CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND HISTORY

GEOLOGY AND PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY OF BISCAYNE NATIONAL PARK

The Florida Keys begin with Soldier Key in the northern section of the Park and continue to the south and west. The upper Florida Keys (from Soldier to Big Pine Key) are the remains of a shallow coral patch reef that thrived one hundred thousand or more years ago, during the Pleistocene epoch. The ocean level subsided during the following glacial period, exposing the coral to die in the air and sunlight. The coral was transformed into a stone often called coral rock, but more correctly termed Key Largo limestone. The other limestones of the Florida peninsula are related to the Key Largo; all are basically soft limestones, but with different bases. The nearby Miami oolitic limestone, for example, was formed by the precipitation of calcium carbonate from seawater into tiny oval particles (oolites), while farther north along the Florida east coast the coquina of the Anastasia formation was formed around the shells of Pleistocene sea creatures.

When the first aboriginal peoples arrived in South Florida approximately 10,000 years ago, Biscayne Bay was a freshwater marsh or lake that extended from the rocky hills of the present-day keys to the ridge that forms the current Florida coast. The retreat of the glaciers brought about a gradual rise in global sea levels and resulted in the inundation of the basin by seawater some 4,000 years ago. Two thousand years later, the rising waters levelled off, leaving the Florida Keys, mainland, and Biscayne Bay with something similar to their current appearance.

The keys change. Tides scour the eastern shores, slowly dissolving the porous limestone. The tidal surges of hurricanes clear the islands, washing soil and small plants away, and turn groves of trees into stands of rotting timber. Storm surges at times totally submerge the keys. Today the Key Largo limestone of the upper keys rises just south of Key Biscayne, showing

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itself above the water’s surface first at Soldier Key, and forming the islands from Soldier south to Big Pine Key. The Largo stone also underlies the oolitic limestone of the lower keys, extending at least as far south and west as the Dry Tortugas, and underlies the sand keys north to Miami Beach and beyond.

The northern park boundary is located off the southern tip of Key Biscayne. From this point a wide area of shoals known as the Safety Valve extends more than eight miles to the south, with only the small island of Soldier Key rising in the gap between Key Biscayne and the first of the Ragged Keys. Stiltsville, a small community of weekend residences that rise from the shallow shoal waters between Key Biscayne and Soldier Key, predates the acquisition of the area by the National Park Service; the houses sit on land that the tenants originally leased from the State of Florida but is now owned by (and thus leased from) the National Park Service.

The Ragged Keys, five small rock islands with low vegetation, are so close together, and the water around them so shallow, that it is possible to walk from one to another at low tide. At the southern end of the Ragged Keys lies Boca Chita Key. At twenty-nine acres Boca Chita is much larger than the other Ragged Keys, primarily because of the man-made expansion of the island in the first half of the twentieth century. Boca Chita is the only site in the Park with substantial, intact historic structures. These are described in more detail in chapter 3.

Sands Key is the next island south of Boca Chita beyond Lewis Cut, followed by Elliott Key. Elliott is the largest of the islands in the Park and has been the site of most human activity on the

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5Hoffmeister, 86.

6Soldier Key is the northernmost of the true Florida Keys. Key Biscayne and the other islands to its north are geologically different from the limestone-based keys to the south.
park’s keys. At the lower end of Elliott Key lies a cluster of smaller islands gathered around Caesar Creek and Jones Lagoon. Old Rhodes Key is the largest of these, with Totten, Adams, and others lying to the west. South of Old Rhodes Key lie the small islands of Swan and Gold Keys, the last keys inside the Park boundary. Shoals and a few more islands (the various Arsenicker Keys) dot the bay from the shoreward side of Old Rhodes and Totten Keys to Mangrove Point on the mainland. The eastern boundary of the Park runs east of the Hawk Channel into the Florida Straits, encompassing the northern extremity of the Florida Reef, the northernmost living coral reef in the continental United States.

ABORIGINAL POPULATIONS AND EUROPEAN EXPLORATION IN BISCAYNE BAY, 1513-1859

In 1513, the Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León discovered a chain of rocky islets off the Florida coast that he called Los Martires (the Martyrs). On May 13th of that year, Ponce’s ships sailed south along a sand bar and a reef of islands to an island they called Santa Pola. A bay stretched between the reef and the mainland. The bay was probably Biscayne, but the identity of the island of Santa Pola is unknown. It may have been Key Largo, or possibly one of the keys lying between Largo and Key Biscayne.7

At the mouth of the Miami River, Ponce’s party encountered the people known to the Spanish as the Tequesta.8 The domain of the Tequesta reportedly stretched from the vicinity of the current Dade-Broward county line to Cape Sable. Although the name disappeared from the Spanish records over the next two hundred years, other native groups were reported in the same area. Archeologists suggest that some of these groups, notably the Costas, Vizcayano, and Boca Ratone, may have been descendants of the Tequesta or related groups.9

The ancestors of the Tequesta probably visited the Biscayne Bay area by 8000 B.C. Excavations at the Cutler Fossil site, located adjacent to the northwest corner of the Park, yielded artifacts and bones that represent the earliest known occupation for South Florida. Marine faunal remains at the site demonstrate a continual link between man and the sea that has characterized the human adaptation in South Florida, Biscayne Bay, and the Florida Keys for 10,000 years.10 Additional archeological sites from this period most likely exist on the outer reefs and on the bottom of Biscayne Bay.

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8 The name is also spelled Tekesta or Chequescha.


Evidence of human occupation in the centuries before European exploration has been found on the mainland as far south as Coconut Grove, as well as on both the bay and ocean sides of the keys within Biscayne Bay and on the Florida Keys to the south. A unique site exists on Sands Key, which is located within Biscayne National Park. Pottery sherds collected from the site date from the Glades IIB-IIIB Period up to early European contact, around A.D. 1650. The site includes extensive mounds of worked shell and middens, suggesting intensive settlement on the key by A.D. 1000, if not earlier. These conclusions are largely based on surface finds; potentially, more subsurface excavation could reveal longer use of the area.

Neither these early peoples nor their descendants, the Tequesta, practiced agriculture. Instead, they migrated seasonally from the shore to the inland regions and back, subsisting on native plants and animals, including both manatee and turtle. A Spanish account from the sixteenth century describes the local Indians as traveling to an offshore island to eat “nuts and dates.” Although it appears by these accounts that the inhabitants of the Biscayne area were visiting the islands during the period immediately after European contact, there may not have been any permanent Native American settlements on the keys during the historic period.

The Tequesta and other aboriginal peoples of South Florida appear to have died off in the early- to mid-eighteenth century. In the 1770s the English cartographer Bernard Romans described the area as having only empty, unpopulated villages. One writer believes that eighty native families taken to Cuba by the Spanish when control of Florida was relinquished to Britain in 1763 may have been the last remnants of the Tequesta.

About the same time the Tequesta disappeared from South Florida, the Oconee tribe and several smaller, related groups from Georgia and Alabama began to move into Florida. In 1778, this group, which soon became known as the Mikasuki (Mikcosukee), was joined by a large group of immigrants from the Lower Creek towns. The Mikasuki tribe expanded again in the aftermath of the Creek War, which was fought in Alabama between 1813-1814; Muskogean refugees, primarily from the Upper Creek settlements, fled to Florida after the disastrous defeat of the Creeks at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in March 1814 and the resulting Treaty of Fort Jackson, in which the Creeks ceded 20 million acres in Georgia and Alabama.

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community that resulted came to be known as the Seminole, from a Creek word meaning fugitive.\textsuperscript{14} The Seminole expanded southward down the depopulated Florida peninsula, establishing the town of Ochupocrassa (Echeepocrassa) near Biscayne Bay about 1820. The Seminole were primarily an agricultural people and by this date had adopted many European methods of animal husbandry and agriculture. It is unlikely that the Seminole occupied any of the lands now included in Biscayne National Park.\textsuperscript{15} In 1823 representatives of the Seminole signed the Treaty of Moultrie Creek, agreeing to cede much of their land to the United States and to retreat to an inland reservation. Soon the United States government began inducing the voluntary emigration of the Seminole to Oklahoma. Forcible removal began in the 1830s; by 1859, all but a few hundred of the Seminole people had been removed from Florida.\textsuperscript{16}

THE WRECKING INDUSTRY IN THE FLORIDA KEYS, 1513-1921

The Spanish made few attempts to settle in South Florida and established no permanent settlements in the Florida Keys. Nevertheless, Spanish ships utilized the area intensively after Ponce’s discovery of the Straits of Florida, the channel between the mainland and the Bahamas through which the Gulf Stream flows. The warm waters of the Gulf Stream provided the quickest route from the Gulf of Mexico to the North Atlantic Ocean; therefore, this passage soon became the preferred route for ships returning to Spain from the New World.

Although the Straits of Florida provided the fastest route to Europe, the passage was also dangerously narrow, particularly given the limited navigational aids available to sailors prior to the nineteenth century. As evidenced by the archeological shipwrecks found within Biscayne National Park, many ships wrecked in and around the Florida Keys during this period. Two of the more significant historic wrecks whose remains are located within the Park are the sites of the \textit{Nuestra Senora de Populo}, a Spanish treasure galleon wrecked in 1733, and the HMS Fowey, a British fifth-rate warship sunk in 1748.\textsuperscript{17} Because many ships leaving Spanish America carried rich cargoes, the wrecking industry emerged to assist sailors in salvaging their cargoes. The wreckers recovered goods from dying ships and helped refloat ships that had run aground

\textsuperscript{14} Swanton, 181.

\textsuperscript{15} Cline, 191,249; Fairbanks, 263,289; Swanton, 182; Fischer and Johnson, 3.


\textsuperscript{17} David E. Brewer and Barbara E. Mattick, \textit{National Register of Historic Places Registration Form: Offshore Reefs Archeological District (draft)}, 1993, section 7, 1-2.
but which remained seaworthy. In return, the wreckers received a percentage of the value of the property saved.¹⁸

Native Americans, Spaniards, Bahamians, and Americans established temporary salvage camps in the Florida Keys. Although not documented, it is likely that the keys within Biscayne National Park provided sites for many of these camps over the centuries. During the period of Spanish dominance of Florida the center for wreckers was in nearby Havana, Cuba. Later, the center of the wrecking business moved to New Providence, in the Bahamas, with a British Admiralty Court sitting at Nassau. Bahamian salvaging in Florida waters began in the seventeenth century and continued until 1825, when a Congress passed a law requiring that all wrecks salvaged in American waters be brought to an American port for adjudication. The federal government established a court in Key West, and many Bahamians moved to the Florida Keys soon thereafter, turning the area into a well-known center for wrecking.

The wrecking industry began to decline in importance in the keys between 1852 and 1878 with the construction of the Florida Reef lighthouses. The gradual replacement of the sailing vessel with the steamship in the latter half of the nineteenth century also contributed to the industry’s decline. The wreck of the Alicia (or Alecia) on Ajax Reef, near the Fowey Rocks Lighthouse, in 1906 provided the last great opportunity for the wreckers of the Florida Keys to profit from the misfortune of sailors;¹⁹ after that time, wrecks continued to occur along the coast, but in smaller numbers and at less profit. Jefferson Browne noted in 1912 that “eight or


¹⁹The remains of the Alicia are one of the archeological sites in the Park. In 1984, the archeological remains of the Alicia and 42 other shipwrecks within the Park were listed on the National Register of Historic Places as contributing sites within the offshore Reefs Archeological District. Lindsay C. M. Beditz, National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form: Offshore Reefs (Triumph, Long, Ajax, Pacific) Archeological District, 1980.
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American Settlement on the Keys, 1822-1865

Although wreckers and other groups had utilized the keys as temporary camps for many years, no permanent settlements existed in the area in 1821 when the Spanish cession of Florida to the United States took effect.\(^\text{21}\) The establishment of a United States Navy base on Key West in 1822, followed by the creation of a federal court on the island several years later, caused the local population to grow, and in 1828 the town of Key West was chartered.

Immigrants from the Bahamas, known as “Conchs,” were the largest group to settle in the Florida Keys during the early- to mid-nineteenth century. The Conchs formed the backbone of the early society of the keys, from Key West north to Elliott. The outbreak of the Second Seminole War during the 1830s forced settlers on the upper keys and on the mainland as far north as the New River to flee to the safety of Key West.\(^\text{22}\)

South Florida grew slowly. At the time of the Civil War, Key West was the only city in southern Florida, and only a few settlers had established themselves around Biscayne Bay. Florida seceded from the Union in 1861, but the lower half of the state contributed little to the war effort. South Florida, with the exception of the port and fortress of Key West, was of little strategic significance to either the Union or the Confederacy during the war. Although the proximity to the ports of the Caribbean and the many secluded island and streams along the coast might have provided refuge for Confederate blockade-runners and their contraband, the lack of overland transportation routes to the north made runnin goods through the state impractical. For the most part, blockade-runners sailed for Savannah and other points farther north.

The only notable incident related to the Civil War that occurred within the park was during the flight of the Confederate cabinet after General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Courthouse. John C. Breckinridge, Confederate general and secretary of war and former vice president of the United States, fled down the east coast of Florida in a small boat with a few companions. The group entered Biscayne Bay on June 7, 1865, spending an uncomfortable

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\(^{21}\) The treaty conveying Florida to the United States was signed in 1819, but the transfer of power did not occur until 1821.

\(^{22}\) Charles M. Brookfield and Oliver Griswold, *They All Called It Tropical: True Tales of the Romantic Everglades National Park, Cape Sable, and the Florida Keys* (Miami, Fla.: Data Press, 1949), 34, 58.
night anchored off Key Biscayne, and, after a poor meal on Elliott Key, passed a second night anchored in the bay before passing through Caesar’s Creek and continuing south to Cuba. 23

**AGRICULTURE ON THE KEYS, 1860-1926**

Commodore Ralph Middleton Munroe, who first visited Biscayne Bay in 1877, related that there were “but a few dozen settlers” when he first came to the area. He wrote, “to the explorer and sailor [the bay area] was all pure delight, although to the settler trying to make a living there might be disadvantages.” 24 Indeed, the keys did not offer a great deal of arable land to the early settlers, and much of that was covered with hardwood hammocks. Early visitors to the area valued these clusters of mature hardwoods for their mahogany. Later settlers generally saw the hammocks as worthless, and the “almost universal custom” was to clear the “scrubby woods” to plant fields or groves. The preferred method of clearance was burning. 25

Pineapple became the first successful crop to be grown in the keys. Benjamin Baker of Key West brought pineapple slips from Mexico in 1860 and introduced them on Plantation Key. The plants grew easily on the coral islands, taking root in small crevices, and were believed to require no fertilization and little care. By 1890, growers had established pineapple plantations along the keys from Matecumbe to Elliott. The keys produced all of the pineapples grown in the United States until around 1884, when they were introduced in the Indian River area in Florida. 26

Pineapple farmers brought gangs of laborers, primarily African-Americans, from the mainland to harvest and pack the fruit for shipping. Before the completion of the Florida East Coast Railway south to Miami in 1896, pineapples were loaded onto schooners and shipped north to east coast markets like New York City and Baltimore. After the railroad opened, farmers on the keys sent the fruit to Miami for shipment north by rail.

At the height of pineapple cultivation on the keys, Plantation Key produced the largest number of pineapples annually, with Elliott a close second. Elliott Key, the center of the farming community on the Biscayne Keys, had a population of about ninety people and a one-room school, a general store, packing house, cabins for farmhands, and houses. About

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25Ibid., 311. The old West Indian term for mahogany was “Madeira wood.”

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Figure 5. Pineapple fields in Boynton, Florida, 1906

fourteen families, most of Bahamian descent, lived on Elliott during this period, just prior to the turn of the century. They farmed pineapples on the bay side of the island. Like their neighbors on other keys, Elliott residents supplemented their income by wrecking and harvesting marine life from the bay.

The experiences of Asa Sweeting and his family, who were among the earliest homesteaders on Elliott Key, were probably similar to that of other families living on the keys during the late nineteenth century. The Sweetings sailed from the Bahamas to Key West in 1866, then moved to Elliott Key in 1882, claiming 154.4 acres for the family homestead. They built a temporary wood-frame dwelling, sixteen by twenty-four feet in size, on their property, hauling timber and other supplies from Key West for construction. The family had to bring fresh water from springs in Biscayne Bay and the mainland until a cistern was built. In 1887, Sweeting reported that he had cleared and cultivated 30 acres on the key, planting a variety of fruits and vegetables. The family eventually planted 100 acres, with pineapples and key limes as the primary crops.

The pineapple boom on the keys gave out because of the leaching of organic material from the soil and a devastating hurricane in 1906. Charles Torrey Simpson described the collapse of pineapple cultivation in the Florida Keys as a direct result of the destruction of the hardwood

27 R. Munroe, 211.

hammocks. “As soon as the forest was destroyed [to plant pineapples] the roots began to decay, the soil washed down through the bed of loose porous rock, and in five years nothing was left but the old original stony fields. Finally the pineapple crops were no longer profitable, failing as the soil departed.” He also lamented the later planting of lime groves in the keys.  

Dr. Henry Perrine introduced the first lime trees to the Florida Keys from the Yucatan in 1838, planting on Indian Key and possibly other nearby keys. For many years the lime was used only locally; the Conchs utilized the citrus to flavor their foods as well as for medicinal purposes. As late as 1906 an expert reported that, though the limes picked from wild trees in the keys sold for very high prices, “the peculiar demands of the market...are such as to make lime growing unprofitable.” Nevertheless, after the collapse of the pineapple industry, the residents of the keys “developed slowly a lime industry,” and plantings increased rapidly after 1913 both in the keys and near Fort Myers.

Lime production peaked in 1923 at more than 40,000 boxes. A 1926 hurricane devastated the industry by damaging or destroying most of the lime groves in the keys. Competition from growers in the West Indies and Mexico hindered recovery. Florida Key lime production was nil in 1927 and by 1935 had climbed to only one quarter of the 1923 total.

Farmers tried other crops in the Florida Keys at various times. Commodore Munroe reported that sweet potatoes grown on the keys were extraordinarily large. He described a sweet potato from Elliott Key that he ate in 1877 “which was so big that it was far easier to cut with a saw than a knife, and was further remarkable in having to be dug out of the hollows of the rock with a crowbar!”

Even allowing for the Commodore’s liking of a good story, this was probably a very large sweet potato. The keys also produced peaches, tomatoes, coconuts, lemons, and sapodillas for market.

The history of homesteading on the keys of Biscayne National Park is being further developed. Homesteading was not limited to Elliott Key, but would have also included the keys to the south, Totten, Adams, and Old Rhodes. In September 1997, the Sweeting Homestead

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32. R. Munroe, 91.
site was added to the National Register. This and other homesteading sites in the Park will be the subject of further archeological survey.