

“MAD PASSIONS OF THE HOUR”:
KEY WEST AND THE CIVIL WAR

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ABSTRACT

This review discusses two recent books that focus on Key West in the Civil War. Employing vastly different approaches, both works will have their share of admirers and detractors. Given the complexity of Key West’s role in the Civil War, however, much fertile ground remains for future researchers.

KEYWORDS

Confederate States of America, Cuba, Disease, Fire, Fishing and Sponging, Forts, Historiography, Hurricanes, Key West, Slavery, Spain, U.S. Civil War, Wrecks and Wrecking

CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION392

II. PREVIOUS WORKS397

III. PRIDE’S BOOK398

IV. THUERSAM’S BOOK.....400

V. CONCLUSION.....402

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MIKE PRIDE, *STORM OVER KEY WEST: THE CIVIL WAR AND THE CALL OF FREEDOM*. SARASOTA, FL: PINEAPPLE PRESS, 2020. Pp. 320. \$26.95. ISBN 978-1683340935.

JOHN BERNHARD THUERSAM, *KEY WEST'S CIVIL WAR: "RATHER UNSAFE FOR A SOUTHERN MAN TO LIVE HERE."* COLUMBIA, SC: SHOTWELL PUBLISHING LLC, 2022. Pp. 264. \$24.95. ISBN 978-1947660663.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the centuries, Key West has inspired distinctive visions for visitors and residents alike: bewitching semi-tropical paradise; boiling cauldron of irredeemable decadence; strategically essential outpost; festering nest of pestilence; or any one of a range of other possibilities, some well-grounded and others arising from mere whimsy or delusion. In 1847, for example, Catharine S. Hart (wife of future Florida governor Ossian B. Hart) lamented, "Vice and immorality and licentiousness is looked upon by some who are heads of families [here in Key West] as no crime and are guilty themselves of many indiscriminate acts."¹

In contrast, in 1849 Dr. Edward Aldrich exulted:

There are as many pleasant families here as you will find in any southern town of the same population—and in praise of the climate—enough cannot be said—The sea breeze is so exhilarating, and the gardens look so green and fresh, that I can [scarce realize] the impression that I am still in Uncle Sam's territories."²

For Brevet Colonel Robert E. Lee, writing home in the same year as Aldrich, Key West offered little that was worthy of recognition or comment. "This is a long narrow low island," he related, "containing a small village, apparently composed of wreckers [salvagers who worked wrecks on the Florida Reef] & those calculated for the wants of the shipping, driven here by distress of some kind."³

No discerning visitor to the island during the Antebellum Era, however, could miss one important fact. After the 1821 cession of Florida to the United States, Key West furnished its new host nation a critical bulwark against the seeming might of the Spanish Empire. Moreover, it offered a marvelous strategic outpost for controlling access from the Atlantic Ocean into the Gulf of Mexico and for projecting national power and influence toward the riches of the West Indies. A 1908 report by the U.S. Naval Institute later highlighted these points:

¹ Letter from Catharine S. Hart to her parents (Abner and Deborah Campbell), Aug. 29, 1847, *available at* <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00096090/00002/images> (University of Florida Digital Collections).

² *ECHOES FROM A DISTANT FRONTIER: THE BROWN SISTERS' CORRESPONDENCE FROM ANTEBELLUM FLORIDA* 229-30 (James M. Denham & Keith L. Huneycutt eds., 2004) (underlining as in the original).

³ Letter from Robert E. Lee to his wife (Mary Anna Randolph Custis Lee), Feb. 22, 1849, *available in* Lee Family Manuscripts, Virginia Museum of History and Culture, at Mss1 L51 c 85-104 (<http://librarycatalog.virginiahistory.org/final/portal.aspx?lang=en-US>).

The strategic value of Key West or any point on the extremity of the western end of the Florida Keys, was recognized long before the Civil War. In fact, during the first part of the last century, when the West Indian Islands, by their production of sugar and tobacco became one of the richest marts in the world, the political control of the West Indies and Caribbean was one of the chief problems of the maritime nations. Our statesmen were not ignorant of these conditions. They have left indisputable evidence of their appreciation of the strategic importance of this region.⁴

Real estate promoters since time immemorial famously have praised “location, location, location,” and so it was with Key West. Less than 100 miles on a southerly course across the Straits of Florida lay Cuba. Covering nearly 45,000 square miles, this lush Spanish dominion outranked Belgium, the Netherlands, and Portugal in size and almost equaled the state of Pennsylvania.⁵ Havana, the island’s urbane capital, lay a mere 105 miles to the south-southwest. With a residential base approaching 200,000 by the early 1860s, that metropolis alone easily dwarfed Florida in population. For that matter, no city of the future Confederate States of America eclipsed its size.⁶

Key West’s strategic importance, ultimately confirmed during the Civil War, also factored significantly when it came to Gulf of Mexico shipping and trade. New Orleans stood out as the region’s dominant port and urban center. Sited on a Mississippi River bow 631 miles northwest of Key West, the “Crescent City” controlled the immense downriver commerce of the fabled “Father of Waters.”⁷ Already by 1820, New Orleans, with more than 27,000 inhabitants, was the fifth largest city in the United States, trailing only New York (123,000), Philadelphia (63,000), Baltimore (62,000), and Boston (43,000).⁸ Four decades later, at the Civil War’s eve, New Orleans’ population had jumped to nearly 170,000. By comparison, the soon-to-be Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, counted only about one-quarter as many residents.⁹

Not surprisingly then, federal military authorities moved early to ensure that Key West—despite a tiny social order that numbered about 3,000 people by the Civil War’s onset—could withstand hostile threat and, by implication, that the United States could maintain unshakeable control of the outpost against external or internal assault. The U.S. Navy quickly established a local presence in the 1820s.

⁴ U.S. NAVAL INSTITUTE, PROCEEDINGS: VOLUME 34—PART 1, WHOLE NUMBERS 125, 126, at 608 (1908).

⁵ See BUREAU OF THE CENSUS LIBRARY, CUBA: POPULATION, HISTORY, AND RESOURCES 1907, at 9, 131 (1909).

⁶ See JULIA WARD HOWE, A TRIP TO CUBA 20-131 (1860); *Notes on Cuba*, 3 HARPER’S WKLY. 72 (Jan. 29, 1859).

⁷ WILLARD GLAZIER, DOWN THE GREAT RIVER; EMBRACING AN ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE TRUE SOURCE OF THE MISSISSIPPI xii, 30 (1892). See also MARK F. BIELSKI, A MORTAL BLOW TO THE CONFEDERACY: THE FALL OF NEW ORLEANS, 1862, at xvii (2021) (describing the significance of New Orleans to the Confederacy).

⁸ See United States Census Bureau, *Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990* (June 1998), available at census.gov/library/working-papers/1998/demo/POP-twps0027.html.

⁹ See PAUL J. SPRINGER, PROPAGANDA FROM THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR 118 (2019).

The U.S. Army followed two decades later with construction of Fort Zachary Taylor on Key West itself. Rigors of climate, logistics, fluctuating political winds, local intrigue, and other considerations limited the fort's progress toward completion. Still, as one local historian put it, "[The project] injected new life into the Key West economy."¹⁰ It also encouraged slave ownership through a policy that favored government leasing of enslaved workers from local masters, a factor that generated intense local resentment upon the policy's reversal as the war ensued.

As Fort Taylor evolved into "a massive trapezoidal structure complete with drawbridge and moat,"¹¹ a companion post named Fort Thomas Jefferson grew into one of the largest citadels ever erected by the United States. Located at Garden Key in the Dry Tortugas, about 70 miles west of Key West, the monumental structure was designed to stand defiantly as a "brilliant and undeniable symbol that the United States wanted to be left alone."¹²

While the growing military presence signaled the government's commitment to defense of its prized outpost, the local citizenry nonetheless found themselves repeatedly forced to endure harsh—even fatal—reminders that the government's prowess counted for little against the overwhelming forces of nature. For one thing, hurricanes and other tempests ripped into the island with disturbing frequency. An October 1846 gale known as the "Havana Hurricane" literally tore corpses from the ground as its winds and water nearly obliterated the settlement. Of 600 buildings on the island, only eight survived unscathed. "The [army] barracks were gone," a modern-day chronicler has noted, "as was most of Fort Taylor."¹³

Hand-in-glove with tropical storms came disease. Most frightfully this meant the dreaded yellow fever, more commonly called "yellow jack."¹⁴ As an island resident acknowledged a few years before the Civil War began, "The yellow fever of 1854 will be long remembered in our Island, having left its mark on the bleeding hearts of some of the most estimable members of our society."¹⁵

Not long after the 1854 epidemic, other—and equally ruinous—natural forces paid their visits. This time, flames were the culprit. "The city has been visited by a fire most disastrous in its effects, and from which it cannot recover for years," one newspaper editor reported in May 1859.¹⁶ Another source described the disaster by writing:

On the morning of the 16th the work of destruction commenced in the store of L.M. Shaffer, and raging for eight hours in every direction, reduced full one-half of the best built portion of the city, in that short space of time, to smouldering ruins.

¹⁰ MAUREEN OGLE, *KEY WEST: HISTORY OF AN ISLAND OF DREAMS* 40 (2006).

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² National Park Service, *Fort Jefferson* (Mar. 6, 2021), available at <https://www.nps.gov/drto/learn/historyculture/fort-jefferson.htm>.

¹³ OGLE, *supra* note 10, at 43.

¹⁴ See JOHN R. PIERCE & JAMES V. WRITER, *YELLOW JACK—HOW YELLOW FEVER RAVAGED AMERICA AND WALTER REED DISCOVERED ITS DEADLY SECRETS* (2005).

¹⁵ *Key West Correspondence*, CHARLESTON DAILY COURIER (SC), Sept. 27, 1854, at 2.

¹⁶ See *Terrible Conflagration!*, FLA. PENINSULAR (Tampa), May 28, 1859, at 2.

The devouring element never found buildings in a better condition for its voracious appetite; for many days no rain had fallen, the broiling sun had absorbed every particle of moisture from the wood and left it dry and tinder-like. After the fire had commenced, there were no means of stopping its progress but by removing the houses from beyond its reach. This was effected after several trials, and by burning three one-hundred pound barrels of gunpowder. There were no means at hand of throwing water but by buckets, the city being unprovided with fire engines; and the flames once under headway, all efforts to quench them were futile.

Besides the buildings burned, a large number of cocoanut [sic] trees were destroyed. These trees, in one or two instances, were the means of saving the buildings which they shaded. The loss of these beautiful trees will be seriously felt for a year to come. Some of them were 40 years old, and had attained great height and beauty. The fire burned over an area of nearly twenty acres, and destroyed property to the value of \$275,000.¹⁷

Despite passionate divisions that soon set many locals at odds with the military, the 1859 fire saw Key West’s residents immensely thankful for the selfless acts of kindness and heroic cooperation offered by the Army and the Navy. One source reported: “Had it not been for the presence of Capt. [John M.] Brann[an] and his company of soldiers, it is impossible to say when the fire would have stopped.”¹⁸ Elsewhere readers learned:

Capt. B. took charge of a large amount of goods and stationed sentinels to guard them. He also, with the assistance of Lieut. [Asher R.] Edd[y], blew up five or six buildings which would have otherwise gone with the rest and assisted in destroying half the city besides. The store ship, *Relief*, was fortunately in port when the fire broke out. Lieut. [Roger] Perry, the officer in command, sent his men ashore to assist the Mayor and the city authorities. Their first act was to save the Custom House, which was done by battling for an hour with the flames. They assisted in demolishing some buildings and protected property already saved.¹⁹

The 1859 fire lamentably, if understandably, left a dark legacy in some quarters as a lingering sense of despair soon fertilized seeds of insular conflict. Some well-heeled residents quickly recovered from the disaster; countless less-fortunate persons experienced prosperity’s return only as it benefitted others. The military, meanwhile, enjoyed the boon of government payrolls delivered in much-envied hard money.

All the while, dynamics swirling within the population at large spurred a slow drift toward division. Key West-born historian Jefferson B. Browne later described the island’s assemblage of humankind as a “rare aggregation”²⁰ and continued:

¹⁷ *The Great Fire in Key West*, DAILY EXCHANGE (Balt.), May 30, 1859, at 1 (paragraphing inserted for improved readability) [hereinafter *Great Fire*].

¹⁸ *Destructive Fire at Key West*, CHARLESTON DAILY COURIER (SC), May 30, 1859, at 2.

¹⁹ *Great Fire*, *supra* note 17 (italics added).

²⁰ JEFFERSON B. BROWNE, KEY WEST: THE OLD AND NEW 174 (1912).

It was a cosmopolitan population; Bahama wreckers and immigrants, small fishermen from Noank and Mystic, Conn., refugees from the mainland, gentlemen from Virginia, Georgia, and the Gulf States, businessmen, commercial adventurers and mechanics from the Northern States, and world wanderers from every portion of the globe, brought to Key West by chance or inclination, and held here by her lotus charms. [Included were] Englishmen, Bahamians, Irish, Dutch, Swedes, Norwegians, Hindoos, Russians, Italians, Spaniards, Cubans, Canary Islanders, South Americans, Canadians, Scotch, French, shipwrecked sailors, deserters and discharged men from the army, navy and marine corps; men who had knocked about all over the world and developed personalities of their own, which they retained. . . .²¹

Browne's portrait of Key West's volatile mix effectively illustrates the diversity of island society. Taken alone, though, his report tends to mislead. For one thing, by 1860 over 600 slaves and free Blacks lived on or near the island.²² Not to be forgotten were those who comprised the majority, a faction often characterized as "Bahamians." Writing in 1853, one newspaper's correspondent remarked:

This "city" contains about 3,000 inhabitants, of which about 300 are slaves, 1,700 are *Conchs*, and the remaining thousand are descended from the 'rest of mankind. These *Conchs* are peculiar specimens of human kind, and immigrated to the Key from the [British] Bahama Islands, some 260 miles to the east of this, upon the other side of the Gulf stream. When first, or wherefore, they were called *Conchs*, authentic history has not informed us. We know, however, that they are descendants of the English emigrants and the royalists of Georgia and Carolina, who settled upon and fled to the sandy and barren Bahama Islands. Living there in comparative indolence, and disregarding the laws of Nature and of Nature's God, by marrying and intermarrying within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity, they have become a distinct class or race, whom the Almighty has, apparently marked with degeneracy. Among their children, and they are legion, you can only occasionally recognize an expression or a feature of the "human face divine."²³

In this same correspondent's opinion, the *Conchs*' former connections to the British Crown—when combined with their ingrained habits and inclination—too often weakened or displaced their newfound attachments to Uncle Sam:

The *Conch*-men of this day and generation, at least upon this island, are a cadaverous, sorry, and fishy-looking *genus hominum*. They are proverbially peaceful, honest, temperate and religious, but have none of the pugnacious energy, scheming proclivity, and perpetual mobility of the Yankees. Their chief business is fishing, sponging, turtling and wrecking,

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 173.

²³ *Key West*, Feb. 8, 1853, SAVANNAH DAILY GEORGIAN, May 14, 1853, at 2 (*italics as in the original*).

and generally on their own account, and not as the "hirelings" of others. The labor which a Northern or Western man performs at a dollar a day, and one hundred and fifty a year, the *Conch* regards as *servile*. . . . Their wants are few, and in this latitude and locality, easily supplied. Their principal food being fish, the waters around the Key furnish a continuous and inexhaustible supply, and occasional wrecking procures for themselves and families the necessary clothing, bread, groceries, &c.²⁴

II. PREVIOUS WORKS

As the city's melting pot simmered in the late 1850s and early 1860s, state, regional, and national events jolted the nation step by step toward unthinkable disunion. Given the island's prevailing circumstances, the jolts were bound to echo profoundly—and violently—in the small but increasingly complex and often-conflicted world that Key West was becoming. Above all else, the island's strategic positioning—when combined with the powerful presence of Forts Taylor and Jefferson—virtually guaranteed that upcoming military and political movements would project national turmoil directly on the Keys.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that only recently have scholars and professional writers taken substantive first steps to provide ready access to Key West's rich Civil War experience. The delay's causes are discernable and in good part human in nature. During the war, local fissures and fractures compounded themselves. Passions, some sadly not fully resolved today, soared. Valuable personal and economic interests faced challenge, hard positions were staked out, pain and loss visited every quarter, and loyalties suffered strain and too often were betrayed. Along the way, embarrassing, hurtful, and sometimes horrible mistakes were made.

Accordingly, during the post-Civil War decades many locals held to the conviction that memories of that dreadful time remained too hot to be aired openly. In 1876, for example, Walter C. Maloney barely mentioned the conflict in a historical address given at a gathering convened to celebrate Key West's new city hall. For the published version of his talk, though, Maloney reluctantly appended six pages of conflict-related information. He tellingly introduced the material as follows:

It is with great repugnance, and only after repeated solicitations, that I have consented to add to the foregoing address some references to a few of the incidents which transpired in your city, during the period embraced within the years 1861 and 1865. My unwilling consent has only been obtained upon the *plea of justice* to the memory of those now dead, whose confidence I enjoyed and whose sympathies I shared. The disruption of social, conjugal, fraternal, political, and even religious ties, wrought by real or fancied grievances, growing out of the mad passions of the hour during that period, serves as a beacon to warn against the danger of re-opening wounds not yet fully healed.²⁵

²⁴ *Id.* (italics as in the original).

²⁵ WALTER C. MALONEY, A SKETCH OF THE HISTORY OF KEY WEST, FLORIDA 62 (1876) (italics as in the original).

Three dozen years elapsed thereafter before the first extensive “history of Key West” reached publication. It came in the form of Jefferson Browne’s *Key West: The Old and the New*.²⁶ This 1912 work allotted nine of its 200 or so pages of text to the Civil War. Evidencing a decidedly pro-rebel stance, Browne introduced his wartime discussion thusly: “The influence of the cultured Southern men who located in Key West in the early days fostered the spirit of resisting Federal usurpation.”²⁷ While available space for wartime coverage proved dear for Browne, he managed nonetheless to enumerate all members of “that band of noble men who left Key West . . . to fight for their native Southland.”²⁸

Matters rested essentially as Browne had presented them for nearly a century. A noteworthy breakthrough arrived beginning in the late 1980s when retired telephone company executive Lewis G. Schmidt self-published several volumes—and penned numerous locally-circulated essays—that addressed Key West’s Civil War happenings.²⁹ Offering a wealth of original source materials, Schmidt’s writings particularly highlighted the 47th Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers, a unit with extended service on the island.³⁰

Capitalizing partly on Schmidt’s output, Maureen Ogle in 2006 acted to supplant Browne’s work with her own *Key West: History of an Island of Dreams*.³¹ Notably, Ogle aimed for a popular, as opposed to a scholarly or specialized, audience. As one commentator observed: “Ms. Ogle was a historian at the University of South Alabama, but left in 1999 because she no longer wants to write for an academic audience.”³²

Ogle’s daunting task called for an approachable synopsis of the city’s entire story almost to the 21st century, all within 300 generously illustrated pages. She dedicated one-twelfth of that total to the Civil War. Although space considerations strictly limited the depth of her examinations, Ogle’s approach and tone evidenced greater objectivity, and better underscored the diversity of the island’s wartime experience, than had Browne’s narrative.³³

III. PRIDE’S BOOK

The 21st century had gotten well underway with no study focused directly on Key West’s Civil War experience coming to the public’s attention. This milestone ultimately was reached in 2020 when Florida’s respected Pineapple Press released

²⁶ See *supra* note 20.

²⁷ *Id.* at 90.

²⁸ *Id.* at 97.

²⁹ See 3 LEWIS G. SCHMIDT, *THE CIVIL WAR IN FLORIDA: A MILITARY HISTORY: FLORIDA’S KEYS & FEVERS* (1992). Portions of this book later (1998-2000) were serialized by the *Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal* (<https://keywestmaritime.org/journal/>).

³⁰ See LEWIS G. SCHMIDT, *A CIVIL WAR HISTORY OF THE 47TH REGIMENT OF PENNSYLVANIA VOLUNTEERS* (1986).

³¹ See *supra* note 10.

³² Jason M. Breslow, *History for the Masses*, CHRON. HIGHER EDUC., May 30, 2007, available at chronicle.com/article/history-for-the-masses/.

³³ See OGLE, *supra* note 10, at 55-80.

Mike Pride's competently researched and very readable *Storm Over Key West: The Civil War and the Call of Freedom*.³⁴

A veteran journalist and author who for many years administered the Pulitzer Prize Board's work, Pride, insofar as possible, exposes readers to the era's events and personalities through the voices of those who lived and died in the region. As a result, his narrative expresses the passions, agonies, and even boredom of daily life and experience.

Perhaps most movingly, Pride underscores the profoundly disturbing terror of prostration and death at the whim of smallpox, yellow fever, and other tropical diseases. As he illustrates, the war for many at Key West did not so much involve combat with an armed enemy or clashes between Union occupiers and secessionist locals. Rather, it came down to a life-or-death struggle with little-understood natural afflictions and incessant grappling with uncontrollable anxieties about hidden dangers, including the mysterious hazards of swamp seepages and the frightful consequences of inhaling miasmic gas.

Pride's enthusiastic dependence on personal accounts, while enriching the stories that he shares, inadvertently limits the scope of an otherwise-solid study. As a result, the book's title overreaches its coverage by depending on White Northern perspectives (whether of military men or otherwise). Local White and Black experiences, in turn, command less attention. The problem is an understandable one. Home-grown Key West newspapers were shuttered early in the war. Correspondence to Southern newspapers that escaped military control efforts tended to become lost. Thus, Northern newspapers, together with the Key West news they contained, enjoyed greater chances for survival than did content published in their Southern counterparts. This same dynamic applied at Key West to personal papers. One can only speculate as to the volume of additional fascinating information lost in the Great Key West Fire of 1886 (the most devastating fire in the city's history).

Pride's sources further restrict his accomplishment in that they carry his narrative only so far. The book's text runs to about 235 pages. That total includes four introductory chapters meant to set the scene for wartime affairs. They cover a glimpse of the Havana Hurricane of 1846 and a portrait of "slave days" that focus on Key West's famed African American farmer, religious leader, and personality Sandy Cornish. "An account from the diary of [lawyer] William Hackley comes next," Pride explains.³⁵ "The final prewar chapter tells the harrowing tale of three ships caught in the Caribbean in 1860 and brought to Key West with their human cargo from Africa."³⁶

Much of the rest of Pride's narrative adheres relatively closely to his chosen sources and the activities of the individuals and entities introduced by them. Additional contextual material about the complicated and destructive nature of the war elsewhere in Florida—conflict that sometimes directly confronted the military at Key West—would have been useful. Lacking, too, is context related to interaction with the British and Spanish presence in the region, especially wartime travel, trade, and communications from and to the Bahamas and Cuba. British, Bahamian, and Spanish-language publications and archival sources go untapped.

³⁴ See MIKE PRIDE, *STORM OVER KEY WEST: THE CIVIL WAR AND THE CALL OF FREEDOM* (2020).

³⁵ *Id.* at 2.

³⁶ *Id.*

A final thought about *Storm Over Key West*. As suggested by his attention to Sandy Cornish and the slave cargoes, Pride commendably aims to recognize in his book the island's African American heritage and experience. Yet readers are left yearning for additional information about, and personal perspectives of, African Americans. A friend did alert Pride to the rich source materials available in the New York *Anglo-African* newspaper, and he utilized them productively. The presence on Key West of so prominent a future Floridian as John Wallace, though, fails even to merit mention. A soldier in the Second Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops, Wallace fought at Fort Myers and Natural Bridge before going on to service as a state senator; authorship of the state's first history of the Reconstruction Era; and renown as a pioneering black attorney who practiced successfully into the 20th century.³⁷

IV. THUERSAM'S BOOK

Having waited seemingly forever for the first serious examination of Key West's Civil War past, readers in 2022 were presented with a second volume, John Bernhard Thuersam's *Key West's Civil War: "Rather Unsafe for a Southern Man to Live Here."*³⁸ A retired architect from New York who lives in North Carolina, Thuersam's publisher is Shotwell Publishing of Columbia, South Carolina. It was founded in 2015 in response "to the rabid anti-Southern hysteria that began sweeping the country during the build-up to and aftermath of the removal of the Confederate Battle Flag on the grounds of the South Carolina State Capitol."³⁹ The company's motto is "Southern Books. No Apologies."⁴⁰

Thuersam chafes at what he considers unsettling interpretations of the island's wartime heritage. "Above all it is important to point out," he writes, "that the 'unionism' of Civil War-period Key West has been overstated and mistaken from temporary acquiescence to intimidation and the presence of a formidable occupying power."⁴¹

Thuersam's book is best evaluated within the context of its ideological origins. It stands at the end of a continuum that began with the famed Southern Agrarians. This group of 12 writers had taken offense at social critic H.L. Mencken's literary assaults on the South in the 1920s and mounted a defense in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930).⁴²

Thuersam's direct link with the Agrarians comes through their disciple

³⁷ See Larry Eugene Rivers & Canter Brown, Jr., *Attorney John Wallace: Pioneering the Profession of Law within Florida's African American Community*, 30 J. GA. ASS'N HISTORIANS 1, 4 (2011); James C. Clark, *John Wallace and the Writing of Reconstruction History*, 67 FLA. HIST. Q. 409, 410-11 (1989).

³⁸ See JOHN BERNHARD THUERSAM, *KEY WEST'S CIVIL WAR: "RATHER UNSAFE FOR A SOUTHERN MAN TO LIVE HERE"* (2022).

³⁹ Shotwell Publishing LLC, *About Us*, at <https://shotwellpublishing.com/about/>.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at homepage.

⁴¹ THUERSAM, *supra* note 38, at vi.

⁴² See TWELVE SOUTHERNERS, *I'LL TAKE MY STAND: THE SOUTH AND THE AGRARIAN TRADITION* (1930). On the Southern Agrarians generally, see, e.g., PAUL V. MURPHY, *THE REBUKE OF HISTORY: SOUTHERN AGRARIANS AND AMERICAN CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT* (2003); PAUL KEITH CONKIN, *THE SOUTHERN AGRARIANS* (2001).

Clyde N. Wilson, a longtime University of South Carolina professor of history; co-founder (in 1980) of *Southern Partisan* magazine; and editor of the John C. Calhoun papers.⁴³ Additionally, Wilson edited 1981’s *Why the South Will Survive: Fifteen Southerners Look at Their Region a Half Century After I’ll Take My Stand*.⁴⁴ Wilson also is the co-founder and co-publisher of Shotwell Publishing.⁴⁵

Thuersam acknowledges his debt to Wilson as the first among those “who helped educate, prepare, guide and inspire me.”⁴⁶ Wilson, in turn, contributes the Foreword to Thuersam’s book and characterizes the American Civil War as “the great American bloodletting of 1861-65.”⁴⁷

Thuersam’s book delivers (in 226 pages of text) on his promise to feature Key West’s secessionist and pro-Confederate elements. He takes pains, for instance, to trace in detail the wartime Confederate service of local men, especially those associated with the Key West Avengers. He additionally delights in exposing instances of anti-abolitionist sentiment within the 47th Pennsylvania Regiment (among other Union military elements). Most remarkably, perhaps, he rehabilitates pro-secessionist Conchs as stalwarts of the local scene while praising them “above all [for] maintain[ing] a defiant Loyalist tradition with pride in their British heritage.”⁴⁸

Given the foregoing, readers should take care when entering the world presented by Thuersam; they also should go into it with their eyes wide open. Thuersam often presses along heedless, or even disdainful, of the need for context other than that supplied by his own ideological conceptualizations. A reader at times is left fearing that the very idea of complexity and diversity of experience seems anathema to Thuersam. Perhaps more harmful, he lapses into serious mistakes of fact, a possibility that, to his credit, he concedes is likely. “I admit apprehension to any claim of complete accuracy within these pages, despite the laborious research of nearly three years,” he declares.⁴⁹

One specific example illustrates the greater problem. Thuersam wants to declare Reconstruction a failure. To do so, he observes: “A fitting commentary on ‘Reconstruction’ was offered by black Charlotte editor Richard Henry Cain, who wrote that when it concluded, ‘The Negroes had gained nothing, Southern whites have nothing left, and the Northern jackals have taken all the booty.’”⁵⁰ Future African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Cain’s words actually were written in late 1871, long before Reconstruction’s end, and referred only to the South Carolina legislature’s work product. Cain wrote: “When the smoke and fighting is over, the negroes have nothing gained and the whites have nothing left, while the jackals have all the booty.”⁵¹

⁴³ See Clyde N. Wilson, WIKIPEDIA: THE FREE ENCYCLOPEDIA, at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clyde_N._Wilson.

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ See Shotwell Publishing LLC, Clyde N. Wilson, at <https://shotwellpublishing.com/authors#clyde-wilson>.

⁴⁶ THUERSAM, *supra* note 38, at vii.

⁴⁷ *Id.* at I.

⁴⁸ *Id.* at 9.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at vii.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 193.

⁵¹ *Assembling of the Legislature*, CHARLESTON DAILY COURIER (SC), Nov. 13, 1871, at 1.

V. CONCLUSION

Those interested in the Civil War, Florida, and Key West at least can take comfort that the processes have begun in earnest to place the island's story in its proper place within Civil War historiography. No future researcher, however, needs to feel discouraged that this fertile ground has been over-tilled, nor believe that no rewards of insight or information remain to be uncovered.