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ODET PHILIPPE IN SOUTH FLORIDA

by J. Allison DeFoor, II

Historically, the ties between Tampa and Key West have always been strong. In the nineteenth century, when Key West was south Florida's largest and most sophisticated city and Tampa an emerging village, the *Mascotte* was one of many ships trading between the towns. Tampa's coup in persuading the cigar industry to relocate from Key West to Tampa in the 1880s was a turning point for both cities. It marked the beginning of Tampa's emergence as a major city, and the start of a decline from which Key West may have only recently emerged.¹ During the depression of the 1930s, many Key West families relocated to Tampa. Even today two Key West city commissioners are the sons of Tampa fathers, and they were raised at least in part in the cigar city.²

As a son of Tampa who has relocated to the Keys, the author recently learned of an even earlier tie between these two places. Count Odet Philippe, an ancestor who is credited as the first white settler on the Pinellas peninsula, also had an extensive history in Key West and in Monroe County.³ Moreover, records in southeast Florida reveal a background for Philippe which is significantly different from that commonly accepted in the Tampa Bay area and which suggests a dark side to this historic figure.

Odet Philippe is a figure of mythical proportions in the Tampa Bay area. Indeed, there is a well-known legendary story of how the French surgeon Odet Philippe supposedly came to Tampa Bay. According to legend, Dr. Philippe and his family were intercepted on their vessel *Ney* by the pirate Gomez and taken prisoner while on a voyage in Florida waters. When Gomez learned that Philippe was a surgeon, he enlisted his services in the treatment of the pirate and his crew. The grateful pirate is purported to have given to Philippe a chest of treasure, a letter of protection directed to other pirates and a map indicating Old Tampa Bay. Gomez supposedly waxed eloquently about Tampa Bay generally, describing it as "The most beautiful body of water in the world, with the possible exception of the bay of Naples."⁴ It was near Old Tampa Bay that Philippe later established his homestead of St. Helena. The site of St. Helena is preserved in large part today as Philippe Park in Safety Harbor, Florida.

The date of Philippe's arrival at Tampa Bay has always been somewhat unclear. Older Tampa histories gave the date as early as 1823, apparently based on old family records.⁵ The plaque marking Philippe Park credits the year 1842. The earliest records of his conducting business in Tampa are dated in the late 1830s.⁶ He received title to the property under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842.⁷

Philippe is best remembered in Tampa Bay today because of his early settlement of St. Helena. On this plantation Philippe engaged in the cultivation of citrus, and he is generally credited with having planted the first commercial orange grove in central Florida. The plantation was one of the finest in the unsettled region of peninsular Florida. The site was also the previous location of an Indian village. Proof remains to this day in the form of an Indian mound over forty feet in height at the site.⁸



Plaque at Philippe Park in Safety Harbor.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

During the hurricane of 1848, one of the most devastating ever to hit Florida, Philippe allegedly observed a tidal wave of water coming up Tampa Bay towards his home. He saved all of his family and slaves by taking them to the top of the Indian mound. However, his home and grove did not survive the dreadful flood. Legend has it that the cask of jewels which he had received from the pirate Gomez was also lost in this flood. After the disaster, Philippe replanted his citrus grove and reestablished his home at St. Helena.⁹

In addition to his plantation, Philippe had a number of business interests in old Tampa. Indeed, he may have introduced the first cigarmaking from Key West, thereby anticipating the move that would come later in the 1880s. He also apparently engaged in other commercial transactions in Tampa, including land speculation, trade in livestock and slaves and ownership of a billiard hall.¹⁰

Philippe spent the duration of the Civil War far inland in what is now Pasco County, but he returned to live the remainder of his life in peace at St. Helena with his family until his death in

1869. Many descendants of this pioneer remain in the Tampa Bay area, including members of the Rumley, Booth, Kelly, Grillon, Newton, Sloan and Washington families. Today one of the most beautiful parks in Florida sits on the site of this early settler's plantation.¹¹

The perhaps legendary story of Philippe's activities prior to his arrival in Tampa Bay is as sweeping as the story of his capture by the pirate Gomez. It is said that he was raised as a nobleman in Lyons, France, and studied with Napoleon Bonaparte. He supposedly went on to complete medical school to become a surgeon who was subsequently appointed by his friend Napoleon to a position of rank in the French navy. It was in this capacity that he is said to have been captured at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and sent to England as a prisoner of war. He is said to have made arrangements to leave England for the New World on parole and with the promise never to return to France. Released in the Bahamas, he made his way to Charleston, South Carolina, a great culture in its day, with a French population of some significance. Business reverses there led to his leaving to homestead briefly in the New River (now Ft. Lauderdale) area of Florida before departing that place for Tampa. He is said to have had two wives: one a Dorothee Desmottes and, after her death, a Marie Charlotte Florence Fontaine. By his first wife he had four daughters: Louise Poleanna, Mary Elizabeth Octavia, Charlotte Septima Marie and Melanie.¹²

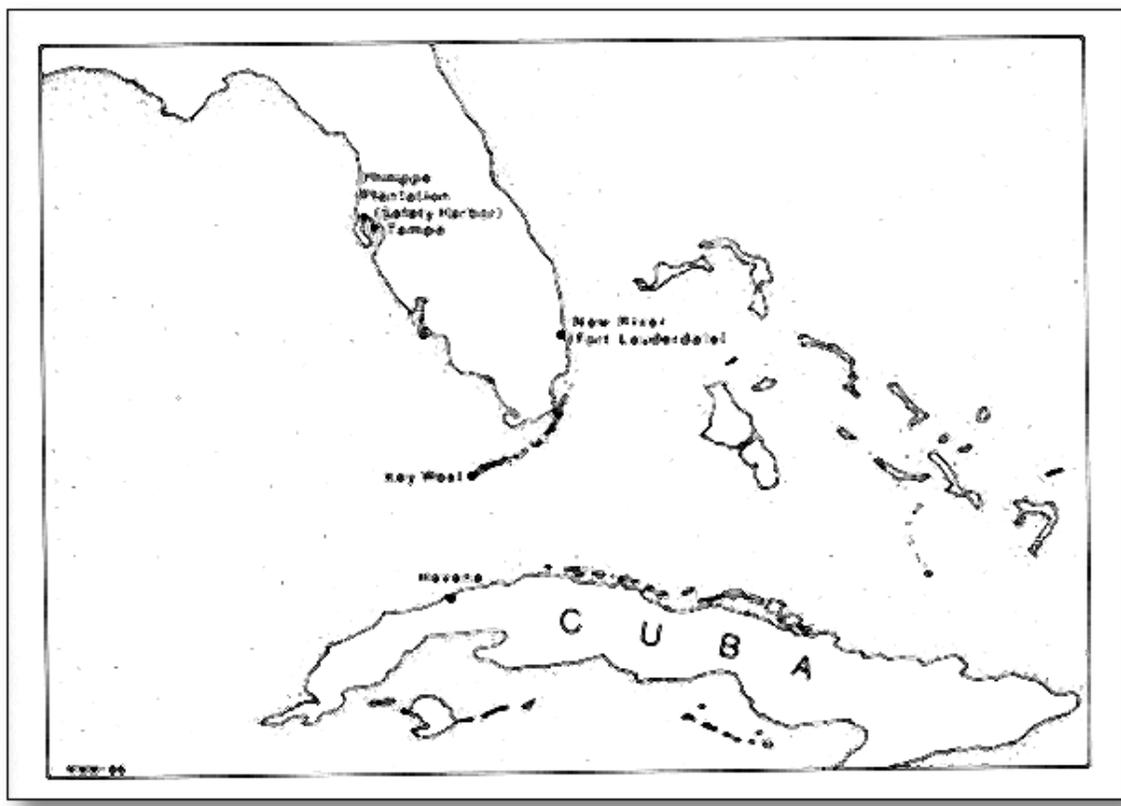


An early drawing of Odet Philippe.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

However, records in Charleston and in Florida's Monroe County reflect a different time frame for Philippe's activities than previously assumed by Tampa historians. Charleston documents reflect his presence in that city through 1829. One researcher showed twenty years ago that Philippe did not practice medicine in Charleston, but he was listed in the city directories of 1819 and 1822 as a "Segar [sic] maker on East Bay Street." On April 5, 1825, the *Charleston Courier* mentioned that he had mail to be picked up at the post office.¹³ Philippe renounced his French citizenship during January, 1829, in Charleston, and he became an American citizen.¹⁴

Philippe's citizenship papers raise serious questions about his supposed ties to Napoleon. In his affidavit of citizenship, Philippe declared that he was thirty-four years of age at the time of his declaration of intention to become an American citizen in 1822. This would fix the date of his birth as 1788, and if true, it would cast grave doubt on the legendary affiliation between Philippe and Napoleon. It is doubtful that he could have studied with Napoleon Bonaparte who had come to France from Corsica in 1778 to attend military school and who was commissioned into the



Map by William M. Murray.

artillery in 1785, at the age of sixteen. A birthdate in 1788 would also make Philippe some seventeen years old at the time of his capture at the battle of Trafalgar in 1805, by which time he was supposedly also a surgeon.

It is clear that Philippe did his best to play up such a connection, whether it existed or not. By naming his vessel “Ney,” after the French marshal who served under Napoleon, and by calling his plantation “St. Helena,” the place of Napoleon’s exile, Philippe added to the legend. However, the existence of the citizenship affidavit filed in the federal court in Key West clearly refutes any such connection.

By 1830, Philippe was a resident of Monroe County in southeast Florida. Local records from this period show Philippe’s active involvement in the business and political affairs of the emerging frontier of southeast Florida. At different times, Philippe lived both in Key West and New River.¹⁵ At the time Monroe County, with a population of 517, encompassed the Keys and all of southeast Florida, including what is today Broward County. Key West was the county seat and the largest city of south Florida with a population of 688 by 1840.

Historians have made reference to Philippe residing at New River, where he produced salt and homesteaded, before going to Tampa as a result of an Indian massacre. One writer places his arrival at New River as early as January, 1828, and dates his departure as the time of the Cooley

massacre in 1836.¹⁶ William Cooley and his family were the first European settlers in what is now Broward County.¹⁷ All but Mr. Cooley were massacred in an Indian attack on January 6, 1836, at the outbreak of the Second Seminole War. Philippe and his family are said to have escaped, having been warned by friendly Indians. After the massacre the settlements in the New River vicinity were abandoned, and many pioneer families moved to Key West for safety.¹⁸

That Philippe was a contemporary of William Cooley, Jr., in the early settlement of New River is borne out by surviving records. On February 17, 1833, both William Cooley and “Obed Phillippe” received appointments as justices of the peace, having been nominated by the governor and confirmed by Florida’s territorial legislature. Philippe’s name appeared four names away from Cooley’s in the 1830 census, suggesting proximity of residence.¹⁹ On August 9, 1833, a marriage license was issued in Key West to “George P. Washington to marry Mary Elizabeth Octavia Phillippi [sic] of New River.” On August 12, 1833, Justice of the Peace William Cooley performed the wedding ceremony for Washington and “Mary Elizabeth Octavia Phillipe of New River.”²⁰ (It should by now be apparent that correct spelling was a minor concern in the nineteenth century.) Washington was from a Key West family. He and Mary Philippe apparently travelled to Key West to get a marriage license and then went to the bride's home in New River for their wedding three days later.

The county records for 1833 indicate that Philippe still had some remaining business matters in Charleston, though the exact nature of the dealings is unclear. On September 6, 1833, Philippe sold a slave, Nelly, together with her infant and two other children, Julia and Madelaine. The slaves were recorded to be in Charleston. Philippe was described as “late of Charleston in the State of South Carolina but at present of said County and Territory,” and the document was processed in New River. The sale was to Edward Chandler of Charleston, but his title was in trust for “Marie Charlotte Florance Philippe the present wife of the said Odet Philippe.”²¹ He would use this trust device later, both in Key West and in Tampa.

Philippe’s concern with the mainland portion of Monroe County is revealed in one further document. Although his place of residence other than Monroe County generally is unspecified, he signed a protest concerning severance of all of Monroe County north of Bahia Honda to become the newly-formed Dade County, with its seat at Indian Key. This document, dated February, 1836, placed Philippe back in Key West.²²

Philippe’s time in Key West appears to have overlapped his stay at New River, so it has been suggested that he may have maintained a home in Key West even as he homesteaded at New River.²³ The recollections of a Charleston physician who was a resident of Key West from 1829 to 1833 include a dialogue between the physician and a “French quack” who was a “segar maker” by trade and who appears to have been Philippe. The recollection, published under the title “Florida Sketches” in the *Charleston Mercury* of July 12, 1833, also relates that the French doctor, in addition to practicing medicine, kept a coffee room and billiard table.²⁴ These activities, both in terms of industriousness and nature, comport with Philippe's later business activities in Tampa.

The earliest record of Philippe in Monroe County consists of a deed from him, dated April 22, 1830, relating to a building he sold to R. A. Stanard. The deed was executed in Key West and for

\$100 conveyed “A Small Building belonging to me situated on the back part of the government house which I have occupied in Key West.”²⁵ A more precise location of the house is unknown today.

By the mid-1830s, Philippe had substantial business interest in Key West. A bill of sale, dated August 25, 1835, at Key West, shows he purchased a “Billiard Table, Bar fixtures, etc.” for \$319.88. Philippe paid for these with several notes.²⁶ In June, 1836, he deeded the billiard table, bar and other personal property to William R. Hackley, once again in trust for his wife, which served to shelter his assets from attachment by creditors. The deed specifically stated that Philippe was “Late of Charleston,” but “at present a resident of said City,” referring to Key West.²⁷ William R. Hackley was the son of Richard S. Hackley, who was formerly the consul for the United States at Madrid. In 1818, Hackley had purchased a part of the land grant of the Duke of Alagon. The so-called “Hackley Grant” became the site of the first settlement of Tampa by Americans when it was seized for use as a fort by Colonel George M. Brooke in 1824. This was the subject of considerable litigation between the federal government and the heirs of Hackley into the 1900s.²⁸

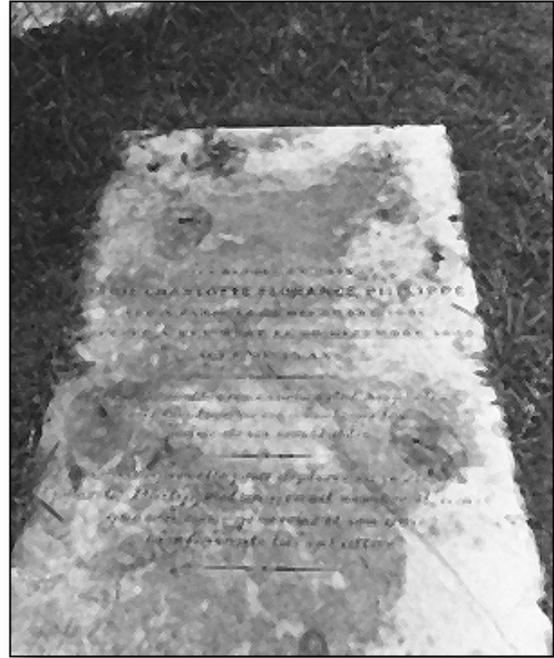
Records show Philippe continued to have personal and business ties to Key West through the 1830s. A marriage license was issued on May 22, 1837, to Ramon Moreno and “Miss Septima Phillipe” [sic], both of whom were identified as residents of Key West. The marriage certificate also specified that Septima was the daughter of Mr. O. Phillippi [sic] and that he was a resident of Key West at that time.²⁹ Philippe’s interest in cigars, which he had apparently pursued in Charleston, was continued in Key West. Walter C. Maloney, in his definitive history of Key West published in 1876, referred to Philippe being engaged in the cigar business with one Shubael Brown with a labor force of six men during the period of approximately 1837-38.³⁰

A concrete piece of evidence linking Philippe to Key West in the 1840s is the presence there of the gravestone of his wife, Marie Charlotte Florance [sic] Philippe, who died in 1846. The grave is located on the grounds of the “Old Stone” Methodist Church at Eaton Street and Simonton Street and is visible to this day from Simonton Street on the side of the church. The site occupied by the church was originally the location of one of Key West’s early cemeteries.³¹ The graves were later relocated, and it is unclear why Mrs. Philippe’s grave was not also moved. The inscription on the grave (translated from the French) reads:

Rest in Peace
 Marie Charlotte Florance Phillipe
 Born in Paris Dec. 25, 1801
 Deceased in Key West, Dec. 20, 1846, at the age of 45
 Friend of the unhappy
 Supporter of the orphans
 She spent her life relieving the pains of her peers
 She leaves behind her husband Ot. Phillipe and a
 great number of friends attracted to her by her
 generous heart and soul.³²

A final tie to Key West remains. On September 8, 1856, Odet Philippe witnessed the marriage of his daughter, Charlotte Septima Grillon, to Jobe Andrews at her residence in Key West.³³ This was at least Septima's third marriage.³⁴

It becomes apparent, of course, that Philippe's life in southeast Florida began to overlap the period in which he purportedly lived in the Tampa Bay area. It would appear that his business dealings in the New River area from 1829 to 1836, coupled with his dealings in Key West from at least 1830 through 1838 and perhaps as late as 1856, together with his activities in Tampa beginning at least by 1837, involve substantial overlap. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that he had substantial business dealings in Havana, all of which raises more questions than answers.³⁵



Key West gravestone of Odet Philippe's wife.

Photograph courtesy of Jeffrey Cardenas.

A plausible explanation was suggested by another descendant of Dr. Philippe's in Key West. After first arriving in Key West, the author had occasion to become acquainted with State Representative Joe Allen, Jr., a fifth-generation "Conch." In addition to being the founder of the Key West Art and Historical Society, Allen was a journalist in the community for many decades and is one of its most active historians. Upon learning that the author is also a descendant of Dr. Philippe, Mr. Allen shared a depth of history such as only Key Westers could retain. He stated that the house where Dr. Philippe had lived in Key West was at 304 Elizabeth Street, also known as the "Pirate House." He related that some of the doctor's effects and clothes had been taken from this home to become a still extant exhibit about Philippe at the Art and Historical Society Museum, located at East Martello Tower in Key West.

Mr. Allen went on to state that the story which was so widely disseminated in Tampa Bay concerning Philippe's encounter with the pirate Gomez contained only the barest grain of truth. According to family tradition in Key West, Dr. Philippe's involvement with the pirates actually consisted of fencing their goods, and he had in fact to leave Key West because things had gotten too "hot" in the local community. While no substantive proof has been found in Key West for the story, this specter of dark dealings has the ring of truth. First of all, Key Westers keep history as perhaps no others in Florida do. They are fiercely dedicated to its accuracy and have a long memory both collectively and individually. The widespread geographical extent of Philippe's holdings, from New River to Key West to Tampa with Havana thrown in, would seem to indicate an unusually high degree of commercial activity. Further, having allegedly left Charleston virtually penniless and been burned out by the Indians, he managed a rare accumulation of capital in a short period of time, in an area desperately short of capital in its day. Certainly, illicit connections with pirates could explain Philippe's mobility and good fortune. While other authors

have suggested possible dark dealings of another kind, specifically slave trading, no proof has ever been forthcoming.³⁶ The explanation maintained by the families in Key West seems, however, to be tantalizingly consistent with the unusual business dealings of Philippe in his day.

Whatever the conclusion regarding the exact nature of Odet Philippe's business dealings, he cannot be claimed solely as a founding father of the Tampa Bay area. He also had significant and long-standing business contacts and residences in southeast Florida. Both Key West and Ft. Lauderdale have claims to Dr. Philippe as a pioneer settler. However, wherever he went, this French entrepreneur retained an air of mystery that has become legendary.

¹ L. Glenn Westfall, *Key West, Cigar City, U.S.A.* (Key West, FL: Key West Preservation Board, 1984).

² The commissioners are Joe Balbontin and James Mira.

³ J. W. Keen, prominent Polk County rancher and cattleman, was the author's greatgrandfather. He married Minnie Lee Stephens, daughter of Petrocina Papy Stephens, who was herself daughter of Charles and Olivia Philippe Papy. It was Olivia's second marriage. Octavia Papy is buried in Tampa's Hopewell (now American Legion) Cemetery on Kennedy Boulevard. The grave marker gives her birthdate as 1816 in Charleston, South Carolina, and her death as 1889 in Tampa. M. B. Duncan, *There Is Only One Frostproof* (Frostproof, FL: Frostproof Historical Commission, 1976). Charlton W. Tebeau and R. L. Carson, *Florida from Indian Trail to Space Age* (Miami: Southern Publishing Company, 1965), 111, 802-03. D. B. McKay, *Pioneer Florida* (Tampa: Southern Publishing Company, 1959), II, 305, and III, 78-79.

⁴ The story has been told by many authors, but perhaps none more magically than the source of this quotation, D. B. McKay, in *Pioneer Florida*, II, 299. Most of the romanticism surrounding the story of Philippe may be traced directly to an article by Maxwell Hunter, "Dr. Odet Philippe Was Pinellas Peninsula's First White Settler," published in the *St. Petersburg Times*, December 20, 1936. The article appears to have been largely based on the recollections of Philippe's descendants then living in Pinellas County.

⁵ McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 299.

⁶ Philippe apparently purchased three lots on Tampa Street, near Whiting Street, in 1838. Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa Town, 1824-1886: Cracker Village with a Latin Accent* (Miami: Hurricane House, 1969), 7.

⁷ The act provided for the granting of 160 acres of land to any head of family or single man who would arm himself to defend the property, occupy it and cultivate at least five acres. James W. Covington, *The Story of Southwest Florida* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1957), 106, and Appendix B, 422.

⁸ McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 301.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹⁰ Pizzo, *Tampa Town*, 7-8; McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 303.

¹¹ McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 302, 305.

¹² *Ibid.*, 299.

¹³ William M. Straight, "Odet Philippe: Friend of Napoleon, Naval Surgeon and Pinellas Pioneer," *Journal of Florida Medical Association*, 53 (1966): 705.

¹⁴ According to records of the United States District Court in Charleston, South Carolina, "Odet Phillippe" declared his intention to become an American citizen on December 3, 1822, when he was thirty-four years old. The clerk of the court acted upon the request on January 7, 1829, presumably after a required waiting period. Philippe's 1829

declaration stated: "I Odet Philippe [sic] a native of France born in Lyon now aged Forty one years Do solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States and I do absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foheran [sic] Prince Potentate State or Sovereignty whatsoever and particularly Charles the tenth the King of France – so help me God – [signed] Odet Philippe." Given the controversy over the years regarding the spelling of his name, it is interesting to note that the body of the declaration appears to be in different writing than the signature and, indeed, spells the name differently. An original copy of this document was filed in the federal courts in Key West in 1829. It was surrendered, along with other such documents, by the courts to the Monroe County Library for safekeeping, and it remains there today. Packet 1829, Sheet #1, Document from United States Circuit Court (Charleston), Citizenship Oath of Odet Philippe.

¹⁵ United States Census, 1830, manuscript return for Monroe County, Florida; Walter C. Maloney, *A Sketch of the History of Key West, Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, facsimile ed., 1968; 2nd ed., 1983; original ed., 1876), 54.

¹⁶ Straight, "Odet Philippe," 706. Based on the doctor's naturalization in Charleston, in January, 1829, it would appear that the year 1829 is more likely.

¹⁷ Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades: River of Grass* (Miami: Banyan Books, 1978), 216. Douglas refers to the family, incorrectly, as Coolee. See also Jefferson B. Browne, *Key West: The Old and the New* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, facsimile ed., 1973; original ed., 1912), 85.

¹⁸ Jacob Rhet Motte, *Journey into Wilderness: An Army Surgeon's Account of Life in Camp and Field during the Creek and Seminole Wars, 1836-1838* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1963, edited by James F. Sunderman), 223,309; McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 300; Browne, *Key West*, 85.

¹⁹ *U. S. Territorial Papers, Florida*, XXXIV, 817; U. S. Census, 1830, manuscript return for Monroe County.

²⁰ Official Records of Monroe County, Book B, 11-12.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²² "Petition & Remonstrance to Congress by Inhabitants of Monroe and Dade Counties to the Senate and House of Representatives in Congress assembled, February, 1836," in *U. S. Territorial Papers, Florida*, XXV, 242.

²³ Straight, "Odet Philippe," note 18, p. 706.

²⁴ E. A. Hammond, "Dr. Stroebel Reports on Southeast Florida, 1836," *Tequesta*, 21 (1961): 65.

²⁵ Official Records of Monroe County, Book A, 279.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Book B, 399. Philippe had used this trust device before, when resident at New River. He also would use it again in 1842, when living in Tampa, according to McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 304. Doubtless this technique was used to shelter his assets from attachment by creditors.

²⁷ Official Records of Monroe County, Book B, 284.

²⁸ James W. Covington, "The Hackley Grant: The Fort Brooke Military Reservation and Tampa," *Sunland Tribune* (Journal of the Tampa Historical Society), 6 (November, 1980), 4.

²⁹ Official Records of Monroe County, Book B, 299.

³⁰ Maloney, *History of Key West*, 25. See also Brown, *Key West*, 125.

³¹ Neal Weaver, "Two Old Graves Lie Under Church," *Key West Citizen*, August 28, 1960.

³² The author expresses his appreciation to Joan Schwartz of Montreal, Canada, for translating the inscription from French to English.

³³ Official Records of Monroe County, Book E, 837.

³⁴ The first marriage was to Ramon Moreno. The second was to John Grillon on June 12, 1843. It was performed and originally recorded in Wakulla County, but a copy was recorded in Monroe County on August 15, 1855. Official Records of Monroe County, Book E, 697. Apparently there was yet another marriage for Septima since Odet Philippe's will mentions her under the name of Charlotte Septima Laughridge. McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 303.

³⁵ Pizzo, *Tampa Town*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*