

Did You Know?

During the Civil War, Key West remained in the United States despite Florida having joined the secession. A large population of Key West settlers from New England and the nearby Bahamas had little interest in leaving the Union, let alone taking up arms for the Rebel cause. Residents of Key West even celebrated the implementation of the Emancipation Proclamation on Jan. 1, 1863.

African Americans on the island lived as free men and women long before it became the law of the land. During the Civil War, Key West was **the center of the Union naval operations and the base for the blockade of the South**. At one time, 299 captured Confederate ships were held in the Key West Harbor under the guns of Fort Zachary.



This Florida historic marker tells the story of the slave ships that was intercepted and brought into Key West.

“Near this site lie the remains of 294 African men, women and children who died in Key West in 1860. In the summer of that year the U.S. Navy rescued 1,432 Africans from three American-owned ships engaged in the illegal slave trade. Ships bound for Cuba were intercepted by the U.S. Navy, who brought the freed Africans to Key West where they were provided with clothing, shelter and medical treatment. They had spent weeks in unsanitary and inhumane conditions aboard the slave ships. The U.S. steamships Mohawk, Wyandott, and Crusader rescued these individuals from the Wildfire, where 507 were rescued; the William, where 513 were rescued; and the Bogota, where 417 survived. In all, 294 Africans succumbed at Key West to various diseases caused by conditions of their confinement. They were buried in unmarked graves on the present day Higgs Beach where West Martello Tower now stands. By August, more than 1,000 survivors left for Liberia, West Africa, a country founded for former American slaves,

where the U.S. government supported them for a time. Hundreds died on the ships before reaching Liberia. Thus, the survivors were returned to their native land, Africa, but not to their original homes on that continent.”