

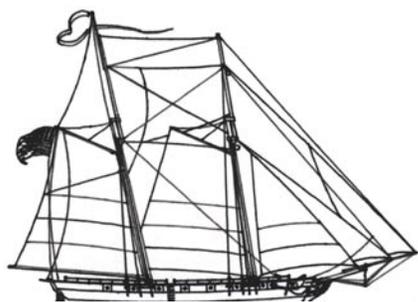
Florida Keys

Sea Heritage Journal

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USS SHARK



 OFFICIAL QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE KEY WEST MARITIME HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Labor Day: Night Of Harrow

Mozelle Williams' Handwritten Account of the 1935 Labor Day Hurricane

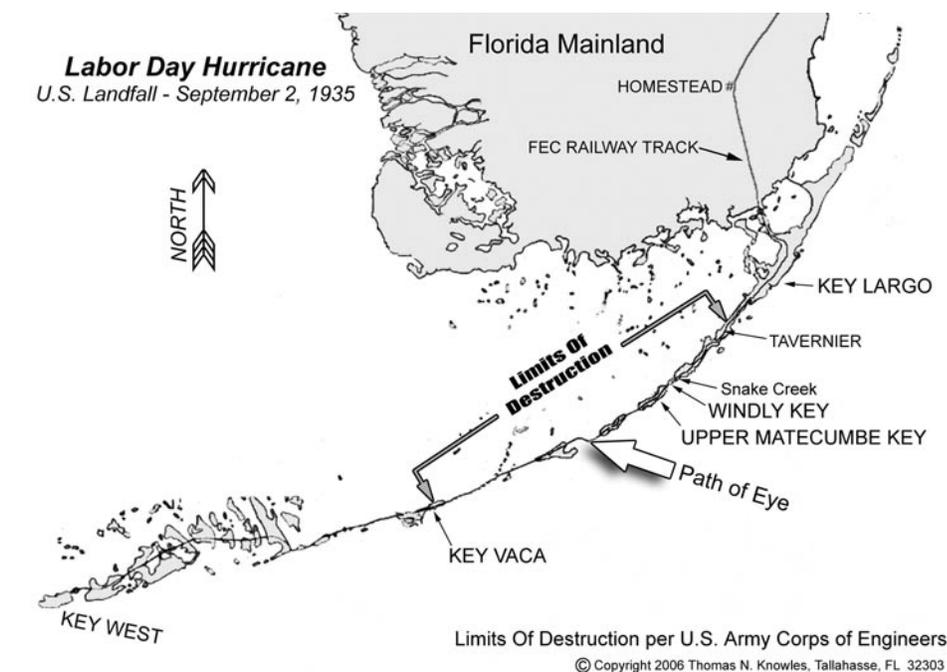
Commentary and Transcription

By Thomas Neil Knowles

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On the evening of September 2, 1935, the first Category V hurricane to make landfall in the United States cut a swath of death and destruction across the Florida Keys. The center crossed the Florida East Coast Railway track at Craig with maximum winds estimated by the Weather Bureau at over 200 mph. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the water surged across the low-lying islands from Long Key to the south end of Key Largo reaching a maximum height of 18 feet above mean sea level. On Upper Matecumbe Key where the most powerful part of the storm came ashore, two families had taken shelter inside a heavily braced storm house. When that began to come apart, the four adults and five children tried to jam themselves into an automobile wedged between two coconut trees. For Mozelle Law Williams, her brother, their spouses, and their children, it truly was a night of torment.

Mozelle and Edwin Morris Williams had been married for 10 years and had three children: two



The hurricane originated east of the Bahamas and had been tracked for several days by the Weather Bureau's hurricane center in Jacksonville, Florida. A compact weather system that was difficult to precisely locate with the technology available in 1935, the eye of the hurricane had been projected to pass south of Key West, but instead passed over Craig near the middle of the Florida Keys. Photo credit: the Author

girls (9 & 8 years old) and a boy (18 months). They had recently moved into a house that Eddie had built on the railroad fill at Whale Harbor between Upper Matecumbe Key and Windley Key.

Eddie & Mozelle struggled to make ends meet, as did many people living on the Keys during the Great Depression. Born in Key West and

raised in the Keys, Eddie had a boat that he used for commercial fishing and to take tourists charter fishing. In addition to carpentry skills, he had a good mind for mechanical things and worked on cars and engines. Mozelle was an excellent cook and during the winter season

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SOCIETY NEWS AND NOTES

By Tom Hambright

Editors of The Key Outpost



THE NEW WEEKLY NEWSPAPER of the Key West Operating Base makes its debut today to all officers and enlisted personnel of the Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Corps stationed in this area. Published under the supervision of the Zone Public Relations Office, the editorial board is headed by Francis M. Watson, Y3c, USNR, left, editor-in-chief, who is a damnyankee from New York State; and Joseph B. Allen, Y3c, USNR, right, associate editor, a Florida rebel. A complete list of correspondents representing all activities will be announced next week.

As a student of history for over sixty years I have often seen how one man can do many things in one lifetime. I was reminded of this again this week, working with "The Key Outpost" which the Friends of the Library gave the Florida Room funds to microfilm. This was the weekly paper of the Key West Naval Base from 1943 to 1973. What started me thinking was the photograph of the associate editor Joe B. Allen Jr. on the front page.

Joe Allen was born in Key West and began his career as delivery boy for "The Key West Citizen." During World War II he joined the Navy and was stationed in his hometown. After the war he started a weekly newspaper and a career in politics.

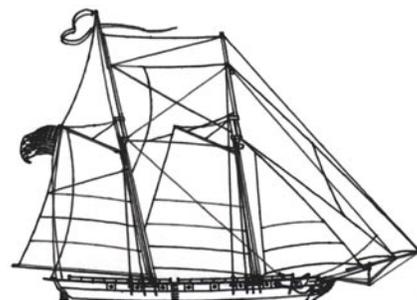
From 1948 to 1958 he served on the Monroe County Commission. He then served as Monroe County Tax Assessor (today Property Appraiser) until 1972. From 1976 to 1986 he served as State Representative for Monroe County. He was also on the board of the First State Bank and founder of Holy Innocents Episcopal Church, which merged with St. Paul's. He worked to preserve the East and West Martello Tower, was a founder of the Key West Art and Historical Society and a supporter of this Society. The West Martello was renamed for him.

He and wife Marjorie were the parents of four sons. After a full life Joe died in Key West in February 2006 at the age of 90.

New Members

Frans H. Botes, Key West; Cricket Desmarais, Key West; USS

Mohawk Memorial Museum, Key West.



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Editor: Lynda Hambright
Production: Tom Hambright

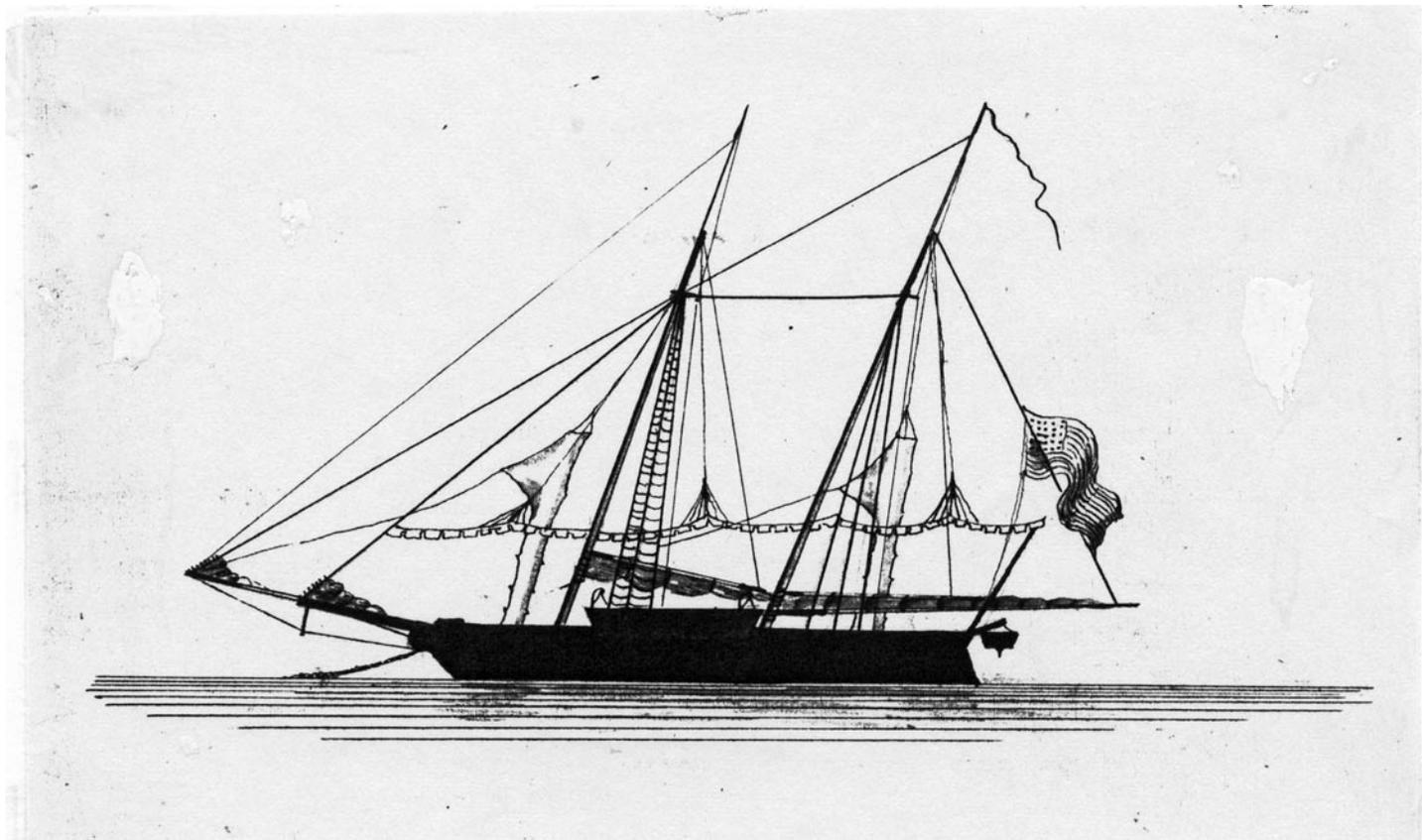
Letters and articles are welcome. Please write to: Editor, Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal, KWMHS, P.O. Box 695, Key West, FL 33041.

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Surveying the Keys in the 1850'S



U.S. Schooner Gerdes 50 tons. Photo credit: the Author.

by John Viele

Almost thirty years after Florida became U.S. territory, there were no American charts of the Florida Keys and the Florida Reef. Navigators had to use old Spanish and British charts which contained many errors and omissions. Lack of accurate charts contributed significantly to the growing incidence of shipwrecks along the reef. By 1850, ships were piling up on the reef at the rate of almost one a week. Marine insurers and shipping companies pleaded with the government to erect lighthouses along the reef and develop accurate charts of the keys and the reef.

The government agency responsible for producing charts of the American coast was the U.S. Coast Survey established in 1807. In 1843, Alexander Dallas Bache,

a graduate of West Point, grandson of Benjamin Franklin, and a top-notch scientist was appointed Superintendent of the Coast Survey. An excellent administrator, he formed good working relations with other government agencies and branches, particularly the Army and the Navy. Many of the surveyors were military officers assigned to work with the Coast Survey.

In 1848, recognizing the urgent need for accurate charts of the Keys, Bache appointed a survey party to undertake the work. He designated Francis H. Gerdes, Assistant U.S. Coast Survey, to take charge of the survey. Gerdes was a hard-working, meticulous leader with extensive experience surveying other sections of the coast. The party embarked at Pensacola on a 50-ton schooner renamed *Gerdes* in honor of their

leader. Initially, the party consisted of nine men in addition to Gerdes. There was a rated heliotroper (a surveyor qualified to use a heliotrope, an instrument used for making long distance observations by means of the sun's rays reflected from a mirror). Other members were a sailing master, a mate, four seamen, a cook, and a cook-steward. On deck, or towed astern, there were an 18-foot surf boat, a 19-foot longboat, and a 12-foot dinghy. Surveying equipment included a heliotrope, a prismatic azimuth compass with tripod, a small azimuth compass, four telescopes, a theodolite, sextant, chain and pins (for measuring distances on the ground), spirit levels, plumbs, drawing instruments, etc. For

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detached parties, there were two tents, cooking utensils, and sky rockets for signaling.

The first step was to conduct a reconnaissance of the Keys and the reef with the aid of a local pilot. The Collector of Customs in Key West recommended Captain Philip Sawyer saying, “he knows more of the islands than perhaps any other man on the coast, having cruised among them for the last twenty years.” The *Gerdes* arrived at Key West on January 8, 1849, but the party was prevented from beginning survey work by bad weather which continued on and off for the next two weeks. While waiting for favorable winds, Gerdes toured the island of Key West. In his journal he wrote: “The appearance of this island town is rather thriving, there being considerable shipping, very good wharves, long and wide streets, and some handsome buildings. The new fort protecting the harbor is in progress and will be an imposing work. The number of inhabitants is about 3,500.

The soil is dry and full of lime rock, intermixed with pieces of the coral species, not much sand, the earth of a dark blue color. The whole island so far as I have seen is covered, and very thickly too, with brush intermingled with single trees. I am too unacquainted as yet to know the different species; some are very peculiar and beautiful. The bushes are up to 20 feet high, The shore towards the reef is rocky; in some places large beds run up to the beach; the latter is covered with conchs, shells of every description, thousands of coral pieces, large sponges and plants (submarine), which have grown on rocks, the foot of the same indicating still the spot on which they grew. The lighthouse

is a very handsome and suitable structure and seems to be kept in excellent order.”

On January 12, Gerdes wrote a note to be sent to headquarters by the next steamer saying, “If ever I was in a box, I am here so – nothing for the love of money to eat or drink, hard work every day, wind and storm continually, and wrecks all around.”

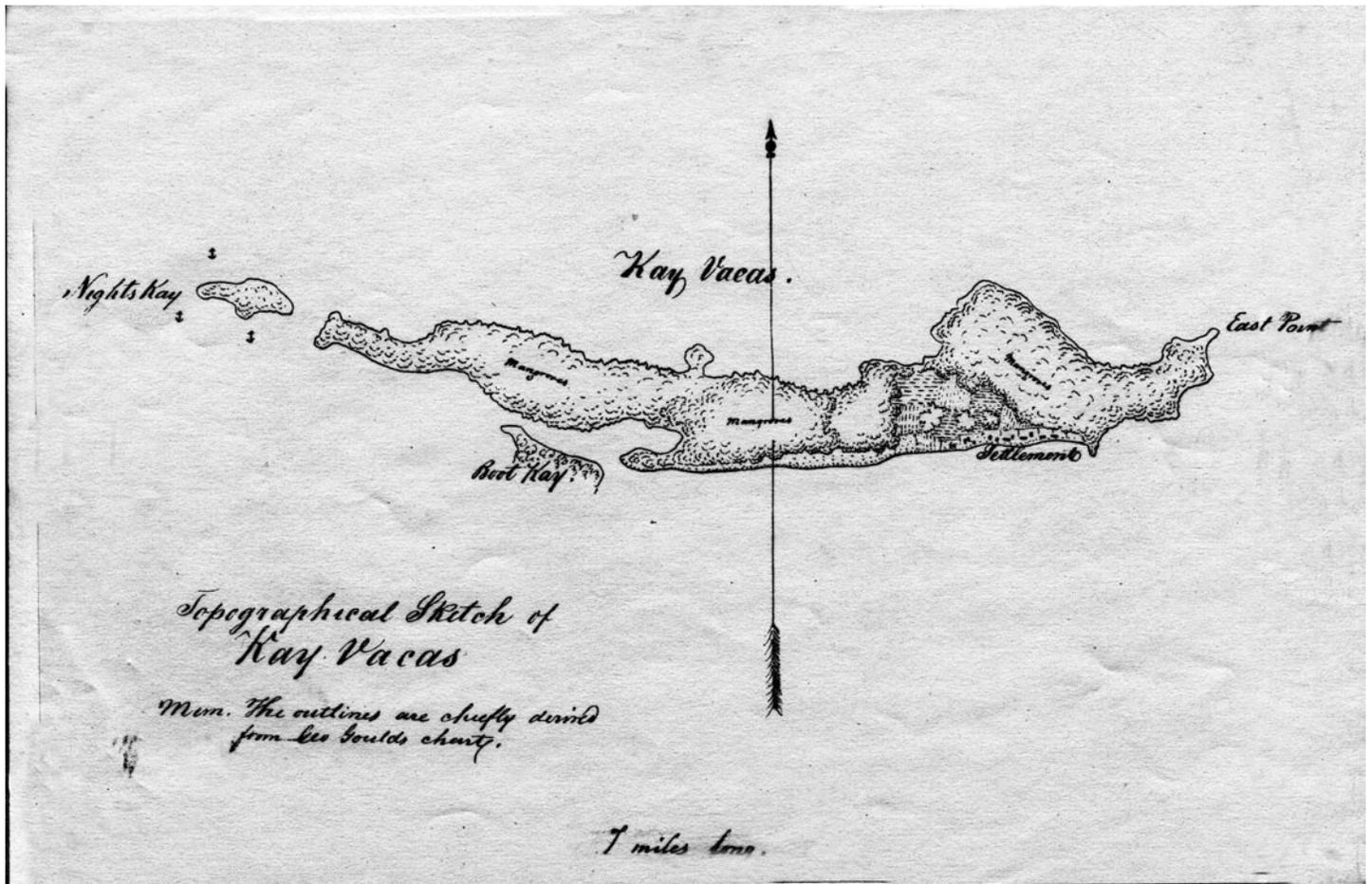
Finally, on January 17, the schooner got underway and sailed out to Sand Key. Gerdes noted that the lighthouse was gone, destroyed by the hurricane of 1846, and a 60-foot high beacon erected in its place had also disappeared. A lightship was anchored nearby. Two days later, with the weather still rough, the *Gerdes* beat up Hawk Channel and anchored off the Pine Islands (Sugarloaf to Big Pine Key). Gerdes wrote to the Assistant to the Superintendent of the Coast Survey, “Well, I am here among the wreckers and pirates of Key West. If I can join these islands into a triangulation it will be a fine thing – so far I have had no difficulties except bad navigation and constant gales.” The *Gerdes* returned to Key West to wait for better weather. Finally on January 26, the survey schooner got underway again and sailed east along the lower Keys.

The purpose of the reconnaissance was to familiarize the survey party with the Keys, to identify them with the names currently in use, to do preliminary triangulation to fix their positions, and to select a place to establish a base line for the triangulation.

As the schooner sailed along the Keys, Gerdes noted that it was no longer possible to obtain fresh water by digging a hole in the sand at Bahia Honda. “. . .the hurricane of 1846 made the water everywhere brackish.” Off Key Vacas (site of

present-day Marathon) he reported that there was “a considerable settlement of 20 houses in a line on the beach” seven miles from the west end of the island. This was the largest settlement in the Keys outside of Key West. He also wrote that there were “settlements of one or a few families on the second easterly Key of Boca Grande (actually Boca Chica), on Big Pine Island which is now called West Summerlands Kay, further on Happy Jack’s point or Kay, and on East Summerlands Kay.” These names are confusing. Part of the confusion stems from an original understanding that the three small keys immediately west of Bahia Honda were the Summerland Keys. This is why the westernmost of the three got the name West Summerland Key even though it is east of today’s Summerland Key. Based on later charts and surveyors’ reports, it appears that the settlements referred to were on Geiger Key, Big Pine Key, Sugarloaf Key, and Summerland Key. At Indian Key, Gerdes observed that there were “six or seven buildings planted around with cocoanut trees.” The island was entirely cleared and there was a wharf extending into two fathoms (12 feet) of water. This was the island, Gerdes noted, that the Seminole Indians attacked and burned during the Second Seminole War. Continuing up the Keys past the Matecumbes, Windley Key, Plantation Key, and Key Largo, Gerdes did not find any more settlements, with the exception of an abandoned plantation and a single empty house on Key Largo opposite Rodriguez Key.

On January 30, the schooner reached Biscayne Bay. In one of the small boats, Gerdes explored the Miami River up to the Everglades. He then anchored off Key Biscayne



Key Vacas in 1849 showing location of settlement at eastern end. Drawn by F. H. Gerdes, Assistant U.S. Coast Survey. Photo credit: the Author.

and went ashore to select a location for the base line.

The method used to fix the positions of the keys, the coast line, and the reef was called triangulation. A base line between 3 and 4 miles in length was established and its length measured with precise accuracy. The exact latitude and longitude of the base at one end of the line was determined by star sights and lunar observations. A marker was erected some distance away at approximately right angles to the base line. The angles between the base line and the line of sight from each base to the marker were measured with the theodolite. Knowing the length of one side and the two angles, the length of the other two sides and the angle between them could be computed. Using beacons planted on the keys and along the reef, a series of triangles were constructed which fixed the position of each beacon.

The triangle network from Key Biscayne to Key West consisted of more than sixty triangles.

In November, Gerdes began a Second Reconnaissance from the Gulf side of the keys. In January, he became ill, went to Pascagoula to recover, and returned to the Keys in April. In the meantime, three more survey parties had been formed and sent to continue the work which now included topographic surveys for the Land Office.

In his journal, Gerdes listed the Keys with their then current names, some brief descriptions, and occasionally, the origin of the name. Most of these names are the same today. Here are some of his comments of particular interest:

Key Largo: "the island contains very good land of a black and yellowish hue, said to be fit to

raise pineapples – also some land at the upper part, on both sides, good timber such as Dogwood, Madeira wood [mahogany], and Yellow wood."

Plantation Key: "Island below Cayo Largo now called on the chart Long Island, is called Plantation Island for the fact of there formerly having been a plantation belonging to English wreckers from Abaco Island."

Tavernier Key and Rodriguez Key: "This island, [Tavernier] as well as Rodriguez Key affords a tolerable harbor and good anchor ground; they are stations for wreckers."

Duck Key: "This island, formerly [a] saltworks, but they were transferred lately to Key West, owned by Mr. Howe, who is the

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possessor of this Key.”

Summerlands Key: “good land, some timber, settled by two families.”

Sally Bunces: “two small islands designated by Blunt as the Saddle Bluffs, each 1 ½ miles by ½ mile, rather high land.” [Known as part of the Saddle Bunch Keys today.]

Bahia Honda Key: “This island is probably the second of all the keys in importance on account of the excellent harbor to the W of it. . . . The harbor is so good that this island ought to be reserved from Public sale for Government purposes and improvements. Into the harbor, 24 to 27 feet can be brought, and an excellent anchorage, perfectly safe and roomy may be obtained in 20 feet. Such a thing is rare in the Keys; and a lighthouse on the W point of the island, and this harbor would be perfect.”

Summerlands Keys: “The three small islands next to W from Bahia Honda are called Summerlands Islands or Kays.”

Boca Chica: “Called by Blunt Samba Island, but not known here as such. . . . The islands are divided by the so called Pilot-creek. . . .”

Under his notes on the General Florida Reef, Gerdes wrote, “The Coffins Patches are called Collins Patches after the captain of a vessel who was wrecked there (there is only 5 feet of water on it).”

In early 1851, Gerdes sailed back to Key Biscayne. He decided to move the marker at the north end of the baseline a short distance to the northwest. The line would then run over land the whole distance instead of partly over water. He returned to Key West to find someone who would accept a contract to clear the baseline of trees and bushes. Because business was booming, no firm was interested for less

than \$1,000. Gerdes decided to hire day laborers and oversee the work himself. He carried fourteen men back to Key Biscayne and in a month, they had cleared a ten-foot wide path through the woods. A thirty-six foot screw pile with red and white painted barrel at its top, was sunk in the ground at the northern end of the line. Surveyors carefully measured the length of the line using the calibrated chains. The result was 5,800 meters. As it turned out, this was a preliminary base line, and the area along the line had to be re-cleared and re-measured four years later.

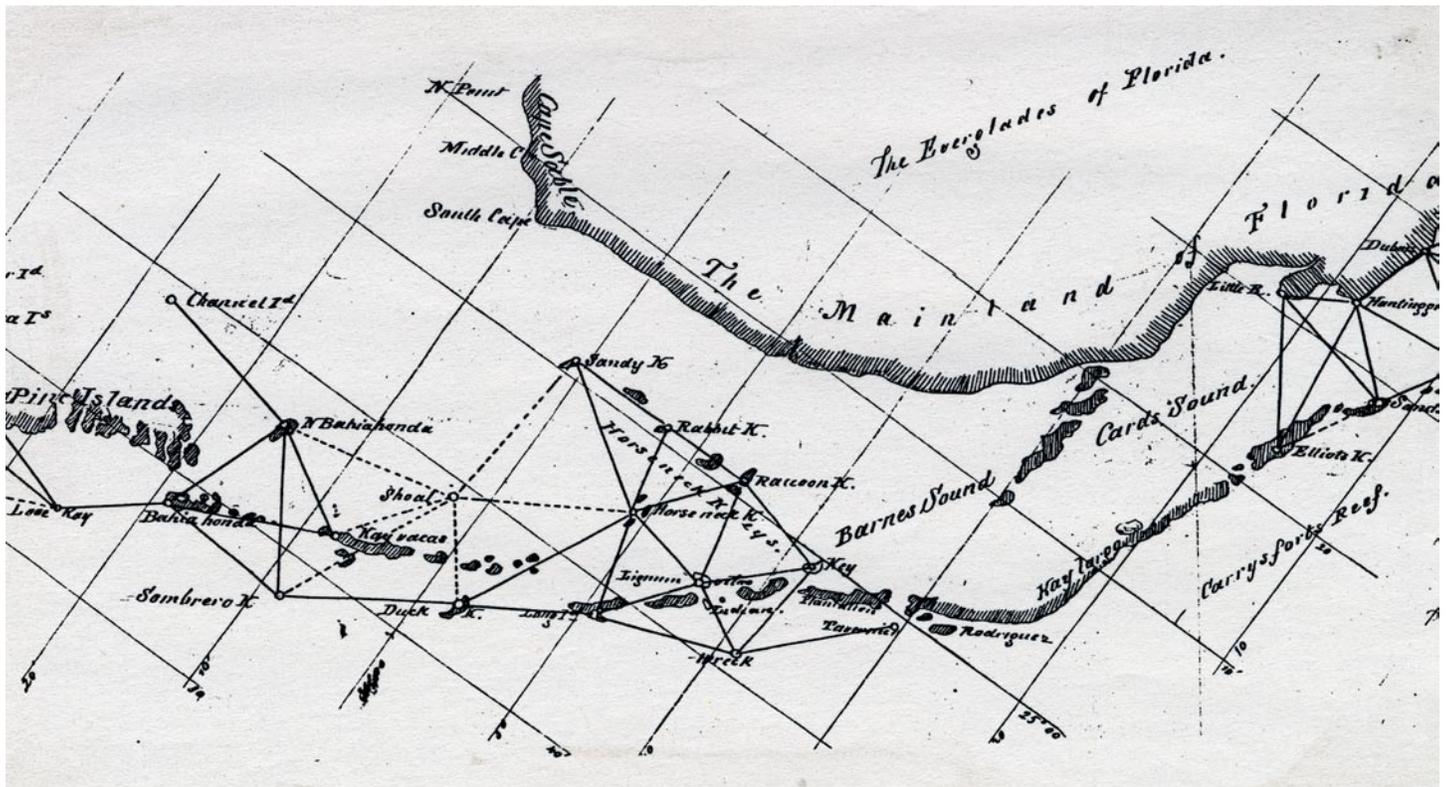
Gerdes described the hardships of living and conducting a survey in the Keys in a letter to Bache: “On the 750 islands on the reef there is hardly any spot where it is possible to pitch a tent. . . . there is no water anywhere to be obtained. Provisions (save fish in the Gulf) are out of the question, and as before mentioned, hardly any other way of existence other than living on board a vessel – no communication with persons or even mails, but by Key West and a trip there can not be made under any circumstances under an average of ten days, and is therefore once a month out of question. – Besides the navigation is [to] say the least very dangerous – for all those and for numerous other reasons, an Assistant who you order to this Section must come with the full knowledge of the great importance of this survey and must be ready to sacrifice advantages which he finds in other sections and devote himself with personal interest to the work.”

Sub Assistant Wainwright wrote: “The difficulties presented in its execution [topographical survey] are almost insuperable. Operations on foot are in many places impossible and in others, the water is so shallow for miles in coves that

boats can not be got through them.”

Sub Assistant John Rockwell wrote: “The keys present many obstacles and few facilities for the prosecution of the survey. The shoalness of the water between them prevents access with the vessel, oftentimes within 5, 6, or 8 miles from the points where the work may happen to be in progress, and an approach with boats is dependent on wind and tide and in many cases difficult. The mangrove swamps which abound on the keys are among the most formidable difficulties. Tall signals become necessary in order to be visible above the trees, and lines have not infrequently to be opened through swamps. This is a slow, laborious, and expensive operation. The swamps are overflowed at high tide, and the mud, water, and mosquitoes that abound in them are beyond description, and these, with the intense heat of the climate, render the work of cutting almost impossible. The labor of opening lines and dragging boats over shoals has proved to be very severe upon the crew of the vessel. The only locality where provisions and good water can be obtained is at Key West, and no small amount of time is lost running to that port for supplies”

As if the natural obstacles in the Keys were not enough, in 1856, the outbreak of the Third Seminole War posed new dangers for the surveyors. Sub Assistant Dorr wrote Bache, “Sir, In compliance with your instructions of November 19, 1856, I proceeded to Key West, but was unable to engage a pilot to accompany me to Cape Sable, such was the general terror of Indians.” The Secretary of the Treasury in February 1857 warned Bache, “. . . . but from the character of the Indians and from the fact that they are likely



Portion of the preliminary triangulation of the Keys 1849 - 1850. Photo credit: the Author.

to approach the coast for supplies, it is considered that the continuance of the Coast Survey parties near Cape Sable may be attended with danger." And on May 4 1857, Sub Assistant Wainright reported to Bache "... the Indian hostilities having increased, it was deemed imprudent to expose the party [on Key Largo], which was without any means of defence."

Lieutenant James Totten, U.S. Army and Assistant in the Coast Survey, was in charge of placing signals, called screw piles, to mark the dangerous portions of the reef. The original signals consisted of a hollow iron screw sunk in the coral with a 30 to 40 foot high mangrove pole inserted in it. A barrel was fixed to the top of the pole and painted black. In 1853, based on Totten's recommendation, the mangrove poles were replaced with iron poles. The barrels were replaced with lattice-work cylinders made of hoop iron, six feet in length and two and one-half feet in diameter. Mounted

above the cylinders were six-foot square vanes, free to rotate with the wind with a letter of the alphabet inset to identify the location.

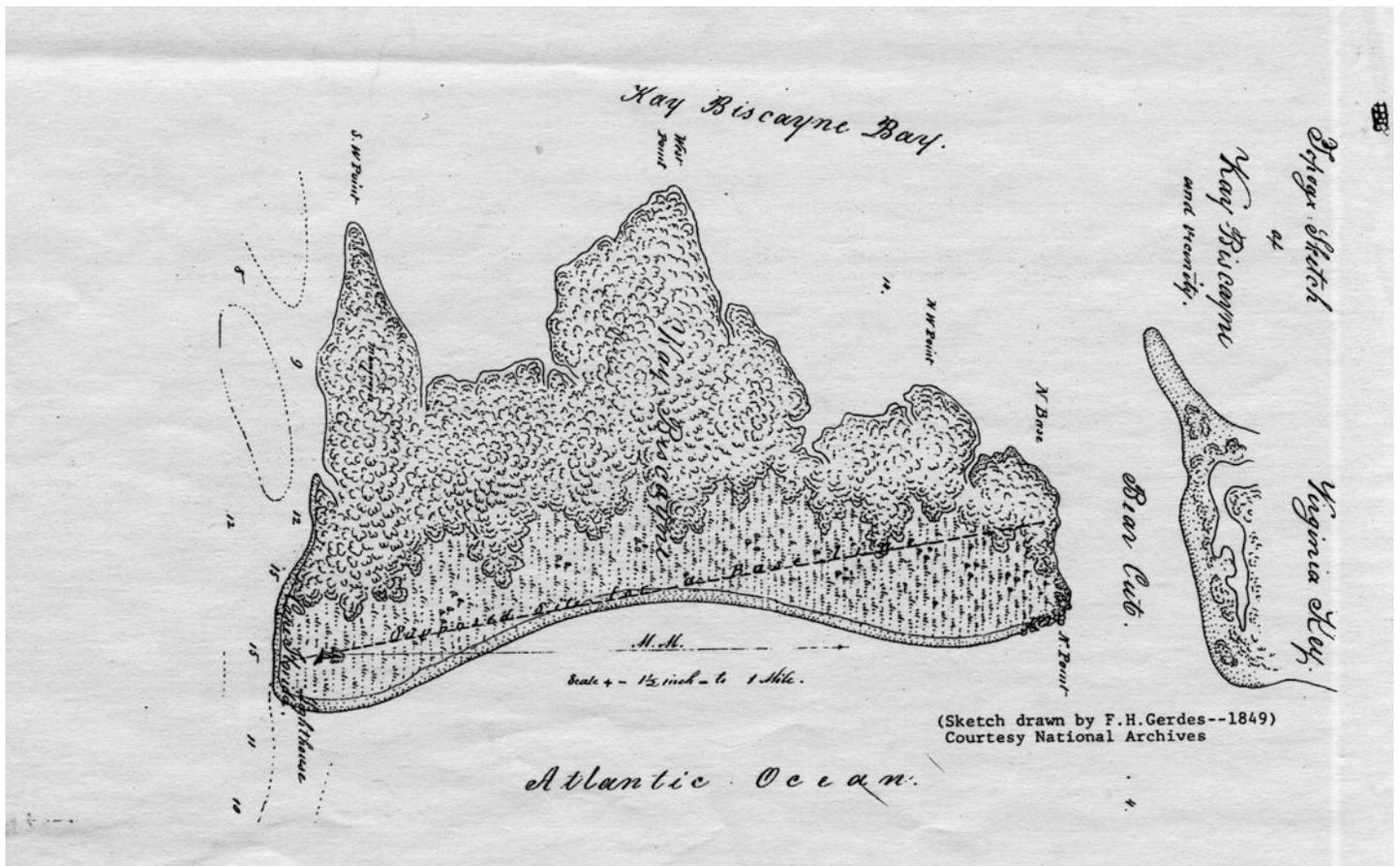
The captain of the steamer *Isabel* who passed the reef four times a month, "has in a very candid and gentlemanly manner acknowledged the aid these signals are to hm." When Gerdes was in Key West in December 1849, an agent of an insurance company told him that if he had erected a beacon on Pelican Shoal last year, it would have saved the large barque *Maryland* from becoming a total loss and that, just a few days ago, a captain said he got a glimpse of the signal at Sambo which caused him to bring his ship about and avoid striking the reef.

But not everyone was happy with the signals on the reef. Captain Philip Sawyer, the pilot, told Gerdes, "... the wreckers on Key Vacas Station had grumbled very much about the tripod on the Sombbrero, and positively asserted that the beacon alone had prevented

four or five vessels from going ashore there." In his journal, Gerdes wrote: "It is said openly in Key West that more than five shipwrecks were prevented by the timely sight of these beacons. My pilot, Captain Sawyer, a very respectable citizen of Key West [and a wrecker himself] was informed so personally by the Captain of the Wreckers, who mentioned chiefly the signal at Sombbrero as destructive of their business."

Gerdes took a somewhat dim view of the wreckers although he acknowledged that they did perform a useful service in saving lives and property. In his journal, he commented: "In the forenoon [shortly after arriving in Key West], a rumor got afloat that a ship was wrecked on the reef near Sand Key and in fifteen minutes afterwards, five or six vessels under the denomination of wreckers, stood under full sail, spite of the

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Proposed site for a baseline on Key Biscayne in 1849. Photo credit: the Author.

(Surveying from page 7)

heavy norther, every one vying to be the first to reap the profits. How much more admirable would such promptness appear, did we know that it was offered more for relief of the poor sufferers in the wreck than for gain – gain from the misfortunes of others; still even so, as it is, it appears to me a blessing, as at least the lives of the unfortunate mariners are generally safe, and the system, though connected with evils, has some good side. Why is no cutter [revenue cutter] stationed here? This, I think, would be the place of all places. The coast survey must ameliorate this system; our charts will be better guides than the present ones, and a series of Lighthouses along this reef will enable the navigator better to avoid its dangerous proximity.

In a letter to Bache, Gerdes wrote, “With the most intelligent portion of Key West population with whom I have become acquainted, I have found great sympathy – every honest man is convinced that a thorough survey is the first step to ameliorate the almost daily occurrence of wrecks and consequently to break up the whole regular wrecking system. You have no idea how these people (a certain class called wreckers) mount at daybreak the lookouts, and if a sail is in the neighborhood of danger, how the vessels run out in storms and gales – such energy, how admirable it would be were it alone for charity and humanity, but alas! gain – gain! By the misfortunes of others is the sole impulse and all other feelings are strange to them.”

In another letter, he wrote, “It is generally understood that even of the vessels which accidentally

get on the reef, three-fourths of them are purposely lost afterwards, for the reason that they never can recover their standing after having been aground – which they had previously. At present there is a ship on the Tortugas, new and fine; she got aground and everything, spars and all, was taken out of her, but the agent of the underwriters in New York went down himself, tried to raise her and succeeded, but when she hove up, there were fourteen augur holes discovered in her bottom. She certainly got aground by accident, but probably it was considered that after she got off, she would always be considered as an injured and damaged vessel, and it was perhaps thought more advantageous to let her be lost and receive full insurance for her.”

The letters and journals of the surveyors also give us an understanding of how sparsely

settled the rural Keys were in the 1850s. In 1849-1850, surveyors reported settlements of “one or a few families” on Boca Chica (Henry Geiger on Geiger Key), Sugarloaf Key (Happy Jack’s plantation), Summerland Key (two families), West Summerland Key, Key Vacas (twenty houses along the beach at the western end), Indian Key (six or seven houses), and an abandoned plantation and empty house on Key Largo. In 1854, a surveyor reported a single house and small plantation on Big Coppitt Key, and another surveyor wrote “just before I left Spanish Key [Bahia Honda], a man had established himself there and seemed to be satisfied he could obtain a comfortable subsistence from the soil” Another report in 1855 noted a settlement on the eastern point of Lower Matecumbe “where good water may be procured.”

A rough estimate indicates that there were less than 100 pioneers living on the Keys outside of Key West in the 1850s. They were growing sweet potatoes, pineapples, tamarind trees, lemons, oranges, and pomegranates. One of the settlers on Boca Chica was growing Manila hemp, to be used in making rope. What they did not need for themselves, they sold at the market in Key West.

For some reason, final measurement of the Key Biscayne baseline was not accomplished until 1855. A large party assembled there in March and work began to clear the baseline which was completely overgrown. Superintendent Bache decided to supervise this vital measurement personally. With his wife, he arrived by steamer on April 2 and went ashore to a camp set up on the island. There were now five vessels, forty men, and one woman assembled at Key Biscayne. Instead of chain, the measuring equipment consisted of metal tubes, six meters

in length, tipped with agate at each end to avoid wear. Periodically, the tubes were checked against a standard tube kept in a padded box. When the baseline had been cleared to a width of sixteen feet, the measurement process began. The tubes, mounted on trestles, were moved along the baseline by a team of thirteen men. The last tube in line would be moved forward very carefully and butted against the leading tube. Surveyors checked the positions of the tubes with levels and recorded temperatures at each movement. The measurement, completed on April 18, showed that the baseline was 3.597 miles in length. Later, Lt. Totten re-measured the angles from the new baseline to the marker on the mainland shore. The party then moved to Cape Sable to clear and measure a baseline there.

Surveyors did not complete their work until just before the start of the Civil War. But as the work progressed, the Coast Survey issued preliminary charts of the Keys and the reef. At the same time, contractors erected three new lighthouses on the reef: Carysfort Reef (1852), Sand Key (replacing the lightship, 1853), and Sombrero Key (1858). Despite the new lights and the more accurate charts, the number of wrecks did not significantly decrease. Part of this was considered due to the increase in the number of ships passing along the reef. Another reason was expressed by the commanding officer of the USS *Pensacola*, during a stopover in Key West. In his opinion, “The recent accurate surveys of the Florida Reefs by the Government of the U. States are not thought to diminish the number of wrecks as was apprehended at first, and, if the majority of the wrecks are intentional, the most accurate charts would only increase the

number by shewing [sic] the rogues just where they should make for the shore.”

The report of the Superintendent of the Coast Survey for 1857 stated “The triangulation of the Florida Reefs and Keys has been rendered continuous this season from Virginia Key to the Marquesas. . . . Two more seasons will close the topography of the Keys. Two or three seasons of continuous effort will complete the hydrography of this, the most dangerous part of the coast”

SOURCES:

Gerdes, Francis H., Assistant, U. S. Coast Survey. “Sec. VI, U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, A.D. Bache, Supt.: An Interesting Journal by F. H. Gerdes on Florida Reefs, 1848-9, Reconnaissance in Sec. VI.” Record Group 23, National Archives.

Gerdes,”Second Season – Vol. III, Third Season, Journal and notes relative to the Reconnaissance and Measurement of a base line in Sect VI of the U.S. Coast Survey.”

Reports of the Superintendent of the U.S. Coast Survey, 1849, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854, 1855, 1856, 1857, 1858, 1859. Record Group 23, National Archives.

Letters from Coast Survey Assistants to Superintendent of U.S. Coast Survey relative to survey in Sect. VI. Record Group 23, National Archives

John Viele has been a member of the Board of Directors of the Key West Maritime Historical Society of the Florida Keys for the past 20 years. He is the author of three books on the history of the Keys published by Pineapple Press of Sarasota: “The Florida Keys – A History of the Pioneers,” “The Florida Keys, Vol. 2 – True Stories of the Perilous Straits,” and “The Florida Keys, Vol.3 –The Wreckers.”

(Night from page 1)

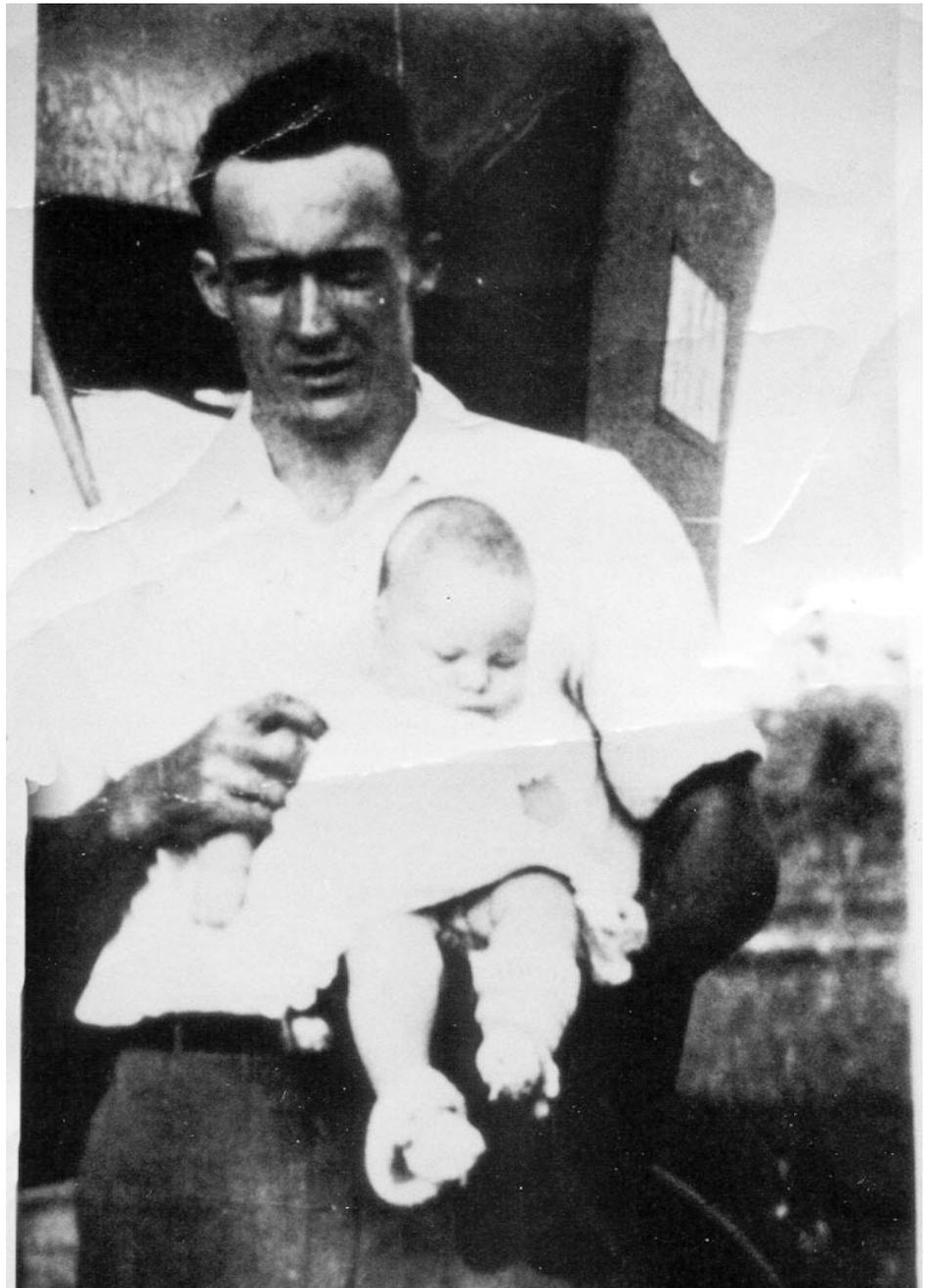
ran the kitchen at the Caribee Colony, a tourist camp at the west end of Upper Matecumbe. When other work was slow, Eddie helped Mozelle in the kitchen and did maintenance at the tourist camp.

As hard as they worked, they were still only able to scrape by. They didn't have the money to go on trips to the mainland. Once in a while some of their relatives would come down to the Keys and bring oranges and other treats. These were especially enjoyable occasions for the Williams children when their cousins came to visit.

The week before Labor Day, Mozelle's brother, Dan Law, and his wife and two children (a boy 11 years old and a girl age 6) had come down from Tampa. The small cottage perched alongside the railroad track on the narrow marl fill was as full of people as it was good times.

Monday, September 2nd was the last day of summer vacation; the public schools were scheduled to open the next day. The morning began much like the previous days with bright sunshine, but by mid morning clouds began to gather. What happened next is described by Mozelle in a narrative written a week later.

She and the five children had just been evacuated from the devastated Florida Keys. Because the bridges and fills between some of the islands had been washed away, they had been stranded for three days among the wreckage and bodies before being reached by rescue workers and taken by seaplane to Coconut Grove on the mainland. They went to stay with Eddie's parents in Miami. After a few days, perhaps with the idea that the exercise would release pent-up stress, her mother-in-law suggested



Eddie Williams holds his first-born daughter, Elizabeth, in 1926. Photo credit: Williams Family Collection.

that Mozelle put her experiences down on paper.

With only a sixth grade education, writing was difficult for Mozelle under the best of circumstances, but she was still recovering from the effects of exposure to rain, wind, and then a blistering hot sun without adequate shelter, food, and water. She was also dealing with the grief of having her husband die beside her, and with the realization that she and her three children were facing an uncertain future now that what

little the family owned was gone. Valiantly, the 30 year-old woman picked up a pen and, struggling to find the right words, began to write. For five handwritten pages Mozelle Williams relived the nightmare so that her children would have a record of what the family had endured and how their father died. Considering the situation, it is remarkable that she was able to write as coherently as she did.

The handwritten document is

difficult to read so the following literal transcription was prepared. No changes have been made to spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Each line contains the words that appear on the corresponding line of the original document. Much of the spelling is phonetic with words written as the writer would pronounce them. Consequently, "her" was written as "hir", "any" appears as "eny", "being" as "bing", "either" as "ethir", "debris" as "dirbs", and so forth. The daughters of Mozelle Williams have verified the accuracy of the transcription. Words in italics have been added for navigational purposes.

Page One

Labor day.

Night of Harrow.

It was on Labor day evening that the typhoon struck Matacumba Key, hitting hardest on upper Matacumba. And no one new that it was going to be so horrible. every weather report give no warning of how hard it was. if only one report would have gave the truth it would have saved hundred's of lives. And hart ache's. & vacant chair's.

Never did my husband and I realize that it was going to be eny weather till about 4. p.m. We had been to get some grocerys and we meet Capt Ed Shearron at Isalamorada station and him bing a real friend of my husband. gave us warning to leave our home whitch We had just compleated on Whale harbir fill. and lived only five months. he said Eddie If I was you I'd get my family away from the fill. so then We went to a little house that was well built and strong braced in every way that a brace could fit, and my Bro Dan Law & wife & 2 children was visiting us. so we made coffee & Sand

over

Page Two

Witches and was Laughing &

Labor day. 1935
Night of Harrow.

It was on Labor day evening that the typhoon struck matacumba key, hitting hardest on upper matacumba. And no one new that it was going to be so ~~horrible~~ horrible. every weather report ~~give~~ give no warning of how hard it was. if only one report would have gave the truth it would have saved hundred's of lives. and hart ache's. + vacant chair's never did ~~my~~ my husband and I realize that it was going to be eny weather till about 4. p.m. we had been to get some grocerys and we meet capt Ed Shearron. at Isalamorada station and him bing a real friend of my husband. gave us warning to leave our home whitch we had just compleated on whale harbor fill. and lived only ~~five~~ five months. ~~he~~ he said Eddie If I was you I'd get my family away from the fill so then we went to a little house that was well built and strong braced in every way that a brace could fit. and my Bro Dan Law. + wife & 2 children was visiting us. so we made coffee + Sand (over)

Image of the first page of Mozelle Williams' narrative. Photo credit: Scanned by the Author from Williams Family Collection.

twalking. then about Seven oclock the wind began to get harder with rain. And my husband went out and turn the car back to the wind

When he come back in, he said if the house starts to go, lets get in the car. And it seem only a few seconds when it seem like it just collapsed. And we all Made it to the car. he carried 2 of the childrin at the time.

and when my bro & wife started the Wind picked them up and I thought they was gone and I put my arms around them and sit down with them and my 18 month old baby. And by the time we all got in the car the water began to come up, and we started to get out and the water was up to my waist as I stepped out of the
(Continued on page 12)

(Night from page 11)

car and my nine year old girl blew out of my reach, and hir dad made a jump and caught hir drug us all in the car a gain. and, he said here is help come for us, as he saw a light of a distance from us and he got out and tried to make it but he was struck with a heavy timber in the stomach and a heavy lick over the left eye. he just did make it in the car when the watercovered the car. and washed my bro & his 10 year old son out and I just knew

Page Three

they was gone. but he strapped his Son to him with his belt, and was gone for hours it seeams. then the boy call his mother and asked if she was there, and what a relief. Then my husband said to me baby I got a bad pain in my stomach, and ask me to rub it so with my baby in my right arm and my two daughters and niece in my lap I taken my left arm and rubed his stomach. My sisterinLaw, she was rubing him all the time then he reached back with his right hand and caught my left and call me. I sit it seeamed for hours and he begain to turn cold I felt his hart and pulse and I realized what had happen and all I could do was to pray and thank god he heard my prairs. I didn't want the girls to realize what had happen and the one ten years of age, she kept saying Oh Mama I think my dady is dead for he is so cold. and she covered him up and kept calling him. And all this happen early in the night and I sit there all night with him in one arm and Baby in the other

(Over)

Page Four

and the children on my lap till day began to come and Elizabeth kept pulling & pushing the dirbs away from the back window of the car and she got out but god knows I don't see how she did it and she started for help and she was so dazed till my bro that was washed out crawled out of the dirbs and sit hir and his boy down. and he went



Mozelle Williams with her son Bob in the spring of 1935. Photo credit: Williams Family Collection.

for help. and two men come and got all out but my self and they left and went for an ax to cut the top of the car out. and only (god) knows what I went thro and to haft to leave my dear one there. so cold. and it stormed all day tuesday. late Tuesday evening 2 plains tried to reach us but it was still storming. and no aid came till Wednesday morning. And I had to leave my brother and his wife to come first aid and I began to walk from Matacumba to snake creek with those five children. And to Whale harbir we was put in a small boat with some man that was drunk or ethir couldent handle the boat. he

got us in the current and we went adrift in the current. if it hadent of been for a

Page Five

Negro man that had escaped death in the storm I think that we all would have cap sized, but he taken the orr and screamed to the man on the stearn to shut the motor off and use the orr, and the Negro worked us out of the current and then rowed us into the mango till another boat picked us up, and taken us across and then it was a young cap. help me to get the children to a plain at snake creek.

And then the Red Cross taken its

steps to provide for us as they put up a perfect job. I haven't wanted for anything or my three children since they got to us. and my Bro & his Wife & two children was cared for. they haven't wanted for anything that the red cross could not give them. And Thank to them for their sympathy & Perfect Service.

End of Transcription

Mozelle, her sister-in-law, and the five children miraculously came through the storm and evacuation with only scratches and bruises. Her brother, Dan Law, had been trapped outside the car with his son during the most intense part of the storm; they survived by using their belts to strap their bodies to a coconut tree. Dan suffered a scalp wound that became infected, and was taken to a hospital in Miami where he was treated and recovered.

When Eddie Williams thought he saw lights off in the distance and left the safety of the car to go get help, he exposed himself to a veritable fusillade of debris including rocks, branches, coconuts, and timbers. The thirty-five year old man received hard blows to the forehead and stomach before he returned to the automobile. Medical authorities say it is likely that he had a major blood vessel ruptured that caused internal bleeding. The pressure of blood accumulating in the body cavity could produce the discomfort/aches Eddie complained of before he fell silent and died. By the time burial teams reached the site, his body was badly decomposed and had to be cremated in the wrecked car. The remains were later removed and given a proper burial. He was one of over 400 people on the Keys who died as a result of the hurricane.

Mozelle and her children moved to Tampa and began their lives anew. Her poignant, first-hand account reinforces the contention that the general populace of the Upper Keys



On the Whale Harbor Fill at the north end of Upper Matecumbe Key, Evelyn (left) and Elizabeth Williams help their brother Bob as they get ready to go to Sunday School. This picture was taken in 1935 several months before the hurricane struck. Photo credit: Williams Family Collection.

was not aware they were in harm's way of such a powerful hurricane until it was too late to leave.

This article is dedicated to the memory of Mozelle and Eddie Williams, and to their son, Robert Edward Williams, who recently passed away. The author is grateful to the Williams family for their willingness to share their experiences and family photographs, and especially for allowing the publication of their

mother's letter.

Thomas Neil Knowles is a retired college administrator who was born and raised in Key West. Some of his relatives, Norman Benson and his wife, were victims of the 1935 Labor Day hurricane. He began researching the hurricane over 10 years ago, and has interviewed survivors and their families as well as the families of victims. He is in the process of documenting this research in a book.

Hackley's Diary

William Hackley practiced law in Key West from 1829 to 1857. He kept a diary for part of the time he was in Key West. Here is the diary for September and October 1855.

Saturday, September 22. Rose at 4:35 and walked round by the duck ponds and the Army Barracks. Took a shower bath the well having dead mice in it and smells bad. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.51, thermometer 85.5, wind east southeast 1, clouds 3. Read papers. P.M. Siesta.

Sunday, September 23. Rose at 4:35 and walked on the beach but the tide was so high that I left the beach at the big log and went inside and back home by the Lighthouse. Returned home and bathed. At 8:30 A.M. barometer 29.50, thermometer 86, wind east by south 1, clouds 3. Dined at Alexander Patterson's. Read papers. Several rain squalls passed over the Island.

Monday, September 24. Rose at 4:30 and walked on the beach. Returned and bathed. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.53, thermometer 86, wind east by south 2, clouds 3. Paid John Conde for candles, butter and ham \$1.35. Paid Kate's wages to William Randolph \$8.00 and house experiences sundries \$1.00. Read papers and Law magazine.

Tuesday, September 25. Rose at 4:30 and walked on the beach. Returned and bathed. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.54, thermometer 85, wind east by north 2, clouds 4. It rained nearly all night. The **Vanderbilt** came in about 12. She started with a quantity of freight but had to go back and discharged the freight. The ship is prohibited by its size from carrying freight and passengers. I got a Bill of Lading from Moreno Brothers for a barrel of flour and a box of star candles. Flour is \$8.25. Quite reasonable after the exorbitant price we have

been paying the last year. The steamer **Star of the West** got in at 4 P.M. and got off before 7. Several deaths onboard on the passage.

Wednesday, September 26. Rose at 4:30 and walked on the beach. Returned and bathed. At 8:40 A.M. barometer 29.49, thermometer 89, wind east northeast 2, clouds 3. A very heavy rain in the night. Hatty sold her young guinea pigs to the Californians for \$2.50. John P. Smith gave me a barrel of Irish potatoes, he had a quarter of Mutton tied out which spoiled. The disease on board the steamer **Star of the West** was cholera. There was three deaths and several sick about 150 of the passengers stopped here there was 600 in all. At 3 P.M. barometer 29.42.5, thermometer 88.5, wind northeast 6, clouds 8.

Thursday, September 27. Rose at 4:10 and walked on the beach. Returned and bathed. At 9:45 A.M. barometer 29.45, thermometer 88, wind east by north 2, clouds 3. The **Vanderbilt** got off about sunrise. The mail from Charleston got in about 3 P.M.. I got a letter from the Solicitor of the Treasury about the money Wills promised me to pay without service and which it seems he has not done. Read papers.

Friday, September 28. Rose at 4:30 and walked on the beach. Returned and bathed. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.47.5, thermometer 84, wind calm, clouds 3. I got papers from the post office and read them. Diner at Alexander Patterson's where Matilda and the children were spending the day. The steamer **Lavana**, one of the Texas Line, passed through about 3 P.M. with out stopping.

Saturday, September 29. Rose at 4:30 and walked on the beach. Returned and bathed. At 8:20 A.M. barometer 29.53, thermometer 85,

wind southwest 1, clouds 5. As I returned home near the Lighthouse Pont I saw five teal in a little hole of water near the beach and as they did not fly I went home and got my gun and returned finding them in the same place and firing killed 4 with the first barrel and the remaining one with the other barrel. Walked round by Gomey's and Lighthouse Ponds home but saw no other game. The brig **Huntress** sold by the Marshal yesterday evening for about \$1,000.00. Had the piles so bad that I did not go down this afternoon. Read papers.

Sunday, September 30. Kept wet clothes to my piles all night and they are better this morning but still very painful. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.55, thermometer 86, wind southwest 2, clouds 3. Went home by 11 and remained all day reading papers.

Monday, October 1 To sore to walk, bathed. At 9 A.M. barometer 29.50.5, thermometer 86, wind northwest 1, clouds 3. The ice gave out today and the weather being hot the water is distasteful without it. Read papers.

Tuesday, October 2. Rose at 4:45 and went to the market. Returned and bathed. At 8:45 A.M. barometer 29.45, thermometer 86, wind west

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southwest 2, clouds 3 cumuli in the northwest. There was an election yesterday for local officers at which I did no vote. The Key Wester had a ticket which was badly beat. The Foreign element here is to strong for them and always will be as out of a population of near 2,000 white not 200 male and female are native born Americans. Read papers At 4 P.M. barometer 29.40, thermometer 86, wind southwest 5, clouds 6.

Wednesday, October 3. Rose at 4:30 and went to the market got some fish. Returned and bathed. At 8:15 A.M. barometer 29.40, thermometer 85, wind northwest 3, clouds 2. The piles will not stay up and are very sore. Bathed in the tub yesterday three times and took one siting. Kept a piece of cotton with ointment on the parts and put some more Mustang Liniment on it at night. Read Law magazine. P.M. Read Putnam's magazine. At 4 P.M. barometer 29.37, thermometer 85.5, wind north northeast 3, clouds 4.

Thursday, October 4. Rose at 5:15 and bathed. At 8 A.M. barometer 29.47, thermometer 82, wind northeast 1, clouds 2. Quite cool last night. Thermometer at home at 6 A.M. 75 in the bedroom. The brig **War Eagle** arrived from New York by 8 A.M. Received of J.B. Browne my fee in the case of the bark **Rainbow**, \$36.62, also my fee in the case of the brig **Huntress** \$48.41 and of Tift \$5.00 for survey of Quano. Paid several bills. P.M. Siesta and read Putnam's magazine.

Friday, October 5. Rose about 5 and bathed. At 8:45 A.M. barometer 29.52, thermometer 88, wind south southeast 1, clouds 4. A heavy rain fell during the night. Read papers and Law magazine. P.M. Siesta. Dined at Alexander Patterson's where Matilda was spending the day.

Saturday, October 6. Rose at 4:30 and went to the Market. At 8:30 A.M. barometer 29.57.5, thermometer 86, wind southeast 3, clouds 2. Got ½ barrel of Graham flour up to the house. The **Haywood** got in last night and went out about 10. Read papers and Law magazine. P.M. Siesta and Household Words. Sun very hot and nearly calm.

Sunday, October 7. Rose about 5 and bathed. At 9:15 A.M. barometer 29.57, thermometer 87.5, wind south southwest 1, clouds 3. The schooner **Florida** got in about 9 A.M. The steamer **Isabel** did not make her appearance last night as expected. Read a Picayne of the 28th. At home all day. Babe not very well having had fever last night. This day I completed my forty ninth year in good health.

Monday, October 8. Rose at 4:20 and went to the market and walked up to the Army Barracks and found so much water fell in the shower of last night that the road is too wet to walk further. At 8:40 A.M. barometer 29.53, thermometer 87.5, wind north northeast 1, clouds 4. Read Law magazine. The steamer **Isabel** got in about 3 having been detained in New York for two days. George Bowne, E. Hour, Matilda Benner and Mary and Captain Welch came in her. Welch brought my baby carriage. The **Isabel** did not connect at Savannah and brought but a small mail. I got my second quarter salary and Intelligence and nothing else. The Congressional Globe and Appointments came and I took a copy.

Tuesday, October 9. Rose at 5 and walked round by the beach and Simonton Road. Returned and bathed. At 8:35 A.M. barometer 29.52.5, thermometer 85, wind northeast 4, clouds 6. Rain during the night. The steamer **Northern Light** came in during the night and coaled and got off about 8.

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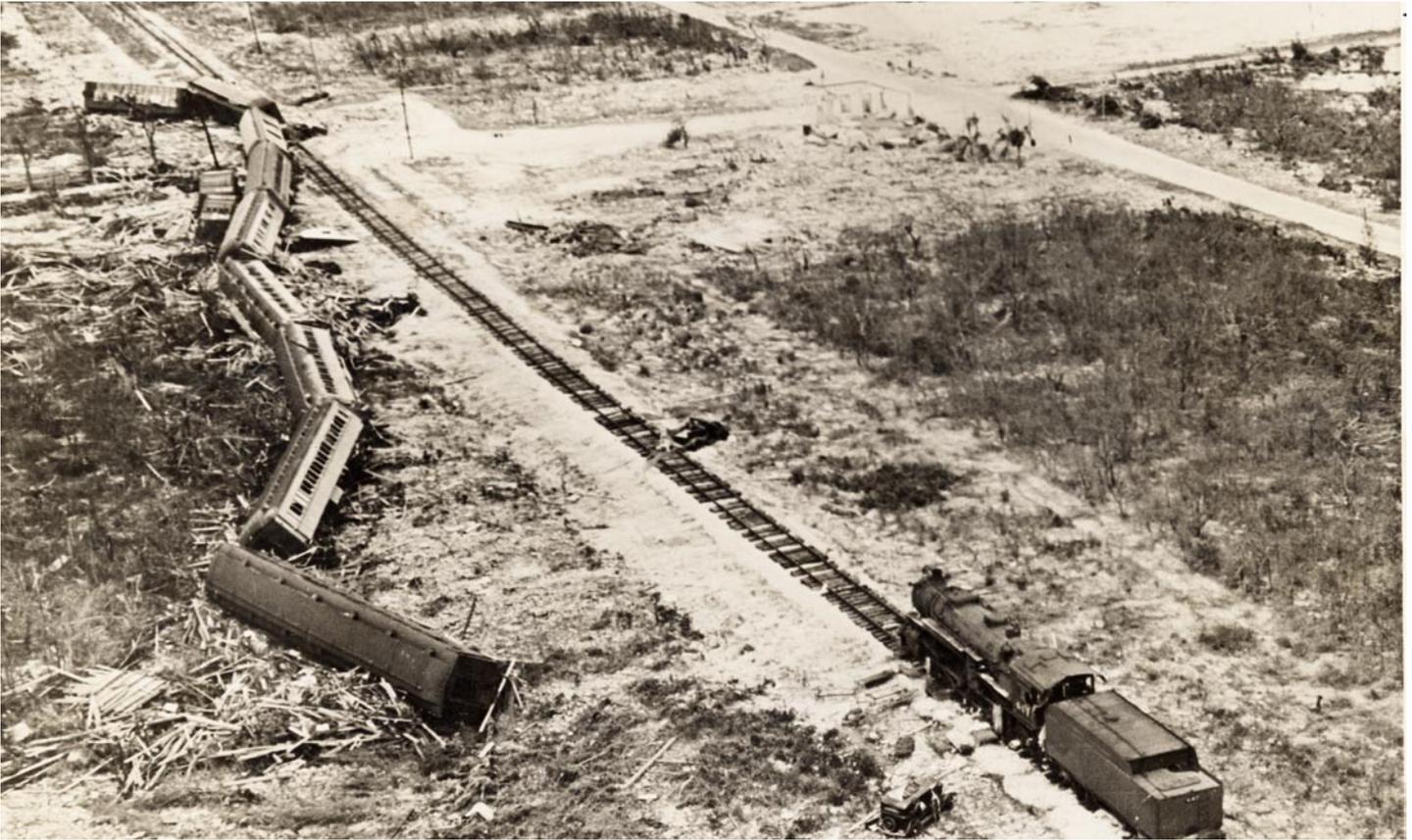
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*The wreck of the train sent in the failed effort to save the veterans on the Keys during the Labor Day Hurricane of 1935.
Photo credit: Monroe County Library.*

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