

Miami's Earliest Known Great Hurricane

By DONALD C. GABY

On 13 September 1824 the area now known as Miami was battered by a severe hurricane, the like of which was not to strike this particular part of the coast again for over a century. Who was there to bear witness and tell the story? What other evidence might there be? It is an interesting account and the pieces to make the whole come from various sources.

In 1824 the United States had only recently acquired Florida from Spain and South Florida was considered by many to be only a wilderness. Yet several pioneer families did live here then and worked the land. The Davis and Lewis families lived on Key Biscayne, the Hagen's (Egan) lived north of the Miami River, another Lewis lived south of the Miami River, and the Pent's probably lived in what is now Coconut Grove^(1,2). These families had all lived in the region of Cape Florida and the Miami River for several years, but none left a written record of what must have been a most terrifying experience. Also in 1824, on the 26th of May, the U.S. Congress provided for the construction of three lighthouses along the Florida Keys, one of which was to be built at Cape Florida. During that same summer the revenue cutter Crawford surveyed the sites for the lighthouses, and a contract for the construction of these was given to a Mr. Samuel Lincoln. But because of the hurricane, the Cape Florida lighthouse would not be built until the following year.

In 1903, Dr. Charles Torrey Simpson, pioneer Florida botanist, retired from the Smithsonian Institution and came to South Florida to build himself a home. He chose a home site facing Biscayne Bay and along the Little River — some 15 acres consisting of mangroves, tropical hammock, and pine woods. Dr. Simpson was himself quite knowledgeable about hurricanes, having personally experienced many in the West Indies and Florida, and was ahead of his time in his understanding of them. The great hurricane of 18 September 1926, still well remembered by many local residents, did immense damage to the trees and plants about his beautiful home, and his observations of this provide our first clue⁽³⁾. In this hammock was living a venerable old oak that had been blown down in an earlier storm, and from its roots had grown a young oak that in 1926 was twisted off at its base. Cutting this younger oak to

clear a path through the hammock, he counted the tree rings and found about one hundred! Later, in going through the pine forest, he found it largely devastated, and wherever the county crews had cut trees to clear the roads he counted the rings. There were many trees with about one hundred rings, and a few with more. Here was clear evidence, speaking from the past, of a great hurricane that had passed this way about a century earlier!

What other evidence might there be? At the U.S. National Archives are the "Lighthouse Letters" from the first keeper of the Cape Florida light and certain correspondence prior to the building of the lighthouse. A letter from Mr. John Rodman ⁽⁴⁾, Collector at St. Augustine, to the Acting Commissioner of the Revenue (then the official responsible for the lighthouses) dated 30 November 1824, states that "I had the honour to address you on the 28th Sept. last informing you that Mr. Samuel B. Lincoln, with whom a contract had been made for the building of three Light Houses in this Territory, had not then arrived at this place. I deem it my duty to inform you that I am still without any information from him and it seems to be the general opinion here that he and his ship with materials on board were lost in the severe gale of *September last*, on the passage from Boston to this place". John Rodman was a man of fair character, a lawyer, previously District Attorney for the City of New York, well travelled, and by the record a prominent citizen of East Florida during the territorial period⁽⁵⁾. Reading of these "Lighthouse Letters" from 1823 through 1829 reveals no other reference to a storm in the vicinity of Cape Florida. Clearly a severe hurricane occurred in September 1824, about a century before September 1926, and no other appeared to pass before or after for some time. Was this our "great hurricane"?

There is yet more evidence. Poey⁽⁶⁾ mentions a hurricane at Guadelupe on 7-8 September 1824 and Ludlum⁽⁷⁾ describes a hurricane that passed through the Lower Bahama Islands on 11-12 September 1824, leaving a vessel driven high and dry at Turk's Island and others ashore on Rum Key, Long Island, and Harbor Island. Later⁽⁷⁾ the storm is recorded coming ashore in Georgia and eventually reaching the southern Appalachian mountains, being known as the Georgia Coastal Hurricane and Storm Tide of that year. The weather record at St. Augustine for 14-15 September 1824 showed a wind shift from northeast to south but no special remarks indicating that the storm was well offshore at that point⁽⁸⁾. Putting all of the evidence together, the pieces make a very coherent picture of what happened long ago. Clark⁽⁹⁾ has deduced a most probable track for this historic hurricane.

No doubt the hurricane was born in the lower latitudes of the North

Atlantic Ocean, perhaps developing from a disturbance that had its origin over Africa. On 7-8 September 1824 the hurricane passed near Guadelupe and on 9-10 September passed to the east and north of Puerto Rico but was little noticed by those living on the island. For the next two days it moved inexorably west by northwest to threaten what is now Miami. The hurricane, now grown to severe intensity, bore in across Cape Florida and its eye, with its awesome stillness and calm winds, came ashore very nearly at the mouth of the Miami River. Then it moved northward up the coast, devastating the Simpson hammock and the inland pine woods, and out to sea again in the vicinity of Cape Canaveral. It came ashore for the last time in Georgia leaving at least 83 persons drowned at St. Simon Island and immense damage to property with additional loss of lives for as far north as Savannah. The flooding of streams that followed as tropical downpours deluged both the coastal plain and the Piedmont brought great losses to the plantations of that region. Eventually it spent its final energy over the mountains. Somewhere along the east coast of Florida the ill-fated Mr. Lincoln with his heavily laden ship was overtaken by the great hurricane and laid to rest at the bottom of the sea. Not until the following year would the Cape Florida lighthouse be built. After its completion, the remainder of the decade passed without a storm to break the peace or delay the rebirth of the tropical growth along the coast that is now Miami.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1Marks, Henry S., 1958: *Tequesta*, No. XVIII, pp 15-21. The Earliest Land Grants in the Miami Area. Miami, Florida.
- 2Carter, C. E., 1956: *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. XXIII, PP 94-95. Petition to Congress by Inhabitants of Cape Florida. Washington, D.C.
- 3Simpson, Charles Torrey, 1932: *Florida Wild Life*, pp 142-146. MacMillan Co., New York, N.Y.
- 4Rodman, John, 1824: *Lighthouse Letters*, U. S. National Archives, Washington, D. C.
- 5Verplanck, Gulian C., 1821: *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, Vol. XXII, P 17 (and others). Gulian C. Verplanck to the Secretary of State. Washington, D.C.
- 6Poey, Andres, 1862: No. 348. *Table Chronologique de Quatre Cents Cyclones Qui Ont Servi Dans Les Indes Occidentales Et Dan L'Ocean Atlantique Nord, Pendant Un Intervalle de 362 Annees (Depuis 1493-1855)*. Paris, France.
- 7Ludlum, David M., 1963: *Early American Hurricanes, 1492-1870*. American Meteorological Society. Boston, Massachusetts.
- 8Unpublished communication from the National Climatic Center, Asheville, N.C.
- 9Clark, Gilbert V., 1973: Unpublished hurricane track based upon all available data. National Hurricane Center, NOAA, Miami, Florida