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## Pioneer Florida: Indian Key and Wrecking in 1833

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PIONEER FLORIDA \*  
by T. FREDERICK DAVIS

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INDIAN KEY AND WRECKING, 1833.

Indian Key, one of the upper keys off its south-east coast, crept into the history of Florida during the Seminole war when on August 7, 1840, it was attacked by Indians who killed the noted horticulturist and botanist Dr. Henry Perrine, resident of the island since December 1838. This event has been well covered by historical writers, but little is known of the situation at Indian Key prior to that time.

An interesting account of conditions at Indian Key was published by the Charleston Mercury in 1833. The writer seems to have been a keen observer and it is believed that what he wrote is a fair picture. The account follows in his own words.

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Indian Key is a place of rendezvous for Wreckers, while engaged in their vocation. Here they procure their supplies of provisions, stores, &c. They are stationed at various places of lookout along the coast. Indian Key, however, possessing as it does, a good harbor, and being in a central situation, is much resorted to, several vessels making it their headquarters. These get under weigh every morning about 3 or 4 o'clock, run out to the reef, and cruise up and down all day, in search of vessels which may have gone ashore in the night. They

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\*NOTE-This is the first of a series of brief articles on happenings and conditions in the Florida of territorial days and early statehood. As the source in each case is contemporaneous material, the reader may in a measure feel that he is carried back to those times. Mr. Davis, whose knowledge of the period was already extensive, has recently made exhaustive research into two of the most important sources: the Florida newspapers of the period, and *Niles' Register*, which doubtless have never before been thoroughly combed for Florida historical material.-Ed.

return towards night, and anchor near the shore. Indian Key is not over eight or ten acres in extent. It contains twenty, or thirty small houses, and one large building. The large building is used as a kind of hotel, and is well provided and furnished for the accommodation of transient persons. This establishment has in connection a billiard table, nine pin alley, &c. The Wreckers amuse themselves, when ashore, in playing these various games. The Island itself is nothing but rock ; but, by great labor, a quantity of earth has been collected and a fine garden made. Cocoa nuts, limes, bananas, and other West India fruits, are successfully cultivated. It is, upon the whole, a delightful residence, reminding me forcibly of the lines of Moore-

"Oh had we some bright little Isle of our own,  
In a blue summer ocean far off and alone."

It is inhabited by the families of the Wreckers and Turtlers, and contains 30 or 40 inhabitants. The waters in the neighborhood abound with the finest fish in the world. I apprehend that many nefarious transactions are effected here. There is an individual resident here, who is entirely engaged in the wrecking business. He keeps a large store, which is well stocked with assorted goods, such as may be required by the Wreckers & others.

There are many poor persons, and some of them not noted for honesty, settled on the Florida Keys, who are compelled to deal with this man. He, by allowing them credit and indulgence in his store, gains an ascendancy which he turns to some account. These people are his agents, or spies, who give him the earliest intelligence of wrecks, in whatsoever part of the reef they may occur. It is always understood that, in the event of their procuring a wreck, they are to receive a share. When occasion

requires they are brought in as *disinterested* witnesses to prove a meritorious claim for salvage. Circumstances which have come to my notice, induce me to think that, in some cases, they have, while engaged as pilots, materially aided in getting vessels ashore [ *i. e.*, beaching them].

I am aware of instances where vessels have been wrecked, when boats have been started to convey the intelligence 30 or 40 miles, other wrecking vessels being passed by in the mean while, which were much nearer the wreck. The notions which these people entertain of morals, may be judged of by this single fact. That they will leave a vessel on the reef and go 40, 50, or 60 miles, to give intelligence to this man passing perhaps in the meantime several wrecking vessels, whose assistance could be procured much earlier. The captains of these vessels, should they board the boat, will be deceived by some tale of parties on board: that they are going for provisions or something else. In the meantime, in all probability, a valuable cargo is endangered: and what is still more censurable, the lives of 20 or 30 individuals left entirely at the mercy of the winds, waves, and rocks. On receiving the intelligence of the wreck the vessels will not immediately get under way and run down to her assistance.

From apprehension that the other wreckers may discover their object and join in pursuit of the game, they frequently wait until night before they start -when the captains and crews of other vessels lying at Indian Key, being ashore engaged at some amusement, they push off and reach the wreck sometimes before morning, and frequently not until late in the day. Many hours and sometimes even several days elapse before relief is afforded to the wrecked vessel. I would by no means convey the idea, that all of the wreckers are concerned in this traffic, nor

would I insinuate against the honesty of all. It is a very hard matter for men to be honest wreckers; yet, hard as it is, I have seen some that were honest and even liberal. This kind of management has a tendency, however, to take business from the hands of those who deal fairly, and to offer them the alternative of coming into similar arrangements or of starving. I propose, at some future day, to publish a complete account of wrecks and wrecking. In doing so I feel that I shall be performing a solemn duty. I have seen the management of many wrecks, and know how things have been conducted. Although 'a mere looker on in Venice', at least so far as wrecking was concerned, I have not neglected the opportunity of collecting such information as I thought likely to be beneficial to society. Where the wrecking business is fairly conducted, those who pursue it, so far from being censured, are entitled to great credit. There is nothing in the business itself discreditable. Vast amounts of property have been saved by the Florida Wreckers, and many lives, which otherwise would have been lost. It will, therefore, be my object to commend when they are entitled to praise, and where they deserve it, to censure.

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We do not know whether the writer of the foregoing ever published the account he referred to; but he has preserved in this article a good picture of the wildcat phase of the wrecking business. There was another class of wreckers, as he mentioned, and of them we get a glance from a letter written from Key West to the New York *Enquirer* in 1827:

"This place [Key West] exhibits a constant scene of business; vessels are continuously passing. A

number of vessels of different denominations are brought in here by the wreckers, in a state of distress. I was taught to believe that this class of men were an unprincipled set of beings, who foraged on the misfortunes of others by plunder and depredation. On the contrary, I find them to be decent men of good common sense. Their usual custom is, when they fall in with a vessel in distress, to bargain with the unfortunate master of the vessel, who has strayed from his course and has been stranded, to pilot him off the reef or shoals for a certain sum. Is this course of conduct more reprehensible than that of our Atlantic pilots? In fact, they are indispensably necessary, for there are a number of lives as well as a vast deal of property saved which would otherwise be swallowed up in the ocean."

Thus we get a first-hand view of both sides of a business that thrived for a generation from Indian Key to Key West. Though an attempt was made to regulate it, by the establishment of a Court of Admiralty at Key West in 1828, which reputable wreckers advocated and for the inauguration of which they were partly responsible, the business continued in much the old way for many years thereafter. The establishment of lighthouses and the issuance of more accurate charts tended to reduce the number of navigational wrecks; then steam navigation appeared, with its better chance of maneuver. Gradually, from one cause and another, the business of wrecking declined until it finally died as a specific occupation.