

| by Karuna EBERL |

24.4540° N  
81.8775° W

BELOW: An aerial photo of Sand Key lighthouse. Sand Key was about an acre in size in 1846. Throughout the centuries, sand builds up and washes away. There was a small bit of land there toward the end of the 20th century, but today it remains below water.



# THE END OF A KEEPER

## SAND KEY LIGHTHOUSE AND THE 1846 HURRICANE

KEY WEST, OCTOBER 10, 1846  
Though the air was stagnant and unusually hot, erratic waves were beginning to lap against the seawall at Sand Key. This small, but ominous warning sign was likely overlooked in the excitement of a family reunion. Captain Joshua Appleby's only child, Eliza, and his young grandson had

just arrived on the island for a visit. For the last nine years, Appleby had lived 7 miles offshore on Sand Key, where he manned the lighthouse. He steadfastly kept the oil burning through storms and summer heat. His efforts ensured the safe passage of countless ships, and enabled the young Key West harbor to thrive.

It was a demanding and sometimes dangerous job. The hurricane of 1844 just two years earlier had reduced the island's size by half and destroyed his quarters. They had only recently been rebuilt when his daughter arrived, along with her husband and son, plus a family friend and her child.

| photo by Rob O'NEAL |



BELOW: No photos exist of the original masonry Sand Key lighthouse, which was obliterated in the Great Havana Hurricane of 1846. The current iron lighthouse (pictured) was erected in 1853.

Eliza's own mom had died when she was a year old, leaving Appleby to raise her. All accounts suggest they enjoyed a strong bond, and so this was likely a welcome reunion for them both. But it would be short-lived. As they shared stories and dinner, they had no way of knowing what catastrophe nature was brewing.

The next morning the wind rose fiercely. Waves pounded the seawall and the barometer fell so low that Appleby must have thought it was broken. The strongest and most destructive hurricane to ever hit Key West was upon them, and it would soon prove to be the last exploit of Appleby, and his 73-years of adventure.

Born in Rhode Island, Appleby first took to the sea as a cabin boy. After raising Eliza, he remarried and set sail for the Keys. That was 1820, one year before Spain relinquished the territory to the United States. He and his new wife fell in love with the place, and soon co-founded a settlement on Knights Key. Dubbed Port Monroe, it was one of the first villages in what is now Marathon. As historian Jerry Wilkinson once speculated, the couple may very well have been the first "developers" of the Keys.

They made a living fishing, farming and salvaging shipwrecks. They even commissioned the first general store on Indian Key. These were wild, frontier days, and Appleby was an enterprising fellow. Port Monroe thrived, but also gained a reputation for lawlessness, especially after Appleby joined forces with Columbian privateer Charles Hopner. Hopner's job was to capture Spanish ships, but international law required him to deliver his "prizes" to Columbia. To circumvent that inconvenience, he instead sailed them to Port Monroe and ran them aground, where Appleby would then salvage and sell the cargo.

| photo by Karuna EBERL |





# B E F O R E

long, Key West's new anti-pirate task force caught wind and sent a sloop-of-war to arrest Appleby. He was taken in irons to Charleston, South Carolina, but soon released after President James Monroe personally examined his case and exonerated him. Appleby could not escape Hopner, however, who successfully sued him for \$7,112 in unpaid promissory notes due from their final prize's cargo. (In Appleby's defense, his lawyer pointed out that there technically were no profits that should have been split, since that load of cargo had been seized when Appleby was arrested, and as such never sold).

Port Monroe eventually dwindled and Appleby set up shop in Key West. Thanks to being officially absolved of any nefarious practices, he was able to legally obtain a wrecking license, which he actively used until he accepted an appointment as head keeper of the Sand Key Lighthouse in 1837.

Where he once profited on ship's misfortunes, he was now paid \$600 a year to keep them safe. By now he was 67. His second wife had died several years earlier. Some historians speculate that he saw this job as welcomed respite from the physical rigors of wrecking. If he did, he soon realized that was far from true. His quarters and the lamps were repeatedly damaged by many storms,

including the hurricanes of 1841, '42, '44 — and finally the Great Havana Hurricane of 1846.

On that fateful day, as the tide rose, the waves and surge would have begun rushing over the seawall and flooding the island. Appleby probably moved his family into the tower, since the lighthouse masonry had withstood every other storm. But not this one. During the night, forceful waves washed away the sand, first undermining the tower's foundation, then eventually eroding the entire island. The next morning, not a trace existed of the Applebys, the lighthouse, or even Sand Key itself.

Lt. William C. Pease of the USS Morris later recalled,

*“Poor old Capt. Appleby - I knew him very well: he told me the first hurricane would sweep all to destruction, and alas! his prediction is verified.”*

**NOTE:** The original Sand Key lighthouse was made of masonry, and the keepers quarters were on the ground level. The 70-foot-tall tower cost \$16,000 to build and was first lit on April 15, 1827. It took around 500 gallons of sperm whale oil (spermaceti) to keep its 11 lamps burning for a year.



**NOTE:** The hurricane of 1846 was described by Colonel Walter C. Maloney as "the most destructive of any that has ever visited these latitudes in the memory of man." It still holds the record for the most destructive storm to have hit Key West in modern history.



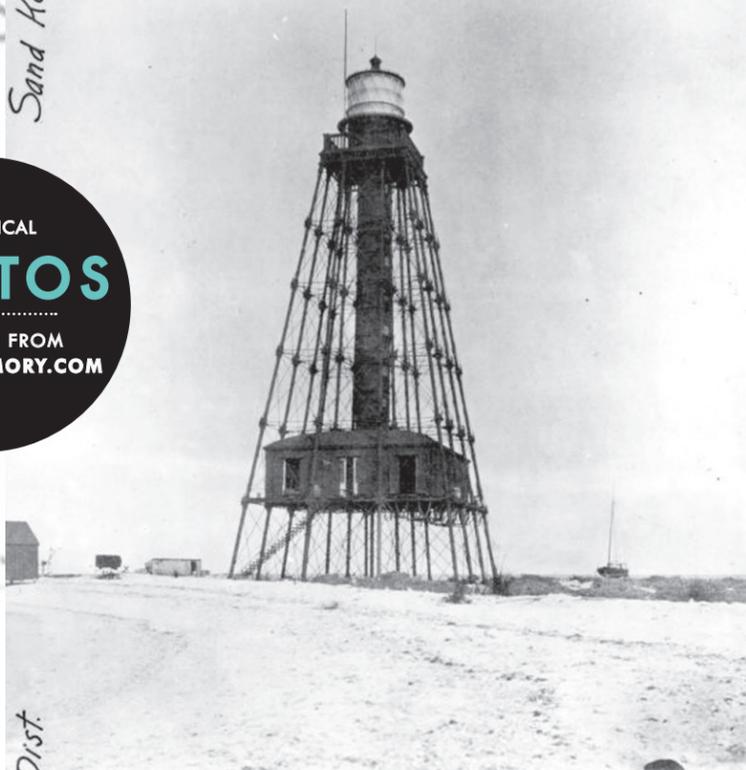
Hurricane Damage Key West 1919  
— Sand Key Lighthouse, showing damage to south side of building



Sand Key Lt. H. July 16-99



Sand Key Lt. Sta., Fla.



Dist.

HISTORICAL  
**PHOTOS**  
PROVIDED FROM  
FLORIDAMEMORY.COM

**CLOCKWISE:**  
Men having picnic at Sand Key, 1899

The image shows Sand Key when there was about an acre of land, 1846

Sand Key lighthouse and keepers quarters, year unknown

Hurricane damage to southside of the lighthouse, 1919

**SOURCES:** used in this story. Sources used to compile this story include the research and published works of Thomas Taylor, John Viele, Corey Malcom, Brad Bertelli, Neil Hurley, and Jerry Wilkinson

The Appleby family made up just six of a couple hundred deaths attributed to the storm. Ninety-five percent of the 500 or so buildings in Key West lay in ruins or disappeared completely, including the Key West lighthouse, where 16 people died. Havana fared poorly as well.

The Sand Key lighthouse was soon replaced by the 140-ton lightship Honey. Rebuilding was slow but in 1853, Florida's first Fresnel lens was lit atop the new 132-foot-tall lighthouse. More than 450 tons of iron went into the screw-pile structure that still marks Sand Key today. Lighthouse pioneer George Meade oversaw the engineering feat, before going on to command the Union Army in its victory at Gettysburg.

The legacy of keepers came to an end in 1941 with the automation of the lamp. In 2014 the Coast Guard deactivated the light for good, replacing it with one atop a 40-foot structure nearby. But that is not the end of the story for old Appleby.

Today, those aboard the Coast Guard cutter Joshua Appleby keep vessels safe by maintaining Florida's buoys, including those in the Keys. They also arrived in Key West to help after the town's most recent brush with Hurricane Irma. While officially the ship was named in honor of a man who gave his life to protect others, the ship's motto — "The Wrecking Keeper" — is perhaps a nod toward a colorful past, and the notion that we may be allowed of a little bit of mischief, along with our good deeds.

The fate of the Sand Key lighthouse is a little unclear today. Last year the Coast Guard requested proposals from those interested in receiving ownership of the site, which is in need repairs and maintenance. It may go to the Florida Keys Reef Lights Foundation, who has helped repair other Keys sites.

**"BASICALLY THEY ARE MORE ENDANGERED THAN THEY HAVE BEEN FOR YEARS,"**

says Eric Martin, president of the nonprofit. His passion for the lighthouses stems from their history, the story of their keepers, and their unusual architecture. To help any Keys lighthouses, see [reeflights.org](http://reeflights.org)

**NOTE:** It took nearly two years to rebuild the seawall and keepers quarters after the 1844 storm. When the man in charge of Florida lighthouses got word they were finally completed, he wrote, "I am very happy to learn that you have repaired the sea wall at Sand Key." In an ironic twist, the letter was dated eight days after the 1846 storm obliterated the lighthouse and all traces of the island.