



Bird Key Wreck



The Bird Key Wreck, also known as the Brick Wreck, is located in shallow, 4-6 feet deep waters on Bird Key Bank. Be cautious: strong currents sometimes sweep across Bird Key Bank. Dive flags are required for snorkeling or diving. To find the wreck, consult the map on the opposite side.

Wreck History

There is no specific information on the circumstances surrounding the wreck. All that is known is that the grounding and loss occurred sometime between 1857, the first date that the firebricks found on the wreck were manufactured, and 1861, the last date that the yellow construction bricks were produced for the Federal government. The wreck could be the *Scottish Chief*, a steamer 126 feet long and built in 1855 in Wilmington, North Carolina. The *Scottish Chief* was operated by the Tift brothers of Key West, who supplied bricks to Fort Jefferson during this period.

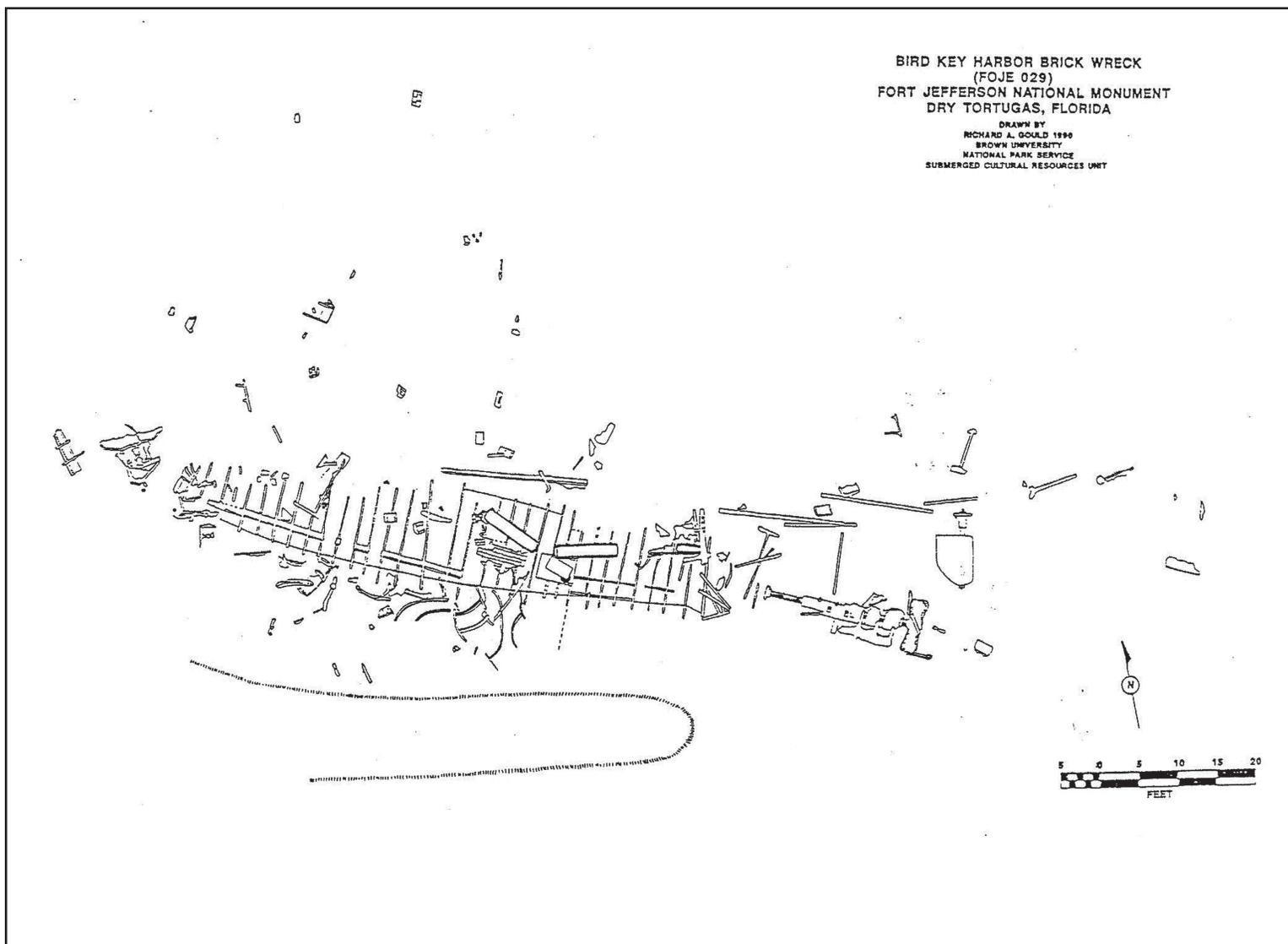
The ship was driven onto Bird Key Bank with the engine running, whether by accident or intentionally. The bow struck the bank and "accordioned," breaking the ship into two separate pieces. After settling onto the bank, the ship was salvaged, with removal of the engine and most of the ship's machinery. Further scattering of materials resulted from storms and hurricanes.

Remains indicate that it was a screw-driven, narrow-beamed, shallow-draft, flat-bottom steamboat of composite construction. She had a wrought iron frame with iron hull plates along the bottom and partway up the sides, and an

exterior covering of wood. The flames flared outward on each side near the tops to support a broad main deck. It was intended for use in shallow and relatively sheltered waters, not the open ocean. The presence of outer hull sheathing of Muntz metal, a copper-zinc alloy, points to a mid-nineteenth century date of origin for the ship. The wreck could be the oldest screw-powered vessel in National Park Service waters.

The vessel had a large, six-foot, four-bladed wrought iron propeller with flared blade tips. The paddle-like configuration of the propeller and need for external strapping over the ship's deadwood reveals flaws in the ship's design and points to a mismatch between the heavily built propeller shaft and the lightly constructed lower hull.

There were at least two types of brick found on the wreck. Unmarked yellow bricks matching those used in the construction of the major parts of Fort Jefferson were found, along with refractory bricks used to line the ship's fire-box. The refractory bricks are dated and have "Evens, Howard St. Louis" markings, indicating that the ship could not have sunk before 1857.



Getting There

Location: Lat 24 37.228' Lon 082 53.071'

Starting from the green BK 5 marker on the western edge of Bird Key Harbor, cross the harbor on a line with Loggerhead Light. When the water shallows on the harbor's western edge, turn left (south) for approximately one hundred feet. The wreck is oriented toward Loggerhead Key, so look for the propeller, which is usually easy to spot in morning or midday light.

Exploring the Site

The Brick Wreck is one of many wreck sites within Dry Tortugas National Park. These islands, shoals, and reefs have been the scene of nearly 300 shipwrecks. The proximity of these reefs to the nearby shipping lanes of the Gulf of Mexico has made them a natural "ship trap."

The wreckage and its associated coral are fragile. Please do not touch! If you choose to drop anchor, pick a location that is a safe distance from the wreck site. Make sure that you anchor on a sandy bottom that is free of coral.

Please remember that all shipwrecks, artifacts, and coral are protected within the park. Take only pictures and memories from the site.

You are the key to preserving this and other important sites. Only with your help will future generations be able to enjoy the park's rich maritime heritage.