


Today in History - January 22

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Today's Stories: [Linking the Keys](#)

Linking the Keys

On **January 22**, 1912, the nearly twenty thousand residents of the city of Key West, Florida, located on a small island some 128 miles south of the Florida peninsula, observed the completion of an overseas rail connection to the mainland. The [Florida East Coast Railway](#) served the island until 1935, when it was destroyed by a hurricane. It was replaced in 1938 by the Overseas Highway, built on the foundation of the old railroad bed. This system of forty-two bridges, which connects the Florida Keys to the mainland, is one of the longest over-water roads in the world.



[Mr. Henry M. Flagler and Party Leaving First Train to Arrive at Key West, Fla. Oversea Florida East Coast R.R. Harris Co., c1912. Panoramic Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division](#)

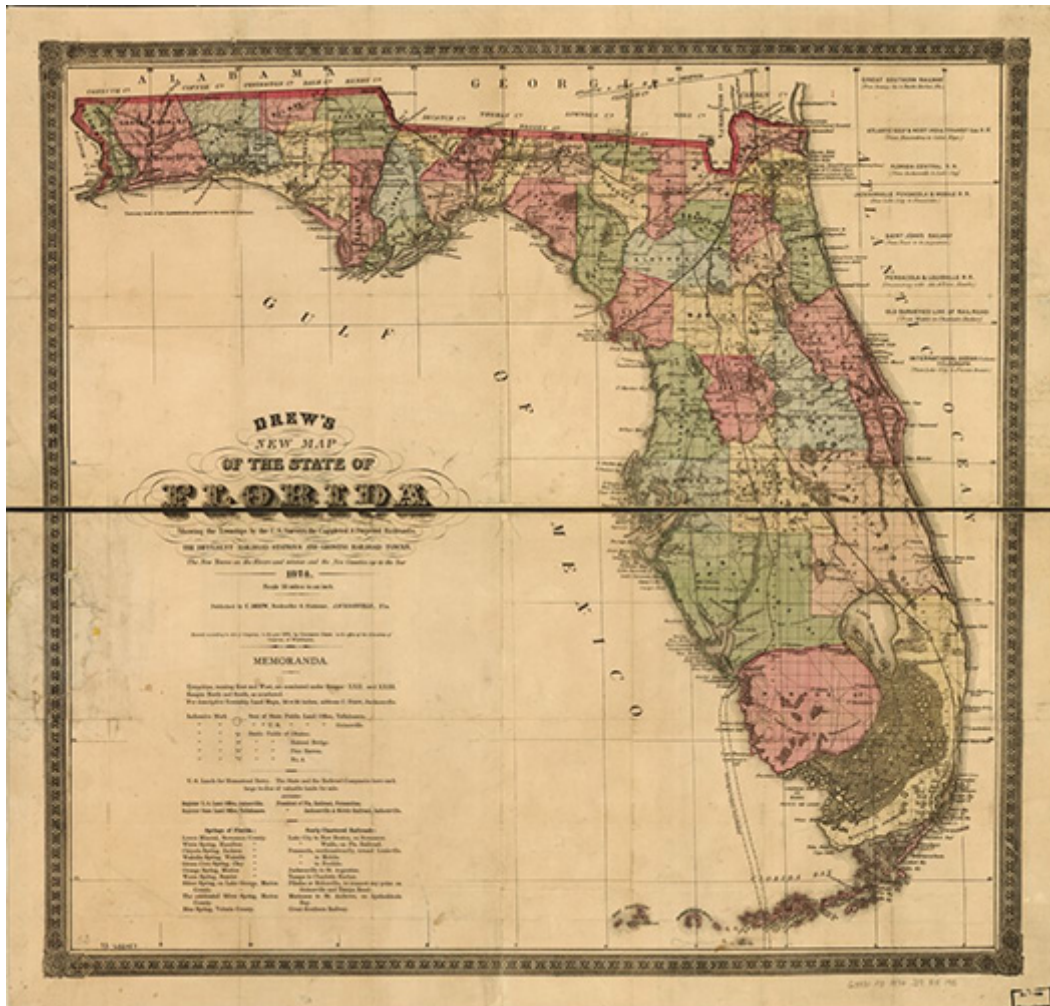
The construction of the overseas railway linking the Florida Keys to the mainland was the last major project undertaken by pioneering Florida developer [Henry Morrison Flagler](#). After losing \$100,000 in the failure of his first business venture, Flagler earned his fortune as a founding partner of Standard Oil. He visited [St. Augustine](#) in 1883 and, realizing the potential for the development of improved hotels and transportation, began construction in 1885 of the 540-room [Hotel Ponce de Leon](#). Flagler then bought and upgraded the Jacksonville, St. Augustine & Halifax Railway, built a railroad bridge across the St. John's River, and by 1894 had extended the railroad to Palm Beach, where he developed two large hotels: the [Hotel Royal Poinciana](#) and the Palm Beach Inn, later renamed [The Breakers](#). Flagler's mansion, [Whitehall](#), a wedding gift to his third wife, Mary Lily Kenan, was constructed in Palm Beach in 1902.



Key West, Fla. from City Hall Tower. Harris Co., c1912. Panoramic Photographs. Prints & Photographs Division

In 1896, Flagler extended his railway to the area that was soon named Miami. His investments in the town included the [Royal Palm Hotel](#), opened in 1897. Henry Flagler died in 1913, a year after the completion of his renamed Florida East Coast Railway to its southern terminus in Key West.

Key West, the southernmost city of the continental United States, is a sand-and-coral island approximately 4 miles long and 1.5 miles wide. American businessman John Simonton acquired the island from a Spanish army officer in 1822; by 1823, the U.S. government officially recognized it as a part of the United States.




Drew's New Map of the State of Florida, Showing the Townships... up to the Year 1874. Columbus Drew, creator; Jacksonville, c1873. Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900. Geography & Map Division

Learn More

- [Search](#) across the collections on the term *Key West* to locate images and recollections of the island. There is an 1884 [panoramic map](#) of the city two years before a fire destroyed its downtown area. The Library's [Maps Collections](#) include early maps of a number of Florida cities. Zoom in for a closer look at houses, parks, boats, fishermen, bridges, and much more in fine and accurate detail.
- Early railroad maps record the nation's growth. Search on the term *Florida* in [Railroad Maps, 1828 to 1900](#) to learn more about railroad operations in that state. These maps are a part of the [Transportation and Communication](#) section of the library's [Maps Collections](#).
- The Library's [Digital Collections](#) contain many images of Key West (known to Spanish-speaking Floridians as *Cayo Oeste*) including subjects such as [cigar packing](#) and a [sponge exchange](#). [Search](#) the pictorial collections on the term *Key West*.
- A cigar-maker familiar with the cigar industry in Key West discusses his experiences in "[Mr. Fermin Souto](#)," an [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1940](#) interview. Search that collection on the term *Key West* to find additional life stories that touch on this location.
- Learn more about the history of *Florida* or the *railroad*. Search [Today in History](#) on these terms for information on a variety of topics including: the military governor of Spanish Florida, Ponce de Leon; Florida's secession from the Union; the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad; and the Oahu Railway.
- Search on *Key West* in [Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, ca. 1870 to 1885](#) to see two sheet-music versions of the "[Key West March](#)."

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