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## *CollectorsClub Philatelist*

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Postal History of Indian Key, Fla.

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# Postal History of Indian Key, Fla.

Thomas Lera

## Introduction

On July 21, 1821, Spain transferred Florida to the United States, and four days later, the Territorial Legislature created two counties out of the entire state. Escambia County encompassed most of the panhandle, from the county seat at Pensacola east to Lake City, while St. Augustine became the county seat of the new St. Johns County, which extended south down the peninsula to Key West.

During the following two years, St. Johns County was broken up into smaller counties. On July 2, 1823, by an act of the Territorial Legislature, Monroe County was established as the sixth county in the Florida territory, encompassing the southern portion of Florida.

## Key West Mail Delivery

In 1828, five years after Monroe County was established, Key West was incorporated and became the county seat. The population at that time was fewer than 600 people. The main industries by 1830 were fishing and shipwreck salvaging on the reef. On Feb. 18, 1829, the post office was established, with Henry Waterhouse as postmaster, and sometime that same year its first mail contract was awarded to the owners of a small sailing vessel, the *Post Boy*.

Key West residents experienced many mail delays. It was decided the boat should make monthly trips between Key West and Charleston. However, due to many factors, the “monthly” trips were irregular, often requiring two months.<sup>1</sup>

## Indian Key Post Office and Mail Delivery

In 1824, Silas Fletcher came to Indian Key, a 12-acre island, part of the chain of Florida keys, located halfway between Key West and Cape Florida. He built a general store for the partnership of Snyder and Appleby, which was visited by the shipwreck salvagers, fishermen and the Key West mail boat. Fletcher unofficially collected and delivered mail as a **private post office** and received no financial assistance from the U.S. Post Office Department to aid in the cost of transporting the mails. Transportation costs were to be paid out of the postage collected or made up by the postmaster. On May 21, 1833, the Indian Key Post Office was formally established.<sup>2</sup>

Henry S. Waterhouse served as postmaster at Key West until April 11, 1833, a year after which, on April 19, 1834, he was appointed Indian Key postmaster. He posted a notice in the *Pensacola Gazette* about the establishment of the Indian Key post office (Figure 1).

**New Post Office.**

**A** POST OFFICE has been established at Indian Key, Florida. All letters and papers for persons residing on this Island, at Cape Florida, Kayo-Biscayno, New River, Key Vacas, on board the light ship Florida, or on board any of the wrecking vessels, excepting the Pizarro, will reach their intended destination most readily if mailed for this Office.

**H. S. WATERHOUSE, P. M.**  
**Indian Key, (Florida,) May, 15, 1834.**

Figure 1. Notice in the *Pensacola Gazette* June 14, 1834.


### **Schooner *Fair American* carried mail between Charleston, Indian Key and Key West**

The *Key West Enquirer's* "Marine History of Entered and Cleared Sloops and Schooners" (on page 3) showed the following listings:

- 10.10.34 *Fair American* entered Key West from Charleston (10.15.34 *Enquirer*).
- 11.06.34 *Fair American* entered Key West Harbor with sundries to master (items not big enough to list) (11.15.24 *Enquirer*).
- 11.15.34 *Fair American* left for Charleston (11.22.34 *Enquirer*).
- 12.13.34 *Fair American* delivered mail and papers from Charleston (12.15.34 *Enquirer*).
- 12.15.34 *Fair American* left for Charleston with U.S. Mail (12.15.34 *Enquirer*).
- "On Saturday last [01.17.1835] about 9 o'clock P.M. a rumbling noise was heard in a direction from Indian Key, and very severe squall followed which continued near ten minutes with great[er] force than has been felt here for many years. The schooner *Fair American* was blown upon the beach, near Browne's wharf, and several boats were damaged and Postmaster Henry S. Waterhouse with his son drowned near Indian Key." (01.24.35 *Enquirer*).

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## Mail Route 2482 serving Indian Key

The July 10, 1834, *Advertisement for Proposals for Carrying the Mails of the United States* stated that for the four years, beginning Jan. 1, 1835, and ending Dec. 31, 1838, Mail Route No. 2483 operated from Charleston S.C (or from St. Marks, Florida), by Indian Key to Key West once a month. It departed monthly from Charleston or St. Marks on the first, Key West the 15th and arrived at the port of destination with "all practicable dispatch."<sup>3</sup>

During this same time period, Charles Howe, inspector of the Indian Key Port, became postmaster on Feb. 9, 1835, after Waterhouse drowned in the aforementioned accident. In 1836, Indian Key became the first county seat of Dade County. In 1844, when the county seat was moved to Miami, the Upper Keys, including Indian Key, were returned to Monroe County.<sup>4</sup>

### Indian Key WAY Mail Letter from 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Timothy Paige

"WAY" letters routing can be determined from the designation and contents of the letter. The WAY marking on waterborne mail indicated the letter was picked up by a vessel on the "WAY" between post offices and delivered to the next post office reached by the captain contracted to carry the mail in locked pouches. He received a handling fee of 1¢ per WAY letter.

The Figure 2 letter is addressed to "General Roger Jones / Adjutant General" in "Washington City, D.C.," with a red "WAY 26" marking, which included the 25¢ regular fee for a letter going more than 400 miles, plus 1¢ for the WAY fee.

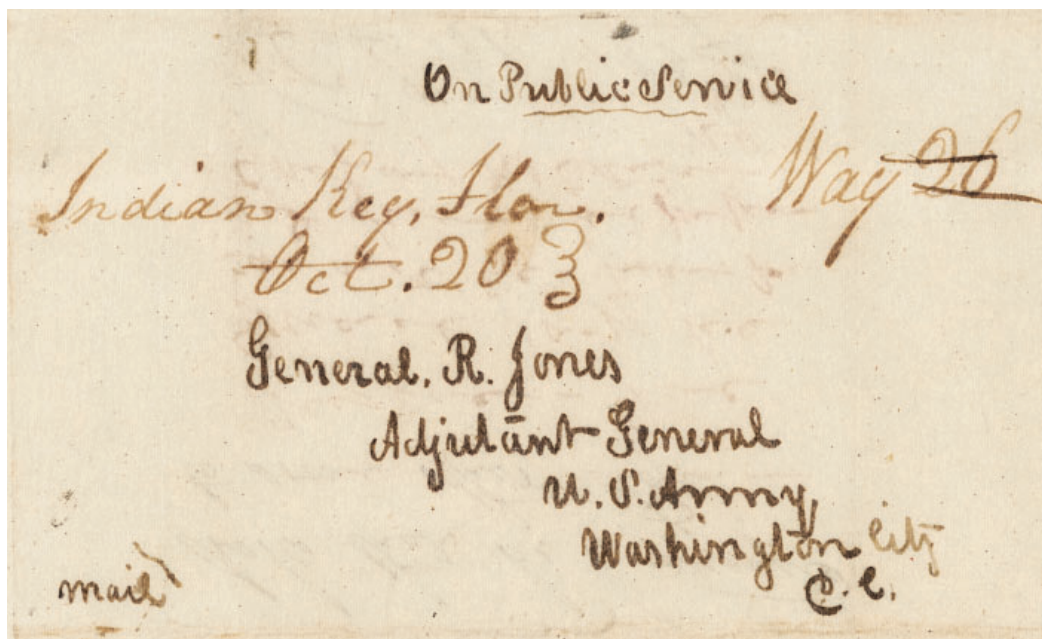


Figure 2. Red manuscript "Indian Key Flor. Oct 20, [1834]" and "Way 26." (Courtesy of the National Archives)

Postmaster Waterhouse did not notice the letter had the words "On Public Service" written on the cover. Had he noticed, the letter would not have been charged the 25¢ postage and, instead, would have been FREE. This was corrected in Charleston, where the postmaster lined out the 26¢. But the word WAY was not lined out because Waterhouse paid the 1¢ WAY fee to the captain who delivered the letter to him at Indian Key.

The letter read:

*Garrison of Key West*

*15 Oct, 1834*

*General,*

*Please cause me to be reassigned to some other station. The state of this Island is such that I cannot get along in peace. I am harassed beyond endurance. I pray to get away.*

*I have the honor to be, General,*

*Most Respectfully,*

*Your Obedient Servant,*

*Timothy Paige*

*1<sup>st</sup> Lt. USA Commanding Post and Asst. Commissary Officer*

Key West was a difficult place in which to live with the mosquitoes, sand flies and often spoiled food. Lt. Paige had been accused of treating the men badly while trying to maintain order.

### **First Lt. Timothy Paige Court Martial**

Paige received an order to attend a court of inquiry to discuss the allegations of abuse. However, he received the letter one month after the court date. Paige was ordered to attend another court of inquiry in New Orleans in early 1835, where Gen. Gaines suspended him.

The *Key West Post Report August 1835*, prepared by Brev. Maj. F.L. Dade listed, "Timothy Paige, 1st Lieutenant 4th Infantry, Suspended for two years from 31 May 1835 by Order No. 23 dated Memphis, Tenn., 20 May 1835."<sup>5</sup>

Timothy Paige wrote a response to the *Army Navy Chronicle* in reference to the publication's brief notice on his suspension, which was published in the July 16, 1835, issue. He wrote:

*"The court awarded this sentence in consequence of the accused having disobeyed the order and summons to attend the court of inquiry.*

*"The court of inquiry was ordered at the Bay of St. Louis, and the recorder was authorized to summons me as a witness. The summons did not reach me until a month after the court had convened. When I received it, I was the commanding officer of the post of Key West, of a company A.S.S., and AQM, and commander of a public vessel with no officer to*

relieve me, neither was anyone sent to relieve me. This was well known to General Gaines when he authorized me to be summoned.

“The record of the court of inquiry shows that it convened as ordered and immediately adjourned to a different place and State, of which I was not notified; and if I had, upon the receipt of the summons, abandoned my post, forfeited my bonds as a staff officer, and gone directly to the Bay of St. Louis, I should have found no court there.

“When I was relieved from my command, I reported to Major General Macomb, Commanding the Army, my reasons for the course which I had taken, and received from him a letter stating that they were deemed satisfactory, and that a copy had been furnished to General Gaines.

“After my arrival at New Orleans and during the session of the court, General Gaines ordered the charge against me for not attending the court of inquiry. General Gaines disapproves of the reasons assigned by the court for suspending me but orders me to be suspended. The record of the court shows that one of the prosecutors, who charged me with injuring his character, was required to appear as a witness and set forth his cause for complaint, refused and failed to do so, and no notice was ever taken of his refusal to obey the summons.”<sup>6</sup>

Key West Commissioned Officers Report May 1836, prepared by Benjamin Alvord, Second Lieutenant, Fourth Infantry Commanding, listed Timothy Paige, First Lieutenant Fourth Infantry as “Absent by permission General Gaines, having tendered his resignation at Fort King Florida on the 25th of February 1836.” It became effective on March 16, 1836.<sup>7</sup>

### Examples of Indian Key Postmarks

The *Florida Postal History 1763-1861, 2022 Second Edition*, page 174, has listed only one type of Indian Key postmark. The Type I was a red manuscript “Indian Key Flor.,” found between 10.20.1834\* and 11.16.1840\* with red manuscript



Figure 3. “Indian Key Flor. Sept 3<sup>rd</sup> [1837],” red manuscript postmark and “Free” rating. (Courtesy of Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries, Sale 83, Lot 63)

postal rates. Three are known to be in private hands and three are in institutional holdings (signified by\*).

Thomas Jefferson Smith, Esq., wrote to Aaron Vanderpoel, in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 3, [1837]. The letter was forwarded upon arrival to Kinderhook, N.Y., as noted in Figure 3 by a red “Washington City D.C., Sep. 17 [1837]” circular datestamp and matching “FREE” handstamp. Vanderpoel was a congressman from New York for three terms (1833-37 and 1839-41) and was a close friend of President Martin Van Buren.

The letter reads:

*“I wish to ask your friendly assistance in forwarding sundry petitions of the inhabitants of Dade County to make Indian Key a port of entry. You will find the papers in the hands of our delegate Mr. Downing...I left the City of New York last November and have, for the benefit of the climate made this place my residence and am practicing law here...”*

*Signed T.J. Smith”*

The writer, T.J. Smith, along with the founder of Indian Key, Jacob Housman, as well as 30 other residents, had signed a petition to Washington in June 1837 requesting a U.S. ship be stationed there to protect it and Key West from Indian attacks.

Two years later, on Aug. 7, 1840, 134 Indians in 30 canoes, led by Chief Chakaika, attacked Indian Key and killed six people. Brad Bertelli, curator at the Keys History & Discovery Center and an expert on Indian Key, said *“Indian Key’s significance to the Seminole War is that the island demonstrates the desperate nature of the Indians and the steps they were willing to take to fight for what they believed. The attack on Indian Key was unique in the sense the Indians traversed a great distance over water in order to attack, and it is also one of the rare instances where the Indians used one of the island’s cannons to fire at American forces.”*<sup>8</sup>

Late in December 1840, Chakaika was killed by troops led by Lt. Col. William S. Harney.

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## Other Indian Key Manuscript Postmarks

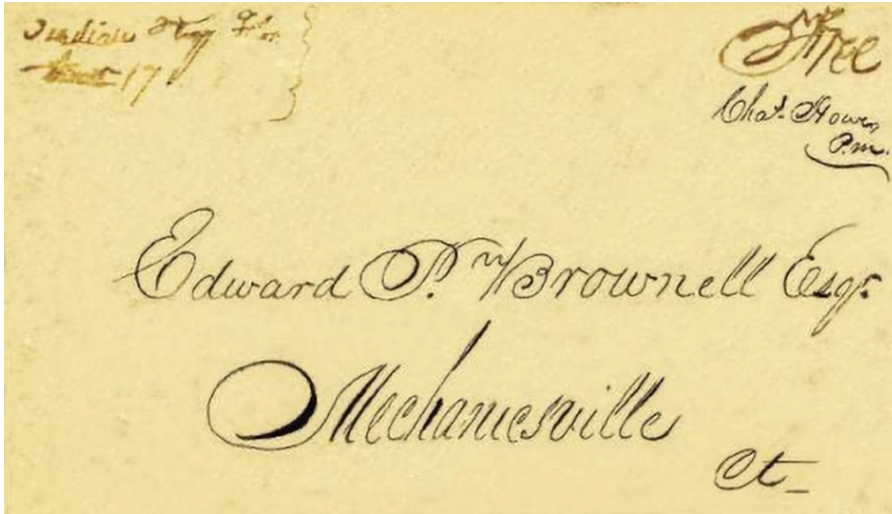


Figure 4. Red manuscript postmark, "Indian Key Flor. Nov. 17, [1839]" and matching "Free" rate. (Courtesy of *Florida Postal History 1763 - 1861*, page 174)

The 1839 folded letter shown in Figure 4, sent to Edward P. Brownell Esq., Mechanicsville, Conn., shows Charles Howe's postmaster notation in black in the upper-left corner. The "Indian Key, Flor." manuscript postmark and "FREE" are in red ink.<sup>9</sup>

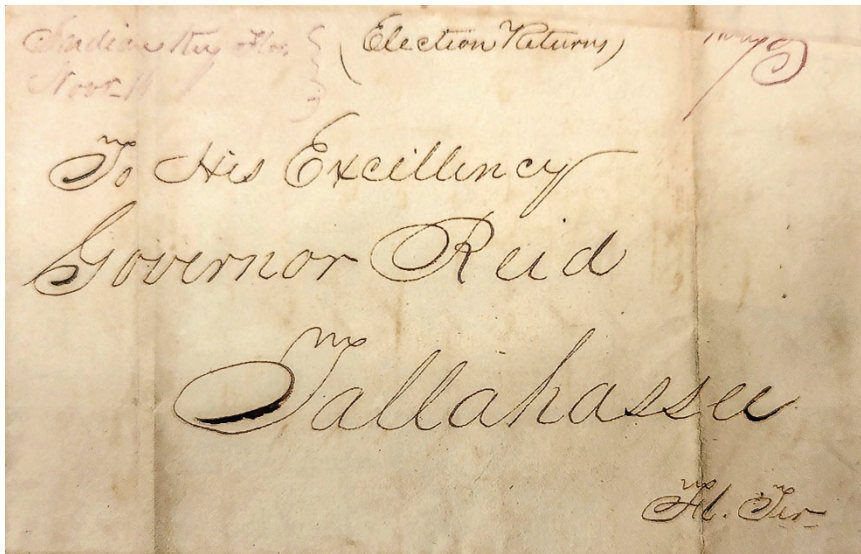


Figure 5. Red "Indian Key Flor. Nov 16, [1840]" and manuscript "75" rate. (Courtesy of Florida State Archives)

The Figure 5 letter, sent from Indian Key to Governor Reid in Tallahassee, submitted the 1840 election return, which revealed the persons who had been chosen to be part of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida.

**Table I: Postmasters' Compensation**

<b>Table One: Indian Key Postmaster's Compensation</b>					
<b>Postmaster</b>	<b>Postmaster Appointment</b>	<b>Reporting Data</b>	<b>Postmaster Compensation</b>	<b>Net Accrued Post Office Receipts</b>	<b>Total Income</b>
Silas Fletcher	05.21.1833				
Henry S. Waterhouse	04.19.1834	year ending 06.30.1835	\$16.35	\$27.31	\$43.66
Charles Howe	02.09.1835	year ending 06.30.1837	\$22.59	NR	NR
		year ending 06.30.1839	\$28.04	NR	NR
		year ending 06.30.1841	\$49.13	\$103.78	\$152.91
		07.01.1841 to 03.31.1842	\$87.49	\$181.08	\$268.57
John W. Marshall	03.15.1842	04.01.1842 to 06.30.1842	\$47.42	\$82.29	\$129.71
Luther A. Hopkins	09.14.1842	07.01.1842 to 09.30.1842	\$15.92	\$31.70	\$47.62
<b>P.O. Discontinued 05.29.1843</b>					
William H. Hilliard	11.01.1850	2 qtrs. ending 06.30.1851	\$0.32	\$0.48	\$0.80
		07.01.1852 to 08.05.1852	\$0.04	\$0.06	\$0.10
<b>P.O. Discontinued 08.05.1852</b>					
E. Ware	03.11.1873	07.01.1872 to 09.30.1873	\$12.00	NR	NR
<b>P.O. Discontinued 11.20.1873</b>					
William H. Bethrel	05.05.1880	No Return (NR)	NR	NR	NR
<b>P.O. Closed 09.21.1880</b>					

Indian Key Postmasters' Compensation, based on a commission of 30% on \$100 of letter postage collected, is shown in Table One.<sup>10</sup>

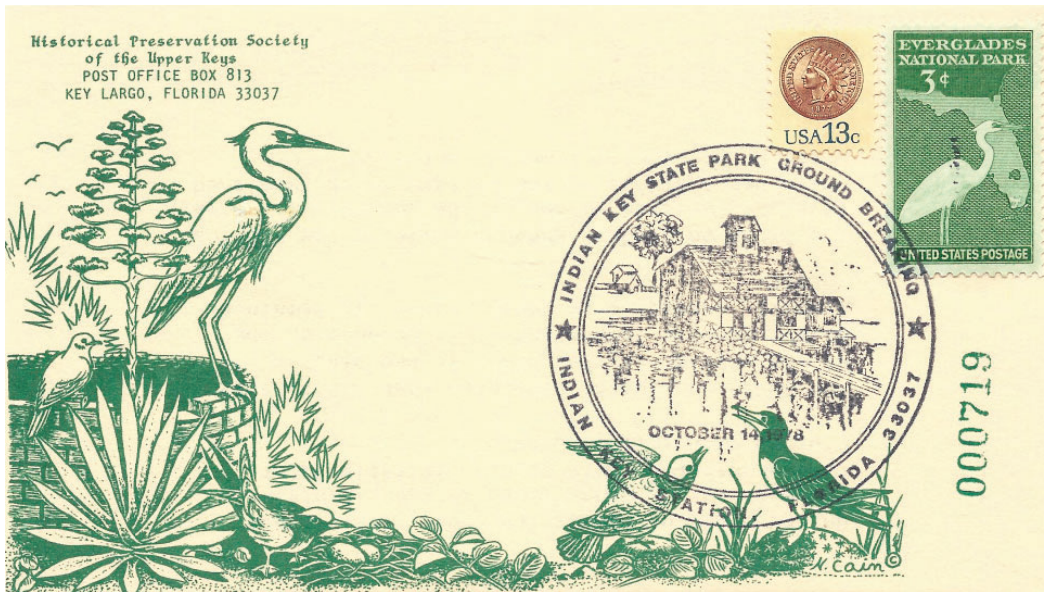
Postmasters were required to transmit quarterly statements to the U.S. Post Office Department, which were recorded in the Florida State Register. The table shows a postmaster's commissions, for one year on postage collected, unless the time period was shorter as indicated in the table.

The postmaster's compensation and post office net accrued proceeds added together total the gross income of the office.<sup>11</sup>

The amount of commissions stated is after deducting payments to a clerk, or contingent expenses, such as wrapping paper, twine, wax or plain pine boxes for the safe keeping of letters and papers. Invoices and receipts were included with the quarterly report. Rent and fuel were not considered contingent expenses.

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Figures 6a and 6b. Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys covers showing Indian Key State Park groundbreaking ceremony on Oct. 14, 1978. (From the author's collection)

**Indian Key State Park Commemorative Postmark**

Figure 6a shows birds painted by James Audubon while he was in the Florida Keys. The Great White Heron stands on the cistern that furnished water to Houseman's Tropical Hotel. Figure 6b shows a street map of Indian Key with the latitude and longitude of the Island drawn by Charles Howe.

The artwork was designed by Keys artist Nancy Cain. Note the two stamps used: the 1947 Everglades National Park issue showing the great white heron against a map of Florida, and the 1978 Indian Head Penny stamp, symbolic of the name and history of Indian Key.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for allowing me to use their images:

Figure 2, from the National Archives and the archivists who located and scanned the image; Figure 3 from the Robert A. Siegel Auction Galleries Sale 83, Lot 63; Figure 4 from The Florida State Archives in Tallahassee; and Figure 5 from The Florida Postal History Society. I would also like to thank Tara Khan at the Florida Keys History and Discovery Center for allowing me to research the various collections in its archives.

I appreciated for their perspectives and comments: Steve Rinck and Chris Kimball, board members of the Seminole Wars Foundation, and Sandra Fitzgerald.

## Endnotes

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