City of Intrigue, Nest of Revolution: A Documentary History of Key West in the Nineteenth Century by Consuelo E. Stebbins

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All scholars interested in Florida history owe Consuelo Stebbins gratitude for uncovering, translating, and discussing the correspondence to the Spanish Ministry of Ultramar (Overseas Ministry) from a series of Spanish consuls who were stationed in Key West from the 1820s through the 1890s. Stebbins’s volume divides the material into several chapters based upon the focus of the consuls’ letters and provides a glimpse of Key West through the consuls’ eyes. These themes include the wrecking and fishing industries in the city, Key West as a port, the 1886 fire that destroyed many homes and businesses, the city’s cigar industry, and the revolutionary clubs in the community that backed the Cuban drive for independence from Spain.

*City of Intrigue* is an apt title for this work. Any reader expecting a picture of a relaxed, live-and-let-live Margaritaville will be sorely disappointed. By the 1870s, the cigar industry dominated the city’s economy. Cuban immigrants arriving in Key West worked predominantly in that industry and surpassed the city’s large Bahamian community by the mid-1880s. This immigration led to Key West becoming Florida’s largest city by 1880; it remained the largest in 1890. The Spanish consuls in Key West paid detailed attention to the Cubans in the Island City, most of whom strongly supported Cuban independence from Spain.

Key West during the later nineteenth century—the period that is primarily discussed in this book—was a place of intense community strife. Strikes in the cigar factories were common. Cubans were often at odds with Spaniards, sometimes due to competing perspectives on independence and sometimes because of job competition within Key West’s cigar industry. Although race relations were generally better in Key West than in most southern communities, racial conflict also surfaced.

Much material in this book will be fascinating to those interested in Tampa’s history because the history of Key West and Tampa were interwoven in a variety of ways. The most obvious example is the decision by Ybor to move his factory to Tampa and then close his Key West facility. Stebbins also discusses the several occasions where workers left Key West to relocate to Tampa during cigar strikes in Key West. The documents and analysis in this book related to José Martí and the more general push for independence from Spain make clear the important role that both communities played in this campaign.

Stebbins does an excellent job of supplementing the consuls’ correspondence with excerpts from local newspapers and other sources. She should not be expected to do more. Readers interested in Key West’s nineteenth-century history, however, will want to examine the works of other authors who have studied this fascinating community. Glen Westfall’s examination of the cigar industry in Key West is
especially important. And the work of Gerald E. Poyo provides important analysis of Key West’s Cubans in elections, in the workplace, and in the drive for independence. His perspective, not surprisingly, often conflicts with the viewpoint of the Spanish consuls. It is also worthwhile to look at Jefferson Browne’s reprinted volume on Key West, originally published in 1912. Finally, the scholarship of Canter Brown Jr. and Larry Rivers on black elected officials in Florida after Reconstruction is important because it documents and analyzes the fact that, compared to most other cities in Florida, including Tampa, African Americans in Key West were more successful in being elected to local political positions until early in the twentieth century.

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_A Most Disorderly Court: Scandal and Reform in the Florida Judiciary._ By James A. Dyckman. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008, xviii, 204 pp. Foreword, chronology/cast of characters, preface and acknowledgments, B&W photographs, notes, bibliography, index. $29.95 cloth)

This book presents a penetrating and shocking account of a dark period in the history of government and politics in Florida, in general, and the Florida judiciary, in particular. Conduct on the part of several high-profile members of Florida’s Supreme Court that, at a minimum, could be characterized as gross conflict of interest and, at worst, as scandalous seems to have engulfed the state’s court of last resort during the 1960s and early 1970s. Implicit in the misconduct was the seemingly widespread complicity of a significant number of attorneys, private citizens, and business interests that expected and encouraged behavior contrary to the spirit of the judicial canons of ethics and, in many instances, was patently illegal. Moreover, it is apparent that several other justices on the court at that time were aware of this unacceptable conduct and did nothing more than “wink and look the other way.” In fact, these justices (part of the so-called “Old Guard”) seemed to be more interested in punishing individuals employed by the court (aides and law clerks) who had dared to reveal the court’s “dirty linen” to the press than in reining in their wayward brethren.

As uncomfortable as it may be to read this sordid account of the behavior and activity of some of the state’s highest-ranking jurists, the reader should come away with several important lessons (or reminders) from this ugly period. First, the reader should clearly recognize the important role played by the free press and bar associations. If it had not been for the aggressive role played by the media in pursing the truth in this matter, the Florida judiciary might still be languishing in the shadows of corruption, influence peddling, and the perception that a favorable disposition of litigation pending before the courts can be bought for the right price. All too often,