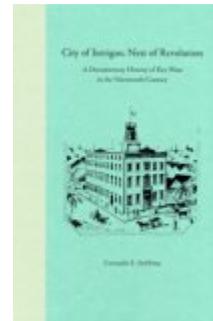


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Consuelo E. Stebbins. *City of Intrigue, Nest of Revolution: A Documentary History of Key West in the Nineteenth Century*. Foreword by Gary R. Mormino and Raymond Arsenault. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. xx + 233 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3050-0.

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The Conch Republic through Spanish Eyes

On August 23, 1895, the citizens of Key West announced their secession from the United States to protest the establishment of a border checkpoint at the northern land exit from the Florida Keys. Within minutes, the newly proclaimed Conch Republic surrendered to naval authorities of the United States and began claiming the right to relief funds to repair the damages sustained during the secession. Key West is a place with a difference, and Consuelo E. Stebbins's *City of Intrigue, Nest of Revolution* maintains that reputation. This book has been published by the University Press of Florida as part of its Florida History and Culture series. More than forty volumes published in this series thus far have been intended to help "newcomers and old-timers appreciate and understand Florida ... [and] foster a sense of community and collaboration among Florida scholars" (p. xi). The goal of the editors is to provide a variety of perspectives and types of work.

The greatest strength of *City of Intrigue, Nest of Revolution* is the convenient access that Stebbins provides to primary source information from Spanish diplomatic archives. In the nineteenth century, Key West was south Florida's principal settlement, and the Spanish government maintained a consular post there, close to Cuba. The post took on greater importance when Cubans began plotting the overthrow of Spanish rule in Cuba. Between 1842 and 1896, nineteen Spanish consuls served in Key West, and, in addition to the usual consular duties, some of them wrote detailed reports about Key West life and activities, which they thought would be of interest to the

Spanish Foreign Service. The consular reports sometimes included copies of other documents and newspapers published in Key West.

Stebbins has divided her material thematically. Navigation, wrecking, naval information, and slave trafficking make up most of the first part of the documentary selections and text, while the second half of the book includes documents and commentary about the role of Key West in the Cuban revolutionary movement against Spanish rule in Cuba. The consular reports on navigation and wrecking have a quotidian quality, but Stebbins sometimes enlivens the text with sources outside the Spanish Foreign Service archives, including, for example, "The Wrecker's Song": "Ane when you're passing by dis way / Onde Florida reefs should you chace [chance?] to stray, / Why we will welcome you on shore, / Amongst de rocks where de breakers roar" (p. 9). Stebbins also repeats Jefferson Browne's story of Brother Eagan, the Methodist preacher and wrecker, who spotted a wreck while preaching but kept his congregation enthralled and distracted while he headed for the door to be first at the scene.

The consular reports are less rollicking, but they do portray the controversies and contentions that roiled the United States in the 1850s over the matter of slavery and slave trafficking. Federal officials in Key West were generally opposed to slavery and the slave trade, but they were sometimes at odds with the commercial interests and cultural attitudes of the shipping community harbor-

ing in Key West. A consular document of 1859 describes the way in which the Spanish consul contrived to gain the return of an escaped slave from Cuba despite what he perceived as the antislavery bias of federal officials.

In the second half of the book, Stebbins turns to the role of Key West in the series of Cuban insurrections in the second half of the nineteenth century. To an extent, the organization of this section by topic rather than strict chronological order creates some confusion, making the story more difficult to follow on the one hand and sometimes repetitious on the other. Having a brief summary or timeline of the events of the Cuban revolution might

have helped a reader not familiar with the details of the long struggle for Cuban independence. Still, the cast of characters is fascinating, and Stebbins employs the consular documents in ways that highlight the complexity of the struggles within the revolutionary movement as well as the rebellion against Spain.

In both parts of the book, the U.S. government and the state of Florida seem distant from the southern tip of Florida. The Conch Republic is a fiction, but the sense of Key West as a place apart finds imaginative and documentary support in the pages of *City of Intrigue, Nest of Revolution*.

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