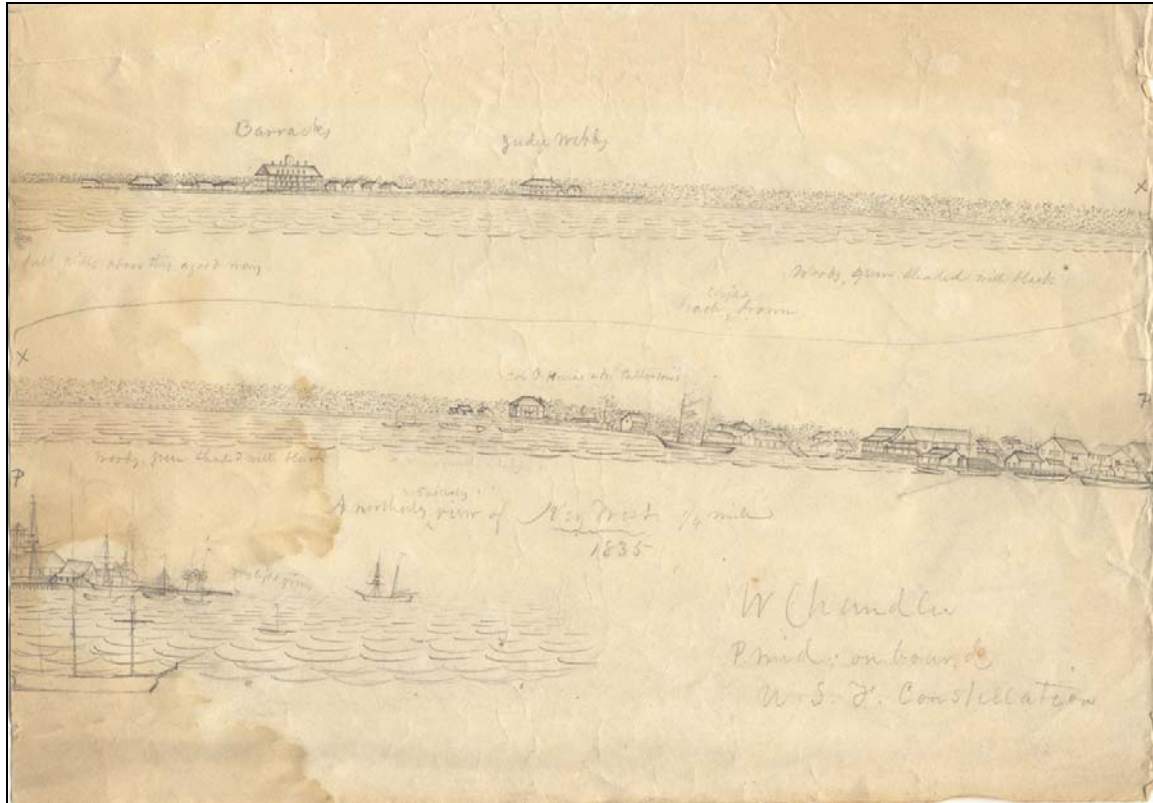


## William Chandler's Sketch of Key West, 1835

By Corey Malcom

Reprinted from *Navigators: Newsletter of the Mel Fisher Maritime Heritage Society*, Vol. 20, No.2, May 2004



*A Northerly (Easterly) View of Key West 1835* by William Chandler  
Herbert and Ruth Schimmel Archives at the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum

Some time in the autumn of 1835, Passed Midshipman William Chandler, sitting aboard the USS *Constellation*, made a remarkably detailed pencil sketch of the small island community of Key West. The *Constellation* was anchored off the northern shore of the island as part of a fleet sent to battle the Seminole Indians in what is known as the Second Seminole War. The sketch is labeled as being a “Northerly (easterly)” view, and depicts in three sections, all of the northern shore that was occupied at that time.

Key West was a community of around 600 people, with roughly 450 Whites, 80 Slaves, and 80 free Blacks. The port was a quite busy one in 1835, with 331 vessels entering, and 260 clearing. Customs revenues that year were over \$20,000. Wrecking was the chief occupation, with twenty vessels engaged in the business, and many warehouses had been built to hold salvaged goods. There was also nascent cigar industry. The first ship to be built at the island, the 10-ton sloop *Mary McIntosh*, was built by John Bartlum that same year. Also, it was the first year schools were opened on the island.

Chandler made a number of notations that describe prominent homes and industries. Looking at them from east to west, the first refers to the “salt mills above this [the barracks] a good way.” The salt works, or “mills,” made use of the naturally occurring salt ponds covering much of the central and western portions of the island, and through

evaporation collected salt from seawater. The “La Fayette Salt Company,” as it was then called, was operated by John Simonton, and financed by investors from Mobile and New Orleans. The prominent “barracks” drawn along the waterfront are those of the US Army, and were first erected there in 1831. The depicted buildings were destroyed in 1844. The home of James Webb, the first Superior Court judge for the Southern District of Florida, is shown as relatively isolated on the beach east of the military grounds. The homes of “Col. O’Hara” and “Mr. Patterson” are those of two prominent early citizens. Oliver O’Hara was a merchant from South Carolina. He was described as “a giant in height and physique,” and “a ruddy faced Irishman with snow white hair.” Alexander Patterson had been the first Mayor of Key West, and was serving as Postmaster in 1835. He was also an auctioneer of wrecked goods, and kept a store at the foot of Whitehead Street. A busy cluster of buildings and ships is found at the western end of the drawing. This main business area is dominated by numerous warehouses, including those of Fielding A. Browne, and the largest one on the island with its prominent cupola, owned by Pardon C. Greene. These covered the waterfront on the northwestern promontory of the island. The men also owned the docks adjacent to their buildings. It is likely that some of the sloops and schooners shown in the foreground were engaged in the wrecking industry. Chandler also made note of some of the colors he saw – “woods, green shaded with black,” and “very light green” water.



Chart of Modern Key West showing the *Constellation*'s likely Anchorage and Chandler's View

Chandler's view was from ¼ mile distant, and the *Constellation* was most likely anchored between Key West and Wisteria Island. In modern terms, his view ran from today's Palm Avenue to Mallory Square. The 1835 shoreline in most of this area was much further back than at present, and the relatively modern features of Trumbo Point and the railroad docks did not exist. The area of the barracks is still occupied by military housing, and is known as Peary Court. Today, Judge Webb's house would be found near the intersection of Grinnel and Eaton streets. The O'Hara and Patterson homes were on the south side of Greene Street, along the water's edge, and near a small inlet feeding the salt pond that covered much of today's downtown. The heart of this maritime community, as shown in the sketch, was located along the waterfront from the foot of Elizabeth Street around to Mallory Square, and down Front Street.

The *Constellation* would have been a looming presence anchored in the harbor. At 1278 tons, the vessel was 164 feet long, and carried a complement of 340 men. The *Constellation* was the first-ever US Navy vessel, being commissioned in 1797, and also the first put to sea, and the first to engage, defeat and capture an enemy ship. The *Constellation* sailed for the Gulf of Mexico in October of 1835 for support in the ouster of the Seminole Indians, whose growing uprisings were interfering with the development of the Florida territory. All Native Americans in the southeast were to have been located to reservations west of the Mississippi River by 1832, but the Seminoles resisted, and had found refuge in the swampy wilderness. As ever more remote areas of Florida began to be claimed by White settlers, the Seminole peoples already occupying these lands began to combat the encroachments. In December of 1835 hostilities erupted into an all-out war. That same month the *Constellation* was dispatched to Ft. Brooke at Tampa Bay, and troops she was carrying participated in the first battles of what became a seven-year conflict.

With the rank of Passed Midshipman, Chandler was eligible for promotion to Lieutenant, which he received in 1837. This was just one step in a naval career that spanned 41 years. Chandler had entered the service in 1820, and he left it in 1861 with the rank of Commander. In 1835, as a low-ranking officer, he would have served the officers of the quarterdeck and forecandle as they needed him. Somewhere along the line he had obviously honed his artistic skills. The precise lines, scale, and fine detailing of the Key West sketch show a strong talent. But exactly why he made this magnificent drawing is not known.