WILLIAM COOLEY: BROWARD'S LEGEND

Dr. Cooper Kirk

History has not treated William Cooley kindly. In modern parlance his has been a bad press or, rather, no press at all. A remarkable person he is vaguely remembered as the man whose family was massacred on New River on January 6, 1836. As matters now stand, it is as if he possessed no personality or career of his own. Like biblical Melchisedec he is credited with no beginning or ending. To him is given only the brief day when history thrust him unwillingly into the limelight. His sole claim to fame seems to rest upon his survivorship of a tragedy that brought horrible death to his family at the hands of revenge-bent Indians. In addition to the loss of his family at his advanced age, the tragedy robbed him of all his worldly goods and left him destitute.

Yet, Cooley deserves better in his own right. As the first official lawman and judge in what is present day Broward County, he combined this calling with many others, some official and others private. Upon his shoulders rested the tiresome official duty of appraising land, buildings, ships and slaves in southern Florida when nature prevailed to prevent all but the most hardy and adventuresome from travel, much less settlement. His explorations of southeast Florida astounded his contemporaries. No other guide for the wilderness was more trusted. As a manufacturer, he had no equal and hardly a competitor in south Florida. Not the least of his accomplishments, he acted as guardian and buffer between docile Indians and rapacious white men who swore their dominion extended to whatever their hands touched. To him belongs the distinction of bringing to south Florida some humaneness and culture which partially lifted the blanket of ignorance and barbarity.

For more than a quarter century, Cooley survived the Indian massacre of his household which consisted of his devoted wife, three children and Joseph Flinton, the family tutor from Cecil County, Maryland. He never remarried. Highly respected in his circles as evidenced by his being uniformly addressed as "Mr. Cooley" and by the use of the title "Esquire," his was an unusually long and productive life. Few men of his day could claim such a life that spanned two of the most formative periods in this country's history: the American Revolutionary War and the American Civil War. Judicious in thought and strenuous in execution of plans, his public career, although temporarily eclipsed by personal tragedy, rose phoenix-like to new heights after his tenure as New River Settlement Justice of the Peace, 1831-1836.

Born in Maryland in 1782 or 1783, Cooley arrived in Florida in 1813 at a time when the Spanish barely held Florida. Their nominal ownership suffered from the fierce pressures exerted by the government of the United States and by individual citizens anxious to exploit virtually virgin lands. Fragmentary evidence indicates that Cooley may have accompanied Colonel John Williams and the Tennessee Volunteers of 1813 in their attempt to wrest Florida from the Spanish on behalf of the United States. Supportive of this view is the fact that Cooley established a plantation at McGirt's Landing on the St. Mary's River near the point where the Tennesseans crossed into Florida. Later, he improved land on the west bank of the St. Johns River about thirty miles south of present day Jacksonville, a plot Americans designated "Cooley Hammac."

Locating at Alligator Pond in the vicinity of present day Lake City, he set about cultivating a small piece of land and trading with Indians who hardly were knowledgeable of white men's ways. Bold and often aciduous in speech, he cultivated friendship with Indians led by Chief Miconopy. Soon he mastered their language and customs. By upholding the Indians claim to the unsettled lands, he incurred the enmity of Don Jose del Maza Arredondo who then was engaged in actively pressing his claim for 330,000 acres of land in the Alachua territory, the center of Indian life in north central Florida. Despite Cooley's representations on behalf of the Indians, Arredondo succeeded in getting the Spanish crown to reward his services in its behalf. After American possession of Florida in 1821, Arredondo increased his efforts to sell portions of his huge domain to incoming Americans. Disgusted by legal usurpation of Indian lands, Cooley made the decision to settle as far away as possible from Spanish influence. In 1824 he settled on the north bank of New River near the "forks."

In line with the other settlers of the New River Settlement, he did not purchase land. He "squated" in anticipation of purchase after the United States government surveyed the area and opened it to legal ownership. His neighbors in the blossoming community included the aged Frankee Lewis whose residence on New River certainly dated before 1793, possibly as early as 1783. In the year of Cooley's arrival, she submitted her claim for a section of New River land based upon her residence and cultivation of land there prior to 1819. Tennessean David Williams either accompanied Cooley to New River or shortly preceded him. Other settlers who were there in 1824 or had settled prior to 1830 embraced such personalities as Samuel Kimble, Wade S. Rigby, Daniel C. Mallus, Joel Yancy, Junior and Edward Marr and totaled 60-70 persons, including black slaves. Wishing to locate with her children on Miami River, Frankee Lewis sold her section of New River land in 1830 for $400 to Richard Fitzpatrick of Key West. With the settlement of "Fizzy" and his subsequent development of the plantation system of black slavery, the New River Settlement entered a new era of prosperity.

With the exception of Cooley, the New River Settlement, prior to 1830, appears to have been composed in large part of transient Bahamians bent upon surviving by "turtling," fishing, shipbuilding and "wrecking." Wrecking offered the greatest immediate returns both

Early nineteenth-century "Wrecker" as conceived by Gregg Lerman, eleventh grader of Piper High School

from the ships' commodities washed upon the beach and from participation in the guaranteed proceeds from the salvage of distressed vessels to New Providence until the United States established firm control of wrecking operations through the United States Superior Court which was established in Key West in 1828 and vested with control of admiralty cases.

Although Cooley pursued many occupations from New River including wrecking, his chief endeavor lay in gathering, processing and shipping arrowroot. This was known to the Indians as compte' or coontie but scientifically designed *Zamia integrifolia*. In addition to its domestic use as bread dough, coontie commercially was used for wafers and biscuits. Arrowroot starch was excellent when used as a staple food aboard ships because of its non-spoiling characteristics. In addition, the remaining pulp could be fed to animals and used as fertilizer. The New River environ was the acknowledged center of coontie growth in Florida. This fact accounted for the large contingent of Indians, reaching 300 during the Indian War, who frequented the area and at times were almost entirely dependent upon the coontie products to ward off starvation.

As Broward's first manufacturer, Cooley found New River to be a utilizable stream whose ocean outlet lay about six miles south of its eastward flow, separated from the Atlantic Ocean by a sand dune varying in width from fifty to one hundred-fifty feet at the inlet bar. The river averaged about fifty yards in width before forking northwest and southwest. Swift flowing current during half the year proved ideal for Cooley's water-operated coontie machinery. Powered by three men, his equipment could manufacture 450 pounds of finished product daily. After a few years' operation Dr. Benjamin B. Strobel, publisher of the Key West *Gazette*, noted that Cooley had brought the coontie manufacturing process "to a great perfection." The New River manufacturer received from 8 to 16 cents per pound and learned, to his delight, that the price could go much lower than 8 cents and still provide a handsome profit.

Despite his nearly intractable and primitive surroundings barely matched on any other American frontier, Cooley appreciated the finer things of life. New River presented an esthetically pleasing sight to a man of his education and perceptiveness for beauty. The river was crystal clear except during the rainy season from May to October. Boasting perpendicular banks green to the water's edge, festooned with a profusion of wild grasses and shrubs, it varied in depth from three to twenty feet while on its upper reaches many tumbling rapids lowered the water from the Everglades as it rushed to the ocean. Numerous alligators sunned themselves on the sand spits located on the stream's lower end. An astonishing variety of fish could literally be had for the taking by the most novice of fishermen. Banks were usually clothed with pines, occasional hammocks of palmetto, water-oak, swamp maple, bay, Spanish oak and other trees which stood silently threaded with a growth of wild berries. Scattered about were little coves or bights thickly grown with rushes and acquatic plants. Along and back from the bank, the tangled growth provided shelter for myriads of insects and small animals. Hardly bestiring himself from his piazza, Cooley could site black bears, wildcats, wild turkeys, rabbits, turtles, deer, ducks, raccoons, opposums and wild hogs, each capable of providing food and fiber in abundance.

Frequent trips to the Monroe County seat at Key West on legal and business matters generated respect for him among its leaders, particularly territorial legislator Richard Fitzpatrick. Such respect led to their acceptance of Cooley's word on matters pertaining to the area north of Cape Florida. At home his natural ability to command led to his assumption of leadership of the tightly-knit community which numbered 40-50 white residents in 1830. He lent advice to the Rigby's in their construction of the oak-timbered schooner *Florida* that served for years as an army transport between Charleston and New Orleans. Together with David Williams he stood ready to operate a ferry over New River in the event that the military road proposed by Colonel James Gadsden became a reality. Manifesting an adventuresome spirit verging on recklessness, he explored the head waters of Rio Ratones, New, Middle and Hillsboro rivers. He explored the ever recurring and disappearing lagoons lying eastward of the pine ridge that ran north and south approximately three to five miles west of the Atlantic Ocean. His hunting and explorations pushed him inland and northward so much so that Fitzpatrick informed Territorial Governor Richard Keith Call, that Cooley had by 1835 become the first American to explore the Everglades in any systematic way from New River to Lake Okeechobee. He visited Indian villages at Lake Okeechobee even as author-explorer John Lee Williams referred to the lake as a figment of an overwrought imagination.

Cooley entered politics in 1831 sponsored by Fitzpatrick, who had installed young Stephen R. Mallory of Key West as assistant to James Wright, Fitzpatrick's overseer on his New River plantation. Mallory, who was to gain immortal fame as the Confederate Secretary of Navy and father of the iron-clad *Monitor*, admired Cooley's versatility and discovered that the most indolent man he ever knew could live from the fecundity of New River with little apparent effort. Utilizing black slave labor, Mallory and Wright put under cultivation groves of coconut and lime trees, plantains and fields of sugar cane. A vigorous entrepreneur, he was determined to accumulate wealth. From his New River plantation in August, 1832, Fitzpatrick alerted Washington authorities to the potential of southeast Florida. It was "decidedly the richest land I ever saw and will certainly produce more sugar to acre than any land in Florida or Louisiana when properly cultivated; as a proof of which I will take occasion to observe that a few weeks ago a party of gentlemen from the neighborhood of Tallahassee came to New River and Cape Florida to examine

the land and so well satisfied were they, that they immediately picked out such places for their plantations and will remove their negroes the ensuing fall." Anticipating just such a response from such Middle Florida entrepreneurs as John G. Gamble and Colonel Gadsden and utilizing his political muscles, "Fizzy" prevailed upon territorial legislators in 1831 to appoint Cooley Justice of Peace for the area from Cape Florida northward. Fitzpatrick's grandiose schemes for settlement required a survey by the United States Land Office head Robert Butler so that government lands could go on the market. Sales meant population increase. A heavy influx of driving plantation operatives and their slaves required a man of Cooley's experience and prestige at the helm of justice and law enforcement. "Fizzy" saw to it.

Always a man for law and order, even prior to his appointment as Justice of Peace, Cooley had served on the Monroe County grand jury that fully explored the state of justice in the county whose boundaries stretched from the keys to Lake Okeechobee and then across to the Gulf of Mexico. The jury petitioned the United States Congress to build a jail in Key West to replace the makeshift quarters that were easier to get out of than in. Justices of Peace on the bustling frontier served not only as the symbol of law and justice, they were the reality. From Cooley's spacious, colonial-type dwelling, he adjudicated disputes of person and property, and punished minor offenders by fines and whippings. Justices also oversaw the activities of "wreckers," men whose admitted courage and alleged cupidity alternately brought them praise and blame. Onerous or not the multitudinous and interminable laws regulating slaves and free blacks, promulgated by the territorial legislature council, called aloud for enforcement. By legislative enactment, Indians suspected of crimes were liable to preemptory whipping by enraged whites. Although subscribing to southern sentiment respecting the need to maintain strict surveillance over Indians and blacks, Cooley on the whole gained the respect of Indians as he curbed the harshest white outbreaks. After Cooley's court tried minor offenders without jurymen, he reported his actions and decisions to the court in Key West. He transported serious offenders to Key West for trial by territorial and national courts. Obviously, Cooley adjudicated most cases because trips by water were long and dangerous; and for years, the Key West jail was no more than a seive.

Skill in seamanship and navigation made life and trade possible in southeast Florida for many generations. Cooley excelled in this field. He used cypress canoes for Everglades travel and manned his ten-ton schooner for trips to Cape Florida, Indian Key, Key West and Havana. In addition to his innumerable passages to Key West for delivery of coontie, sugar cane and tropical fruit to his factory, legal matters necessitated his navigation of the treacherous shoals and reefs of the Florida Keys. Wide experience and guidance provided by the Cape Florida Lighthouse, Carysford Lightship and the Key West Lighthouse made his trips more palatable. For all master pilots seeking license to enter and depart from the port at Key West, regulations required the passing of a stiff examination that winnowed out all but the most skillful, bold and commanding. Excellence in navigation as well as the ability to arrive alongside stricken vessels ahead of fierce competitors, turned Cooley to the lucrative "wrecking" business.

Until the Civil War, "wrecking" provided the chief means of livelihood along the southeast Florida coast. This was an occupation heatedly denounced in commercial centers such as New York and New Orleans. As early as 1832 newspapers in these cities claimed that "wrecking" on the Florida Reef, beginning near New River, grossed over $250,000 annually, an astronomical sum for that day. Some victims charged that "wrecking" consisted of nothing short of overt piracy and covert manipulation by lighthouses that drew unwary ships to certain doom on reefs and shoals where, by preconcert, human vultures waited to devour them. Charles Nordhoff, a "wrecking" victim in the 1830's, described the practitioners as "stout, Burly red-faced, sun-burned..., whose only clothing consisted of a Guernsey shirt, pantaloons rolled up to the knees and a slouched weather-beaten hat, without stockings and shoes." In conjunction with his wrecking operations, Cooley, the man transplanted from Maryland, received a territorial appointment as appraiser of wrecked vessels and their cargoes.

Inappropriately termed gales in the language of the times, hurricanes affected southeast Floridians in two ways. For most they provided a substantial seasonal livelihood because wreckers intensified their salvage fee claims in stormy weather. Fees usually ranged upward from one-third of the cargo value. Appraisers determined the cargo value. Fees were awarded by the Superior Court of the United States in Key West, presided over first by Judge James Webb and then by Judge William Marvin, both nationally recognized experts in admiralty cases. Baneful effects of hurricanes resulted in flooding and damage to crops and dwellings. New passages issued from hurricanes that dug new inlets to the ocean, which necessitated new transportation routes, and they damaged or destroyed the wreckers' own ships. Shifts in river inlets, due to the tremendous volume of water accompanying hurricanes, seem to have been a common occurrence. In May, 1765, William Gerard De Brahm, official British surveyor for the southern colonies, personally witnessed the relocation of New River inlet during a fierce hurricane. On this occasion, wind-driven ocean water clashed with flood waters surging eastward across the land to bring about cataclysmic changes. De Brahm's experience raises the possibility that New River received its name as a result of the struggle of hurricanes and floods to form a new inlet, later spotted by cartographers and denominated New River on maps.

The awesome September 1835 hurricane dramatically changed the destinies of Cooley and the New River Settlement over which he presided. Even Frankee Lewis,

whose memory extended backward almost fifty years, could recall no other hurricane of such destructive force or any gales that disabled every wrecking vessel from Cape Florida southward to the Keys, Cooley's excepted. William A. Whitehead, United States Collector of Customs at Key West, dispatched Lieutenant C. B. Beaufort with the United States Revenue Cutter *Washington* to examine the spanking new 200-ton Spanish brigatine, *Gil Blas*, beached by the hurricane near Hillsboro Inlet. Whitehead informed Beaufort that the *Gil Blas's* cargo consisted principally of sugar and "segar" and that it was "important that the merchandise she has should not be distributed along the coast without the payment of duties." Whitehead directed Beaufort to get information "as to the cargo of the *Gil Blas*; whether it will be entirely lost, its present condition, and that of the vessel." On October 28, Lieutenant Beaufort reported to Whitehead with the desired information which included the word that the *Gil Blas* had been bound from Cuba to Spain. With the exception of Peter Scott, an American well-known along the southeast Florida coast, the excellent brig carried a Spanish crew.

Upon his arrival at New River Settlement enroute to the beached *Gil Blas*, Lieutenant Beaufort was informed by Cooley that he, in the performance of his legal duties and in obedience to the instructions of the Spanish captain, had removed the ship's cargo to his New River plantation dwelling until such time as the admiralty court in Key West made disposition of the ship and cargo in accordance with the wishes of the captain. The captain and crew, then guests of Cooley, assented and then proceeded in the revenue cutter to the *Gil Blas*, with Cooley acting as pilot. Along with three smaller vessels, they found the brig's bow stuck there on the beach. William R. Rigby, who accompanied the expedition at the request of the Spanish captain, removed a small portion of the six tons of lead cargo in order to take it to Key West for appraisal. Stern anchors were lowered to prevent the brig from being completely washed upon the beach and sails were struck to ward off further damage. Lieutenant Beaufort returned to Key West with the Spanish captain and crew and subsequently made his report to Whitehead. Legal niceties had been honored by Cooley in every detail of the *Gil Blas* affair.

Later testimony by Cooley, Rigby and others asserted that merchantman John P. Baldwin purchased the *Gil Blas*, but not its Cooley-lifted cargo, at a public auction in Key West in December, 1835. Baldwin then engaged Cooley to superintend the unbeaching of the brig and to bring it under full sail to Key West. However, high seas forestalled Cooley's efforts until the begining of 1836.

As the year 1835 ended, Cooley could survey with satisfaction the extent of his prosperity and the well-being he had achieved since his relocation to New River in 1824. He had been a Florida resident twenty-two years, eleven of then on New River. It was here that he probably met and married a woman who was formerly an Indian captive. Much younger than her husband, she bore him three children, two sons and one daughter. His empathy and admiration for Indians led him to name his sons Almonock and Montezuma after two of their chiefs. His daughter, now nearly eleven years old, and his nine year old son had excellent tutors in the persons of Mary E. Rigby and Joseph Flinton. His infant son still required the constant attention of his devoted mother.

In politics, he represented the law and enjoyed the power and prestige that the position brought. Through legislative appointment, he held the position of appraiser of wrecks; his duties often carried him to distant Tampa Bay. The legislature also recognized his business accumen by designating him as appraiser of property and slaves for the powerful Union Bank of Florida headed by John G. Gamble, an entrepreneur bent upon enriching himself first and his clients second. His legislative recognition stemmed from his alignment with Richard Fitzpatrick, a wealthy New River and Miami River plantation operator and perennial Monroe County representative to the Territorial Legislative Council. The alliance resulted in Cooley ignoring Fitzpatrick's habit of cutting timber on United States land along New River for ships that he had under construction. Eventually, Fitzpatrick purchased Cooley's fine coontie and citrus plantation on Miami River for $2,500, a handsome figure compared to the purchase of Frankee Lewis' section of land on New River in 1830 for $400. Cooley recently had saved Fitzpatrick's power and political influence on the territorial level. In the election of 1835, Fitzpatrick had won re-election by only three votes. The New River Settlement had returned a near unanimous vote for "Fizzy." As Justice of Peace, Cooley conducted the non-secret balloting and made the returns; whereupon, the Key West *Inquirer* boldly denounced irregularities in all the balloting conducted outside Key West. There Fitzpatrick had been roundly defeated by his opponent William Hackley.

Having tasted the prosperity that stemmed from his manifold activities, by the end of 1835, Cooley erected a substantial frontier home "twenty feet by fifty feet, one story high, built of cypress logs, sealed and floored with 1-1/2 inch planks." One of the piazzas that surrounded his comfortable dwelling was well supplied with fine Madeira wine. Serviceable furniture rendered it cozy and he armed it with sufficient guns, powder and lead to supply food and create a sense of security. When not "book learning" under the tutelage of Joseph Flinton, the two older children assisted the three black slaves and several Indians in the cultivation of the 20 acre farm which produced sugar cane, corn, potatoes, pumpkins and an assortment of other vegetables for domestic use. Domesticated animals, particularly the 80 hogs, demanded time and care. Cooley's spacious coontie mill, attached to his fifty foot wharf, was housed in a building 27 x 14 feet. From his wharf, processed arrowroot was loaded onto schooners for shipment to Key West where

it was trans-shipped to northern and European ports. Beyond his manufactory stood two storage houses, kitchen and slave quarters. Coconut, lime and orange trees, scattered throughout his acreage, provided a habitat for domesticated as well as wild fowl.

Cooley's plantation home opened wide its doors to weary guests and provided them with food, shelter and an abundance of conversation. Edwind T. Jenckes, a four hundred pound giant from St. Augustine, lodged there in 1835; subsequently, he lived for sometime among the Indians located at the head of New River. Distinguished botanist, Dr. Frederick Leitner, laid over with the Cooleys after exhausting exploration trips in search of flora and fauna habitats. Acting as his guide, Stephen R. Mallory, now a rising Key West lawyer, often accompanied Dr. Leitner to Cooley's homestead. Dr. Benjamin B. Strobel consulted with the New River Indians to learn their folkways. He stayed to marvel at the perfection of Cooley's coontie manufactory. James Wright, Fitzpatrick's white overseer, often luxuriated in the bounties of the Cooley table. In his promotion of the area, Fitzpatrick brought influential visitors to Cooley's hearth. Here, for the visitor's benefit, Cooley expatiated on the virtues of south Florida soil. Astute in the matter of hospitality, Cooley did not neglect the Seminole and Creek Indians camped near the head Waters of New River. When interested, they found Cooley's table open to them. Madeira wine, cigars and tasty forest food enlivened every conversation.

Overflowing from his dwelling, the surplus of the *Gil-Blas* cargo was stored in his outhouses to await disposition by the admiralty court in Key West. That no action had been taken by the court hardly concerned Cooley. Storage and shipment charges from the cargo would turn a neat profit for him. Why worry?

Comfortably ensconced with his budding family in their New River surroundings, Cooley anticipated a bright and expanding future. Even a tiny cloud on the horizon did not upset his equanimity, though it bore watching. For some years he had maintained friendly relations with the few nomadic Seminole Indians who occasionally camped along New River and traded with them when opportunity offered. Some years prior to 1835, Creek Indians, moving down from Alabama, joined these Seminoles. The Creeks recently had built up resentment against Cooley. During a dispute with the Creeks, swaggering white men had killed their old Chief "Alibama" and burnt his hut. As Justice of Peace, Cooley took the offenders into custody. At the next session of Monroe County Court held in Key West, however, charges were dropped due to insufficient evidence. Tribesmen accused Cooley of complicity and aserted that he had withheld evidence essential to conviction. Their resentment burned at white heat against not only Cooley but against all white men. In the summer of 1835 when Jenckes camped among them, he found them "sulky and dangerous," which he reported to Cooley. In consequence of their animosity, the Indians, late in 1835, began to remove their women, children and aged men by canoe to their towns near Lake Okeechobee. Because emigration plans which required the transporting of all Florida Indians to a trans-Mississippi area had stalled in north Florida and because hostile feelings had flared there, Cooley informed Fitzpatrick of the animosity and removal of the Alabama Indians.

Great excitement prevailed in some quarters in southeast Florida as the year 1836 dawned. Major Francis L. Dade, military commandant at Key West, had received word that Indians were receiving smuggled arms from Cuba and Spain and asked Whitehead, Collector of Customs for South Florida, to investigate the matter with him. Neither unearthed evidence to support the smuggling rumor. Captain Robert Armstrong of the military transport *Motto* arrived in Key West from Tampa Bay in December, 1835. He reported that military authorities at Fort Brooke were alarmed at the hostility displayed by Indians toward forceful emigration to territory beyond the Mississippi which was in accordance with the general United States government policy of Indian removal. The Indians were claiming fraud in the enactment of the Treaty of Payne's Landing (1832) and in the Treaty of Fort Gibson (1833) in which the United States authorities asserted that the Indians voluntarily had agreed to emigrate peacefully. In addition to the alarming news which he brought, Armstrong denuded the military establishment in South Florida by taking Major Dade, two companies of soldiers and all the available arms to Fort Brooke at Tampa Bay, the port from which the Indians were supposed to begin their emigration westward. Returning to New River from Lake Okeechobee with additional warriors from their towns there, the sullen "Alabama Indians" numbered more than usual near Christmas, 1835. This fact was duly reported to Fitzpatrick who, in turn, notified authorities in Tallahassee.

Meanwhile, the admiralty court, a phase of the United States Superior Court which was presided over by Judge James Webb, awarded the *Gil Blas* and its cargo of lead to Key West merchant John P. Baldwin for an undisclosed figure. After consultation with Thomas Jefferson Smith, a lawyer living on Miami River, Jacob Housman, a propriator of Indian Key, Cooley and others who were experienced in the wrecking business, Baldwin contracted with Cooley to salvage the *Gil Blas* and bring her to Key West. Cooley engaged the services of most of the able-bodied men who resided on New River as salvors. These included the families of Edward Basely, William Rigby, David Williams, Daniel Mallers, Edward Marr, I. Todd and Cooley's slave boy, Peter, though the latter seems to have been called back to the settlement before the work actually began in earnest.

Sunday, January 5, 1836, passed as a day of high festivities for the New River Settlement. It marked the end of the two weeks of holiday celebration customarily taken by settlers and exceeded July 4th, the only other holiday observed, in fun making. Word of the December

28, 1835, disaster, had not reached the settlement. On that day, Major Dade and his command of over one hundred men had been ambushed and slaughtered as they marched from Tampa Bay to Fort King; and at the latter post, Indian Commissioner, Wiley Thompson, and several companions were cut down as they strolled outside the stockade. The Second Seminole Indian War had begun in earnest as the families on New River set themselves for a season of merry making. On Sunday, the Cooley's hosted the community. Because Monday began the new year of incessant labor, festivities ended before midnight and the settlers dispersed to their homes; however, Mary R. Rigby and her daughters and son remained overnight to assist Mrs. Cooley with the following morning's clean up.

Early Monday morning, Cooley and the settlement men proceeded to the Atlantic beach near Hillsboro River to begin salvage of the *Gil Blas*. Entirely without warning, a watchful band of Indian warriors moved into the almost deserted New River Settlement during the noon hour to begin their ghastly work of revenge against the Cooley family for imagined wrongs. They waited until the Rigbys had crossed the river to their home before beginning their assault. None of the intended victims noticed the highly painted Indians as the slipped cautiously from the brush toward the Cooley home. Wholly unsuspicious of approaching danger, tutor Joseph Flinton presided as the two older children recited their assigned lessons to him and Mrs. Cooley busied herself by attending to the needs of the infant.

Startled by blood-curdling war whoops, Flinton attempted to bar the door as the 15 to 20 Indians forced it with their bodies. Overcoming his resistance, the Indians horribly mangled his body even as they scalped him with an ax, while the screaming Cooley mother and children watched, momentarily stunned. Jolted into action by the macabre scene being enacted before their eyes, Mrs. Cooley grabbed the infant boy and pushed the other children before her. Screaming as they fled, they attempted to escape to the river. Taking careful aim, the Indians shot Mrs. Cooley about 150 yards from her house. The ball entered between her shoulders, passed through her breast and broke the arm of the infant cradled in her arms before it passed into his body. Cooley's nine year old son fell, a victim of a fractured skull and arm probably inflicted by a piece of firewood. Near him lay the book from which he had been reciting. The eleven year old girl perished with her recitation book in her hand.

Aroused by the Cooley's screaming from across the river, young William Rigby ran down to the river and witnessed the last stages of the massacre. Gathering his aged widowed mother and two younger sisters, and not attempting to take one item from their own home, young Rigby and family fled southward by land and boat to seek safety in the Cape Florida Lighthouse. As they sped in fear for their lives, their clothes were torn from their bodies and their feet were horribly cut and bruised by saw grass and sharp stones. Along the way they warned the settlers at Arch Creek and Miami River of the terrible danger that faced them and urged them to flee to the lighthouse. The Rigbys spent two days at the lighthouse recuperating from their injuries before they could again stand on their own feet.

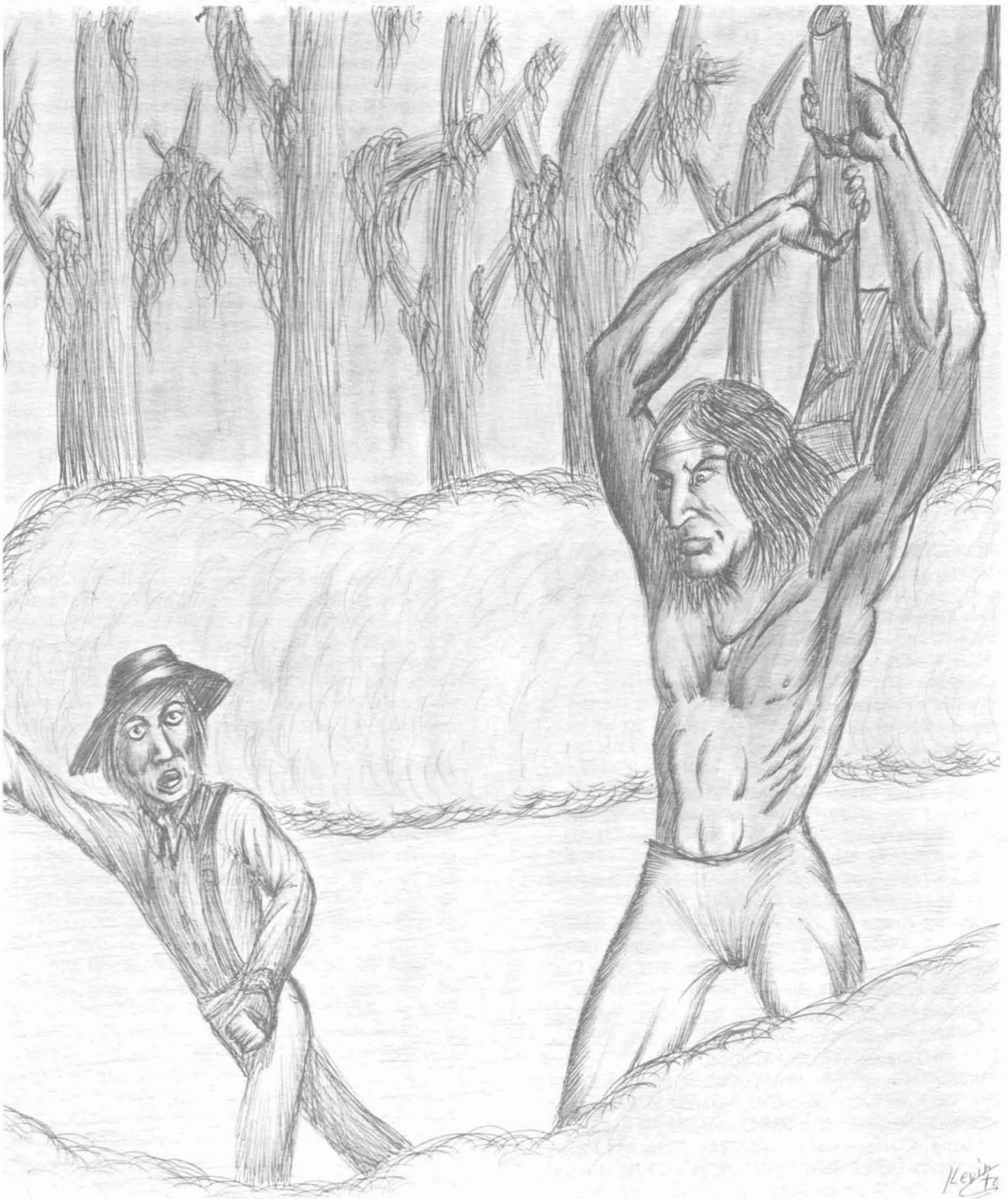
Back at the New River Settlement, the Indians plundered Cooley's property of everything of value. They carried away the $7,000 worth of cargo stored from the *Gil Blas* and drove before them his livestock. However, they did no harm to his coontie manufacturing plant, reserving it for their own future use. Two of Cooley's black slaves, Peter and a young black woman, also disappeared. Sated by the blood of the Cooley family, the Indians harmed none of the other New River settlers, all of whom made their way to Cape Florida.

By the night of January 6, Florida had another massacre to go with the Dade "ambush" and the Thompson massacre. Determining the denouement of these murderous assaults would have to be a long time vocation for suffering Floridians; their immediate task was to save their own lives from a tragic end. Word of the Cooley massacre spread throughout the South and became a legend for both soldiers and civilians to ponder.

Clouded in mystery is the manner in which Cooley and the *Gil Blas* salvors learned of the massacre. Who, or what, alerted the salvors to flee for their lives remains unknown. Since Cooley's is the only version of what immediately transpired, it must be accepted.

Cooley himself stated that he had gone to Cape Florida Lighthouse where he learned of the disaster from the Rigbys. Returning to the New River Settlement on January 7 in the company of volunteers Basely, Roberts and Fitzpatrick's black slave, Simmons, they first came upon the mangled body of Flinton and the nearby bodies of his two oldest children. About 100 yards in the distance they found the bodies of his beloved wife and infant. The Indians apparently had returned shortly after carrying away their loot the day before because Cooley found his house smouldering from low burning flames. His coontie plant, however, still remained untouched. With the assistance of his sorrowful companions, Cooley gave a decent burial to the members of his household. In death the deceased looked out over calm New River, the scene of bygone life and merriment. Their tragic and senseless murder ended New River Settlement as first the Indians and then the United States Army took control.

After remaining on New River for three days, Cooley and his companions returned to Cape Florida Lighthouse where they learned the reason for the massacre and took stock of the future. Cooley's slave, Peter, turned up at the lighthouse to report that before his escape he had overheard the Indians give the reason for the Cooley massacre. Cooley's failure to obtain the conviction of Chief "Alibama's" murderers had so enraged his followers that they were determined upon revenge,



A scene from the Cooley Massacre drawn by Kevin Stawieray Piper High School student

life for life. Peter's disclosure of the slayers' identities confirmed Cooley's suspicions. Indeed, they were Indians who often had supped at his table as they made merry with his family.

Left alone and peniless at the age of fifty-three, Cooley's future seemed almost a thing of the past even to him. No one,least of all Cooley himself,could or would predict that an unparalleled period of achievement spread before him. For the twenty-seven years until his death in 1863, his public and private career would amaze Floridians as he assumed new and hazardous duties. Like history itself, for Cooley the past was prologue.

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

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The material for William Cooley's life and career have been garnered from many documents. The following listing is representative of them.

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

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