

USS SHARK

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The Crossing at Knights Key and The Island Community of Pigeon Key

By
Thomas Neil Knowles
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"In memory of Edith "Billie" Chesser Hancock (1933-2011) whose memories and family information inspired and enhanced this article."

Smoke from Civil War battlefields had barely cleared when the president of the International Ocean Telegraph Company, General W. F. "Baldy" Smith, dispatched a survey party into the wilds of South Florida. After years of negotiations a forty-year agreement had finally been worked out with the government of Spain, giving the company an exclusive cable landing on the western coast of Cuba. The logical place to cross the Florida Straits was the narrow, 90-mile-wide gap between Key West and Havana. Now the problem was to find the best route to bring the cable from Key West to the mainland of Florida and the IOTC telegraph system at Lake City. For that task Baldy Smith hired a highly respected civil engineer, J. C. Bailey of Toronto.

Bailey was told to explore two promising routes. One would use



Florida in 1866. Photo credit: the Author.

a submarine cable laid from Key West to Punta Rassa, a spit of land at the mouth of the Caloosahatchee River near Fort Myers on the west coast of Florida. From there landlines would carry the signal to Lake City. The competing route would use landlines from Lake City down to Fort Dallas (later known as Miami) then continue across

the chain of islands that formed the eastern rim of the Florida Keys. Water openings between the islands would be crossed by driving steel piles into the submerged bedrock and installing wooden telegraph poles into the ends of the piles that protruded above the high water

(Continued on page 3)

Society News and Notes
by John Viele



Submarine Squadron 12 at U.S. Naval Station about 1970. Photo credit: Monroe County Library.

Tom Hambright Honored

Tom Hambright, Society Board Member, Treasurer, and *Sea Heritage Journal* Editor, was honored by the Monroe County Commission for his 25 years of service as head of the Florida History Room at the Key West Public Library and as Monroe County Historian. He has been of inestimable help to reporters, historians, government officials, genealogists, and many others. Norma Kula, director of the Monroe County Public Library, has said of him, "There's no one who can

replace him He's truly a treasure." Tom said, "I can't imagine doing a job I didn't love, I will keep doing this as long as my brain keeps working and the body holds out. It's still fun."

Truman Waterfront Historical Markers

Ed Little, Society President and John Viele are collaborating on the design, text, and photographs of the first of a series of signs to be installed at the Truman Waterfront. The first sign will tell the history of the Key West U.S Naval Station

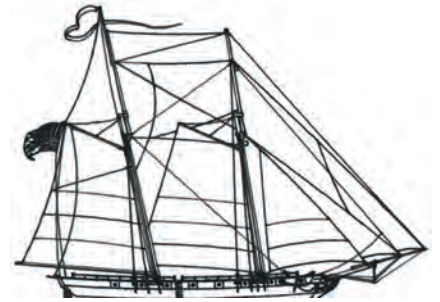
Thank You from the Editor

The Key West Citizen's articles and the community's acknowledgement of my 25 years as Monroe County Historian was humbling and satisfying experience. It was gratifying to have people stop me on the street to express their satisfaction with the service provided by the Monroe County Library and the Florida Room. What I have accomplished would have been impossible without my

wife, Lynda, who worked with for 17 year, Betty Bruce who founded the Florida Room in the 1960s, the support of the Key West Library staff and the tax payers and government of Monroe County who funded and operated the Library system for the past 51 years. Thank you for a great 25 years, I hope to be here for a few more years.

Tom Hambright

New Member
Shirley & L.T. Perpall, Key West.



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Editor: 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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(Pigeon Key from page 1)

mark. Although the Punta Rassa route was selected, the survey of the Keys route had some benefit.

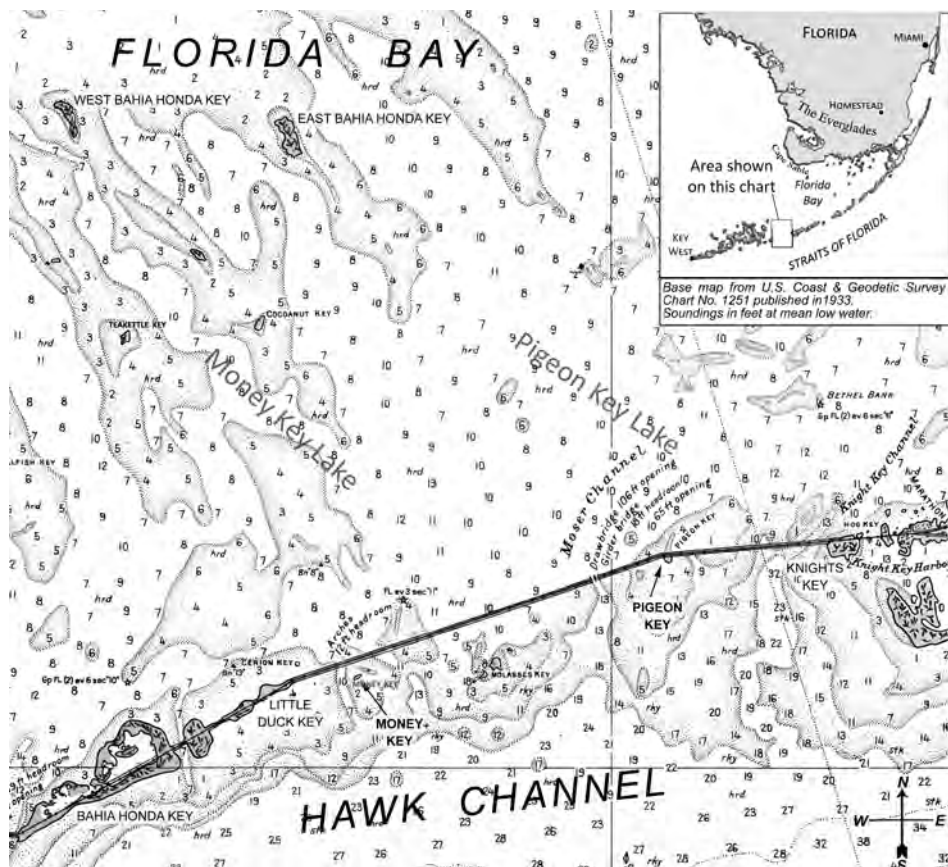
When Bailey conveyed his findings to the company in 1866 he included comments on the feasibility of constructing a rail line to Key West. The coordination of rail traffic required ready access to telegraph service so, this was relevant to his analysis. There had been great interest in providing rail service to Key West, which in 1860 was one of the wealthiest cities per capita in the United States. Bailey's résumé included extensive railroad work and his determination that the project was a viable proposition was welcomed by proponents.

The civil engineer believed construction of the railroad would be straightforward except at several major waterways that carried tidal flows between the Gulf of Mexico and the Straits of Florida. He identified the broad expanse of water between Knights Key and Little Duck Key (now Pacet Key) as the most difficult and expensive to cross.

Located 40 miles east of Key West, the seven-mile-wide water opening feeds a part of Florida Bay that was known to local fishermen and spongers as Money Key Lake and Pigeon Key Lake (see above). They are not lakes in the traditional sense, but are areas of deeper water surrounded by shallow banks or flats.

In the late 1800s Money Key Lake had a typical depth of 9 to 10 feet while Pigeon Key Lake was a little deeper at 11 to 12 feet. Beds of wool, yellow, grass, and glove sponges of superior quality thrived in the lakes and the adjacent Knights Key Channel until over-harvesting depleted them.

The lakes were named after



The Florida East Coast Railway crossing ran between Knights Key and Little Duck Key. Photo credit: the Author.

two small islands situated in the waterway. Money Key's name derived from the rumored discovery of pieces of eight on the island. Pigeon Key is believed to have been named by Spanish explorers who were impressed by the large flocks of white-crowned pigeons they found in the area.

Stretching almost across Florida Bay, the lakes merge at their southern ends into a channel having a breadth of a half mile and an average depth of over 20 feet. Named Moser Channel, it is one of the few passages along the Florida

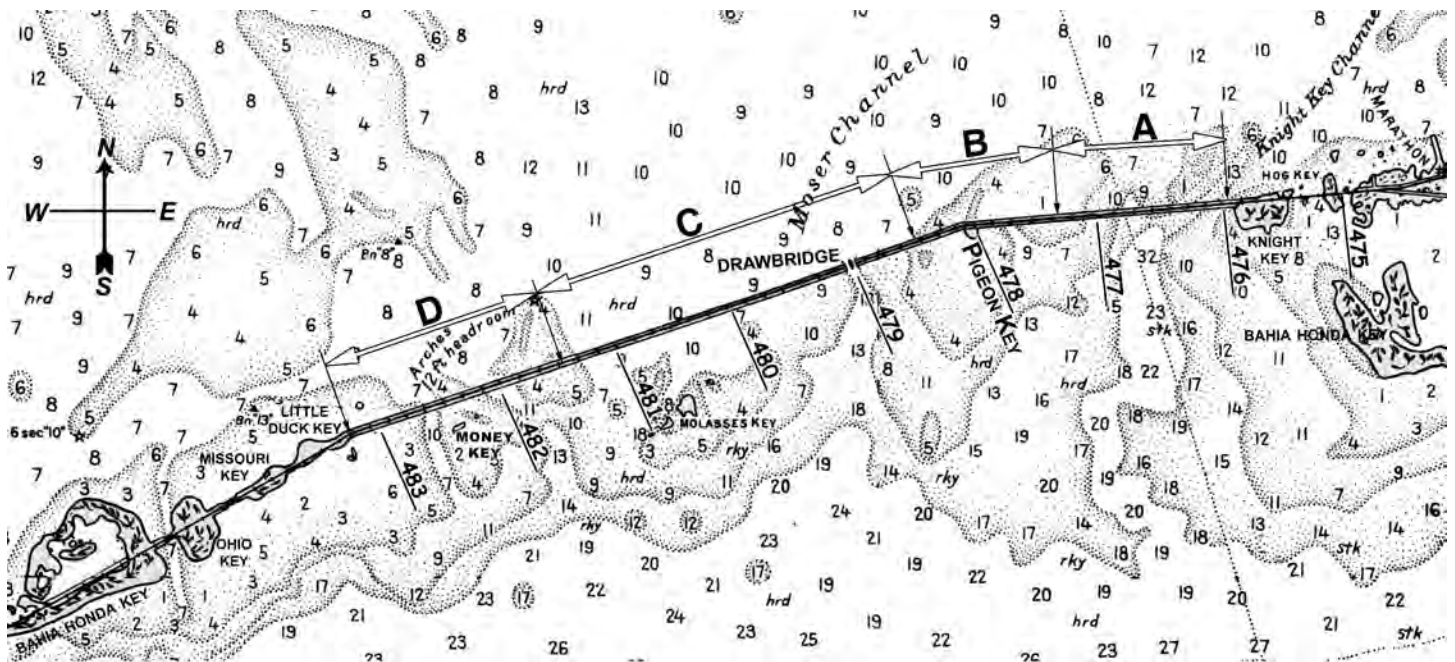
Keys where larger vessels can access Florida Bay from the Florida Straits.

Constructing the Crossing

When Henry Flagler approved the project to extend rail service to Key West in 1904, his Florida East Coast Railway (FECR) terminated two miles southeast of Homestead at Florida City. Construction of the Key West Extension began in 1905. The planned route took the line across 19 miles of the eastern Everglades to Jewfish Creek, a navigable waterway that separates

(Continued on page 4)

The label "Knights Key" has been used on U.S. Coast & Geodetic Survey charts to identify the island immediately west of Hog Key and related water features such as "Knights Key Channel and Knights Key Harbor." Some writers have used the term "Knight's Key." In this article the island and related features are indicated by "Knights Key," the name used in the right-of-way maps and company literature of the Florida East Coast Railway, by historian Jefferson Browne, and by many natives of the Florida Keys.



| Label | Structure | Type | Construction | Length | | Clearance (ft) | |
|-------|--------------------------|-------------------|--|--------|-------|----------------|---------------------|
| | | | | Feet | Miles | Horiz. | Vert. |
| A | Knights Key Bridge | Steel Span | Steel girders 80' long and 8' high | 6,803 | 1.29 | 67 | 15-31 (see text) |
| B | Pigeon Key Bridge | Steel Span | Straightaways: girders 80' long and 8' high. 600' curved section: girders 60' long and 7' high. | 5,935 | 1.12 | | |
| C | Moser Channel Bridge | Steel Span | Steel girders 80' long and 8' high | 13,947 | 2.64 | | |
| | Moser Channel Drawbridge | Swing Drawbridge | Steel Box Truss | 253½ | - | 110 | 23 |
| D | Pacet Channel Viaduct | Concrete Spandrel | 210 concrete arches | 9,035 | 1.71 | | 12 |

Clearances over water. Vertical clearances relative to Mean High Water. Draw horizontal clearance is each side of draw pier; vertical clearance is with draw closed. Viaduct vertical clearance is at peak of arch. On the map the numbers 475-483 indicate FEC Railway milepost locations; i.e., the distance from the Jacksonville station. Sources: FECR ROW Maps, USC&GS Charts, and Pigeon Key HAER Study

The crossing consisted of four major structures. Photo credit: the Author.

(Pigeon Key from 3)

the mainland from the Florida Keys. From there the rails traversed 29 islands and 43 waterways to reach Key West. Water covered 37 miles of the 106 mile route, but extensive fills, particularly in the Upper Keys, reduced the amount of bridging to 17 miles. The waterway between Knights Key and Little Duck Key, the one identified by Bailey as the most difficult and costly to cross, was to account for 41% of the Extension's bridging.

FECR engineers designed the crossing with a 4.8-mile straightaway running from Little Duck Key to the west side of Pigeon Key and another 2.2-mile straightaway running from Knights Key to the east side of Pigeon Key. An elevated, 600-foot section of track curved 12 degrees, 57 minutes

across Pigeon Key to connect the straightaways. The small island provided the firm foundation required to resist the enormous forces that can be exerted when the heavy mass of a train makes a turn.

Construction of the crossing was divided into four segments identified as the Knights Key Bridge, Pigeon Key Bridge, Moser Channel Bridge, and the Pacet Channel Viaduct (see above). Each segment had a distinctive feature. The three bridges consisted of steel girders mounted atop massive concrete piers. The Moser Channel Bridge featured a swing truss drawbridge almost as long as a football field located a mile west of Pigeon Key. The Pigeon Key Bridge had the curved section described above. The Knights Key Bridge had the highest elevation rising to a height of 31 feet at its

eastern end to clear a trestle that ran under it. The viaduct across Pacet Channel was a concrete spandrel structure with graceful arches.

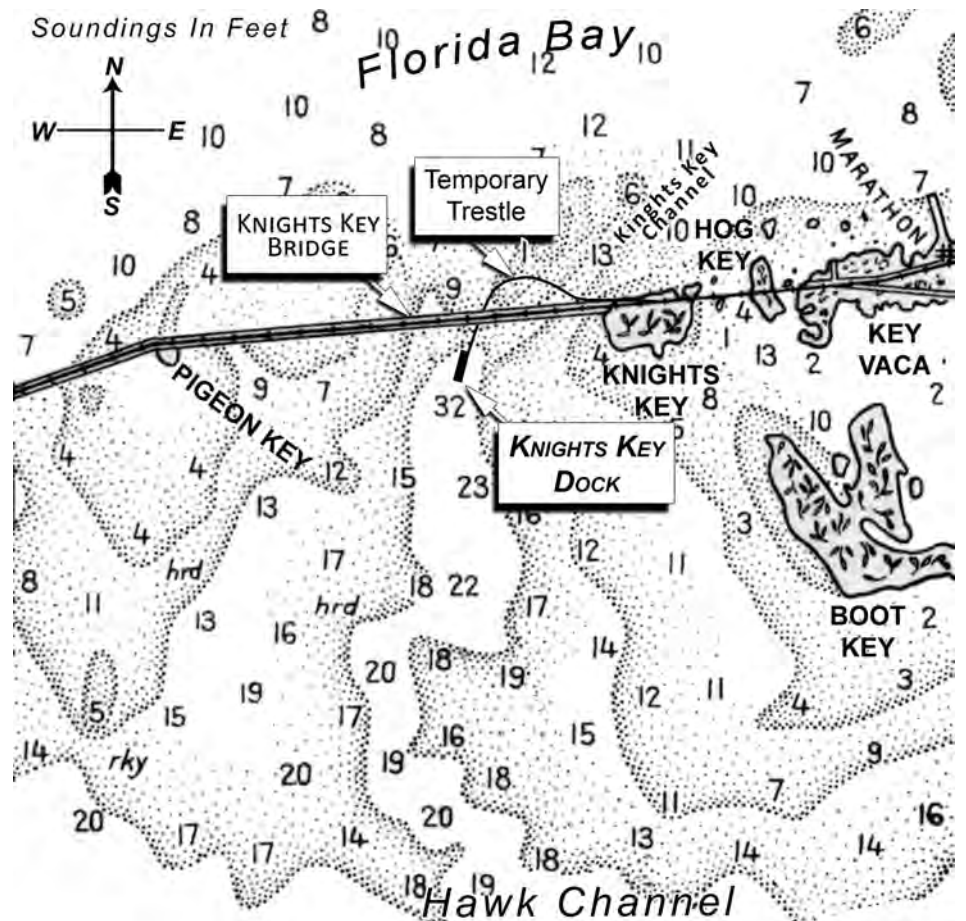
The trestle running under the Knights Key Bridge led to a mammoth, stand-alone wooden dock built by the FECR to serve as a temporary port for ocean-going ships carrying cement, crushed rock, sand, piling, and other construction materials. The transport of large quantities of these materials required the use of deep draft vessels, which required a deep-water port that did not exist in the middle Florida Keys. The dock was constructed during the latter part of 1906 and was operational by the end of the year. Located north of the Sombrero Reef Lighthouse at the tip of a finger of deeper water that intrudes into the banks of Hawk Channel, it was easily accessed from

the Florida Straits. With an average depth over 20 feet the passage was an ideal site for the port (see page 5).

Six hundred feet long and 75 feet wide, the Knights Key dock was equipped with storage bins for crushed stone and screened gravel, and featured a crane that could reach directly into a ship's hold to move material to the storage bins on the dock. The materials were later removed from the bins to shallow-draft barges for distribution to worksites. A customs office, small passenger station, and staff quarters completed the facility. A 2,000 foot temporary trestle connected the dock to Knights Key (right).

In December 1907, 83 miles of track from Homestead to Knights Key became operational. A month later passenger service to Key West and Havana, Cuba via the Peninsular & Occidental Steamship Company was relocated from Miami to the Knights Key Dock, which became the new southern terminus of the FEC Railway. For the next four years the wooden structure served as the transfer station for the railroad's Havana Special.

To house the large number of workers required to build the crossing, camps were erected in 1907 at each end and on the barren patch of land known as Pigeon Key.



Knights Key Dock was located 5 miles due north of the Sombrero Key Lighthouse and the Florida Straits. It provided a deep-water facility where ocean-going ships could unload materials for transfer to shallow-draft barges for delivery to railroad construction sites. Photo credit: the Author.

At peak activity, 400 workmen and the engineering staff were housed on the 5-acre island. As construction on the crossing neared completion, engineers and work crews were moved

from Pigeon Key to other locations; however, the island was not deserted. Bridge tenders, who had become residents when the Moser Channel drawbridge was completed

(Continued on page 6)

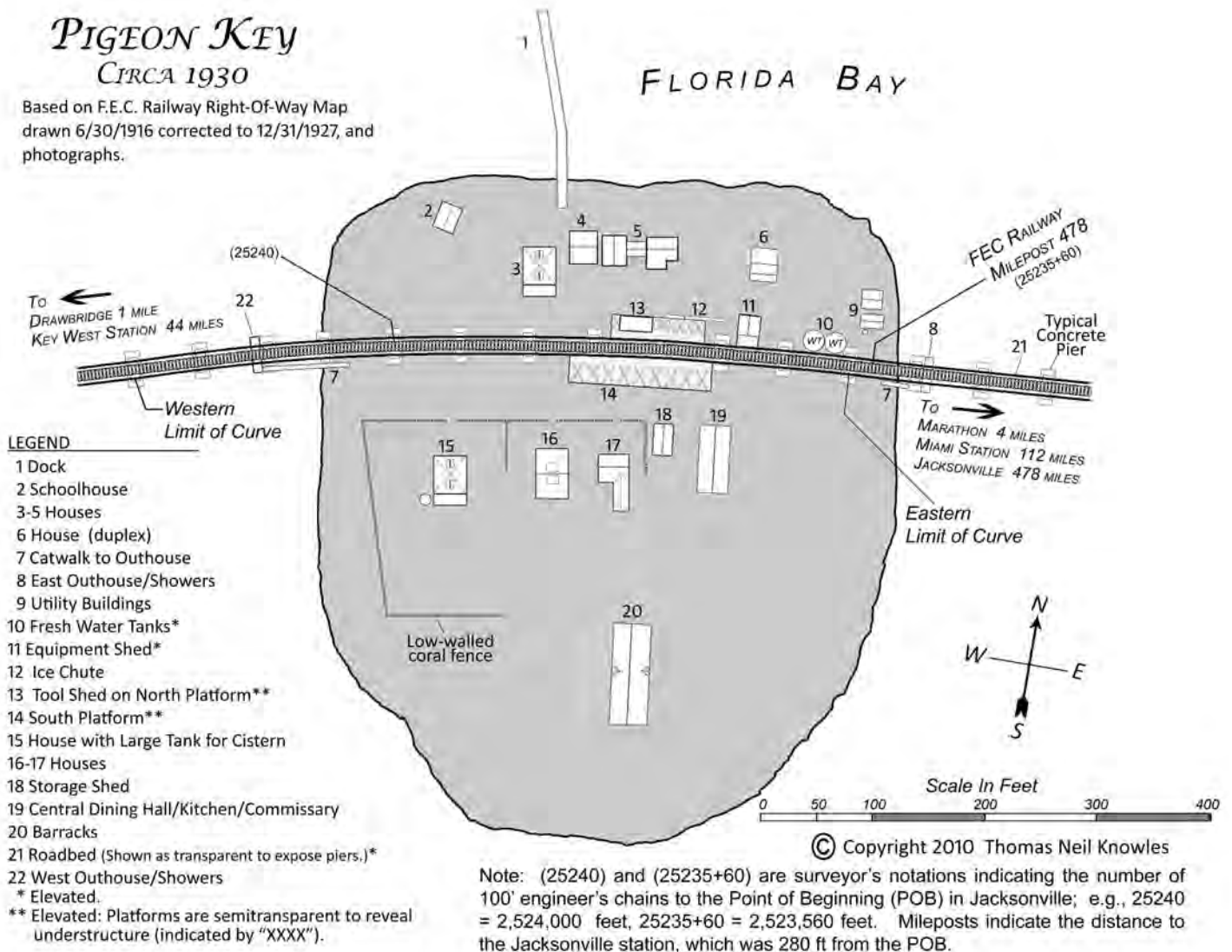


: The Knights Key Dock as seen from the Knights Key Bridge. A free-standing wooden platform the length of two football fields, the dock was connected to Knights Key by a temporary trestle. The Knights Key Bridge, which was built over the trestle, was designed with sufficient clearance to allow trains to continue accessing the dock. Bottom: The trestle emerges on the north side of the Knights Key Bridge and curves around to Knights Key in the distance. Photo credit: State of Florida Photographic Archives.

PIGEON KEY

CIRCA 1930

Based on F.E.C. Railway Right-Of-Way Map drawn 6/30/1916 corrected to 12/31/1927, and photographs.



Pigeon Key evolved during the first three decades of the 20th Century from a deserted island, to a camp that housed four hundred workers, to a community that in 1935 was home for fifty people including nine families with fifteen children. Photo credit: the Author.

(Pigeon Key from page 5)

in January 1911, continued to live there as did maintenance crews that had also been based there during construction.- Maintenance, painting in particular, was never-ending; the girders, drawbridge, and various fittings and equipment contained almost a million square feet of steel surface that would quickly rust if exposed to the salt-laden atmosphere.

In January 1912 the crossing was opened for regular service and the Extension became operational all the way to Key West. Simultaneously, the trestle to the Knights Key dock was closed and the P & O Steamship

Line discontinued service to the facility. Passengers on the FECCR's Havana Special were now transferred to the steamer at Key West, which became the southern terminus of the Florida East Coast Railway. The huge wooden dock in the Knights Key Channel was abandoned and eventually burned to the waterline. Work continued on the Extension until 1916, primarily at Key West and at various locations on the Keys where wooden trestles were replaced with more durable concrete structures.

The Community of Pigeon Key

For years Pigeon Key remained barren of foliage and disfigured

from the abuse it suffered as a construction camp. The island's remoteness was both a blessing and a curse to the bridge tenders and maintenance personnel who lived there. Mosquitoes were not a problem because of the distance from breeding grounds on larger keys, but the remoteness from other settlements meant that opportunities for the residents to get away from the workplace and socialize with other people were few and far between.

The railroad delivered books and newspapers, but there was little available in the way of recreational activities and other diversions

on the island. The situation was especially hard on men away from their families and turnover became a problem, particularly among the skilled positions. The FECR began encouraging employees with families to bring them to the island and homes were built. Pigeon Key gradually took on the domesticated look of a community with coral rock fences demarcating residences (see page 6). Trees and small gardens were planted and abandoned structures were recycled or demolished.

By 1922 there were 19 children of school age living on the island. Train schedules did not permit daily commuting to schools on the Keys so the Pigeon Key families pushed for the establishment of one on the island. An agreement was worked out between the FECR and the Monroe County School Board, and in January 1923 the County provided a teacher and the railroad provided the facilities for the school.

The immediate problem faced by the first school teacher, Miss Eloise Curtis, was the lack of furniture and equipment. As an incentive for the FECR to allow the school, the residents volunteered to build the necessary desks, benches, and blackboards if the company would provide the materials. The company shipped the \$35 worth of materials promptly, but the furniture did not get built. Miss Curtis complained to the FECR management. She received a letter dated May 7, 1923 from the Engineer of the Way stating that Robert Kyle and John Chesser, resident employees, were capable of constructing the benches and desks, and that he was sure they would do so if shown the letter. R. T. Kyle had overseen the assembly of the mechanism that rotates the swing drawbridge and was the first designated bridge tender. One of



Top: Teacher Edith Carnom and her students stand outside the Pigeon Key schoolhouse on December 22, 1926. Edna Louise Hines, age 12, is on her teacher's right. Her sister, Esther Hines, is third from the right. Photo credit: State of Florida Photographic Archives.

Bottom: A close up view of the teacher and her class taken on the same day. Edna Hines is standing at the rear on the left. Her sister Esther is standing at the extreme right. Photo credit: Edith Chesser Hancock.

the senior employees on Pigeon Key, he and his family lived on Pigeon Key until he died in 1926. Apparently the letter had the desired effect and the furnishings were built for the school.

The school was initially housed in a patched-up building left over

from the construction era. In the mid 1920s Calhoun Hines, who was staying with his son's family, built a one-room schoolhouse at the northwest corner of the island next to the dock. Painted red and topped with a surplus locomotive (Continued on page 8)



Edna Hines Chesser and her daughter, Edith Lucretia Chesser circa 1935 at Pigeon Key. Photo credit: Edith Chesser Hancock.

(Pigeon Key from page 7)

bell and towering flagstaff, the little wood frame building was used as a place of learning for almost ten years. A photograph of the school taken in 1926 shows the teacher, Edith Carnom, posing with eight students including two of Hines' granddaughters, Edna and Esther Hines. (See Page 7)

During the Great Depression, other than the isolation, the residents of the Pigeon Key had a relatively good situation. Housing, provisions, potable water, and even ice were supplied by the railroad. A generator provided electricity for the island. Occasionally some of the men would take the workboat out and bring back nice catches of fish. Homeless people sometimes showed up on the island getting there by stowing away on a train or hiking across the bridge. They were fed and sent on their way.

The State of Florida census taken in the spring of 1935 provides a snapshot of the community that evolved. At that time a total of 50 people were recorded as residents. Of these, 24 men and one woman

were listed as FECR employees. Nine families lived on the islands with a total of 15 children and one dependent adult. Fifteen employees, all laborers, were unaccompanied. The census recognized two racial categories; "White" and "Colored". Of the residents, 19 were classified as White while 31 were classified as Colored. (see page 14)

The oldest resident of the island was 61-year-old Lucy Lueders, the dependent sister of the paint foreman. Six-month-old John Vernon Chesser, the foreman's son, was the youngest.

His father, John Edgar Chesser, was an interesting fellow who was born and raised in Georgia on an island in the Okefenokee Swamp near the Florida state line. His grandparents had settled there in the 1840s. Living off the land and water, the family had minimal contact with the outside world and thrived on the 596 acre island that bears their name. When John Edgar left Chesser Island to work for the railroad he was well adapted to



Raleigh and Tina Hines. Their daughter Edna married 41-year-old John Chesser in 1928 when she was 14. Right: John Edgar Chesser with his dog on the east side of Pigeon Key circa 1923. Photo credit: Edith Chesser Hancock.

| AGE BY RACE AND SEX OF ALL PIGEON KEY RESIDENTS IN 1935 | | | |
|---|------|--------|-------|
| Race/Age Group | Male | Female | Total |
| WHITE | | | |
| Adult: 18 or older | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| Child: 14 to 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6 to 13 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Less than 6 yrs | 2 | 3 | 5 |
| Total White | 9 | 10 | 19 |
| COLORED | | | |
| Adult: 18 or older | 19 | 5 | 24 |
| Child: 14 to 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 6 to 13 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Less than 6 Yrs | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Total Colored | 24 | 7 | 31 |
| All Residents | 33 | 17 | 50 |

| OCCUPATIONS BY RACE AND SEX OF ALL RESIDENT EMPLOYEES IN 1935 | | | |
|---|------|--------|------|
| Occupation | Male | Female | Race |
| Bridge Tender | 3 | | W |
| Ass't Railroad Foreman | 1 | | W |
| Track Foreman | 1 | | W |
| Painter Foreman | 1 | | W |
| Painter | 1 | | C |
| Chef | 1 | | C |
| Laborer | 16 | 1 | C |
| All Employees | 24 | 1 | |

Source: 1935 State of Florida Census

Summary of selected census data.

living in an isolated community. He was assigned to the Knights Key Bridge project and lived in the work camp on Pigeon Key. He stayed on the island when construction crews moved on working first as a bridge tender then as paint foreman.

Chesser had a rifle and, although



not a sworn law officer, was responsible for keeping order on the island.- In this endeavor he had the assistance of “Big Black Henry,” a laborer with a powerful build (believed to have been Henry Reed from South Carolina).- Every now and again there would be a disturbance in the dormitory housing the unaccompanied laborers. Chesser would rap the butt of his rifle on the side of the building; if that failed to have the desired effect, Big Black Henry was sent in to restore the peace.

On November 25, 1923, someone (believed to have been the male teacher assigned to the school at the time) wrote the general manager of the railroad that “hogs were running wild on Pigeon Key” and complained that the animals interfered with the children trying to use the playground. About 10 days later, Chesser received a letter from the divisional general foreman requesting that he find out

who owned the hogs and whether or not the owner would consider keeping the hogs in a pen. Chesser responded that the hogs were his and he considered it cruel to place them in a pen. He also reported that no one had complained to him about the situation and that the hogs relished eating the sandspurs that were a nuisance to children and adults alike. The hogs were a female and male named Bingum and Bangum

The task of resolving the issue fell to F. W. Humphries, Supervisor of the 4th Division, who visited the island and diligently interviewed several of the resident wives of employees, one of whom was Mrs. Myrtle Chesser. The women said the hogs were not a problem because the children played in their yards, which were surrounded by fences made of coral rocks. Apparently this satisfied management and the hog incident was laid to rest.

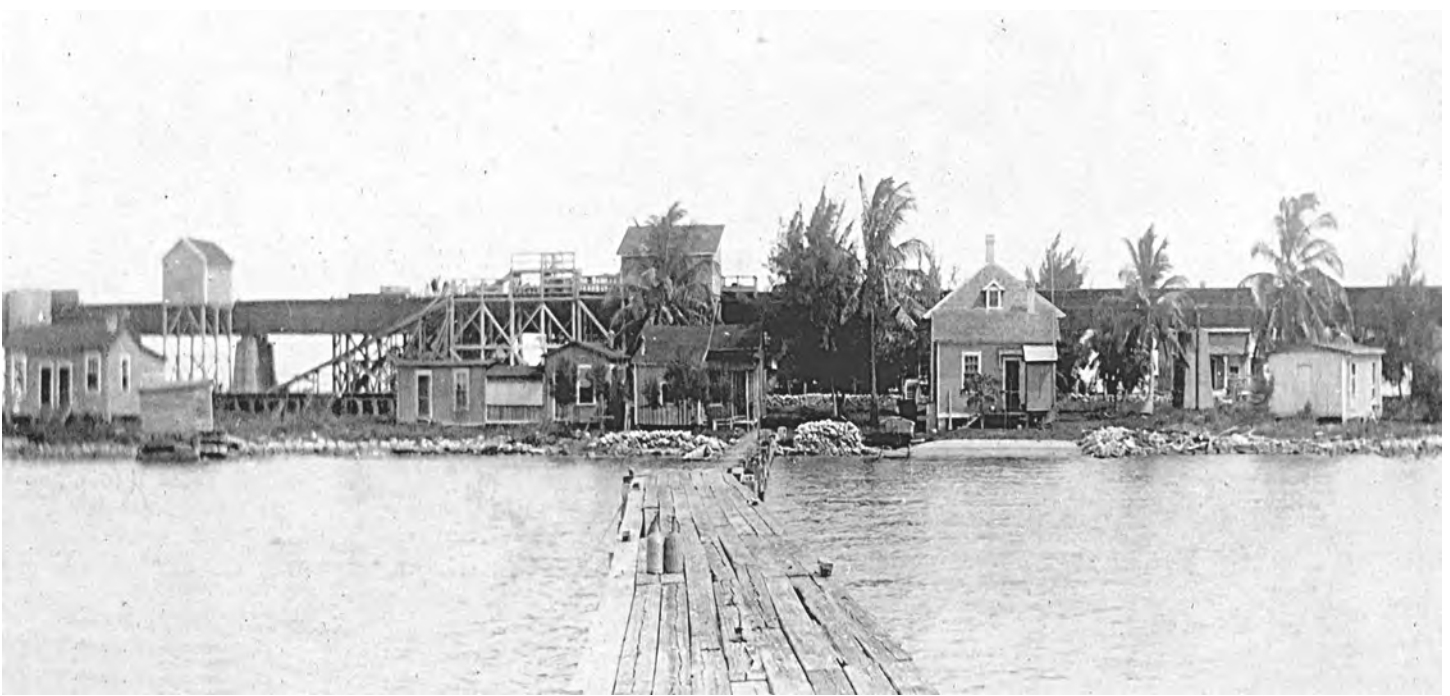
(Continued on page 10)



Raleigh Hines and others often fished in the adjacent waters bringing in catches such as this jewfish (now known as goliath grouper). The elevated cypress tanks in the background held fresh water delivered by train from the mainland. Photo credit: Marshall L. Brewton Jr.



Potable water for Pigeon Key and other FEC Railway installations including the station and yard at Key West was delivered from the mainland in cypress water tanks carried aboard flatcars. At Pigeon Key the water was transferred to elevated tanks located adjacent to the track. The latter were attached to concrete piers so that they hung over the water on the east and west sides of the island. Part of the west outhouse/shower is visible above on the leftmost pier. Photo credit: State of Florida Photographic Archives.



North side of Pigeon Key circa mid 1920s. The tops of the elevated fresh water tanks are visible at the extreme left. A chute for receiving blocks of ice can be seen extending down from the north platform. The Chesser family's home and the schoolhouse are on the right. Photo credit: Publication of Archival Library & Museum Materials.

(Pigeon Key from page 9)

Sometime during the next five years the Chessers terminated their marriage for reasons unknown. In 1928 John Edgar Chesser married Raleigh Hines' fourteen-year-old daughter, Edna Louise Hines. Chesser was twenty-seven years

older than his wife and six years older than his father-in-law.

Edna had two daughters and a son by Chesser, the first in 1930 when she was sixteen. Although the Chessers lived on Pigeon Key, the children were not born in the Florida Keys. It was standard procedure

for the pregnant wife of an FECR employee to take the train to St. Augustine where she gave birth at the company's hospital. Edna was so fond of her teacher, Edith Carnom, that she named her second daughter after her.

Life on the island was what one



The island as viewed looking east from the the Moser Channel Bridge. Coconut trees and Australian Pines were the most common shade trees. At one time a Poinciana tree grew south of the track that was so beautiful when in bloom the train would stop to let the passengers take pictures. Photo credit: Publication of Archival Library & Museum Materials.



In 1937 railroad bridges were modified to make a continuous highway to Key West. Above right: The Pigeon Key Bridge is widened to accommodate two lanes of automotive traffic by placing steel beams across the girders. Left: Entrance to the Knights Key Bridge after modification. Forty miles of rails salvaged from the defunct railroad were used make the guardrails for the bridge between Knights Key and Little Duck Key. Photo credit: State of Florida Photographic Archives.

made of it, and for at least one of the children it was paradise. “Pigeon Key was a wonderful place,” recalled Edna’s sister, Esther Hines Diver, at age 88. “I was 5 years old when I went there and I was 17 when I left. I lived, you might say, my whole childhood was there on that four acre island. I had my own little boat and I would go fishing. We caught snappers, groupers, yellowtail, grunts, kingfish, mackerel, barracuda. If we decided we wanted to have a fresh fish for breakfast in the morning we’d run out and jump in the boat and run out there, and push out offshore, and in five minutes we’d have fish, come out, clean ‘um and fry ‘um up for breakfast. My mother fried many a fish for our breakfast.”

There was a one-legged pelican that frequented the dock and jumped in the water along with the children when they went swimming. A cow named Naomi roamed the island freely and was normally very docile,

but her temperament was affected by the weather. “Come a northeast wind or nice cool breeze, that old cow would chase me!” said Esther, adding that she was sure Naomi meant no harm and was just having fun. According to Esther, there were “plenty of cats and dogs.” The island also had its share of chicken coops and, of course, the two hogs, Bingham and Bangum, who helped with garbage disposal and sandspur control.

There was no church on the island. Once in a while some folks would come on the Sunday morning train and hold religious services, then leave on the evening train, but this occurred so seldom that it had little effect. As Esther Hines observed, “If you was a heathen when you got there, you left (a heathen).”

From mid June until late in the fall hurricanes kept all resident of the island on their toes. The women held an annual competition

to see who was best at trimming a kerosene hurricane lamp wick so that the flame burned evenly across the wick’s width. The flame judged to have the flattest top was declared the winner.

The End of the Railroad Era

On the evening of September 2, 1935, Labor Day, the center of a category 5 hurricane crossed the Florida Keys 23 miles northeast of Pigeon Key. Edith Chesser, who was two-years-old at the time, was placed on top of the dining room table to keep her out of the rising water. Fortunately the island was on the weak side of the storm and, although the wind and tide combined to cover the Key with several feet of water, there were no significant injuries and no major damage.

The same could not be said for the Upper Keys where hundreds of lives were lost and a 38-mile

(Continued on page 12)

(Pigeon Key from page 11)

section of track from Grassy Key to Tavernier was destroyed. The destruction of track immediately ended the railroad's delivery of provisions, potable water, and other necessities to its facilities along the Extension including Pigeon Key. Several days later when the full extent of the damage became known, nonessential personnel were evacuated to Key West and the island was used as the western base for boats involved in search and rescue operations. Chesser and his family were subsequently relocated to Jupiter, Florida where he became a bridge tender.

The Key West Extension had been in operation for 23 years when the storm struck and had never been a financial success. The invention and rapid deployment of shipboard refrigeration soon after the line became operational erased the attractiveness of Key West as a transshipment point for perishable cargoes from Central America and the Caribbean. The lucrative freight traffic anticipated for the Extension never materialized. Without adequate income to offset steadily rising maintenance costs, the Extension was becoming an increasingly heavy burden on the FECR's bottom line. The Great Depression exacerbated the financial problems that beset the Florida East Coast Railway, and forced the railroad to declare bankruptcy and go into receivership in September 1931.

The destruction of a significant portion of the Extension by natural forces made abandonment of the line politically tolerable and economically fortuitous. Within six weeks after the Labor Day hurricane, the railroad ferry facility at Key West was stripped and the equipment moved to the



At 9 A.M. on March 29, 1938, a ceremony was held on the Pigeon Key Bridge (see inset) to officially open the first continuous highway from the mainland to Key West. The daughter of the Cuban consul in Key West, Ida Rodriguez, was given the honor of cutting the ribbon in recognition of the international significance of the roadway in promoting tourism between the U.S. and Cuba. The ceremony was repeated at Lower Matecumbe Key in the afternoon. Photo credit: State of Florida Photographic Archives.

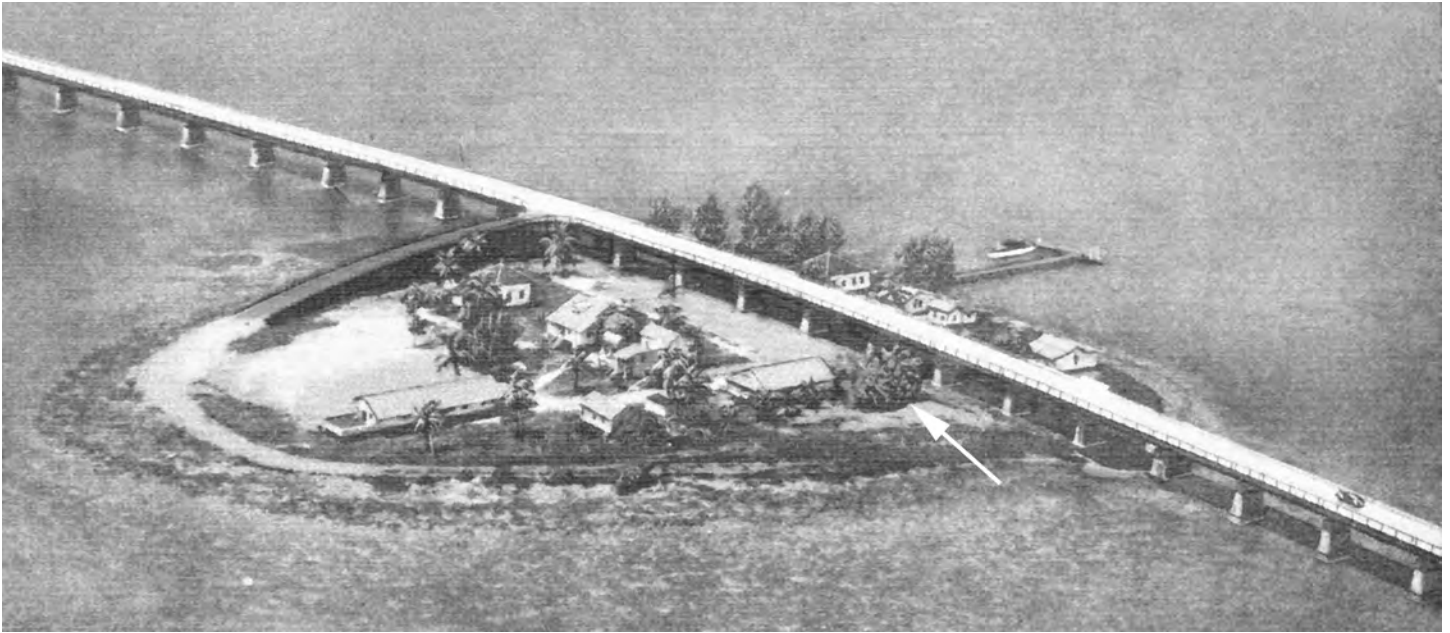
mainland to outfit a new facility at Port Everglades north of Miami. Relieved of the cost of maintaining the line across the Florida Keys, the FECR's railroad ferry operation to Cuba became a profitable activity.

In 1937 Monroe County and the State of Florida concluded an agreement for acquiring all the infrastructure of the Extension including right-of-way and bridges. With the exception of the Snake Creek trestle, the bridges and viaducts had suffered no structural damage. By 1938 the water crossings and roadbed from Big Pine Key to Lower Matecumbe Key had been converted for use by cars and trucks and connected to the existing highway to form a continuous although circuitous road from the mainland to Key West.

Pigeon Key continued to be used to quarter bridge tenders and some maintenance personnel, but they were now in the employ of the Overseas Road and Toll Bridge District. A wooden ramp

was constructed in 1938 from the elevated bridge down to the island and the Pigeon Key Fishing Camp opened. The camp was described in a 1939 guidebook as featuring “. . . parking spaces for cars and trailers; facilities for shuffleboard and horseshoe pitching; picnic grounds; boats for outside fishing.” The camp was managed by George Schutt, who was the manager of the world-renowned Long Key Fishing Camp when it was destroyed by the 1935 Labor Day hurricane. At this time the bridges and viaduct across the waterway were known collectively as the “Knights Key Bridge” or “Long Bridge”.

The situation in Europe preceding the Second World War prompted a military buildup at Key West in the late 1930s and early 1940s. The city had no source of potable water other than rainfall, which the inhabitants collected in privately-owned cisterns. After Pearl Harbor, new installations were being built and manned at such a rate that the



Soon after the opening of the highway, a wooden ramp was constructed from Pigeon Key Bridge to the island. A necessity for highway employees quartered there, the ramp also allowed the motoring public access to a fish camp that opened on the island. Photo credit: the Author's Collection.

lack of an adequate supply of fresh water was threatening military readiness. Further complicating matters was the poor condition of the highway. Built in the 1920s, it could not accommodate the heavy loads of supplies needed to support the military.

These problems were quickly addressed. A pipeline was run from a well field on the mainland at Florida City down the keys to Key West, and work was commenced on the conversion of the remainder of the former railroad right-of-way to a first-class highway. In September 1942 fresh water began to flow via the pipeline to Key West. With the pipeline completed and work on the highway in progress, the Coast Guard was assigned the responsibility of protecting these vital supply lines. One of the segments most vulnerable to sabotage was the Knights Key Bridge. During 1943 the Coast Guard took over Pigeon Key for quartering men assigned to protect the bridge. In May 1944 the new highway was completed and designated part of federal highway U.S. 1.

After the war the crossing at the Knights Key Channel and the Money Key and Pigeon Key Lakes became a tourist attraction and was touted as one of the wonders of the world. By the early 1950s promoters began referring to it as the Seven Mile Bridge.

Pigeon Key never returned to the residential community it had been prior to the 1935 hurricane. With development occurring on Big Pine Key and in the Marathon area it was neither necessary nor cost effective to provide homes for bridge tenders and maintenance personnel on the island. For more than a decade the facilities served as headquarters for the Overseas Toll Road District and evolved into a private resort for its commissioners and senior administrators. In 1953 toll collections amounted to \$1 million causing an investigative reporter to question why tolls were still being collected since revenues over fifteen years had been enough to repay the bonds several times over. An audit of the Overseas Bridge and Toll District uncovered kickbacks and extensive inappropriate use of

toll collections. On April 15, 1954, Governor Charlie Johns dissolved the District and discontinued tolls on the Overseas Highway.

On September 4, 1954 Pigeon Key was deeded to Monroe County. In 1968 the island was leased for twenty years to the University of Miami for marine research and educational purposes.

By the 1970s concerns began to be raised about the structural integrity of the railroad bridges in general and the Seven Mile Bridge in particular. In 1979 construction of a replacement was begun. The new bridge traverses the waterway from Knights Key to Little Duck Key without touching any islands passing 250 feet south of Pigeon Key. It features a high arch over Moser Channel that eliminates the need for a drawbridge.

Tragically, fifteen months before the new bridge was completed an accident occurred that permanently closed the Moser Channel drawbridge. The arm of a back hoe being towed on a

(Continued on page 14)

Appendix 1
1935 State of Florida Census—Pigeon Key

| Name | Relation | Sex & Age | | Race | Place | | Occupation |
|------------------------|----------|-----------|----|------|-------|-----------|---------------------|
| | | M | F | | Born | Education | |
| Arthur Stephens Maige | | 44 | | W | GA | High | Bridge Tender |
| John Edgar Chesser | | 48 | | W | FL | Grade | Painter Foreman |
| Edna Louise Chesser | wife | | 21 | W | FL | High | Housewife |
| Betty Louise Chesser | dau | | 5 | W | FL | | Child |
| Edith Lucretia Chesser | dau | | 2 | W | FL | | Child |
| John Vernon Chesser | son | 1< | | W | FL | | Child |
| Lucy Lueders | sister | | 61 | W | GA | Grade | Adult Dependent |
| Raleigh W. Hines | | 42 | | W | FL | Grade | Ass't Foreman R. R. |
| Jonas Smallwood | | 55 | | W | GA | Grade | Bridge Tender |
| Stella Smallwood | wife | | 23 | W | GA | Grade | Housewife |
| Ed Natkke | | 39 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Samuel Sweeting | | 29 | | C | (A) | Grade | Chef |
| Will White | | 36 | | C | AL | Grade | Painter |
| George E. Handley | | 34 | | W | GA | Grade | Track Foreman |
| Ethel Handley | wife | | 32 | W | GA | Grade | Housewife |
| Esther Louise Handley | dau | | 11 | W | FL | Grade | Student |
| Elbert Hugh Handley | son | 4 | | W | FL | | Child |
| James Blayloch | | 31 | | W | TN | High | Bridge Tender |
| Ida Blayloch | wife | | 29 | W | GA | High | Housewife |
| Eugene Blayloch | son | | 11 | W | GA | Grade | Student |
| James Blayloch Jr. | son | 7 | | W | FL | Grade | Student |
| Dorothy Blayloch | dau | | 4 | W | FL | | Child |
| James Jay | | 23 | | C | SC | Grade | Laborer |
| Willie C. Allen | | 35 | | C | GA | Grade | Laborer |
| Calvin Butler | | 36 | | C | (N) | Grade | Laborer |
| Tom Cartwright | | 39 | | C | NY | Grade | Laborer |
| Henry Reed | | 32 | | C | SC | Grade | Laborer |
| Benny Smith | | 34 | | C | WA | Grade | Laborer |
| George Alexander | | 23 | | C | FL | Grade | Laborer |
| James Dumas? | | 33 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Harold Pinder | | 34 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Irene Pinder | wife | | 34 | C | FL | Grade | Housewife |
| William Denoujik? | | 48 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Bettie Denoujik? | wife | | 38 | C | FL | Grade | Housewife |
| Dave Smith | | 38 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Maude Smith | wife | | 32 | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Junior Smith | son | 12 | | C | FL | Grade | Student |
| Thomas Smith | son | 10 | | C | FL | Grade | Student |
| Mary Smith | dau | | 8 | C | FL | Grade | Student |
| Charles Smith | son | 6 | | C | FL | Grade | Student |
| Zack Williams | | 34 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Glenwood Smith | | 35 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Elizabeth Smith | wife | | 30 | C | (A) | Grade | Housewife |
| Lewis Rutherford | | 34 | | C | (N) | Grade | Laborer |
| Janette Rutherford | wife | | 33 | C | (A) | Grade | Housewife |
| Donal? Rutherford | son | 4 | | C | VA | | Child |
| Ruth Rutherford | dau | | 1 | C | FL | | Child |
| Russell Rutherford | son | 1 | | C | FL | | Child |
| Herman Carey | | 34 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |
| Ed Moncur? | | 29 | | C | (A) | Grade | Laborer |

General Notes

- Listed in order of appearance on census sheet.
- All residents were non owners. The FEC Railway owned the island including the houses.
- "?" beside name indicates illegible entry on census page; best guess used.
- "Place Born" lists state abbreviation or:
(A) = alien. All were listed as citizens of the British Isles.
(N) = Naturalized citizen of US. All were formerly citizens of the British Isles
- "Race": W = White, C = Colored (non-White).
- Families enclosed by boxes. Family = employee with one or more resident dependents.
- Census taken in March-April 1935.

(Pigeon Key from page 13)

trailer was six inches too high and sliced through the upper members of the drawbridge ripping open a propane tank mounted next to the bridge tender's cab at the top of the structure. The propane exploded and ignited a nearby gasoline tank that fueled the engine used to rotate the bridge. The 39-year-old bridge

tender was incinerated at his post. The inoperable drawbridge was left in its closed position and maritime traffic rerouted until the new bridge could be completed.

On May 24, 1982 the new Seven Mile Bridge was opened and the old bridge was closed. Segments of the Pacet Channel Viaduct and Moser Channel Bridge including the

drawbridge were removed. Access to Pigeon Key was maintained by leaving intact the portion of the bridge to Knights Key.

In 1988 the University of Miami terminated its lease of Pigeon Key. Two years later the island was designated a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places. In 1993 it was leased for 30 years to the Pigeon Key Foundation so that it could be managed as an historic preserve. The Foundation operates a museum and gift shop on the island and makes the facilities available for seminars and other activities. While most of the remaining old buildings have had additions or modifications made that have changed their exterior appearance to varying degrees, the house in which the Chesser family resided near the dock on the north side of the island is an exception. It is currently used by the Foundation as a guest house for major benefactors.

The future of Pigeon Key as a historic preserve is uncertain. Vulnerable to hurricanes, one storm could destroy the entire complex. The costs of maintaining the buildings and grounds continue to rise. The two-mile, steel bridge that passes over the island and connects it to Knights Key has deteriorated to

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the point that it has been closed to vehicles and may soon be closed to pedestrians. There are no funds available to restore or replace the bridge. A small boat that operates as a ferry from the visitors center on Knights Key to the island has become the most convenient way for many people to get to the island. Thanks to the efforts of the Pigeon Key Foundation the island is still available to the general public and serves as a unique venue for presenting the rich history of the area.

The Florida East Coast Railway crossing over the Knights Key Channel and the Pigeon Key and Money Key Lakes was one the great engineering and construction feats of the 20th Century. The steel structures that remain are rapidly rusting away. Eventually all that will be left is a line of over 350 massive concrete piers precisely spaced over five miles ending in two miles of graceful concrete arches: an impressive monument to a monumental work.

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Thomas Neil Knowles is a fourth-generation native of Key West and a retired university administrator who enjoys researching and writing about the history of the Florida Keys. He is the author of Category 5: The 1935 Labor Day Hurricane (University Press of Florida --2009). He can be contacted by email at Cat5Hur@comcast.net.

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As can be seen in this aerial photograph of Pigeon Key taken in 2006, the shape of the south end of the island was changed to accommodate a saltwater swimming pool in the 1950s for the exclusive use of the commissioners and senior administrators of the Overseas Toll Road District. Governor Charley Johns disbanded the District and lifted tolls on the highway after an audit revealed misuse of funds. While leased by the University of Miami for marine research, an opening was cut in the seaward wall and the pool was used as a marina for small craft. Photo credit: Monroe County Property Appraisal Office.

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