

PRESERVING PIGEON KEY

BY GEORGE BORN

Published in the Key West Citizen on Sunday, February 11, 2007

In light of recent events concerning Pigeon Key, it is appropriate to refresh our knowledge of this island's history and the preservation issues surrounding it.

The history of Pigeon Key divides into five main phases — comparatively long periods of settled calm and stability. Additionally, four transition times fall in between — shorter periods of sometimes difficult searching and adaptation to new uses.

During the first epoch — by far the longest, from time immemorial until the early 1900s — Pigeon Key existed in its natural state, an uninhabited, undeveloped and rarely visited island two miles southeast of Knight's Key.

Pigeon Key's first transition occurred as Henry Flagler's work crews built the Overseas Railway, using the island as a base camp for the construction of the Seven Mile Bridge. Laborers lived in temporary quarters, enduring heat, mosquitoes, and hurricanes, until completing the project in 1912. The massive bridge remains today.

The second era of Pigeon Key's history lasted from 1912 to 1935, when it served as a maintenance facility for the Overseas Railway and the Seven-Mile Bridge. The temporary camp was replaced with the sturdy wooden buildings we see today: the Section Gang Quarters, the Commissary and the houses of the bridge tender, the assistant bridge tender, the paint foreman, the assistant paint foreman and the bridge foreman. A small community lived there until the Labor Day hurricane of 1935 destroyed long stretches of low-lying track in the Upper Keys. The railway company decided not to rebuild, as it had been losing money for some time.

Thus began the second period of transition for Pigeon Key, from 1935 to 1938. The Monroe County Toll Bridge Authority, a public agency, acquired the entire railroad right of way — including the bridges, the remaining tracks and Pigeon Key — incorporating them into the Overseas Highway.

Pigeon Key's third incarnation began in 1938, when the island took on a new role as the headquarters of the Monroe County Toll Bridge Authority. One of the buildings on the island, the so-called "Honeymoon Cottage" dates from this era. But in 1956, the toll-bridge system ended.

The island experienced its third transitional period from 1956 to 1968, when it was not yet considered historic, and its fate was uncertain. Fortunately, for the purposes of historic preservation, this seems to have been a relatively benign entr'acte.

The fourth phase began in 1968, when the University of Miami signed a 20-year lease with Monroe County. For the next 19 years, the island served as a marine research station. But in 1987 — one year before the lease was to expire — the university asked the County Commission to be let out of the lease, which it was.

Pigeon Key's fourth major transition — from 1987 to 1993 — was the most recent and the most contentious. The County Commission appointed a Pigeon Key Advisory Authority, a volunteer board to study options for the future of the island. Additionally, the county hired consultants with

expertise in history, architecture and economic development to prepare a detailed report, which came out in 1991. The consulting team recommended combining "educational retreats and day tourists," sketched out a restoration plan, estimated rehabilitation costs at \$3.7 million and included a market analysis.

Meanwhile, a non-profit organization, the Pigeon Key Foundation was established to formally take over stewardship of the island. But a rival group came together, too, advocating for a park providing free access to locals. When the County Commission selected the foundation for a 30-year lease, the other group challenged the decision in court. While the challengers won an initial victory in a lower court, the foundation ultimately prevailed.

At the same time, the island was listed as an historic district on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, and the County Commission designated Pigeon Key a historical and cultural landmark under Monroe County Code in 1993.

Thus began the fifth and most recent stage in the history of Pigeon Key. Literature of the time described Pigeon Key as a "multi-use education and research facility ... to benefit our community as well as to attract visitors." The Pigeon Key Foundation aggressively sought and received funding from both private and public sources. The state of Florida's historic preservation grant program alone contributed \$884,801, while private donors contributed significant matching funds to pay for restoring the historic buildings on the island.

What does the future hold for Pigeon Key? That is the question that set the coconut telegraph buzzing recently when a cluster of events happened in close succession: Rumors circulated that Cay Clubs might want to run a ferry to Pigeon Key while the old Seven Mile Bridge is repaired; County Mayor Mario Di Gennaro made public statements — including some to Marjorie Mearns, Pigeon Key executive director — that some understood to mean that he favors more development on the island; a courtesy county fire inspection turned into a show-down that appeared excessively draconian; and the county attorney's office requested a slew of legal documents from the foundation.

As it turns out, Cay Clubs is not bidding on the ferry service; Mayor Di Gennaro and Marjorie Mearns seem to have mended fences; the Pigeon Key Foundation is addressing concerns raised in the fire inspection; and it is providing the documentation that the county requested.

Pigeon Key is the only historic district in the Middle Keys, and it is the most important site left anywhere in the Keys relating to both the Overseas Railway and the Overseas Highway. Let us remember the history of this remarkable island — and recommit ourselves to its preservation.

Note: Today is the second and last day of the Pigeon Key Foundation's 13th annual Art Festival at Marathon Community Park at Mile Marker 49, oceanside. Admission is \$7 for adults, \$3 for students and free for children under 12. Proceeds benefit the Pigeon Key Foundation.

George Born is the past executive director of the Historic Florida Keys Foundation.