

## ITS EARLY HISTORY—DESCRIPTION OF ITS PUBLIC BUILDINGS—THE CIGAR FACTORIES.

From Our Own Correspondent.

KEY WEST, Fla., Wednesday, Dec. 31, 1873.

Key West is an island, forming the extreme southern boundary of the State of Florida, and is seven miles long by a width varying from one mile to over two. Its location is between 24° and 25° north latitude, and between 81° and 82° west longitude (from Greenwich.) This island embraces 1,975 acres, of which 340 are covered by the Salt Pond, which is adjacent to the town of Key West, and where the greater portion of the salt used here is made, much being shipped to adjacent keys and the mainland. This is the only one of the Florida Keys, as far as I know, that has ever been placed in the market, the remainder of them being still held by the Government, for purposes best known to those in authority. The existence of Key West as a town was first recognized as early as 1822, but it remained a small village, chiefly inhabited by wreckers, fishermen, and sponge-gatherers, until 1860, when it had a population of 3,000 or more. The late war and the Cuban troubles since then have combined to give this place an increased importance, the Government paying more attention to it, and many Cubans seeking a refuge on its coral strand. The result is that commerce, trade, and manufactures have increased, and to-day Key West contains a population of from 9,000 to 10,000, and besides her former business of obtaining, preparing, and shipping sponges, &c., has added the very lucrative manufacture of cigars. The name of the county is Monroe, and the town has an organization under an act of the Legislature, giving it a Mayor, &c. The streets are broad, and, for the most part, are laid out rectangularly. The town has grown very rapidly within the past few years, and is still expanding, as I see in every direction new buildings rising, most of them, however, small and unpretending, but some of really good architectural design and substantial execution. The cost of lumber, and of all materials for building, I am told, is very great here, and it costs about \$10,000 to erect a house in this town that would hardly cost more than from \$3,000 to \$5,000 anywhere else in the Union. The natural growth of the island is a dense chaparral, thickly studded with cactus of several varieties, the chief being that known as the "prickly pear" in the Southern States, but of gigantic size. But there are all sorts and shapes of these cactuses, not only in the gardens, but in the wild wastes in every direction, where hardly anything but lizards can penetrate.

The town is very picturesque, notwithstanding the fact that all its buildings are of wood, and mostly small at that, (the Western Union Telegraph Company owning, with one exception, the only brick house in town which does not belong to Government;) for every residence is shaded and embowered in tropical trees and shrubbery, the principal feature being the cocoanut-tree, with the nuts in all stages of maturity and immaturity. Besides the cocoanut-tree there are here seen the guava-tree, the safadillo, the almond, the banana, and a few orange-trees. There is also an infinite variety of tropical shrubbery and flowers, in perennial bloom and foliage. Winter never placing his chilling finger on this spot. Nevertheless, when there is a fall in the temperature of a few degrees you can see the natives and Cuban refugees wrapping themselves up in cloaks and overcoats, as if it were really cold.

## PUBLIC BUILDINGS.

The United States Government have here a number of buildings. There is the Custom-house, Col. F. N. Wicker, Collector, where the receipts on imports are from \$20,000 to \$35,000 per month, the principal articles from which the revenue is derived being tobacco and sugar. The sugar is brought here in small vessels and reshipped northward on larger ones. Tobacco is principally used here in the manufacture of cigars. The Customs officials are very vigilant, particularly as they are urged on by the jealousy of the local manufacturers of cigars, &c.; but there is, nevertheless, considerable smuggling going on continually, in a small way, of cigars and other dutiable articles. The Marine Hospital is a brick building, first erected in 1845 under an act of Congress of June 15, 1844, and is not very capacious. It was partially destroyed by a hurricane Oct. 11, 1846, but was repaired early in 1847. The buildings and grounds have suffered serious injury from storms several times since 1846. The hospital is still in operation, and is under the competent charge of Dr. R. D. Murray. The service has always been small, and the hospital one of the most expensive to maintain on account of its isolated situation. The naval storehouse, which is now filling rapidly with all sorts of stores, is in charge of Paymaster A. J. Clarke, assisted by Past Assistant Paymaster Frank Bissell, and presented a scene of busy activity. There is also a Government dock, with cisterns to catch rain-water, and a condensing or distilling apparatus, and United States ships are here supplied with fresh water when they need it for their boilers or other purposes. The machine shop and foundry have fallen into great neglect the past few years, but Chief Engineer J. Q. A. Zeigler has recently arrived here, and through his tireless and well-directed exertions they are now in efficient operation, and he has a vast deal of work to do in repairing the machinery of the vessels hastily fitted out and sent here.

## FORT TAYLOR.

Fort Taylor, which has about 120 guns mounted, and forty more ready for mounting, is practically abandoned, and would hardly be used even in the event of war. Its guns are 9 and 11-inch Dahlgrens, with some heavy Parrotts, and these, should hostilities ensue, would probably be placed in sand-batteries, several of which, flanking the fort on both sides, are already in process of construction and equipment. In fact the whole series of brick and stone batteries, or forts, projected and in progress for the defense of the harbor and island have been temporarily forsaken, and every effort has been concentrated on the erection of sand-batteries, which are considered more effective both for offense and defense. Nine-inch or 11-inch guns, not to speak of those of heavier calibre, could, it is said, batter down Fort Taylor in a very short while. The Government railway, which is several miles long, is now busily engaged daily in the transportation of sand and other materials to construct sand-batteries. The barracks are now garrisoned by sixty men of the First Artillery, under command of Col. C. L. Best. There are here six buildings, well constructed and very pleasant, for the quarters of the officers and their families; and three for the quarters of the men, besides a hospital. There is here also a United States Court-house. The Court-house and jail of Monroe County are located here, and the town itself has a public institution known as the "Sweat-Box," in which the local police (several of whom, I see, are colored) incarcerate offenders against the peace and dignity of the municipality.

## RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENTS.

There is a Catholic convent here, known as "St Mary's of Montreal," in which there are a Mother Superior and about a dozen nuns or sisters. They have one or two schools under their charge. Their property, which consists of an elegant house, located on a large square lot, fronting on one street and running from one street to another, has been recently sold to the "Leland Hotel Company, of Key West." The convent, however, has purchased an eligible site, not far from its present one, where buildings more extensive and more suitable to its purposes will be erected. They have two Methodist churches, a Roman Catholic, a Baptist, and an Episcopal. Rev. C. A. Fulwood is Pastor of the First Methodist; Father Allard (with an assistant) of the Catholic, and Rev. Mr. Ruther of the Episcopal. The name of the Baptist minister escapes me at this writing. It would seem at first blush that this array of churches should be sufficient to moralize and Christianize so small a place as Key West, but the truth is that this place is not a whit more pious than other Southern towns, and Sunday is merely a holiday, though, of course, sacredly observed by some good people.

## MISCELLANEOUS MATTERS.

There is a Masonic Hall here, and two lodges of Masons—one American, the other Cuban—and a Commandery of Knights Templar. The American lodge on the Commandery of the Illuminated St. John's Day on the 27th, making a brilliant display, Judge J. W. Locke, of the United States District Court, delivering a fine oration on the occasion. All the flags in town were displayed—Mr. Dixon, the proprietor of the "Old Curiosity Shop," displaying not only the flags of all nations, but all the signal flags and other bunting in his possession. There are two lodges of Odd Fellows here, one of which, I believe, is colored. Two weekly newspapers

are published in the town, the Key West Dispatch, in English, and El Republicano, in Spanish. We have an opera-house, built and owned by the boys of the town. In this the Gilbert Sisters' Dramatic Company is now performing, while there are two other combinations in full operation—Waltack's Varieties, at Masonic Hall, and Sophie Miles' English Comedy Company, at Gillon's Ice-cream saloon. Near the naval store-house, and south-west of it, stands a monument, "erected 1866 by the Navy Club of Key West, to the memory of the officers, sailors, and soldiers of the Army, Navy, and Marine Corps of the United States who lost their lives in their country's service upon this station, from 1861 to 1865." This monument is of dark gray granite, and consists of a square pedestal, from which rises a tapering shaft having four sides. Right against the railing surrounding the monument the officers of the Coast Survey have placed their tent, where they take daily observations toward fixing the longitude, &c., of the place. Not far off is the former residence of the late Hon. Stephen R. Mallory, of Florida, who died about a month since at Pensacola. Mr. Mallory was once United States Senator, and afterward Secretary of the Navy of the "so-called" Confederate States. The late Prof. Agassiz spent a Winter here some years ago, in pursuit of health and scientific research. He is well remembered by many, and his recent death caused general regret here.

## THE CIGAR FACTORIES.

The cigar factories form a most noticeable feature of the local industry. There are a great many of these, employing large numbers of Cuban refugees; but the largest factories are those of Seidenberg & Co., and Vicente Martinez Ybor. The first is said to have formerly employed 1,200 hands, (men, women, and children,) but since the recent money crisis the number is reduced to about 700. I am told that about 25,000,000 cigars are manufactured here annually, of a quality very little, if any, inferior to real Havanas, and sold at much less price. Skillful workmen on first-class cigars can make from \$3 to \$15 per day. All the native and Cuban refugee population smoke. The most curious and amusing spectacle that presented itself to me on Christmas Day was that of a little bow-legged boy, scarcely three feet high, dressed in mannish style, striding along with a cigar in his mouth six inches in length and half an inch in diameter. The Cuban ladies also smoke, not only cigarettes, but cigars. I saw a beautiful woman leaning from her window the other morning smoking a cigar of large proportions, with much nonchalance, and, apparently, much enjoyment. I have seen no female smoking on the streets, however.

## THE TEMPERATURE.

When I came here, (not much over a week since,) I laughed at the people, who wrapped themselves up in cloaks, shawls, and overcoats when the temperature declined a few degrees below seventy-five; but I find that one soon becomes effeminate here, and very sensitive to any decrease of the usual temperature. Recent rains and "northers" have brought the temperature as low as 61°, and I confess that a fire in the room would have been very comfortable; but there was no means of enjoying a fire without resorting to the kitchen, so I put on overcoat and gloves, and enjoyed the warmth they afforded me. This is the severest Winter they have here, and yet even the hottest days of Summer, I am told, are not so uncomfortably torrid as days of like date are in the City of New-York.

## THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT AND POST OFFICE.

The United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida is presided over by Judge J. W. Locke, who lives in an elegant residence here. He is a young man, but one of high ability, correct life, and most amiable and agreeable qualities. The business is not great, but the Judge lends his aid not only to all public enterprises of "pith and moment," but to the arbitration and settlement of differences that do not officially come before him. There is, of course, a Post Office here, of which Mr. E. L. Ware is Postmaster. In this office I notice that a negro is principal assistant, and, in fact, there are colored clerks all over town, and in one principal establishment a negro is cashier! Nevertheless, among the old native population here they have all the old prejudices against the negro, and the memories of the late Southern Confederacy are cherished as sedulously and warmly as they are upon "the sacred soil" of Virginia.

## WEALTHY RESIDENTS.

Mr. William Curry, a native of the Bahamas, is the wealthiest resident of Key West, where he made all his money; and it is said that his assets are valued at near \$1,000,000. John Jay Philbrick, a native of New-York, I believe, is another local magnate that I must not forget to name. He is British Vice Consul, and the commercial representative of several other nations; and thus it happens that his wharves are crowded with the principal shipping that comes to this port. At present his wharves are piled with mahogany and logwood. He is an energetic gentleman, but has never married, preferring to live single and confer benefactions upon the widows and orphans left by comrades who fell in the late war. His outlay in these respects is great, and shows the generosity of the man in the best light. He is one of the most public spirited of the citizens of Key West, and is foremost in every enterprise tending to develop its capacities. During the war he was paymaster and store-keeper here for the United States.

## A GOOD PLACE FOR JUNK DEALERS.

Key West is a good place for a junk dealer, provided his freightage be not too heavy. The amount of sponge kicked about the island is enormous, and would make into sponges superior to those sold on the street of our cities. In some parts of the town the streets are literally littered with rags, bits of paper, &c., so eagerly sought by scavengers elsewhere. The fragments and large masses of old iron about the wharves and elsewhere would freight many large ships, and the empty bottles are simply innumerable. Empty bottles are considered trash, and are taken up and carted away to some remote spot and there dumped as so much rubbish. Yet these bottles are worth three cents apiece in Havana, and it ought to pay to transport them thither. At all events, it is a pity that some manufacture is not started here to utilize them. Not only are some of these bottles (as I have before stated in another letter) used for paving, but I see them in some of the gardens used for making borders to the flower-beds.

## THE CUBAN JUNTA.

There is an organized Cuban Junta here, which is in close communication with the insurgents on this island, and Key West, when opportunity affords, can, it is said, throw 1,000 or more well-armed and enthusiastic patriots upon Cuba. The strong sympathy of these Cuban refugees with their struggling brethren at home is very marked and demonstrative. The greater portion of them work in the cigar factories, and their excited discussion of home politics and affairs has led the proprietors of every considerable factory to employ a "reader," who sits in the midst of the workmen and engages their attention by reading in a loud voice all the news, rumors, and speculations of the day, as set forth in the newspapers, private correspondence, &c. This "reader" is a most voluble and well-stored personage. He reads rapidly and loudly, first a newspaper and then a letter, and he is so well supplied with reading matter, either in print or manuscript, that he goes on all day without exhausting his material. He commences with the stock in his hat, then descends through the pockets of his coat, vest, and pantaloons. In this way the refugees are made to listen and work, whereas without a device of this kind they would lose much time in their animated debates.