The first American military expedition to the Everglades winds up a dismal failure.

WILLIAM COOLEY; BROWARD'S LEGEND

PART TWO

By Cooper Kirk

Phase One of William Cooley’s Florida career ended with the horrible New River massacre of his household by hostile Seminole Indian allies on January 6, 1836. For the next year and a half official duties and private undertakings required his presence in a myriad of locations. He operated from Key West northward to military camps near Jacksonville, westward to the Suwannee River and southward along the Gulf of Mexico to the Keys. A whirlwind of activities threw him into almost every conceivable situation in a territory largely unknown and unexplored by Americans. That he survived through it all is astonishing enough; that he enhanced his reputation and sphere of influence simultaneously is almost miraculous.

News of the Cooley massacre threw the inhabitants of the South Florida mainland and keys into a near panic condition. In a matter of hours a dozen or more whites, their families and slaves from New River and Miami River crowded onto Key Biscayne near the Cape Florida Lighthouse to await an anticipated onslaught by an undetermined number of rampaging Indians whose slaughter of the defenseless Cooley household spread from lip to lip. The refugees had escaped with only the clothes on their backs because time did not permit the bundling together of even a little food. Leadership of the motley band devolved upon Cooley because of his position as justice of the peace. Subsequently, the less than stoic sufferer became a cause celebre to South Floridians because of his losses and refusal to succumb to them.

Cape Florida Lighthouse keeper John L. Dubose shared responsibility with Cooley in a subordinate status because of his official position on the cape, although he hardly seemed the man to defend terror-stricken refugees. Bereft of his family and possessions, Cooley had only his life to lose while Dubose had a family and twenty slaves to protect. The transplanted South Carolinian, after serving as United States Collector of Customs at St. Augustine, where he acquired a well-merited reputation for knowledge of wrecking operations along the east Florida coast, became the first Cape Florida Lighthouse keeper and Inspector of Customs in late 1825. Conditions were cramped as James Wright, Richard H. Fitzpatrick’s Miami River plantation overseer, added fifty to sixty slaves to Dubose’s.
The white settlers took stock of their desperate situation as they fearfully contemplated an imminent assault by a band of blood-thirsty Indians possibly numbering two hundred. Investigation soon revealed the scarcity of arms, ammunition and food necessary for sustenance during a potential long-term siege by an Indian force well-supplied from Cooley's trading post. Dubose scarcely contributed to the refugees' sense of security as he pointed out the susceptibility of the wooden portions of the lighthouse and the flimsy nature of the outbuildings to Indian attempts to fire them. His arguments clinched the matter.

Late on January 10 the settlers and slaves scrambled aboard Cooley's recently acquired large schooner and upon several smaller craft and set out to sea. They headed for the safety of Indian Key, located well off the mainland one hundred miles north of Key West and a few miles southeast of Lower Matecumbe Key. Heavy seas soon rendered the vessels well-nigh helpless and only the timely arrival of a large schooner, attracted by their distress signals, prevented the refugees from being plunged into a watery grave. Late the next afternoon as they stepped ashore at Indian Key the rescued and the rescuers gave thanks, mindful of the frightening conditions they had endured aboard a vessel designed for one third its recent human cargo.

Security on Indian Key recently had been tightened. For one or two days prior to the refugees' arrival several boatloads of Indians had appeared there and when questioned by the suspicious islanders, denied any knowledge of the Cooley household murders, stating they only wished to purchase some lead and powder. Quickly the islanders ordered them off empty-handed, convinced that the Indians had lied up to their teeth. Soon, upwards of two hundred whites and slaves from the mainland and adjacent keys had flocked to the twelve-acre Indian Key, a principality of the notorious wrecker-merchant Jacob Housman, who occupied the island not by fee simple but simply through the sufferance of the Cooley household. He had formed a militia force consisting of forty to fifty able-bodied islanders and seamen who now hastily threw up wood and rock fortifications.

Immediately upon his arrival at the key, Cooley noted the desperate situation confronting the islanders who were destitute of the means to prevent a determined Indian attempt to land in force. He returned through heavy seas to the brigantine Gil Blas, beached near Hillsboro Inlet. From this brig he returned with two brass cannons and ample balls, armaments considered capable of repelling an Indian invasion. The cannons furnished the main firepower of the militia kept in a high state of readiness by daily, fatiguing drills.

Sheer weariness, rather than fear, took its toll as the defenders remained at their posts night and day. A "correspondent" of the Charleston Mercury wrote from the island on January 14, revealing the peril faced by the embattled refugees and their hosts. He believed that the islanders had made the best preparation possible to prevent the enemy from landing, "but our feeble force will be nothing if they succeed in effecting a landing. We are nearly worn out and exhausted from having been compelled to keep watch every night." Imperiled as they were, the defenders' vigilance heartened women and children as they scrounged for wood, cooked and spoke cheering words. Danger of another sort from the north, however, threatened the islanders and seaborne commerce. They surmised that help, if it arrived, must come over three hundred miles southward from St. Augustine.

On the night of January 14 the Steamboat Champion, bound from St. Augustine to Key West, passed the deserted Cape Florida Lighthouse only to note the great hazard posed to shipping. For some months an extraordinarily swift current of three to four knots had driven numerous commercial and passenger ships onto the Florida Reef. Only the daring and skill of the wreckers prevented total loss of cargoes and passengers. Never before in memory had seafarers stood so greatly in need of the reassuring and directive light of the Cape Florida Lighthouse.

The bare mention of returning to the lighthouse made brave and wizened settlers and seamen blanch. Nameless terror arose from lack of knowledge regarding the size and intentions of the Indian bands thought to be roaming the southeast Florida mainland. If the Indians struck, would there occur a repetition of the Cooley massacre, further pillage and destruction of property?

The position of lighthouse keeper went begging among men intent on preserving their own tortured existence until Cooley arrived at Key West on January 16 aboard the Steamboat Champion and volunteered to take the dangerous assignment. This threw young William A. Whitehead, the former New Jerseyite who served as United States Collector of Customs at Key West, into an extremely awkward situation. He did not possess the legal authority to make an appointment reserved for his superiors in Washington. Besides, the lighthouse was in Dubose's bailiwick. Mastering his trepidation, three days
later he appointed Cooley as temporary lighthouse keeper. As he wrote his superior Stephen J. Pleasanton, United States Superintendent of Lighthouses, Dubose would not return as long as one Indian was reported on the mainland. Cooley, armed to the teeth, returned to the lighthouse with a hastily assembled guard of five men and maintained a twenty-four-hour vigil.

Either from foolhardiness or heroism, but within days of his appointment Cooley returned to the abandoned New River Settlement only to discover that the hostiles had removed everything of value that had not been taken from his plantation on the day of the massacre. Further inspection revealed that the houses of his nearest neighbors had been "ramsacked—the furniture destroyed—beds ripped open, etc." Upon taking inventory, Cooley listed his principal losses of provisions as: "21 gallons of Maderia wine and barrels of corn, sugar, rice, grits, pork, beef and coffee." Other material losses included eighty hogs, fowls, sheep and horses, one keg of powder, over two hundred pounds of lead, $700 worth of dry goods, $480 in specie, and one Negro slave woman. Property losses included his home and furniture, outhouses, slave quarters, processed

---

Copy of Alexander Patterson’s Bill of Sale of slave woman Patsy to Cooley for $450, dated December 20, 1834. In 1837 she was described as "aged about thirty-five, of a dark color, and about five feet five inches high, slender made." Captured by the Seminole Indians, Patsy was the object of Cooley’s search at Tampa Bay in 1837 when he incurred the wrath of General Jesup. Monroe County, Florida Records, Deed Book A.
coontie, coontie mill and machinery, tools, shipbuilding tools, wagon, horses, clothing, boat and wharf. The marauding Indians destroyed his twenty-acre crop consisting of sugar cane, "Bermuda Arrowroot," corn, potatoes and pumpkins. Sadly, his New River trading post had come to an ignominious end. Cooley fixed his loss at $12,700. Furthermore, his Spanish coontie processor I. Emanuel disappeared with the Indians on the massacre day, never to surface in white society. Cooley now possessed only the clothes on his back, some arms, a schooner, but plenty of courage. Surprisingly, for an American frontiersman robbed of his irreplaceable family by murder and his property by rapine, he had no desire for revenge against Indians among whom he had lived so long.

From the lighthouse Cooley kept Whitehead informed of nautical and Indian affairs. From February 14-20 five wrecking vessels saved the schooner *Grecian*, bound from Boston to New Orleans, by removing her cargo and passengers, unreeling her, and then replacing them. During the salvage operations the wrecker *Olive Branch* capsized at Cape Florida when attempting to harbor for the night. One schooner loaded with settlers, their livestock and furnishings, bound for Texas was disabled on the Florida reef. A schooner sailing under the colors of a wrecking vessel boarded the distressed ship, made the captain, crew and passengers prisoners, and sailed off in the direction of the Bahama Islands. No further details could be learned of this ill-fated ship whose passengers might have aided General Sam Houston and his independence movement in Texas.

By relying upon signs left by them on the New River and by observing their fires from the safety of the lighthouse, Cooley estimated that two to three hundred Indians occupied the coastal region from New River to Miami River. He recommended to Whitehead, for transmittal to Secretary of War B. F. Butler in Washington, the construction of forts at New River and Cape Sable so that reconnaissance operations might forestall Indian subsistence from the coontie that grew so abundantly between the two locations. Subsequent scouting expeditions along the Miami River revealed the total destruction of all white property including Fitzpatrick's immense plantation which Stephen R. Mallory later valued at not less than $50,000, and which had the makings of one of the finest plantations in the South.

After serving until April at the lighthouse, for the abnormally swollen wages of $100 monthly for himself and his armed guard, Cooley turned the keeper position over to Captain Griffin who then served until the arrival of John W. B. Thompson, the appointed permanent keeper.

Cooley retired to Indian Key where he began to draw up a petition listing his losses and praying the United States government for relief since his tormentors were now at war with the government. In the petition preamble he confessed his bleak condition: "since his loss and misfortune he had no permanent place of abode, not being able to do hard work at his age, is obliged to trade from place to place for support." Resilience and resourcefulness characterized Cooley's life and career and the plaintive outburst bespoke the initial reaction of a man whose once bright future had suffered irreparable loss. Past the prime of life at fifty-three years of age, penniless, with the prospect vanished of a hearth warmed by frolicking children and nurtured by a comparatively young companion chosen to share the intimacies of marriage, his outburst seems mild indeed. Despite his misery, life must go on and Cooley joined the throng who picked themselves up after disastrous bouts with Indian outrages.

Sailing his schooner again under the colors of a wrecker. Cooley operated out of Indian Key. Here he joined forces with Jacob Housman, Richard H. Fitzpatrick, Thomas Jefferson Smith, Walter C. Maloney, Charles Howe and John P. Baldwin in an effort to maintain freedom from domination by Key West interests, particularly from the admiralty court situated there. Wreckers of the upper keys and mainland plantation operators had long groaned under the Key West yoke. They reserved special criticism for having to transact salvage and legal matters in that far out of the way island town. In a petition to Congress one hundred-thirteen men complained they "must serve as jurors at Key West twice each year at a season when our presence is most required at our place of residence." They had "no other means than small open boats to travel by water a distance between two and three hundred miles, subject to all the ill consequences of exposure to boisterous and disagreeable weather, with great hazard attending such a mode of travelling and frequently owing to headwinds exceeds two weeks." It was well-known that the southeast Florida mainland was rapidly "coming into notice for the cultivation of sugar cane, sea island cotton, tropical fruits, the mulberry tree and rearing the silk worm, to which the climate and soil are both peculiarly applicable, particularly at, and in the vicinity of Cape Florida, New River and Indian River." Obviously, the signers favored the creation of a new county out of Monroe County, for then business and legal matters could be conducted close to home.
Ground plan of Indian Key in 1840. William Cooley furnished cannons and armaments in January 1836 to protect the key against Seminole Indian attack. Florida territorial Senator William English, who owned the

Frankee Lewis Donation on New River near the Cooley plantation, maintained a residence on Indian Key after Indians had driven him off the Florida mainland.

The brunt of endeavors fell upon Housman, Smith and Fitzpatrick. For sometime, in deepest secrecy, Fitzpatrick had been hatching a plan to create a new county from the northern part of Monroe County. He had lost favor in Key West following his opposition to a more liberal city charter which only the Legislative Council could grant. He then transferred his residence and interests to his blossoming New River and Miami River plantations. The 1836 Legislative Council put power into his hands when it elected him its president and the Dade ambush provided him with an immediate hero around which to spin his web of separation.

The gallant Major Francis L. Dade had been on duty with the army in Florida for many years prior to leading himself and one hundred six of his men to death in an Indian ambush on December 28, 1835. Thereafter, his name was on everyone's lips. While military commandant at Key West in the mid-1830's, the major had made many friends in South Florida during his round of duties which included inspection of the Cape Florida Lighthouse after the severe September 1835 hurricane. Fragmentary evidence indicates that he inspected the Gil Blas cargo stored at the Cooley trading post on new River as he swung along the coast inspecting the many vessels beached by the hurricane. His business dealings with Fitzpatrick, however, rendered him a special favorite with this powerful politician.

With the Florida populace virtually worshipping the memory of the fallen heroes of the ambush, Fitzpatrick appealed to the members of the Legislative Council to memorialize Major Dade and his slain comrades by creating a county in their memory. Housman went in person to Tallahassee to plead the cause of a new county. Encountering little opposition and enlisting much support, Fitzpatrick guided a bill through on January 28, 1836, that created Dade County from Monroe effective February 4 and specifying Indian Key as the temporary county seat, thereby holding in abeyance the possible claims of Key Vacas,
Miami River and New River, the other chief settlements, to be designated the permanent county seat.

Comprised, for the most part, of the large watery wasteland variously known as the Everglades or Pai-hai-o-kee, an Indian name for river of grass, Dade County was huge. It extended along "a line running from West end Bay Honda Key, to Cape Sable and from thence to Lake Macaco (Lake Okeechobee), thence to the head of what is now known as Hillsboro River, (the north branch) and down the said river to the Atlantic Ocean." The judge of the Southern District was to hold one term of the Superior Court each year at Indian Key and the judge of the county court was to hold a term each at Indian Key and Cape Florida, while records of both courts were to remain on Indian Key. For all practical purposes Dade County became Indian Key and Indian Key belonged to Housman. In addition to thrusting Indian Key into undue political prominence, the desertion of the mainland in January 1836 by white settlers proved momentous in the long run. Almost fifty years would elapse before the southeast Florida mainland would attain the agricultural prosperity and population of pre-1836.

The closely knit Housman partisans conducted the public affairs of Dade County. After 1836 Fitzpatrick sought in vain to restore the prosperity of his New River and Miami River plantations and, for years, he continued to sit in the territorial legislature as Dade County representative. Maloney assumed the clerkship of the county court and in 1838 married Mary Elizabeth Rigby, survivor of the New River Settlement massacre, who bore him eight children. As United States Inspector of Customs Howe moved from Key West to Indian Key. Smith, a brilliant lawyer with powerful Washington political connections, became the first county judge. Cooley, Whitehead and Lemuel Otis shared law enforcement chores as justices of the peace. Belying his age and self-confessed incapacity, Cooley assumed other official duties in Dade County as he joined William H. Fletcher and Whitehead as legislative appointed auctioneers. Time, fortune and Indian deprivations rendered all arrangements tenuous, and appointees came and went in rapid succession.

Economic considerations and pride forced Key West boosters to launch a vigorous campaign to have Congress reverse the legislative ukase which created Dade County. Their generally unsuccessful efforts, led by Whitehead, A. B. Browne, and Judge William Marvin, continued for years. Petition after petition alleged that the meager population of Dade County could hardly man the county court, much less a Superior Court and, for this reason Congress should annul the territorial act creating the county court and abolish the Superior Court which controlled admiralty cases. Furthermore, since Housman owned Indian Key lock, stock and barrel, he would allow no competition at auctions, causing irreparable loss to owners and insurors of wrecked vessels while making Housman incomparably wealthy.

Rising to unprecedented heights of vituperation and character assassination, the petitioners dwelt at length upon the allegedly unsavory character of Smith and Housman. Marshaling a vast array of pertinent data relative to population and commerce in the new county, and couching it in sober language, Smith methodically refuted each charge without engaging in personalities. Still unappeased, Whitehead and his cohorts countercharged: what would become of justice in Dade County with Smith in charge? Obviously, with political throatcutting the order of the day, Justices Cooley and Fletcher could hardly cooperate with or even maintain decent relations with fellow Justice Whitehead. While shunning extreme partisanship, Cooley generally acquiesced in the political decisions of Fitzpatrick, Housman, Smith and associates. He doggedly held onto his justice post and wore it as a badge of honor; even long after he left the county he continued to sign his correspondence "Justice of the Peace, Dade County."

Sandwiched between his activities as justice of the peace, wrecker, and auctioneer of wrecked vessels, Cooley piloted schooners for the United States Army and Navy through the shoal-ridden Florida Straits and the Bahama Channel to points between Key West and New River. By a Legislative Council Act of 1836 slaves abducted by Indians must be recovered within six months or be escheated to the territorial government. Faced with the possibility of this loss, Cooley was driven to New River on several occasions in search of his missing slave woman. On these occasions he reported to military authorities on the situation on the river.

Numerous other witnesses observed Indians moving in their canoes in the direction of the river. Captain Robert Armstrong, commander of the United States Army Transport Motto, reported that upwards of two hundred Negroes had been whisked away from New River inlet by a large Spanish ship. These often unverified reports generated fear on the part of the military that Indians and their Black allies would secure the five to six tons of lead remaining on board the brig Gil Blas beached by the September 1835 hurricane near Hillsboro Inlet. Such a dreaded event might
Cape Florida Lighthouse, Key Biscayne, Florida, built 1824-1825. William Cooley served as temporary Lighthouse Keeper in early 1836 when Southeast Florida was under attack by Seminole Indians.
prolong the war that whites expected to end momentarily. In response to this threat Commander M. P. Mix, aboard the United States Ship Concord lying at anchor at Tampa Bay, dispatched Lieutenant Thomas J. Lieb and Midshipman Stanley and nineteen enlisted men on July 6, 1836, aboard the schooner Motto, with urgent orders to proceed to Hillsboro Inlet and destroy the Gil Blas. At Key West, United States Navy Lieutenant George Clark came aboard and Captain Armstrong engaged Cooley to pilot the transport to the distressed brig. The Motto arrived at the Gil Blas on July 23 and, according to the statement sworn by Lieutenant Lieb to Justice Cooley, "did set fire to the brig Gil Blas, that she might become covered with sand, and that all traces of her might be destroyed to prevent the Indians ever getting from her any lead, or other articles which would be of any use to them," and all "for the public good." Leaving the derelict vessel afire with wood procured from the shore, the Motto proceeded for Key West mistakenly confident its mission had been performed. Later testimony revealed the fire consumed only the upper portion of the brig while the hull remained intact. Unsuspected by the officers and crew of the Motto another, even more dangerous, mission beckoned as they proceeded southward.

Nearing dusk in the area of New River Inlet the Motto fell in with the schooner Pee Dee of New York, commanded by Captain Cole. A short time later those aboard the ships saw the sky suddenly light up in the direction of the Cape Florida Lighthouse. Astonished and mystified by what appeared to be an unnatural phenomenon, the ships unfurled more sail and sped southward at an increased tempo, hardly knowing what to expect. In the meantime, one of the most dramatic episodes in United States Lighthouse Service history had already commenced.

Near four o'clock in the afternoon of July 23 a party of forty to fifty war-whooping, combat-painted Indians ferociously attacked Cape Florida Lighthouse outhouses. Retreating to the safety of the sturdy lighthouse from the indefensible outdoor kitchen, keeper John W. B. Thompson and his Negro attendant Carter bolted the door, scrambled up the wooden lighthouse ladder, firing their guns as they went. Unable to break down the door despite repeated surges, the rampaging Indians emitted blood-curdling screams in the genre of Confederate rebel yells as they set fire to the windows and door and loosed volley after volley from their Spanish rifles in an attempt to kill the besieged. His clothing afire, his legs punctured by bullets and Carter dead from one, Thompson made a last desperate attempt to survive by hurling a keg of gunpowder down the stairwell to the base of the stairs. The powder keg exploded and tore down the stairs and provided the light seen by the Motto and Pee Dee. This left the half dead Thompson stranded on the platform eighty feet above the wave-swept rocks below. He alternately prayed and contemplated suicide by jumping to the rocks below. Unable to reach their prey, the Indians loaded the moveable items aboard their boats, departed in a northward direction and left Thompson to die a slow, horrible death.

Piloted by Cooley, the Motto, accompanied by the Pee Dee, arrived at the lighthouse near midnight. Working intermittently through the night and morning the officers and crews finally extricated Thompson's and Carter's bodies through the ingenious use of blocks and tackles. Making Thompson as comfortable as the situation permitted, the Motto and Pee Dee skirted the Cape Florida and Miami River plantations and observed their state of total destruction wrought by the pillaging hands of the Indians. Proceeding with utmost speed to Key West, Thompson was placed in the military hospital through the kindness of Lieutenant Benjamin Alvord of the Fourth United States Infantry Regiment. Remarkably, Thompson eventually recovered from his disastrous experience.

Led by the sub-chief, guide and warrior Chico, a band of about seventy Indians began to plunder white possessions from Key Largo northward early in the hostilities. Chico proved doubly dangerous because in addition to harboring an intense hatred of whites, he was thoroughly conversant with their ways. Prior to the war he broke away from the "Spanish fishing Indians" near Charlotte Harbor and embraced a nomadic existence which led him in circuit from the keys to the New River Settlement. In return for instructions in the manufacture of various little articles useful to his way of life, he reciprocated by hunting and fishing for the whites. After being roughly handled by Captain John Whalton, commander of the lightship stationed at Carysford's Reef south of Cape Florida, he intensified his deprivations. Late in September 1836 he began a series of savage forays which propelled United States Navy Lieutenant Levin M. Powell into action at Key West, a move long advocated by prominent Floridians who believed that the Navy, despite its assertions to the contrary, was dragging its feet at the expense of suffering Floridians.

As early as January 1836 Richard H. Fitzpatrick recommended to Brigadier General Richard K. Call of the Florida Militia that a
tri-pronged sally of light draught steamboats be employed to ferret out the Indians who were residing along the fringes of the Everglades. When Call became territorial governor in June he set into motion plans to crush Indian hostilities by a bi-pronged pincer movement. With 1500 men from the Tennessee Volunteer Brigade, reinforced with a few regular troops and militia and buttressed with politician Fitzpatrick as staff colonel, Call planned to crush the main Indian force near the cove of the Withlacoochee River in the vicinity where he had fought them late in December 1835. Meanwhile, a naval force would scour the Everglades to capture or eradicate Indian remnants. Thus, in a matter of weeks, the Indians and the Negroes among them would be caught in a vise-like grip which would make surrender mandatory and preliminary to their shipment west of the Mississippi River, the permanent home assigned them by the United States government.

By early October Call had penetrated to the Withlacoochee River cove, ready for combat. On the southern flank the Navy readied a small flotilla. Their general mission was to flush the hostiles from their Everglades recesses on a line extending from Cape Sable northward to some indefinite point around Lake Okeechobee. The specific objective was much more limited. The Navy must surprise the Indians at or near Cape Florida and New River, take them captive, and provide protection against further Indian outrages for settlers like Cooley who wished to return to the mainland.

Chico's lightening, ferocious attacks galvanized the Navy into hurriedly assembling a light-draught fleet for the accomplishment of its missions. Enlisting every Navy ship available in South Florida waters, Lieutenant Powell found his miniature armada consisted of 50 seamen, 95 marines, 8 officers, reinforced by the schooners Caroline and Firefly and the United States Cutter Washington commanded by Captain Day. Doctor Charles A. Hassler accompanied the determined expedition as surgeon, while versatile Doctor Edward Frederick Leitner and future Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory volunteered to serve in a military capacity. The latter two provided backup experience and knowledge about the terra incognita where the naval fleet proposed to operate. Both were explorers girded with vast experience in South Florida waters and the waterlogged land lying back from the coast. For years they had traversed the outer fringes of the Everglades in an investigation of South Florida flora, soil, and topography. The German-bred doctor and scientist, assisted by Mallory, gathered data which when published would permit settlers to select the choicest locations. The fact that he had spent one winter living among the Indians on New River gave him an insight into their thinking and a knowledge of the area.

As commander of the expedition, Lieutenant Powell chose as his chief guide the one man uniquely qualified by experience and craft to locate Indian trails and settlements. Included among his many qualifications was Cooley's familiarity with the Indian mode of life and language and his own long residence in Florida dating back to 1813. Consequently, Cooley had become acquainted with the chief Indian leaders and many of their braves.

As a resident of South Florida for a dozen years Cooley had hunted, trapped, and explored the eastern edge of the Everglades northward to Lake Okeechobee. His knowledge of the Everglades, southward from New River, rested upon his travels up to the headwaters of New River thence southward, utilizing the Rio Ratones (present day Snake Creek) until he reached the Miami River and Cape Florida settlements. He was knowledgeable of the sea lanes after years of sailing the Bahama Channel and Florida Straits past Indian Key onto Key West in pursuit of his commercial and legal obligations. As a ship captain he had mastered the intricate regulations promulgated for that position by the Key West City Council. Beyond these technical and experiential accomplishments, he possessed a native cunning and intelligence which his contemporaries often found either reassuring or else mystifying and irritating.

Moving from Key West in great haste on October 13, the confident flotilla passed through the keys with minor side excursions and reached Cape Florida eight days later. Coincidentally, on the same day that the flotilla departed Key West, Call and the Tennesseans were repulsed at the Withlacoochee River by swollen flood waters and by the devastating fire of Indians from across the river. Dividing the expedition at the cape, Lieutenant Powell passed up the inland waterways while Lieutenant William Smith sailed northward with a detachment intent on sweeping the coast and then rendezvousing with Lieutenant Powell on New River. If successful, this pincer tactic would terminate hostilities in South Florida and begin a new era of prosperity.

Between October 27 until he formed a juncture with Lieutenant Smith on October 30 Lieutenant Powell banked upon Cooley's astuteness and comprehensive knowledge of South Florida. Thus, Cooley led Lieutenant Powell's
Stephen R. Mallory: William Cooley’s friend, military compatriot and lawyer. Mallory served with great distinction as United States Senator from Florida and as Confederate Secretary of the Navy.

Since their primary mission to scout Cape Florida and New River for Indians had proved extremely disappointing, the council implemented the general mission. Lieutenant Powell again divided his forces by sending Lieutenant Smith northward with directions to penetrate the inlets as far north as Indian River. It was thought this maneuver would determine the presence of coastal Indians.

Powell relied upon Cooley’s knowledge of the inland Indian trails that led northward and pushed the second detachment in light boats into the dreary, dark morasses. From there their early evening camp was an island forest of pine and cypress which enclosed on the east. Westward stretched an eerie expanse of flat wasteland. From the island elevation the party commanded a position from which any Indian fire certainly could be seen. At dawn the weary, soaked, insect-bitten men pushed forward over the shallow grassy sea; however, the dry season had set in and, thusly, even the smallest of the miniscule fleet could not approach the islands in the distance. Discouraged, the sleepless expedition retraced its path to New River.

Utilizing his field notes, Lieutenant Powell described the impossibilities of foot and boat traffic in the partially dried out, forbidding Everglades by writing: “The matted saw-grass which wounds like a razor, and the deep sluices, which intersect the glades, prevented access to them on foot. I found it impracticable to navigate the glades, at this stage of water in keel boats, though no labor had been spared; and we reluctantly commenced our return to camp.” While the lieutenant did not describe in his report any currently recognizable landmark, the most carefully conceived estimate places his furthest penetration some miles northwest of Hillsboro Inlet. Although hatched amid the highest hopes, the first attempt by the American military to discover and capture Indians in the Everglades ended in dismal failure.

Even though he carried out his mission in the highest traditions of the navy, Lieutenant Smith met with no more success than his superior. On November 6 the lieutenants rendezvoused with their forces on New River where the commander ruminated upon his lack of accomplishment. True to his directives, Lieutenant Powell had minutely examined New River and the adjacent country by land and sea but had not found “the Southern Indians, reported to be in force” on New River.

Powell had, however, confirmed the widely circulated report that arrowroot abounded on the river in a manner “peculiar to Florida.” Conviction mounted on his part that arrowroot was
“the bread, the chief sustenance of the Indians, deprived of which they might starve.” Some other conclusions accounted for his failure and the subsequent results. The expedition had commenced too late in the year; some months had passed since the Indians had harvested arrowroot on New River. Abandoning their favorite granary, the Indians had retreated to pose danger on other presently discernible Florida fronts.

After putting their vessels and equipment in a state of readiness and catching up on their sleep, the disappointed and highly subdued expedition on November 8 proceeded south to Cape Sable. There, Cooley relinquished the position of guide to Doctor Leitner. He was content to resume his interrupted wrecking and judicial duties from Indian Key. Lieutenant Powell’s naval entourage explored the Gulf of Mexico coast northward to Charlotte Harbor without encountering a single Indian, a repeat performance of the Atlantic coast expedition.

Returning to Key West on December 8, 1836, the lieutenant compiled a fabulously lengthy account of his two months and 1,000 mile odyssey to his immediate superior, Commander Thomas Crabb who was commanding the United States Ship Vandalia, then riding at anchor at Key West. Doctor Leitner continued his topographical exploration for the season and young Mallory continued his intermittent study of law at Key West. Although he failed to mention it in his report, Lieutenant Powell’s unsuccessful expedition precluded the return of Cooley and other settlers to the mainland.

Four days before Lieutenant Powell returned to Key West, Governor Call surrendered command and control of the Florida conflict to Major General Thomas S. Jesup at Camp Volusia on the St. Johns River. Richard H. Fitzpatrick left the military service and, like Call, was bitter at the sudden but not unexpected order of Secretary of War B. F. Butler to relieve Call of his command. Butler acted on the direct order of President Andrew Jackson.

The governor’s supply system had broken down completely in the wilderness and his troops suffered to the point of exhaustion and starvation. He had been balked by the wily Indians who simply melted away before the superior force and retreated ever deeper into a veritable jungle, erroneously described as the Everglades by the governor’s associates. The grand failure of a modified pincer strategy, operating along the northern and southern perimeters of Indian concentration, insured another season of bloody, fatiguing warfare. Contrary to popular and military expectations, the Indian uprising now approached the proportions of an Indian war.

In early March 1837 General Jesup persuaded Chief Miconopy and several important sub-chiefs to sign articles of “Capitulation.” The articles required that all Indians and the Negroes among them journey to a cantonment located about ten miles west of Tampa Bay preparatory within a short period to their shipment west to the Arkansas Territory. Movement by the Indians from scattered locations proved exceedingly slow, however, in part due to frenzied opposition by Osceola and Sam Jones, two die-hard leaders who opposed emigration.

While waiting for the Indians to congregate at the cantonment, the general faced two pressing needs. First, he had to maintain the series of forts and camps he had established on a line from Fort Heilman southwest of Jacksonville to Fort Brooke at Tampa Bay. An even greater task required that he prevent white settlers from going among the Indians and seizing by force those Negroes whom they claimed had either been captured by the Indians or else had run away to join the Indians in wilderness freedom.

From his headquarters at Fort Dade, General Jesup heard of Cooley’s whereabouts at Tampa Bay and his reputation as a guide; he engaged the rawboned South Floridian in this capacity in early March. With the army in a state of quiescence for the moment as it waited for the hostiles to obey the “Capitulation,” Cooley was temporarily assigned the position of express rider. His task required him to deliver the absolutely essential messages which flowed between the general’s headquarters and an irregular line of forts that extended from Tampa Bay northeastward to Fort Heilman, a distance of approximately 200 miles through a nearly impassable wilderness.

Repeatedly, white settlers penetrated into the area under military jurisdiction in search of Negroes upon whom they could lay some often vague claim of ownership. When they presented valid evidence of ownership General Jesup surrendered Negroes to them for re-enslavement. Not content with this generous concession, overbearing whites seized any Negro within their path of search although some were legitimate slaves of the Indians. By March 25 seizure had become so critical that the general ordered that no white settlers were to be permitted south of Fort Armstrong located twenty miles north of his headquarters. He had “found the Indian negroes, who govern their master, so apprehensive of being taken by Georgians and Floridians, that to quiet them I was obliged to give orders that no citizen except express riders should pass south of Fort Armstrong, but for all that the negroes would not
come in, and without their assistance the Indians could not be gotten in for a year to come." Citizens, nevertheless, continued to penetrate beyond the line of demarcation and further retarded Indian and Negro movement to the cantonment. Some express riders were suspected by the military of conveying to slavehunters for a bounty the location of unsuspecting Negroes, who were then easily captured and placed in slavery whether or not they had ever been a slave before.

Into this highly flammable situation, upon which devolved the weighty issues of war and peace, stepped Cooley. As an express rider, he could pass at will through military lines. All went well for several weeks until suddenly, at the end of March 1837, General Jesup heard rumblings of anger from the Indians and made an investigation into the cause. Trembling with rage, he wrote from Fort Dade to commandant Lieutenant-Colonel Samuel Miller at Fort Brooke what he had learned. Jesup had just been apprized that Cooley had circulated reports that a Seminole chief at the cantonment was about to quit the cantonment with a party of Indians and Negroes and return to the wilds. If true, this might signal a mass exodus and a return to bitter conflict. The general understood that Cooley had come to Tampa Bay to look for Negroes. If confirmed, Cooley must be sent away because "A trifling circumstance would light up the war again. Any interference with the negroes which would produce alarm on their part would inevitably deprive us of all the advantages we have gained. I sympathize with Mr. Cooley in his afflictions and losses, but responsible as I am for the peace of the country, I cannot, I will not permit that peace to be jeopardized by his imprudence."

It was General Jesup's desire that Cooley be put under oath and examined in the presence of Judge Steele at Tampa Bay. More than once the general had threatened to hang whites who interfered with Indian removal in a reasonable way.

Learning that the judge had not returned to Tampa Bay from a trip, Lieutenant-Colonel Miller examined Cooley verbally and, after, required Cooley to furnish a written statement. Cooley acknowledged that he had been concerned about the Negroes but only with regard to reacquiring the female slave who had been taken the year before by the Indians on New River. He had heard of her whereabouts in the Tampa Bay area and had simply tried to locate her. Exhibiting an attitude far different from that of haughtily slavehunters, he stated to the colonel that he had "lost my all, and for the good of my country I am for peace. If I am any detriment I will withdraw immediately or stay and do all I can for harmony and peace."

There was not a word spoken of revenge for the murder of his family.

In a report to General Jesup, Lieutenant-Colonel Miller's assessment of Cooley was highly complimentary. The express rider had answered every question in a candid manner and enjoyed a high reputation in the Tampa Bay area. Cooley did, however, feel that his presence at Tampa Bay might embarrass the military. He stated "...that as he was known to most of the hostile Indians, and especially to the party who murdered his wife and children—that he thinks it would be better for him not to remain here as there might be some who knowing that he was at Tampa and possessed of material facts in relation to their murders and depredations, who would avoid meeting him." Eventually, the military reassigned Cooley in order to remove him from a location where friction might develop; however, it was not before Cooley gave unwitting testimony involving Captain William Bunce with Indian discontent. General Jesup's wrath then descended upon the captain, whom he threatened to hang.

Always characterized by the abilities to make and retain friends, Cooley exhibited these admirable traits at Tampa Bay as he renewed friendships with two singular individuals. Captain Bunce had migrated to Key West in 1824 after years of navigating boats from his home in Baltimore to Philadelphia and New York. For years at Key West, until his bankruptcy in 1831, Bunce had operated the largest general merchandise emporium in South Florida. Here Cooley traded with his fellow Marylander and whiled away hours and days in conversation with South Floridians and sailors from all parts of the world.

Upon removal to the Gulf Coast in 1832, Captain Bunce had become a justice of peace for Hillsborough County and operator of the largest commercial establishment on the lower Gulf Coast. At his fishing ranchos he employed upwards of one hundred Indians and thirty Spanish fishermen. Naturally, the captain opposed Indian removal as it would remove cheap and efficient labor and result in another bankruptcy. As General Jesup relentlessly exerted pressure for the captain's relinquishment of the fishing Indians for shipment west, Bunce responded by enlisting the support of Cooley and the local judge. Late from Connecticut, Judge Steele possessed journalistic credentials and served as jurist and United States Inspector of Customs in the Tampa Bay area. The judge had met Cooley when the latter was making one of his frequent trips to the west coast in order to auction and appraise wrecked vessels. They became fast friends and, after Cooley left the army as express rider, they became
firm political allies when Cooley decided to enter the arena of elective politics.

Note: This article is a reworked version of the second section of C. Kirk’s unpublished pamphlet entitled: William Cooley: Broward County’s Phoenix.

Bibliography

The material for William Cooley’s life has been garnered from many sources. In addition to those cited in Part I appearing in Broward Legacy, Vol. I, No. 1 (October, 1976), the following listing is representative.

*Army and Navy Chronicle, IV, 298.
*Dodd, Dorothy. “Jacob Housman of Indian Key,” Tequesta, Number Eight (1948).
House Document 798, 30 Cong., 1 sess.
Legislative Council Journal (Florida, 1836).
*Record Group 75: Letters Received, Office of Indian Affairs 1824-1881, Florida Superintendency, 1824-1853. National Archives.
*Record Group 92: Records Office of Quarter master General, Water Transportation 1834-1900, Entry 1403, Schooner “Motto.” National Archives.
Senate Document 140, 25 Cong., 3 sess.
Senate Document 278, 26 Cong., 1 sess.
St. Augustine Florida Herald 1838-1840.
St. Augustine News 1838-1840.

* Copies of the material used in this article are located in the archives of the Broward County Historical Commission, Broward County Courthouse.