 1887.

12. *Oral History Narrative: A visit by former residents of Elliott Key to Convoy Point Headquarters*, (Homestead, Fla.: Biscayne National Park, July 1, 1989), 3.

13. Munroe, "Pineapples in the Florida Keys."

14. Carlton Lowe, "I Remember," *Heraldette* (Miami, Fla.: Miami Herald Publishing Co., 1986), 8.

15. Abner W. Sweeting, Jr., "The History of the Sweeting Family," from the file of Jane Nordt, n.d. (Copy in possession of author).

16. License of Sailing Vessel, *Two Brothers*, March 19, 1898,

Collector of Customs, Key West, Fla., Official File No. 1457622, Record Group 41, Civil Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

17. Charles Theron Lowe, telephone conversation with author, May 24, 1993.

18. License of Sailing Vessel, *Mt. Vernon*, April 6, 1901, Official File No. 93114, Record Group 41, Civil Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

19. John Viele, "Sailing Craft of the Florida Keys," *Tequesta* 52 (1992): 15.

20. License of Sailing Vessel, *Mt. Pleasant*, May 3, 1902, Official File No. 93253, Record Group 41, Civil Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

21. License of Sailing Vessel, *Centennial*, Sept. 9, 1910, Official File No. 125479, Record Group 41, Civil Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

22. License of Vessel, *Vole*, August 9, 1918, Official File No. 161662, Record Group 41, Civil Division, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

23. *Oral History Narrative*, 8.

24. Charlton W. Tebeau, *A History of Florida*, (Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971), 295.

25. Jane Nordt, "Elliott Key Park," (Miami, Fla.: Metro Dade County Park and Recreation Dept., Public Information Office, n.d.), 8 (Copy in possession of author).

26. Obituary for Capt. Abner W. Sweeting, *Miami Herald*, Aug. 1, 1958, 14C.

27. Viele, 13.

28. C. T. Lowe, telephone conversation, May 24, 1993.

29. Cargo *S.S. Alicia*, U.S. Admiralty Court Records, May 1, 1905, Southern District of Florida, Key West, Fla., Microfilm 1360, Roll 19, p. 95, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

30. *1870 U.S. Census*, Monroe Co., Fla., Key West, p. 40, Dwelling 253, Family 258, line 8, Microfilm 593, Roll 132, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *1880 U.S. Census*, Monroe Co., Fla., Key West, p. 3, Dwelling 24, T9, Roll 131, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Bensel's Directory of the City and Island of Key West, 1887*, 153, Stack 42, Local History & Genealogy Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; *1910 U.S. Census*, Monroe Co., Fla., Key West, Sheet 2-A, Dwelling 29, Family 31, line 30, T 624, Roll 165,

National Archives, Washington, D.C.; *Key West City Directory, 1914-1915*, Vol. 3, p. 239, (Columbus, Ohio: R.L. Polk & Co.), Library of Congress, Local History & Genealogy Room, Stack 42, Washington, D.C.

31. Nordt, 7.

32. C.T. Lowe, telephone conversation, May 24, 1993.

33. *1896 Census of Youth of School Age*, School District No. 4, Elliott's Key, Dade Co., Fla., Series 298, Vol. 2, 7, line 5, Dept. of State, Tallahassee, Fla.

34. *Key West City Directory, 1906-07*, Vol. 1, p. 267, (Columbus, Ohio: R.L. Polk & Co.), Stack 42, Local History and Genealogy Room, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

35. Elementary Pupil's Report, May 15, 1929, Elliott Lowe, Seaside School, Elliott Key, Board of Public Instruction, Miami, Fla. (Original report card in file at Biscayne National Park, Convoy Point Headquarters, Homestead, Fla.)

36. Sir Lancelot Jones, interview with author, April 18, 1991.

37. Katherine Sweeting Roberts, taped interview with author, May 24, 1993.

38. C.T. Lowe, interview, May 24, 1993.

39. *Oral History Narrative*, 1.

40. Roxie Brooks Newcomber to author, July 13, 1991.

41. C. Clinton Past, "Elliott's Key Famed for Its Fine Limes and Crawfish," *The Miami Herald*, April 5, 1925, Magazine Section, 1.

42. C.T. Lowe, interview, May 24, 1993.

43. Newcomber to author, July 13, 1991.

44. Roberts, interview, May 24, 1993.

45. C.T. Lowe, interview, May 24, 1993.

46. Roberts, interview, May 24, 1993.

47. C.T. Lowe, interview, May 24, 1993.

48. Nordt, 8.

49. C. Lowe, "I Remember," 8.

50. *Oral History Narrative*, 5.

51. C.T. Lowe, interview, May 24, 1993.

52. Past, "Elliott's Key Famed," 1.

53. Newcomber to author, July 13, 1991.

54. *Oral History Narrative*, 8.

55. "Steamer St. Lucie Went Down Near Mouth Caesar's Creek; Twenty-five Were Drowned," *The Miami Metropolis*, Oct. 20, 1906.

56. "The Awful Tragedy," *The Miami Evening Record*, Oct. 22, 1906, 1.

57. The term "quarterboats" was taken directly from the 1906 *Miami Metropolis* report of the hurricane. A quarterboat was a boat on which the men working on the overseas railroad lived — their quarters. The type of boat used is not specified.

58. "Steamer St. Lucie Went Down," *The Miami Metropolis*, 1.

59. "The Awful Tragedy," *The Miami Evening Record*, 1.

60. "Keys Devastated," *The Miami Evening Record*, Oct. 22, 1906, 1.

61. Past, "Elliott's Key Famed," 1.

62. C. T. Lowe, interview.

63. Petition by William Lowe regarding death of Asa Sweeting, Probate Record, April 12, 1898, Case #60, Clerk, Circuit & County Court, Probate Division, Dade County Courthouse, Miami, Fla.; Also C.T. Lowe, interview with author, April 7, 1991.

64. Certificate of Death for George Sweeting, November 23, 1920, File No. 11564, Registered No. 530, Florida State Board of Health, Bureau of Vital Statistics, Jacksonville, Fla.

65. Katherine Sweeting Roberts, telephone interview with author, April 24, 1992.

66. C. T. Lowe, telephone conversation.

67. Mark Derr, *Some Kind of Paradise, A Chronical of Man and the Land in Florida*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 364.