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# Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



## KEYS' LIGHTHOUSES WRECKED THE 'WRECKERS'

By HAMPTON DUNN

KEY WEST --- Back before Florida became a state in 1821 the principal business was said to be "wrecking."

The reefs along the keys were treacherous, and there were few navigation aids for the ship captains. Often they were wrecked. Local islanders made a career of helping to salvage the contents of the ships. For this they demanded, and got, a huge percentage of the cargo. It is even recorded that some unscrupulous wreckers would put out false beacons to lure ships to the reefs --- instead of away from them.

Thus were the conditions when Uncle Sam stepped in and expanded his lighthouse system to the keys. The tale is handed down that many Key Westers opposed installation of the lights because it spelled the end for their highly prosperous wrecking business. In 1825 alone, \$293, 353 worth of wrecked property was sold in Key West. From 1831 to 1846 the proceeds from 50 wrecks stranded in the Florida Keys totalled more than a million dollars.

The first lighthouse in Key West was erected in 1825, survived several storms and eventually was destroyed. Others succeeded it including one built in 1840 and destroyed by the hurricane of 1846.

A modern lighthouse was built at a cost of \$25, 000. The one serving Key West today sits within the city limits, the only one in the U.S. that does operate within a city. The light is 91 feet above water, has a candlepower of 50, 000 and is visible nine miles at sea.

It's the farthest inland of any in the country.

