

History of the Conch Republic

Though typically a peaceful people, in 1982 the residents of the Keys started an uprising in response to tyranny. The U.S. Border Patrol had set up a permanent roadblock on the Overseas Highway, the only road passage in and out of the islands. The government believed it was doing the country a great service by searching every car leaving the Keys for illegal drugs and immigrants.

The people of the Keys, however, felt they were being unjustly quarantined from the rest of the country and that their livelihoods were being threatened by their sudden inability to transport marijuana, cocaine and Cubans to the mainland. Perhaps the 17-mile-long traffic jam that threatened the other financial life-blood of the Keys — tourism — had something to do with it as well.

Key West Mayor Dennis Wardlow and his attorney tried to resolve the matter peacefully by filing an injunction. To get to the hearing in Miami, though, they first had to outsmart the roadblock, so they piled into a private plane and flew to the court. But their ingenuity was in vain. The federal judge shot down the injunction. With this setback, the mayor now knew that rebellion was their only option.

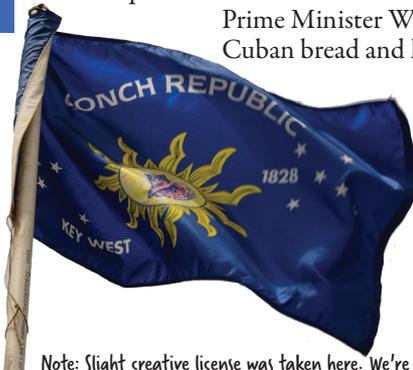
As he left the courthouse, he stood atop the federal steps, his eyes and heart filled with fiery determination. He threw his fist up toward the sky and announced to the press that

Key West would secede from the United States of America!

The next day, it did. On April 23 in historic Mallory Square, Mayor Wardlow stood before an assembly of his citizens to read the declaration of secession, which thereby founded the Conch Republic as an independent nation. The rebellion began moments later as now Prime Minister Wardlow took up a loaf of stale Cuban bread and lightly whacked a person dressed up in a U.S. Navy uniform.

Smack.

The crowd went wild. Everyone was suddenly looking for their own loaf of stale bread and faux government official to whack with it.



Note: Slight creative license was taken here. We're not sure Wardlow threw his fist to the sky.

But after just one minute, before most of them could join in, the Prime Minister surrendered to the admiral in charge of the U.S. Navy base, who was an actual real admiral of the real U.S. Navy. Along with the surrender, he demanded \$1 billion in foreign aid and war relief, with which to rebuild the Conch Republic after federal siege.

The rebellion kind of worked.

The U.S. government kind of listened to the people. They soon removed the roadblock, and the residents of the Keys were free. But oddly enough the \$1 billion still has not arrived. Soon Conch Republic flags were raised and diplomatic passports issued and actually used for travel, being recognized by a handful of foreign countries with good senses of humor, including France, Sweden, Spain, Ireland, Russia, and most of the Caribbean. Visitors received visas, though you don't actually need a Conch visa to enter the Keys.



PHOTO: STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA/CORY MCDONALD COLLECTION.

Through all of this, the U.S. government never challenged or even mentioned the secession. So if you thought the Conch Republic was a joke, it kind of was, but really maybe not. In 1994 the Monroe County Commissioners unanimously passed a resolution recognizing Wardlow's actions. That same year, Conch Republic officials were invited to the prestigious Summit of the Americas in Miami with Bill Clinton and other dignitaries. Today the Republic maintains a navy of roughly a dozen boats under the leadership of historic tall ship Schooner Wolf, plus a small air force.

It's a good thing, as trouble still occasionally rears its head. At one point the U.S. Army tried to "overtake" Key West during a training exercise simulating the invasion of a foreign island. They failed to notify Conch officials, who mistook the exercise for an enemy attack and swiftly mobilized the island for war. Water cannons were fired from fireboats and invaders beaten with Cuban bread. Stale bread, of course. It was a quick victory. The Department of Defense issued an apology the next day, stating that they "in no way meant to challenge or impugn the sovereignty of the Conch Republic," and submitted to a surrender ceremony.

In another time of turmoil, a government budget freeze shut down the remote Dry Tortugas National Park. The Conch Republic raised private money to keep the park open for tourists and sent a flotilla of Conch Navy vessels to deliver the bounty. But upon their arrival they could find no one to accept the money nor reopen the park. They returned home unvictorious, but as fortune would have it, eventually the park did reopen when the U.S. government finally stopped squabbling and voted in a budget for the year.

MOTTO:
WE SECEDED WHERE OTHERS FAILED.



Schooner Wolf of the
Conch Republic Navy.

So what does the Conch Republic stand for?

"The mitigation of world tension through the exercise of humor."

Or as stated by Secretary General Peter Anderson, the Republic is:

"A sovereign state of mind seeking to bring more humor, warmth and respect to a world in sore need of all three."



PHOTO: STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA/DALE M. MCDONALD.

NOTE: FOR NATURAL HISTORY, SEE CHAPTER 15.



Spanish Galleon

ILLUS: STATE ARCHIVES FLORIDA
PHOTO: STATE ARCHIVES OF FLORIDA/JOHN KUNKEL SMALL



Indian Mounds, Everglades, 1923

And now for...

The Rest of the History of Key West

Just take a look around and you will still see the remains of days long passed, in the buildings, roadways, parks and paths. Lush and tropical, there is an enchanting sense that fills the air here, along with countless stories of prosperity and demise.

IN THE BEGINNING

There is solid evidence of humans living in the Keys as early as 1600 B.C., though there is a strong possibility we lived here much earlier. During the ice age of 10,000 years ago, the sea level was much lower and Florida's land mass twice the size of today. In fact, Mel Fisher found underwater tree stumps during his Spanish galleon salvage efforts, indicating a forest existed about 40 miles west of Key West. Sadly, this means artifacts of cultures living by the water would have been swept away by the ocean long ago. Still, Indian mound sites are found on a number of Keys. Only a few have been excavated, revealing kitchen middens (essentially piles of shells, broken pottery, and other castaways), though others are likely ceremonial and burial. None are known to contain gold or jewels, so no need to pillage.

THE SPANISH & THE BRITISH & THE SPANISH ARE COMING

Ponce de León was the first European to find the Keys. He laid eyes on them in May 1513 and pronounced them *Los Martires*, or the Martyrs, because from a distance the rocks appeared as suffering men. For the next few hundred years, there is no record of any European settlement here, though the histories of Westerners and the islands would continue to cross paths. The Keys bordered the trade route from Cuba and the New World to Europe, and as such travelers would occasionally stop here for fresh water, fish, turtles, and wood — or to salvage their ship when it wrecked in the shallow waters just offshore.

Written records concerning the native population of the Keys are scarce prior to 1821. We know through artifacts and scattered European sailing logs that aboriginal tribes inhabited the area, though it is less clear which ones, thanks in part to errors in translation and perception. Regardless, historians speculate that in 1492 between 100,000 and 350,000 Native Americans were living in what is now Florida. The Keys-dwellers were most likely mixed tribes, or sub-tribes developed by visitors who chose to stay, including the Calusa and Tequesta. If you are interested in learning more, read *Missions to the Calusa, Tacachale*, by John Hann, *Florida's first people*, by Robin C. Brown, and *Documentation of the Indians of the Florida Keys & Miami 1513-1765*, by Gail Swanson.