

The Indians and History of the Matecumbe Region*

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Upper and Lower Matecumbe Keys and the nearby Tea Table, Indian, and Lignumvitae Keys have been an important focal point of human activity from very early times. Five archeological sites on these islands suggest that prehistoric peoples found the region suitable for living.¹ In addition a study of historic source material on the Keys also shows the importance of the region to the later Indians and contemporary Europeans. More data on the early historic periods are available for here than for any other region of the Keys—in itself indicative of the area's relative importance.

The very name of the region, Matecumbe, is itself of much interest, as it is the only place name in South Florida which dates from the sixteenth century and is still used to designate the same or approximate location as at that time.² On Spanish maps it is a name which frequently appears, as it did in their records. The exact meaning of the name is unknown, but the suggestion that it was derived from the Spanish *mata hombre* is a weak one. When the term Matecumbe first appeared in use it was in a form very close to its present spelling and pronunciation. As was often the case in Florida, the name was applied interchangeably to the chief and to the tribe.

ETHNOLOGY

At the beginning of Spanish occupation in Florida there were two dominant Indian groups in the southern part of the state. The most important were the Calusa, otherwise known as the Calos or Carlos, who centered on the lower Gulf Coast. On the east coast the Tekesta, located on Biscayne Bay, were the most powerful.³ Both of these groups were political confederacies

* At the request of certain members of our society this paper is being presented in *Tequesta*. With the addition of an introduction and slight textual modifications it is essentially two sections, written by the present author, which appeared in *Excavations on Upper Matecumbe Key, Florida* by John M. Goggin and Frank Sommer III (Yale University Publications in Anthropology, No. 41, New Haven, 1949).

¹ A study of the archeology of the region will be found in Goggin and Sommer (1949).

² Miami is another sixteenth century name but it was originally used to designate the present Lake Okeechobee. The early Calusa is perpetuated in Calusahatchee River, although that is an eighteenth century appellation of the Seminoles.

³ A paper now in progress (Goggin, MS) will present detailed data on these groups.

rather than tribes, and the exact affiliations of some of the smaller groups are unknown.

The political position and relationship of the Matecumbe Indians is uncertain. Fontaneda (1944:12), describing the Keys, previous to the 1560's says "Running from south to north between Habana and Florida, the distance to the Tortugas and the Martires,⁴ is forty leagues; twenty leagues to the Martires, and thence other twenty to Florida—to the territory of Carlos, a province of Indians . . ." It would appear from this that the Keys were distinct from the territory of Carlos, yet we find further on in Fontaneda's narrative (1944:17) that the two towns of Guarungunbe and Cuchiyaga on the Keys were subject to Carlos. López de Velasco (1894:165), writing in the period from 1571 to 1574, also reports the inhabitants of the Keys to be subjects of the Cacique Carlos. Contemporary workers like Swanton (1922:330) generally place the Keys in the territory of the Calusa, although the evidence does not seem to be conclusive.

Later in 1573 we find several references to the "cabeza de los Martires." One writer says that it is in the territory of the Cacique Tequesta (Connor, 1925:59), while another says it is in "the land of a cacique they call matecumbe" (Connor, 1925:51). It seems probable that since the Matecumbe and other people of the Keys were relatively small groups, they were subject to either the Calusa or the Tequesta, who were much more powerful. But the relative power of the two tribes apparently fluctuated so it is likely that control over the Keys may have changed often.

Linguistically the Calusa and Tequesta were probably related, and the Matecumbe language was very likely similar to one of them. Swanton (1922:30) believes that there is a possible connection of the Calusa language with some Muskogean dialect.

There is only a small amount of ethnological data available for the Indians of the Keys, and no specific data have been noted for the Matecumbe. Much of what is available refers to the town of Guarungunbe and Cuchiyaga and is given by Fontaneda (1944).

The individual groups were apparently small and ruled by a cacique or chief. Besides the chieftanship there may have been other social or class rankings, as Fontaneda (1944:12), says, "Some eat sea-wolves; not all of them, for there is a distinction between the higher and lower classes, but the principal persons eat them."

⁴ Martires or Los Martires is the earliest name for the Florida Keys and was used throughout the Spanish occupation.

The natives are described as being large and the women well proportioned with good countenances. The men wore breechclouts woven of palm while the women cover themselves with Spanish moss.

Fish, turtle, molluscs, tunny, and whale were the common foods, and sea-wolves, which were probably seals, were eaten by the principal persons. The Florida lobster or crawfish was important in their diet as was the chapin or trunk fish.⁵ Deer and bear were present and an un-named animal, which was most likely the raccoon, was good to eat.

Fontaneda's reference to a palm fiber breechclout as being the usual apparel of men is confirmed by Twitt who apparently stopped briefly somewhere in the Keys in 1591. The Indians he encountered wore "a platted mat of greene straw about their waist, with the bush hanging down behind" (Twitt, 1941:153).⁶ Gold and silver ornaments were worn by the natives who traded several to the English for old knives and a rusty hatchet. They included "a piece of gold wound hollow, and about the bigness and value of an English angell, which the Savage wore hanging about his knee," and two silver ornaments "in forme like unto the bosse of a bridle" (Twitt, 1941:153).⁷

The Key Indians were said to be great archers and dart throwers (*tiradores de dardos*) and they traveled between the islands by means of shallops (*chalupas*) and canoes (López de Velasco, 1894:165). It is unfortunate that the reference to dart throwing is not more detailed, but this may indicate the use of the atlatl or spear thrower, of which archeological specimens have been found at Key Marco. Shallops, of course, were introduced by Europeans but the *Chalupa* is also used in reference to light canoes. It may have been that in this instance the word shallop was used to indicate some kind of a sailing vessel in contrast to a canoe which was paddled.

Apparently bodies of the dead were set out for the flesh to decay as in other parts of Florida. At least a sixteenth century reference from Sparke (1941:42) would suggest this, for he relates that Hawkins' men found dried bodies and heads on a shore. He thought this indicated cannibalism but it is more likely that the exposure of the bodies was in preparation for secondary burial.

⁵ The chapin is considered by Buckingham Smith to be the *Lactophrys sexcornutus* Mitchel or Knuckle Fish (Fontaneda, 1944:40).

⁶ Breechclouts of this form must have had a broad distribution in south Florida as Dickinson (1945:28) reports similar ones with a brush hanging down behind from the Jobe or Jeaga.

⁷ Specimens of the last form are found in certain archeological sites in the Glades Area (Goggin, MS).

At a much later period (1743), we have more ethnographic data concerning the inhabitants of the Keys (Alegre, 1842:277), although they were then reduced to only a few families. These were migratory, have no permanent homes, moving from island to island according to the abundance of wild fruits and fish which composed their diet. Each group or rancheria had its own cacique, and a second in command, the *capitán grande*. The influence of Spanish names had also spread to the priest or shaman, who was known as the *obispo*. His duties included control of the weather, for he summoned the wind with whistles and broke squalls with various "noises" (chants?). He also participated in certain rituals with incense which the Indians offered to the cacique and his sons. Their ceremony of consecration (*consagración*) consisted of three days of continued races, in the meanwhile drinking (what?) until falling senseless. The recumbent participants were considered dead until revived after sanctification. A fish (*picuda*) painted on a small board was worshipped. This was a very gross and badly formed representation pierced by a harpoon. Surrounding the fish were several figures like tongues.

The attitude of the Indian towards death explains to some extent the archeological problem of the isolation of the burial mound on Lignumvitae Key. The Indians are reported to have had a great fear of bodies and to have interred them in a constantly guarded place some distance from the village. On the death of a cacique one or two children were killed to accompany him. The grave was adorned with turtles, other animals, stones, tobacco, and similar things.

HISTORY

The general historical background of southern Florida is too detailed to be considered here so only the details directly concerning the Matecumbe area and the Keys will be covered. Slave catchers from Hispanola probably raided the Florida coast in the early years of the sixteenth century, but we have no direct record of Spanish visits until Ponce de Leon's first voyage to Florida in 1513. Neither this visit, nor the second of Ponce in 1522, were of much significance as he did not stay long in the Keys.*

For a period of some years little attention was given to the Keys although the west coast of Florida was well known from the trips of Narvaez, De Soto, De Luna, and others. About 1545 Hernando de Escalante Fontaneda was shipwrecked on the Florida coast and spent many years as an Indian captive,

* Recent attempts have been made to locate certain islands visited on Ponce de Leon's first voyage. They are apparently in the Keys; however, the writer is of the opinion that the available accounts are too vague to identify the islands with any reasonable certainty.

at Carlos the greater part of the time. He visited and described the Keys, mentioning two villages by name, Guarungunbe and Cuchiyaga.

Pedro Menéndez de Aviles founded St. Augustine in 1565, and was busied for some time thereafter with the French to the north on the St. John's. When they were finally disposed of, Menéndez turned his attention to the exploration of Florida. The various tribes of South Florida were visited and missions were established, those closest to the Keys being at Tekesta on Biscayne Bay, and at Carlos on the southwest coast. Indian settlements on the Keys may have been visited on this trip; at least the party must have passed close to them going from the east to the west coast.

In the years closely following the initial trip of Menéndez, there are found a number of references to an Indian settlement at Los Martires, which lay between the Calusa and Tekesta. Judging from its name, it was on the Keys, but its exact location is unknown (Vargas Ugarte, 1935:88). It is entirely possible that Los Martires and Matecumbe were the same village; in fact the killing of the Spaniards later described is variously stated to have happened at Los Martires and Matecumbe.

The first mention of the name Matecumbe was in 1573, in a petition from Menendez to the Spanish Crown. Menéndez stated that the Indians of South Florida were very bloodthirsty and a menace to the Spanish, particularly castaways, and requested permission to exterminate or enslave them. This petition was accompanied by sworn affidavits of a number of Spaniards who testified to various incidents of Indian cruelty, among which are several accounts of an incident perpetrated by the Matecumbe Indians.⁹ It appears that a shallop with nine Spaniards aboard was enroute from St. Augustine to Havana. The men stopped to fish in the territory of the Cacique Matecumbe, where the Indians first protested friendship but later attacked them. Eight of the men were killed but one, a soldier named Andrés Calderón, was only wounded. For some reason he was spared, kept as a slave, and fed by an Indian friend. He was later ransomed by Menéndez. Until the time of this incident, the Cacique Matecumbe had been at peace with the Spanish and his son was in Havana in care of the Theatines. The sending of relatives of important Indians to Spain or Havana was a common practice, providing hostages and interpreters, and serving to impress the natives with Spanish power, although it did not seem to do so in this instance. The outcome of the

⁹ This petition and affidavits in Spanish and English are in Connor (1925:30-82). The above account of the incident has been compiled from several of the affidavits, as none gave complete details.

Matecumbe incident is unknown, but the petition for the "giving up as slaves the Indians of Florida" was rejected in 1574.

The next recorded contact of the Spanish in the area was in 1605, when the frigate *Nuestra Señora del Rosario*, carrying a number of missionaries to St. Augustine, ran aground off the coast of Matecumbe (Geiger, 1936:185). These friars, however, had a more fortunate experience with the Indians. The passengers were delayed several days while the ship was being freed, and meanwhile the Indians came out in their canoes, declaring themselves friends of the Spaniards and visitors of St. Augustine. They furnished the stranded Spaniards with fresh water, fish, and wood, and aided in freeing the vessel. The belongings of the travelers had been taken ashore to lighten the ship, and these were returned aboard by the Indians. It is further stated that nothing was lost by theft.

It is probable that there was much contact in this period, although little information is available. The Florida Straits directly off the Keys was the main route of vessels bound for Spain from most of Spanish America, and probably as many ships were wrecked then as in later times. We have Fontaneda's statement (1944:21) to the effect that the Indians of Guarun-gunbe were rich because of wealth derived from wrecks. Matecumbe, which was later famous as a watering place, was probably utilized for this purpose from a very early time. The lack of information on the Keys may be the result of a deliberate attempt to keep such information out of circulation and away from the enemies of the Spanish King, as the area lay along one of the main routes of their plate fleets.

Nevertheless some English did visit South Florida. Sir John Hawkins aboard his famous vessel *Jesus of Lubeck* watered along the east coast near the head of the Keys in 1565. Apparently he had no contacts with the Indians although he feared them (Sparke, 1941:40). The fleet of Christopher Newport some years later, in 1591, fruitlessly searched for water in the Keys, where they encountered some Indians who were noted to be courteous and far more civil than those of Dominica, a dubious compliment (Twitt, 1941:152). The above mentioned visits probably represent only a small sample of the many casual contacts which must have taken place.

Besides the Spaniards who came to the Keys, there were many Indians who visited the Spanish in St. Augustine. We have the above mentioned case where the Indians told of their visits to the capital. Two years later, in 1607, Governor Ibarra received visits from a number of the Caciques of the southern coast among whom were ". . . the principal lords of the mouth of Miguel

Mora" (Swanton, 1922:342). This opening has been considered to be that between the Keys and the mainland, or it may possibly be the present Black Caesars Creek.¹⁰

The next mention of Matecumbe is in 1628, when it was listed by Vásques de Espinosa (1942:109) as one of the villages of the south towards Havana. There appears to be the implication that the inhabitants were Christians.

The Matecumbe Indians drop into obscurity again until 1675, when Bishop Calderon made a trip to Florida inspecting missions. He apparently did not visit the southern part of the state, but listed a number of the groups on the Keys, among them the "Matecumbeses." To the north of this group were the "Viscaynos," probably located on or near the present Biscayne Key, and to the South were the "Bayahondos" possibly located on the present Bahai Honda Key or on Key Vaca, and the "Cuchiagaros," who may have occupied Big Pine Key. Calderon refers to these tribes in general as "savage heathen Carib [sic] Indians in camps, having no fixed abodes, living only on fish and roots of trees" (Wenhold, 1936:12).

In 1697 the Catholic Indians of Matecumbe supplied refuge to five Franciscans from the Calusa country. The Franciscans had been preaching the faith at Cayo de Carlos, but the Indians attacked them, and drove them naked from their region (Barcia, 1723:316). It is probable that the Matecumbe Indians are the only ones in South Florida who could possibly be considered as Christians at this period.

It is interesting to note the continued interest the Indians of the Keys had in the Catholic Faith. For some years they sent petitions to Havana requesting missionaries and in 1743 two Jesuits, Fathers Monaco and Alaña, went to Florida. However, they did not stay in the Keys but traveled further north, landing near Miami.¹¹ The strategic position of the Keys at this time is well shown by the Governor of Havana's belief that sending missionaries was important not only for the glory of God and the good of the Indians' souls, but also as a service to the Crown for the safety of the coast and of Spanish ships (Alegre, 1842:277-8). This last missionary attempt, like all

¹⁰ An early map shows "Abra de M. de Moure" between "Caio de Biscainhos" and "Caio de dose leguas" or Key Largo (Jansson, 1650, Pl. 35, "Insularum Hispaniolae et Cuba").

¹¹ Several unpublished documents exist concerning this missionary effort which might contain interesting material. Two documents of 1737 and 1738 are to be found in the Archives of Archibishopric of Havana (Anonymous, 1944: lxxviii). A later document of 1743, together with an excellent map of the Keys, is in the Archivo General de Indias at Seville, Est. 58, Caj. 2, Leg. 10 (Lowery, 1912:299). A tracing of the map is in the Library of Congress. It is of special interest to South Floridians because it is the first map to indicate the presence and nature of the Everglades.

previous ones was of short duration. Moving from Miami to the southern Indian River, possibly close to the present Fort Pierce, the padres worked with several tribes including the St. Lucies and Miamis. However, raids from the north, carried out by Muskogean peoples so disrupted their work that the mission attempt was abandoned (Alegre, 1842:279).

From this time on we have little information about the Indians of the Keys and none about the Matecumbe Indians as such. Roberts (1763:21), refers to “. . . Cayo Ratones about four miles in length, on which is an Indian town called Pueblo Raton, which is the only settlement of Indians that we have any account of on the Martyres.” This Cayo Ratones may be the modern Virginia Key, as Roberts located it north of Cayo Biscayno, although Virginia Key is not that large. In any case this village is near the present Miami and at some distance from Matecumbe. Roberts (1763:19), however, does give evidence that Indians at least visited the Keys for fishing; he describes the fisheries near the Tortugas, saying that “. . . the Indians of Ratones and the south parts of Florida cure great quantities of this fish, which with the hats and mats they make of grass, and barks of trees in perfect condition, they exchange in traffic with the Spaniards who come here from the Havana with European goods for the use of the natives.” Roberts (1763:21) also mentions the use of Indian divers by the Spanish in salvaging a wrecked plate fleet in 1733. These may have been from one of the other portions of the Spanish possessions but they were most likely South Florida Indians for they had an excellent reputation as divers.

The population of South Florida was apparently dwindling rapidly by the early part of the eighteenth century, and Pueblo Raton may have been a focal point for the last remnants on the east coast. Even this group was not secure for Father Monaco, a missionary on the southeastern coast in 1743, reported that this region was raided by the Yuchi (Alegre, 1842:279). From sources among the Creeks we find that they carried on warfare against the Indians of Cape Florida, who were at length reduced to thirty men and moved to Havana with the Spaniards (Adair, 1775:134). Romans (1775:289), who apparently considered all of the South Florida Indians as Calusa, says they were driven into the mangroves of the Ten Thousand Islands and to the Keys, but that even then they were not safe. Apparently before Roman's time most of the Indians had left the Keys, but were later forced back by this pressure from northern Indians.

The removal of the Spanish above referred to took place in 1763, after a treaty had been signed by Great Britain, France, and Spain in November,

1762. By the terms of this treaty Florida was ceded to England in exchange for Havana, which had fallen to the English earlier in that year, and all of the Spanish residents of Florida were given an opportunity to evacuate if they so wished. Many did, taking most of the South Florida Indians with them. A few, however, remained and were known henceforth as "Spanish Indians." Romans (1775:291), the best authority of the English Period, says that the Calusa remnants on Key Vaca and Key West "... consisting of about eighty families, left this last protection of their native land and went to Havannah" in 1763. Apparently by this time there were no Indians left on the Keys, although Romans himself used a Spanish Indian guide further up on the coast.¹² He does name Matecumbe (Lower Matecumbe) as being one of the last refuges of the Calusa, and apparently various later writers make this statement on his authority. The story of the first massacre on Indian Key must have originated with him, as no earlier source is known. He says (Romans, 1775:292), "A little key lying before Matecombé is a dreadful monument of this [the cruelty of the Calusa], it is called the Matanca, (i.e.) slaughter, from the murder of near four hundred wretched Frenchmen, who being cast away fell into the hands of these monsters; who after keeping them in the adjacent island from some time carried them all to this little key, which now serves them for one common grave."¹³

The Spanish returned to Florida in 1784, but we have no good evidence that any of the Indians accompanied them, although we find that "... Cayo Vaca or Cow Key is remarkable for having been inhabited by the Caloosa Indians from Havana" (Forbes, 1821:109). This might indicate that some did return, but if so they were gone from the Keys by the time the United States took over Florida.

The modern occupation of the Keys apparently began just before Romans' time, possibly around 1750, and was greatly accelerated by the departure of the Spanish and the removal of the Indians. The forerunners in this period were the men from New Providence and other Bahama islands

¹² Manuscript of Romans quoted in Forbes (1821:97).

¹³ The above version is in the text. In the appendix, which is a pilot guide to the coast, he gives another account. "This key is called Matanca, i.e. Murder, from the catastrophe of a French crew said to have amounted to near three hundred men, who were unfortunate enough to fall into the hands of the Caloosas, which savages destroyed them on the spot." Note the discrepancy in the number of Frenchmen slain. Many later writers have repeated this tale apparently on his authority and as far as can be ascertained it began with him. (See Ellicott, 1803:247; Forbes, 1821:108; Vignoles, 1823:120; Williams, 1837:36.) The Florida Guide places the time of the incident as about 1755 but gives no authority (Federal Writers Project, 1939:331). If such an incident did give the key its name it must have taken place somewhat earlier, for Matanzas is the name of this island on a map of 1742 (Liguera Antayo, 1742).

who came to the Keys for turtles and mahogany. According to Romans (1775:292), they always came armed and had frequent brushes with the Indians. This enmity was apparently encouraged by the Spanish. With the English occupation of Florida, many of the former visitors from the Bahamas spent more time in the Keys, mainly fishing and wrecking, for by then most of the valuable timber had been cut.

Tavernier Harbor off Key Largo became an important wrecking station but the Matecumbe region was one of the main headquarters probably because of its strategic location and the presence of fresh water. Even with the reversion of Florida to the Spanish in 1784, there was little slackening in its use, as privateers from the Bahamas patrolled the waters.¹⁴

Florida was acquired by the United States in 1821 and the Matecumbe region immediately grew in importance. Indian Key was one of the three settlements in Monroe County in 1823, the others being Key Biscayne and Key West. Indian Key early became a naval station, port of entry, and admiralty court for adjudicating the claims of wreckers. When Dade County was created in 1836, the county seat was established at Indian Key, and 50 voters cast their ballots at that precinct (Hudson, 1943:24).

In 1838 Dr. Henry Perrine, a botanist interested in tropical plant introduction, settled with his family on Indian Key. He planned to establish a nursery and to cultivate tropical plants suitable for introduction into the United States. However, his plans were frustrated two years later when a band of "Spanish Indians," headed by Chakika, attacked the little settlement. Dr. Perrine attempted to parley with the Indians in Spanish, but was killed along with several other inhabitants. His family, however, managed to escape to Tea Table Key, then a small military or naval post.¹⁵

These "Spanish Indians" were probably Calusa, but some may have been of Matecumbe ancestry. In any case this is the last time they attract notice, as from this time on all trace of "Spanish Indians" is lost except for a few scattered references to them in papers relating to the removal of the Seminoles from Florida to the west. Some of the "Spanish Indians" were undoubtedly incorporated with the Seminoles who remained, while others may have gone west.

¹⁴ See Ellicott's experiences here in 1799 (Ellicott, 1893:251).

¹⁵ Robinson (1942) gives a more complete account and bibliography. There is some dispute about the date of this massacre; Robinson follows many others in citing August 7, 1840, but Swanton (1922:344) says May 7, 1840. It appears that August 2 is the correct date. An account by Dr. Perrine's daughter may be seen in Walker (1841). Most writers believe that Chakika was not present on this raid, as he is considered to have been killed earlier. However, an anonymous account (1841) gives a contemporary description of Chakika's death after the Indian Key raid.

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