

A History of Islamorada by Irving R. Eyster

The following was provided by Irving R. Eyster, a historian and resident. The Village would like to acknowledge the contribution by Mr. Eyster, who was kind enough to take time to write this history for Islamorada, Village of Islands soon after the Village was incorporated.

“Isla Morada Tierra Encantada” – Islamorada, the Enchanted Land

Islamorada, Village of Islands is approximately 18 miles long, including the channels between the four islands and is no more than two or three blocks wide. Islamorada is known as the “Fishing Capitol of the World.”

From archaeological excavations, we know that Indians lived here two or three thousand years ago. The first historical record was of Ponce de Leon in 1513, as he passed through the Keys, calling them Los Martires. He stopped on Metanca, later to become Indian Key, on his way back to Puerto Rico. The fresh water wells on the Matecumbes were well known to the Spanish explorers who filled their casks before sailing to Europe or Central America. Just offshore of the Village is the graveyard of the 1733 Spanish fleet destroyed in a hurricane.

The early settlers came from the Bahamas and New England. They raised and shipped thousands of pineapples to northern markets. One of these ships was the Island Home, built on Plantation Key by Johnny Brush Pinder. It was from this schooner that Islamorada got its name “Is la morada” in Spanish meaning Island Home.

Henry Flagler accomplished what most thought impossible by building a railroad to Key West, which opened on January 22, 1912. This was followed by the first road in 1928, with a ferry across two water gaps.

On Labor Day, September 2, 1935, almost everything in today’s Village was destroyed by the worst hurricane ever at that time killing almost 500 people. Those that survived were dedicated people who stayed and rebuilt the community. The road was constructed on the railway bed and opened on March 8, 1938, without ferries. It was with this determination and having roots in the coral rock that our Village was born.

After World War II, the northerners found the islands, so rich in history, and built homes and businesses. Our Village of Islands – Plantation Key, Windley, Upper and Lower Matecumbe Keys was incorporated on November 4, 1997.

The 1870 census shows a total of 29 people, 77 if counting Indian Key. Our last census (1990) shows a population of 6,721.
