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When Miami lighthouse was a blazing chimney

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Photouring Florida

By HAMPTON DUNN



WHEN MIAMI LIGHTHOUSE WAS A BLAZING CHIMNEY

By HAMPTON DUNN

MIAMI -- In South Florida, where there were few white settlers, the Indians had the upper hand during the savage Seminole Wars. In mid-1836, the settlers fled to populated Key West for protection while the red men were on the warpath.

At Cape Florida on Key Biscayne here, even the lighthouse keeper had deserted his post because he was allergic to Indians. Not so, his brave and devoted assistant, John W. B. Thompson, who decided to stay at his post, come what may. A Negro helper Henry also elected to stand by.

At 4 P.M. on that hot July 23, 1836, the rampaging Indians struck. Thompson and Henry scooted inside the structure. They fired from the windows and staved off the attackers until dark. The Reds broke open the door and set fire to the stairway. Oil drums caught fire. The guards made their way to the top. In a final desperate attempt to halt the Indians, Thompson heaved over a box of ammunition below. It exploded and set off a furious blast, turning the lighthouse into a blazing cannon. The Negro helper was killed during the fracas. Thompson was rescued a day later by sailors from the U.S. schooner *Motto*.

The Cape Florida lighthouse is the oldest structure in South Florida. After that disastrous day in 1836, the government rebuilt Cape Florida in 1837. The lenses and illumination equipment were destroyed by pirates in 1861. Cape Florida was dis-established in 1878.

Today it is a new State park.

