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A brief history of trash in the Florida Keys

By Alex Wilson Key West Citizen

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'Mount Trashmore,' seen here Friday morning, is nestled between Sunset Marina and Gerald Adams Elementary School on Stock Island. (ROB O'NEAL/The Citizen)

The history of trash in the Florida Keys can be an unpleasant subject, in part because it's difficult to imagine the early residents of a tropical paradise polluting such a pristine natural resource. Unfortunately, it appears that is what happened.

According to an essay from the Monroe County Public Library's archives, "A History of Scavenger Service," the earliest history of what early Keys residents did with their garbage is speculative, both because it didn't warrant much attention and because there likely wasn't a huge amount of garbage to begin with. However, by 1898, newspapers reported that the Key West City Council considered "sewage, garbage, streets and taxes" the most serious issues facing the island.

In modern times, the term "solid waste management" is the more accepted term for garbage collection, but in the early history of the Keys, the practice was known as the "scavenger service." In 1926, the city gave the Key West Tire Company a scavenger service contract, the first reference to the service being contracted. The Citizen article that mentions this contract doesn't specify, however, as to the destination of the waste in question.

Throughout the years there have been numerous garbage dumpsites both in Key West and throughout the Keys. These include areas such as Stock Island, Sigsbee Park, Rest Beach, Kennedy drive near what today is Poinciana Elementary, Fleming Key, Cudjoe Key, Long Key, Marathon, Lower Matecumbe Key and Key Largo.

It wasn't just the land being polluted, but the ocean as well. Local historian Tom Hambright said that, in many cases, the garbage was likely hauled out to sea and simply dumped, a practice that continued into the early 1940s.

"Trash has always been a problem in the Keys," said Hambright. "They dumped, not only the garbage, but the sewage too. It was just going in the ocean."

A 1938 article in The Citizen refers to the prohibition of trash being hauled on scavenger vessels without a city permit, and the city passed a law prohibiting dumping within the city limits. The implication of this is twofold: first, residents were dumping their garbage around Key West enough to warrant city action on the matter; second, dumping was probably still legal outside of the city limits.

According to several Citizen articles, 1944 was a busy year for trash. In June of that year, city officials announced the federal government had given more than \$14,000 to create a "modern, self-maintaining garbage collecting and disposal system." Mentioned in the same article is a plan to prepare an area on Stock Island to be used as a garbage disposal system. This, of course, would later grow into what is now known as the Stock Island Sanitary Landfill on College Road, affectionately dubbed "Mount Trashmore" by locals.

Subsequent articles from 1944 show that the garbage issue had hardly been resolved. A Monroe County health director urged the city council to pass an ordinance establishing a daily pickup service to food establishments and, at minimum, a twice-weekly pickup service to residences. Furthermore, an October article states that a city garbage site, located near what would now be Poinciana Elementary School and the sports fields on Kennedy Drive, was preventing the Navy from opening already-built housing for defense workers. The city engineer estimated that it would cost around \$23,000 to clean up the site, but city commissioners felt this was too pricey.

“The city doesn’t have that kind of money,” said Councilman Glenwood Sweeting. “The federal government knew the dump site was there before they built [the housing] around it.”

By the 1950s, the “Stock Island Dump” — Mount Trashmore — was fully operational, with trash collection services bringing garbage from residences and businesses and simply dumping it in the area. Over the next decade it seems the biggest concern for Keys residents, as far as trash was concerned, was the price of their garbage collection fees.

Fast forward to 1966, and a new scandal caused a stink in Key West, quite literally. According to articles from The Citizen, Monroe County officials managed to surreptitiously create a county dumping site right next to the Key West International Airport.

“The county has apparently been getting away with dumping garbage from...county agencies including the hospital for some time now,” wrote Wright Langley, Citizen reporter. “Exactly when the airport site became the county dump, no one is sure, but it appears the dumping has been going on for months in order to save the county [money].”

Langley went on to describe the contents of the dumping site as being full of “bloody bandages, beer cans metal beds and wet garbage.” According to the article, the site was only discovered when the public services director, Charles Aguero, noticed smoke rising from the burning of the trash.

In 1968, Langley reported on the conditions at the Stock Island Dump after a Florida state sanitary engineer from the Board of Health called the conditions “deplorable,” citing that the cover material meant to enclose the trash in the dump was lacking.

“Practically the entire surface area was insufficiently covered,” said E. A. Philen, Florida sanitary engineer.

In 1969, efforts were made to increase the depth of the Stock Island Landfill, but the hardness of the rock beneath the surface meant that workers were only able to dig about four feet deep below the surface, despite the use of dynamite blasting.

As the years went on, the city and county adopted more progressive options for garbage disposal. A solid waste shredder-compost resource recovery facility, dubbed “Conch Recovery No. 1” was built in 1979. In 1986, a garbage incinerator was opened at the Stock Island Landfill, where it burned nearly 150 tons of trash almost every day. The incinerator, run by a company called Montenay, became the center of a controversy over costs and alleged corruption. Eventually the city purchased the plant from Montenay for \$10 million in 1994.

In 1993, Dr. Phyllis Mofson, an environmental consultant and engineer, wrote an article about soil samples taken near Kennedy Drive. The Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority had ordered the tests after evidence of toxins were found while a four-foot trench was being dug.

“Dangerously high levels of heavy metals and petroleum hydrocarbons have been found in soil samples taken from 14th Street between Northside Drive and Duck Avenue in Key West,” wrote Mofson. “Analysis of two soil samples show levels of lead, arsenic and chromium which are up to 25 times more concentrated than is considered safe by government regulators.”

Mofson later cited an expert from the National Center for Environmental Health, who stated that the issue is likely an “environmental problem, but not a health problem, at least as far the lead goes.”

Mount Trashmore officially closed in 1993, although the trash incinerator would operate for more than a decade afterwards, with the burnt trash being shipped off to another landfill in Dade County. It wasn’t until 2004 that the incinerator closed after the city was faced with both extensive costs for repairs and upgrades, as well as complaints from citizens over the smell.

Today, trash continues to be shipped to the mainland, and the landfill remains as both a reminder of our past and a potential obstacle to our future. In an era of environmental concerns and developers eager to utilize land in the Keys, Mount Trashmore is again under scrutiny. After numerous residents and business owners voiced complaints or concerns, city officials have tasked the Sustainability Advisory Board to evaluate the current condition and potential future uses of the 18-acre landfill.

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