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## FROM PAGE 1

## History

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the state, it's the last tall ship built in these parts and a floating museum of local history.

Yes, this legendary boat has fallen on hard times — again.

Ever since its retirement from working-vessel status in 1974, the Western Union has gone through a number of home ports and incarnations, none of which proved to be a permanent gig. The costs associated with maintaining such craft are exorbitant and seem to increase exponentially by the year.

Last July, the Western Union failed a U.S. Coast Guard inspection and was prohibited from providing commercial charter operations.

With yet another drive on to try to keep it in Key West as a living, sailing reminder of the city's glorious maritime past, the Western Union is currently sailing into uncharted waters. At the moment, nobody can say for sure what will happen to this once proud and useful relic of a bygone era. Its fascinating past, though, is an open book.

## Boat of burden

The vessel was ordered, financed and owned by Thompson Enterprises of Key West during the tail end of the Great Depression. It was built to order for and leased to the Western Union Telegraph Co. at the request of the company's local cablemaster, Capt. Gerald Steadman.

The ship's frame was built from Cayman mahogany, found on Grand Cayman Island, and then shipped to Key West, where final construction took place. That included planking with long-leaf yellow pine from Florida at a boatyard at the foot of Simonton Street, where the Pier House stands today.

"It replaced an older cable tender," said Monroe County historian Tom Hambright. "Steadman was a traditionalist, and he wanted a sailing ship. They're less maneuverable than a power boat, but cheaper to operate, and they could stay out longer."

All the same, the Western Union was fitted with a pair of engines to provide stability while working on the cables.

What makes the Western Union special, Hambright said, is that it was the last of hundreds of large wooden ships built in Key West.

"Fleets of wrecking and sponging vessels were built here over the years," he said. "But she was the last of the line."

In 1994, former Capt. Dick Steadman, son of the cablemaster and himself the ship's captain for a time, recalled watching the Western Union come together, plank-by-plank at what is now the parking lot at the foot of Simonton and Front streets.

"She's beautiful," Steadman said. "A real Key West lady. ... Every time she

comes back for a visit I go aboard."

One common misconception about the Western Union is that it was built to lay cable, as well as repair it, but that's not so, according to Hambright.

"They would carry the spare cable they needed to repair breaks in the line," Hambright said. "But this is thick cable we're talking about here. The ships that lay it are some of the largest in the world, hundreds and hundreds of feet long."

During its time as a working ship, however, the Western Union was charged with maintaining 30,000 miles of cable from as far south as Venezuela, to as far north as Halifax, Canada.

"I remember interviewing (Dick) Steadman and asked how they were able to locate the breaks in the cable, and the cables themselves," Hambright said. "He told me that they could send out an electric pulse of some sort that would tell them how far along the break was. As for finding the cables, they would drop a grappling hook into the water as close as they could measure it, and drag it until they found the cable. Their primary instrument of navigation in those days was a sextant."

Nine cables connected Key West and Havana alone during the Western Union's

*"She's beautiful. A real Key West lady. ... Every time she comes back for a visit I go aboard."*

Dick Steadman  
Former Western Union captain

prime and it logged tens of thousands of miles around the Caribbean, Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico.

During World War II, it is said it hunted Nazi submarines off the Florida coast.

In early spring of 1961, with tensions running high between the U.S. and Cuba, the Western Union was supposedly embroiled in a diplomatic incident as it worked on a cable close to the island nation.

"A Cuban gunboat came alongside and ordered the crew to follow him back to Havana," according to current Western Union Capt. Lenn Varreau. "But there were some Cuban nationals working aboard the Western Union who were worried they'd never be seen again if they went back to Cuba, so the schooner's captain faked engine trouble until the U.S. Navy could send an intercept to help."

The crew watched spellbound as U.S. jets and Russian-built MiG fighters zoomed overhead, but the vessel emerged none the worse for wear. The failed



MIKE HENZ/24hr.com

The Schooner Western Union is seen in dry dock at Truman Annex in 2010.

Bay of Pigs invasion took place two weeks later.

## Out of service

But what had been cutting-edge nautical technology in 1939 for a sailboat was, by the early 1970s, redundant, along with the telegraph and cabled telephones themselves. Western Union was relieved of duty, and became a pleasure vessel operating out of Key West under various owners for the next decade.

In 1976, the vessel was sent to New York's harbor for bicentennial celebrations and was temporarily named La Amistad, a nod to the famous freed slave. This has led to rumors that it was used to portray the Amistad in the 1997 film, but this can't be confirmed.

In May of 1984 it was added to the U.S. National Register of Historic Places but was clearly showing its age. That same year with repair and maintenance costs mounting, its Key West owners sold it to a nonprofit group called VisionQuest that works with at-risk youth in Pennsylvania and Arizona.

That pairing seemed like a good fit, and for a dozen years or so numerous troubled young people learned sailing, seamanship — and personal responsibility — aboard the Western Union.

Eventually, however, the organization outgrew the aging vessel, and it was put on the auction block once again.

This time around it was

Key West history buffs turned businessmen Ed Swift and Chris Belland of Historic Tours of America who snapped it up, and brought it back to its home port in 1997. They paid \$455,000 at the time.

Once more the tall ship's twin masts cast their shadows across the Key West Bight, and for the next 10 years HTA ran sunset cruises, private trips and other tropical sojourns aboard the grand dame of the waterfront.

But time caught up with the Western Union.

By 2007 HTA found it could no longer profitably operate the vessel, and so donated it, debt-free — but needing lots of work — to a newly formed 501(c)(3) nonprofit called the Schooner Western Union Preservation Society and Maritime Museum.

The organization was comprised of well-meaning boat lovers and history fans who sought to undertake an extensive retrofit of the Western Union, and put it back to work hauling tourists through local waters in a new era of existence.

The long story of the Western Union and its eventual journey home to ignominy and elegant decline in Key West is an epic tale, and it's easy to see how the vessel has inspired so much loyalty among supporters.

Time will tell if this old story-teller has another chapter in its history left to write.

tschmid@keynews.com

## SCHOONER WESTERN UNION HISTORY

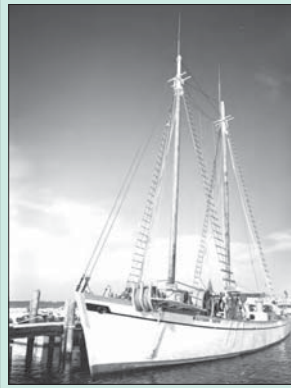


Photo by Dale McDonald

Schooner Western Union is seen in its original configuration as a cable laying and repairing vessel. This image from 1972 shows the boat docked at Britto's Boat Yard, which is now the Gallean condominiums and marina located at the foot of Front Street in Key West.

## TIMELINE:

- **1939** – Western Union built and launched at Key West
- **1941-45** – Allegedly hunts Nazi U-Boats off the coast of Florida.
- **1960s** – Said to have been used to retrieve rocket pieces from ocean floor near Cape Canaveral
- **1961** – Nearly captured by Cuban gunboat in the run up to the Bay of Pigs invasion.
- **1974** – Retired from service; reinvented as a day cruiser
- **1976** – Sails among fellow tall ships during bicentennial celebrations in New York harbor.
- **1984** – Sold to nonprofit group VisionQuest; temporarily renamed "New Way."
- **1984** – Added to the National Register of Historic Places.
- **1997** – Is rumored to have starred in Steven Spielberg's film "Amistad."
- **1997** – Is listed for sale, possibly by the folks who started the "Amistad" rumor. Purchased by Historic Tours of America of Key West. Again becomes a day-sailor.
- **2007** – HTA donates the ship to a nonprofit organization.
- **2007** – Schooner is hauled from the water and placed "on the hard" (dry land) at Key West's Truman Waterfront for the first phase of a \$1 million refit.
- **2011** – Ship is relaunched and returned to its slip in Key West Harbor to resume sailing tour operations.
- **2013** – Western Union cannot pass rigorous Coast Guard inspections. Must cease sailing operations. Loses its operating revenue.
- **2014** – Schooner Western Union Preservation Society works feverishly to raise funds to save the island's flagship through grants, donations and corporate gifts. Approximately \$60,000 is needed by Sept. 30 for insurance renewal. Remaining restoration is estimated between \$860,000 and \$1.6 million.

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You are hereby notified that the Monroe County School District and The United Teachers of Monroe, Florida will hold Collaborative Bargaining Session at the A.J. Henriquez Administration Bldg., 241 Trumbo Road, Key West, on Wednesday, September 3rd, 3:00PM to 7:00PM

Mark T. Porter, Superintendent  
August 31, 2014

August 31, 2014 Key West Citizen

393040

City of Key West will receive  
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Name	Cemetery Sexton's House
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Opening Location	Office of the City Clerk 3126 Flagler Avenue, Key West, FL 33040

Documents may be requested from DemandStar @ [www.demandstar.com](http://www.demandstar.com) or call 800.711.1712 or @ [www.keywestcity.com](http://www.keywestcity.com). All responses must be received on or before the date and time specified. The City of Key West reserves the right, at its sole discretion, to accept or reject any and all responses and to waive informalities or irregularities when it is in the best interest of the City to do so.

8/31/14

City of Key West Purchasing Dept.

August 31, 2014 Key West Citizen

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## Museum

Continued from Page 1A

of inspection from the Coast Guard until we can raise the money to get it to the boatyard for repairs," said Capt. Lenn Verreue, who has skippered the schooner for nearly 20 years and performed more than 2,200 weddings upon its deck. "She's such a huge part of Key West history. I think of all the people she carried, all the jobs she provided and all the stories she could tell. I can't imagine this town not saving her. This ship has touched so many lives."

Capt. Frank Holden is one of them.

Today, he's a world-traveling, accomplished sailor, skipper and secretary of the SWUPS. But in 1971, Holden had no idea where life would lead.

"When I first came to Key West in 1971, I went out sailing on the Western Union and was truly inspired," Holden said Friday. "It was absolutely one of the things that made me become a boat captain."

But the schooner's inspiring traditions will cease if it isn't restored.

"The main thing we need to work on is replacing the deck and the beams," Verreue said.

Other repairs include replacement and/or repair of bulkheads, ceiling planking and stem timbers, according to the society's application for Restore Act funding following the BP oil spill.

"Unlike brick and mortar projects, old wooden boats don't wait. They either get restored when needed or they are forever lost," society members wrote in their application. "The Florida Keys are now home port to Florida's only flagship; as a tourist attraction the schooner uniquely serves as a magnificent working tribute to the Florida Keys and the state's maritime history."

But for now, the sunset sails, wedding charters and full-moon cruises that were keeping the Western Union financially afloat are prohibited until the schooner can be hauled from the water for the costly repairs.

"The owners decided (last year) to hand over the certificate of inspection and place the vessel in a 'laid up' status," said Coast Guard

## BY THE NUMBERS: WESTERN UNION

**Designer:** Heber Elroy Arch, Grand Cayman, British West Indies

**Length:** Overall — 130 ft.; Beam — 23 ft. 6 in.

**Draft:** 7 ft. 9 inches

**Rig:** Gaff mainsail and foresail

**Sail area:** 5,200 square feet

**Fuel:** 6 gal./engine/hour

**Displacement:** 218 tons

**Tonnage:** 91.91 gross

**Spars:** Solid Douglas Fir

**Construction:** Carvel-planked yellow pine over Madeira mahogany frames on five-inch centers

**Power:** Twin G.M. 4-71 series diesel

**Generator:** 8kw diesel

**Speed:** 8 knots under power; 12.8 kph under sail

**Fuel tanks:** four steel, 300 gallons total

**Water tanks:** Aluminum, 1,200 gallons

**Ballast:** 27 tons, lead



Schooner Western Union Preservation Society board members Capt. Frank Holden, from left, Richard Manley and John Dolan-Heitlinger, right, tour the Western Union with Capt. Lenn Verreue Saturday.



The Schooner Western Union under full sail.

Lt. Stephanie Robinette of the inspections division at Sector Key West, who has been working closely with SWUPS members. "She's on a long-term repair plan that was approved last time she dry docked. The dry dock and structural exams validate the structural integrity of the vessel and her rigging. It's a vital piece of our inspection process on all vessels, but especially for wooden hulls."

"This is the reality of old wooden ships," said John Dolan-Heitlinger, society treasurer.

But the reality is a harsh one without funding, so the society is sending a Mayday distress call, hoping for a financial life rope from any combination of commu-

nity members, government grants, private foundations and corporate gifts. An online fundraising site has been established at schoonerwesternunion.causevox.com

The society also has approached the Western Union corporation about a company contribution to honor the ship's working history when it maintained underwater telegraph cables.

"The Western Union, when it's operating, brings in revenue that's slightly more than enough to cover expenses," Dolan-Heitlinger said. "But since we're not operating, we have to do this all through donations and grants."

But they're not abandoning ship, and the schooner's

supporters are working feverishly to raise the funds needed for the next phase of the restoration that began in 2007.

At that time, the schooner was hauled from the water and placed "on the hard" at Truman Waterfront, where a million-dollar initial restoration phase was completed.

"It took awhile, but we raised a little more than a million dollars from the Historic Florida Keys Foundation and the Monroe County Tourist Development Council," said Dolan-Heitlinger.

The Western Union returned to the water in 2011 and resumed passenger operations for two years — until its next required trip to the boatyard and rigorous structural inspection.

"About a year ago, we just didn't have the funds needed to get the boat in shape to pass inspection," he said.

An immediate \$60,000 is needed for insurance renewals and other bills, while the remaining restoration work will cost an estimated \$860,000.

"We got an estimate for \$860,000, but if Bill Gates was standing next to me with his checkbook open, I'd ask for a total of \$1.6 million to cover additional expenses," Dolan-Heitlinger said, adding that at some point the two towering masts will need replacing.

And so for now it sits, still posing for countless photos at the foot of William Street, where tourists still stop to admire the ship and read the placard that details its history.

"Unfortunately, I'm not allowed to repaint or varnish her here at the dock," said Verreue.

The downtown, city-owned marina at Key West Bight is a designated Green Marina. As such, varnish, certain paints and other items are prohibited.

"So she's looking a little rougher than she should," he said, referring to the peeling paint and unvarnished wood.

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