

Key West Remembers Middle Passage

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For the second year, the community of Key West, Florida, has led the nation in the observance of the August 23 **International Day for the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and its Abolition**, proclaimed, in 1998, by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the General Assembly. The date commemorates the beginning of the Haitian Revolution in 1791, pointedly recognizing that the most significant Abolitionist effort came from Africans themselves, and succeeded in establishing the world's first Black republic and the second independent nation in the New World (after the United States).

By history and geography, the small island city of Key West is a most appropriate venue for this global observance, because of its numerous connections to the history of the Middle Passage, as the Atlantic "slave trade" route was known. This southernmost city in the continental United States is geographically the closest point to the major routes of this traffic in human lives, being strategically located across the Florida Strait from Cuba, which is just 90 miles away. Most famously, the artifacts salvaged from the 1700 wreck of the English slaver *Henrietta Marie*, including actual iron shackles, which have been assembled into a national touring exhibition, are housed at Key West's Mel Fisher Maritime Museum. The city also played a role in a remarkable saga in 1827

when it welcomed 120 survivors of the wreck of the Cuba-bound Spanish slaver *Guerrero* off Key Largo (although most of the remaining survivors were taken to Cuba by the rescued crew of the *Guerrero*, who hijacked the boats of their rescuers). Key West figured in numerous other cases as well, such as the Spanish slave ship *Fénix* and the freedom ship *Ajax*, among others.

The strongest and most direct connection to the Middle Passage, however, is the Key West African Cemetery, where 295 Africans, mostly children and youths, were buried in 1860. They were part of a total of 1,432 persons who were rescued from three captured American-owned slave ships bound for Cuba which were brought into Key West by the U.S. Navy—the *Wildfire*, with 508 captives aboard, was captured off Nuevitas on Cuba's north coast; the *William* was taken off the Isle of Pines with 540 Africans, 27 of whom died before reaching Key West; and, the *Bogotá*, with 411, was captured near Lobos Island, off the Bahamas Bank. The Africans were detained in the city for 81 days, awaiting transportation to new lives of freedom in the American colony of Liberia, West Africa (but not to their original homelands).

During this period, despite the generosity of the citizens of Key West, and especially of U.S. Marshal Fernando J. Moreno, in providing food, clothing, blankets, housing, and other needs, the 295 who died could not survive the

illnesses and horrific conditions that they had endured during the ocean crossing. The dead were buried in shallow graves near the shore, at what is now popular Higgs Beach. The Cemetery remained largely forgotten until 1996 when community activist Norma Jean Sawyer and researcher Gail Swanson brought it to light. Some actual burials were later located by archaeologist Corey Malcom of the Mel Fisher Museum.

Although 15 of the burials were located by ground-penetrating radar (GPR), the tragedy of the deaths is compounded by the fact that most of the original burials have been disturbed and displaced on at least three occasions: for construction projects in 1862, in 1903, and during World War II. Present plans call for renewed GPR surveys to search for these additional 280 burials.

The Cemetery site was the appropriate location for the ceremony observing the International Day, which was held on Sunday, August 22. This Second Annual Key West Observance was made all the more special because 2010 marks the 150th anniversary of the Cemetery, and because the first phase of the memorial monument design had been complet-

ed with the installation of artistic fencing. Notably, the fence rail is topped with 250 solid pyramids, one for each of the persons who were buried there. Additional features are planned.

Some two dozen hardy souls, including some from Miami, Orlando, and as far away as England, braved the summer rains to attend the Observance, which honored Native American and African Ancestors, and offered prayers, song, and a panel discussion by researchers and by the artists who contributed to the monument design. A greeting for the occasion was received from the Mayor of Whydah (Ouidah), the once notorious port of the “slave trade” in the Republic of Benin, where, in fact, the Africans aboard the captured *Bogotá* had been originally embarked.

Although the focus of the ceremony was on ensuring that those who died will never be forgotten – of the 1,781 Africans who were originally taken from Africa aboard the three ships, only 1,138 survived to return to Liberia, and only 821 of those survived the return voyage. Those survivors were also remembered, with the hope that they have descendants in Liberia today.



A view of the Key West African Cemetery memorial monument, with the recently installed fencing. The 295 pyramids represent the 295 Africans who were buried at the site. (Photo by Lu-Ellen Esposito.)