

Demystifying the lives of Juan Gomez: from Pirate to Pilot

Carrie Cagnet

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Dr. Catherine Griggs

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John or Juan Gomez is a character well documented in early Florida history. Perhaps John is most familiar in modern times as the man who perpetuated the myth of Jose Gaspar, a fictional pirate who sailed under the black flag on the Gulf of Mexico in the early 1800's. The tale of Gasparilla on Florida's gulf coast has incurred speculation since its inception. It is truly a tale of two cities by virtue of its celebrity in Tampa and its setting in Charlotte Harbor. Much like the man John Gomez, the Gasparilla legend has managed to find refuge in a number of seaside villages on the west coast of Florida from Charlotte Harbor to Crystal River.¹ Despite their ambiguous origins and their similar, yet respective demises, the legends of John Gomez and Jose Gaspar intertwine with facts and fallacies. Within the colorful life of John Gomez was born the legend of Gaspar and it is in the legend of Gaspar that we may find the truth behind John Gomez. Their lives and experiences parallel each other in a manner that is, perhaps, more than just coincidence.

Several primary sources exist on John Gomez, Juan Gomez, or Panther Key John, as he was known on Florida's Gulf Coast. The accounts and recollections came from reporters of popular journals, military officers, young adventurers, business people, government officials, and even a minister. All sources refer to Gomez's uncanny ability as a guide, a pilot, and as a storyteller but only a scant few relate his tales of piracy. He was notorious for his frontier tales of Indians, wildlife, escape from the Cuban authorities and any other perilous premise seeded in his colorful imagination. Gomez's fishing and gaming acumen were cause for comment and his age was a popular subject among accounts from later years. However, it is his earlier

¹ Andre-Marcel d'Ans and Marie-Joele Ingalls. "The Legend of Gasparilla: Myth and History on Florida's West Coast." *Tampa Bay History* 16/2 (Fall/Winter 1987) 5.

experiences that provide some answers to the tales of piracy and raise even more questions about his exploits on the Gulf of Mexico and in a young America.

Like the title character in the popular prose, *the Corsair*, by Lord Byron, Jose Gaspar is described as a chivalrous fellow on one hand, and a ruthless character “of the blackest die”² on the other. According to Frank Hurley, a regional historian and Pass-a-Grille resident, Gomez described Jose Gaspar, as a citizen of Spain, born in 1756. In his youth, Gaspar lifted the crown jewels, turned to the black flag and pirated on the Gulf of Mexico for 38 years until a fateful day in 1821 when the legend, Jose Gaspar, made his last stand and took his own life.³

The legend has a variety of vignettes such as the tale of a righteous Spanish princess and eleven Mexican beauties all marooned on an island in Charlotte Harbor and subject to the affection of Gasparilla. The Spanish Princess refused his advances and in a rage, Gasparilla killed her.⁴ Then there was the clandestine ruse when the American Naval forces surprised Gasparilla while he was collecting stashes of treasure in Charlotte Harbor in an attempt to cash out of the pirate business. According to Gomez, the US Navy bottled up Gasparilla after a failed attempt to take the ship, believing it to be a merchant vessel. In his final and legendary act, Gaspar draped himself in the anchor chain and dove from the bowsprit to a watery grave; his final words were “no one takes Gaspar alive!”⁵

By the 1820s, most countries had recalled their letters of marque and would-be privateers could find few welcoming ports or friendly juntas to allow them to land their prizes and refit

² Frank Hurley, *Surf, Sand & Postcard Sunsets: a history of Pass-a-grille and the Gulf Beaches*, Great Outdoors Publishing, St. Petersburg, FL. 1977. 30.

³ Hurley, *Ibid.*

⁵ Hurley, 31

their vessels. The privateers filtered down through the Gulf of Mexico from ports in New Orleans, Galveston, Charleston, Savannah, and St. Augustine. Many crews and vessels made their way into southern Caribbean waters around the Cuban town of Regla near Havana Bay and St. Bartholomew in the British West Indies.⁶ The concentration of these groups of privateers made competition fierce and in addition to preying on the Spanish fleet, privateering vessels harassed American merchant vessels, too.

John Gomez would have been approaching forty in 1821. He often told a story of his escape from Cuban authorities after an ill-fated “filibustering expedition”⁷ before the Civil War. Capt. W.D. Collier of Fort Myers remembered Gomez’s story and told a friend named Thomas Gonzalez in 1931:

“He once told me of an escape he made from Cuba before the Civil War in the States. He had been to Cuba with a filibustering expedition, and when in the vicinity of Morro Castle the government soldiers gave chase, he managed to escape by hiding under the seat of one of the fishing boats, which had been pulled up on the shore. When the soldiers’ search had proven futile and the last man had disappeared, he paddled to sea with a board. After drifting for three days, without food, he was picked up by a schooner going to Key West. He never left Florida after that.”⁸

-Capt. W.D. Collier remembering John Gomez in *The Caloosahatchee*.

⁶ Davis, *Ibid*

⁷ Thomas Gonzalez, *The Caloosahatchee, Miscellaneous Writings Concerning the History of The Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers, Florida*, “Last Florida Pirate”, The Island Press, Fort Myers, FL, 1932. 116

⁸ Gonzales, 117-118

Jose Gaspar is the master attributed with pillaging the Yankee punga *Orleans* on August 19, 1821⁹. However, the events leading to Gaspar's demise did not occur in Charlotte Harbor, nor where they as romantic as that version portrays. On September 15, 1821, the *Pensacola Floridian* reported that Jose Gaspar had his way with the *Orleans*. Representing himself in a manner consistent with the likes of Jean Lafitte, Gaspar sent a letter aboard the *Orleans* to an American officer¹⁰. According to Frances Bradlee in *Piracy in the West Indies and Its Suppression*, the letter by Gaspar, written in French read:

“At Sea and in Good Luck.

Sir:

Between buccaneers, no ceremony; I take your dry goods, and, in return, I send you pimento; therefore, we are now even. I entertain no resentment.

Bid good day to the officer of the United States, and tell him that I appreciate the energy with which he has spoken of my companions-in-arms and me. Nothing can intimidate us; we run the same fortune, and our maxim is that ‘the goods of this world belongs to the strong and valiant.

The occupation of the Floridas is a pledge that the course I follow is conformable to the policy pursued by the United States”.

-Richard Coeur de Lion.¹¹

⁹ Francis B.C Bradlee, *Piracy in the West Indies and Its Suppression*, The Essex Institute, Salem, Ma., 1923, Kendall, John S, “Piracy in the Gulf of Mexico, 1816-1823”, *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* Vol 8, No. 3, July 1925, 361

¹⁰ William C. Davis, *Pirates Lafitte: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005. 449.

In his book on the Lafitte brothers, William C. Davis details the events leading to Gaspar's actual demise as well as his legendary suicide. The collaborating source is an October 18, 1821 letter from an officer named Francis Gregory to the Secretary of War.¹² According to Gregory, Captain Jose Gaspar sailed from the island St. Bartholomew on the vessel, *Jupiter* and under a suspect commission from Uruguay. Gaspar took the Yankee ship *Orleans* on August 19, 1821. Gaspar retained the *Orleans* for two days, threatening the crew and passengers. He then sent the letter signed "Richard Coeur de Lion".¹³ Perhaps trying to remain unidentified or settling a grudge with one of the Lafitte brothers.¹⁴ Gaspar's luck ran out in October of 1821 when the *USS Grampus* found his ship in St. Bartholomew and put her out of business. With the exception of the young cabin boy and a couple of others, Gaspar and most of his crew were taken to Cuba to hang for their crimes.¹⁵

Today, Gaspar's legend comes to life annually in Tampa, Florida during the Gasparilla Festival with a mock pirate invasion and the ceremonial surrender of the city. The weeklong celebration, complete with parades, street parties and a flotilla is singularly referred to as "Gasparilla". The event began as a theme to a May festival organized in 1904 by Miss Louise Frances Dodge, a society editor for the Tampa Tribune. George W. Hardee was familiar with the Gomez version of Gaspar the Pirate of Charlotte Harbor. Hardee was a federal employee in Tampa and suggested the legend of Gasparilla as a theme to Miss Dodge. Covert meetings to

¹¹ Francis B.C Bradlee, *Piracy in the West Indies and Its Suppression*, The Essex Institute, Salem, Ma., 1923639; Kendall, John S, "Piracy in the Gulf of Mexico, 1816-1823", *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* Vol 8, No. 3, July 1925, 361

¹² Davis, 449, 639 *Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Officers Below the Ranks of Commander 1802-1884*, M-148, RG 45, NA.

¹³ Stanley Faye, *Privateers of the Gulf*, Dogwood Press, 1932, 185;

¹⁴ Beardslee, Francis B.C., *Piracy in the West Indies and Its Suppression*, Salem, MA, 1923, 51

¹⁵ Davis, 449

plan the mock pirate invasion begot the first “Ye Mystic Krewe of Gasparilla,” and the first Krewe made their entrance on horseback.¹⁶ John Gomez’s fireside tale of piracy in Charlotte Harbor assumed a life of its own in Tampa and the tales grew taller and more iconic than even Gomez could spin.¹⁷ In fact, the Gasparilla festival has taken place every year since 1904, except between 1907 and 1909 due to a flimsy economy and from 1918 to 1919 following America’s entry into World War I.¹⁸

On June 14th 1894, the *Fort Myers Press* published an illustrated story about Gomez on his 113th birthday. According to the article, Gomez was born in Portugal in 1781. He and his family then moved to the island of Mauritius, a colony under French control at the time. The French lost possession of the island to the British in 1810 and perhaps the tumult in the years leading up to the overthrow gave the Gomez family reason to relocate to Bordeaux, France. *The Fort Myers Press* article goes on to state that it was from France that a twelve-year-old Gomez took a position as a cabin boy on a transatlantic vessel to the United States.¹⁹ He left the ship in Charleston, S.C. because the ship’s master mistreated him. From there, he made his way to

¹⁶ Gloria Jahoda, *River of the Golden Ibis*, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, FL 1979. 326-327.

¹⁷ Pat LeMoyné penned an early and widely accepted account of Gaspar the pirate in 1914. It was a promotional piece for the Gasparilla Inn. LeMoyné was employed as a publicist for the Charlotte Harbor Northern Railroad, which owned the hotel. In 1923, the LeMoyné’s account of Gaspar was referenced in a book titled *The Suppression of Piracy by 1820-32* by Francis B.C. Bradlee. LeMoyné’s narrative was compiled from incidents told by John Gomez, said to be Gaspar’s brother-in-law who lived on Panther Key and died in 1900. LeMoyné also refers to another man, John Gomez, Jr. who was the cabin boy kidnapped by Gaspar. This man died in Palmetto at the age of 70 in 1875.

¹⁸ Andre-Marcel d’Ans, Marie-Joele Ingalls, “The Legend of Gasparilla: Myth and History on Florida’s West Coast.” *Tampa Bay History* 16/2 (Fall/Winter 1987) 12.

¹⁹ Thomas Gonzalez, *The Caloosahatchee, Miscellaneous Writings Concerning the History of The Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers, Florida*, “Last Florida Pirate”, The Island Press, Fort Myers, FL, 1932. 114. This early explanation of Gomez is also related by a man named Francisco Gomes D’sa in the book, *Our Fascinating past: Charlotte Harbor the Later Years* by U.S. Cleveland and later updated with Lindsey Williams in 1992.

Florida and arrived in St. Augustine long before the Spanish flag ceased to fly over Castillo San Marco.²⁰

Gomez appeared as a pirate as early as the 1810's.²¹ He was the pirate whom Odet Philippi ran into, not once, but twice while traveling the east coast of Florida to Key West from New River and Fort Lauderdale. Philippi found Gomez and his crew in poor health and attended to them. In return, Gomez, showed Philippi a map of Florida and pointed to the Tampa Bay area, and claimed Tampa Bay to be, "The most beautiful body of water in the world, with the possible exception of the Bay of Naples."²² John Gomez also appeared in Key West at the turn of the century as the owner of the home at 306 Elizabeth Street, a notorious pirate's haven in Key West.²³ Philippi also lived at the site for a period during the Seminole Wars.²⁴

Charlotte Sun-Herald reporter, Lindsey Williams, wrote a history series on the subject of Gomez and Gaspar in 1993, prompting a man from Port Charlotte to come forward and share information about his great uncle Juan Gomes D'sa of Panther Key. His uncle claimed to be a cabin boy to Jose Gaspar. Fransisco Gomes D'sa claimed that Jose Gaspar kidnapped his great uncle, Juan Gomes D'sa, and the two developed a bond leading to a life of piracy for the young Gomez.²⁵ Gomes D'sa explained the circumstances much like Francis Gregory in his letter to the Secretary of War in 1821. After a clamp down on piracy in the southern Caribbean, Gaspar

²⁰ Gonzalez, Ibid

²¹ D.B. McKay, *Pioneer Florida, Vol. II*, the Southern Publishing Company, 1959, 300.

²² McKay, 301

²³ Dunn, Hampton "Key West house once a pirates' 'hideout'," *Phototouring Florida Collection*, d20. , Miami, FL, 1973. http://www.lib.usf.edu/lds/digitalcollections/D33/articles/d_20.pdf; McKay, 302.

²⁴ Dunn, Ibid,

²⁵ Williams, Lindsey and Cleveland, U.S. *Our Fascinating Past, Charlotte Harbor: The Later Years*, Charlotte Harbor Area Historical Society Publication, Punta Gorda, FL, 1996, 26.

and his crew were sent to the Cuban gallows. Some of the crew managed to dodge the rope and one of those was John Gomez²⁶.

Gomez hosted many charters to Pass-a-Grille resort. Passengers included Tampa citizens as well as military and support personnel from Fort Brooke, who “found relief from the tedium of war.”²⁷ They enjoyed hunting, fishing, and picnicking excursions to Pass-a-Grille’s resort and campsite at the south end of Long Key. John was quick to pick up the benefit of beguiling his passengers with stories of his own design. This scenario likely gave birth to the Gasparilla legend. It helps to explain the change of venue of the Gasparilla mythos from Charlotte Harbor to Tampa. Consider the possible scenario, there on the sandy shore, with the colors of a Florida sunset illuminating the West and the light of a campfire reflected in the faces of awed listeners, the old man, John Gomez, brought to life the story of the Spanish naval officer turned Corsair.

Tales of piracy, wilderness adventures, Indian Wars, filibustering expeditions to Cuba and many other curiosities were among the many tales he frequently spun on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.²⁸ By the second Seminole War, Gomez, took advantage of the winds of change and made appearances as far north as Clearwater in 1853, over to the Gulf Beaches of Pinellas County and down to Fort Myers and Key West in the course of his duties as a government pilot

The third and final Seminole War (1855-1858) places John Gomez in Tampa as a government pilot, guiding tramp steamers and sailing schooners into Tampa Bay. He would

²⁶ Williams, Cleveland, Ibid

²⁷ Hurley, 30

²⁸Thomas Gonzalez, *The Caloosahatchee, Miscellaneous Writings Concerning the History of The Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers, Florida*, “Last Florida Pirate”, The Island Press, Fort Myers, FL, 1932. 117

bring merchant vessels in from Egmont Key to the Fort Brooke wharf. In addition to his government job, Gomez maintained a schooner of his own, named the *Red Jack*.²⁹

The “Great Gale” of 1848 united Tampa Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, submerging Pass-a-Grille, and filling an old Spanish well on the southeastern tip of Long Key, present day Pass-a-Grille. The well remained inoperable for nine years until Gomez, remembered the location, and cleaned out the well, bringing a freshwater source back to the remote location. The well was a key amenity, making Pass-a-Grille a popular destination for smack fishermen, early sportsmen and leisure seekers from the neighboring villages of St. Petersburg and Tampa. John A. Bethell frequented the spot along with his family and other St. Petersburg founding fathers such as Leonardy, Miranda and Bell. Bethell mentions his acquaintance with John Gomez and the circumstances surrounding the Spanish well at Pass-a-Grille in his book, *Pinellas: a brief history of the lower point*:

“(Fishermen) had a well dug in the rear of the camp walled up with horse-conch shells, but the gale of ’48, when it overflowed the key, filled the well up with sand, and it remained so until 1857, when John Gomez, a Spaniard, who knew where it was, cleaned it out. Gomez carried lumber from Tampa and built tables and benches and put everything in good shape. He had a fine boat and took parties there on excursions.”³⁰

-John A. Bethell remembers John Gomez, 1911

²⁹ Frank T. Hurley, Jr. Surf, Sand & Postcard Sunsets: a history of Pass-a-grille and the Gulf Beaches, Great Outdoors Publishing, St. Petersburg, FL. 1977. 30.

³⁰ John Bethell, *Pinellas: a brief history of the lower point / by the oldest living settler, John A. Bethell*, Great Outdoors Publishing, Independent Job Dept. St. Petersburg, FL. 1914. 60.

By 1857, the winds of war had blown Gomez into Tampa Bay and Fort Brooke to pilot government ships through the shallow bay. Those same winds would blow Gomez and his sideline excursions on Pass-a-Grille out of the tourism business by the 1860's. On January 1, 1861, Florida joined the Confederacy and by November of the same year, the Federal blockade of Tampa Bay led by Capt. Lt. William B. Eaton was in place, effectively putting tourism out of business in Florida. Gomez began working on blockade-runners from the Tampa Wharf and when he was in port, he served with the Tampa Home Guard Unit of the Confederacy.³¹

According to Capt. Charles H. Rockwell in an account published in *Forest and Stream*, Gomez maintained a family in Tampa at the onset of the Civil War. There was a dissenting party to John's claim to the homestead and the family. "A Troubadour" returning to Tampa for a leave from the war threatened Gomez in a saloon.³² This confrontation led to an exchange of dissenting opinions and some shots were fired. Soon after, John found it necessary to make a hasty exit from Tampa and went on the lam.³³

The next account of Gomez is from Capt. C. H. Rockwell, U.S.N. Capt. Rockwell employed Gomez as a guide on several naval expeditions to Florida for the Union and wrote in to the popular journal, *Forest and Stream* (predecessor to *Field and Stream*). He wrote in an account of Gomez, which published on September 12, 1896. At the time of his acquaintance with Gomez, Rockwell was a young officer, selected by the commander-in-chief of the East Gulf

³¹ Hurley, 31

³² *Forest and Stream*, Rockwell letter, 1896

³³ *Forest and Stream*, Rockwell letter, 1896 Rockwell refers to this person in Gomez's enunciation of his name, "Willums"

Blockading Squadron to command the U.S. schooner, *Two Sisters*.³⁴ Rockwell recalls the first time he met John Gomez at Key West in the summer of 1863:

“When I proceeded on board to take charge of this my first command in the government service, I found (Gomez) sitting on deck, smoking silently and diligently, his knees near his chin, his back rounded like a bicycle scorcher, his old straw hat covering his head from the nape of the neck to his eyebrows. John Gomez, pilot, U.S. Navy - a man swarthy, silent and looking like an Indian, but when once opened up, like an oyster, with considerable meat in him.”³⁵

-Capt. C.H. Rockwell, U.S.N., letter to *Forest and Stream*, 1896

Capt. Rockwell described Gomez as a “perfect pilot”. He explained, “I think (Gomez) knew familiarly, every shoal, rock, oyster bed, creek, inlet, mud bank, fishing ledge, roosting place for birds, deer track and channel from Key West to Pensacola.”³⁶ In his letter of recollection to the editors of *Forest and Stream*, Capt. Rockwell gave Gomez a great deal of credit for keeping the crew fed with fresh fish or game. It appears that Gomez’s skills and knowledge of Florida’s coast was in high demand by all in times of peace and war. Gomez had already lived many years in Florida and fought in the Seminole Wars for American control of the region. Through the evolution of Florida control, Gomez kept friends on both sides. By the summer of 1863, when he first met Rockwell, he was in his late seventies. Rockwell explained

³⁴ *Forest and Stream, a Weekly Journal of the Rod and Gun., Sportsman Tourist, Death of John Gomez*, Capt. Charles H. Rockwell letter reprinted from September 12, 1896 Vol LV- No.5, New York, Saturday Aug. 4, 1900. 82

³⁵ *Forest and Stream*, Rockwell letter. 1896

³⁶ *Forest and Stream*, Rockwell letter, 1896.

that John was “between 40 and 70. Over that range of 30 years, you could guess at will. There were no fences on the range.”³⁷ Rockwell continued with a colorful and detailed description of John Gomez, the pilot:

“He carried somewhere about him, a flint and steel and a horn full of tinder and produced fire from it to light his pipe. He was always perfectly clean and neat but his clothing was tropical and free; I do not think he liked to wear shoes. (He) squatted on deck with his old pipe was his usual posture. His language was calm and slow; I rarely saw him vehement. But there was a secret, slumbering force about the man which savored of helpfulness and power, and I have rarely met a man whom I would tie to, for outing or danger, ashore or afloat, with more confidence than I would John Gomez”³⁸

-Capt. C.H. Rockwell, U.S.N., letter to *Forest and Stream*, 1896

Gomez traveled through the Florida brush all the way down through the Everglades to Key West. It is at this time that Gomez began to pilot a Baltimore pungy schooner named *Two Sisters*, under the command of then Lt. Rockwell, for the Union.

Capt. Rockwell mentions that he was charged with Gomez for about 6 months between 1863 and 1864. In this time, and despite many stories and conversations shared, Capt. Rockwell does not mention any stories of association with any acts of piracy. Capt. Rockwell alludes to Gomez’s past by mentioning that he recalled John Gomez was from “Honduras, Central America

³⁷ *Forest and Stream*, Rockwell letter, 1896

³⁸ *Forest and Stream*, Rockwell letter, 1896

or had lived there many years.”³⁹ In keeping with his date of birth approximated to the year of 1782⁴⁰, John would have been broaching his eighty at this time.

Thomas Gonzales, a life long resident of Fort Myers, related another first hand account of John Gomez in his book on the area, *The Caloosahatchee* in 1932. On a December evening in 1931, Captain W.D. Collier, a retired sea captain, who settled in Fort Myers in the early 1870’s shared a manuscript about Gomez with Thomas Gonzalez. Capt. Colliers’ account is significant because it is the earliest account of a person who knew John as a witness to piracy and a self-ascribed pirate, self-ascribed nonetheless.

“In his later years he came to our store about once per month and we supplied him with groceries, which were paid for by the county. He told me that he was a pirate and said that he personally had walked a number if people over the plank to death and had witnessed at least a hundred others.”⁴¹

-Capt. W.D. Collier remembering John Gomez in *The Caloosahatchee*.

Collier, like Rockwell, placed Gomez on the Pinellas gulf coast (Clearwater, 1859) before the Civil War and approximated Gomez to be in his late 70’s.⁴² Capt. Collier indicated that Gomez disappeared from the scene shortly after the start of the Civil War. He also confirms John’s homestead on Panther Key in 1876.⁴³ In 1880, the Monroe County census shows John and Sarah

³⁹Thomas Gonzalez, *The Caloosahatchee, Miscellaneous Writings Concerning the History of The Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers, Florida*, The Island Press, Fort Myers, FL, 1932. 122.

⁴⁰ This date is based on the 1880 census, which listed John Gomes (sic) at 98 years of age and living on Panther Key with a wife Sarah A Gomes. http://www.rootsweb.com/%7Efllee/records/census/1880_Monroe_Full_Census.htm

⁴¹ Thomas Gonzalez, *The Caloosahatchee, Miscellaneous Writings Concerning the History of The Caloosahatchee River and the City of Fort Myers, Florida*, The Island Press, Fort Myers, FL, 1932. 122

⁴² Gonzales, 117

⁴³ Gonzales, 117.

Gomes (sic), ages 98 and 57 respectively, living on Panther Key. John's place of birth and that of his parents is listed as France and his occupation is classified as "woodchopper". Sarah is listed as his wife and her occupation, "keeping house".⁴⁴ She claimed Georgia as her place of origin and the origin of her parents. John was getting up in the years as the end of the century approached. His reputation was also spreading across the country and more people began to seek him out.⁴⁵

The next account of Gomez appears in 1889. A man named Charles Kendall of Tarpon Springs wrote the first account about Gomez and submitted in to *Forest and Stream* after he visited the couple on Panther Key. Kendall describes the scene at Panther Key:

"On Panther Leon Island (sic), seven miles form Cape Romano, lives an old man, John Gomez. I met him first some three years ago, when he was over one hundred years old. On my canoe cruise round the cape last year, I called there and had a long conversation with him. He told me he was born on the island of Mauritius and that his parents removed to Bordeaux, where he lived until 1814 or 1815, when he came to the United States. He followed the sea around Florida and the West Indies until the first Seminole War, when he joined forces under Col. Zachary Taylor and served through the war."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ 1880 Monroe County Florida Federal Census, Includes present day Lee and Collier Counties, 1st & 2nd Dist of Key West outside of City Limits, Dist #118, SD #18, ED# 18, includes all the islands in Monroe County south of Punta Rassa. Pages 7 through 20. Enumerated by John F Horr on July 5 - 24,1880.

http://www.rootsweb.com/%7Efllee/records/census/1880_Monroe_Full_Census.htm

⁴⁵ Gonzales, 121.

⁴⁶ Gonzales, 121

It was widely known that the citizens of Fort Myers and Lee County made Gomez and his wife wards of the county for a decade although supporting documentation from public records are yet to be identified. The commissioners made personal investigations of Gomez and purportedly paid a monthly stipend of \$8 to the couple for maintenance. This stipend was used at Capt Collier's family store for groceries. "Fish, turtle and turtle eggs with a little coffee, sugar and meal made up the sum of their subsistence."⁴⁷ Charles Kendall remarked on the existence of life on the island of Panther Key after a visit there and supper with Sarah Gomes in 1889:

"At the table one of the gentlemen was talking to me about how lonely it must be for them, and remarked, "But I suppose they don't mind it; they get used to it," I do not know how she had heard the remark, but she made answer: "Never do get used to it, sir."⁴⁸

1898 brought some northern adventurer's to Panther Key and they, too, captured a few moments in time with John Gomez. Kenneth Ransom⁴⁹ and his three friends sailed into Panther Key on their voyage chronicled in *A Year in a Yawl*. When they arrived at the homestead, they found a young girl⁵⁰ at the door of a palm hut and an old man lying on a grey rag carpet on the floor. Ransom describes Gomez. "His thick, white hair-bushy and plentiful-framed his face seamed and lined, but keen and full of vigor."⁵¹ Gomez introduced himself and expressed a desire to see the boat, which the foursome had traveled in from the north. They talked about

⁴⁷ Gonzales, 122-123.

⁴⁸ Gonzalez 125

⁴⁹ Kenneth Ransom retired to Indian Rocks Beach later in his life according to Frank Hurley.

⁵⁰ This young girl may very well have been Martha Weeks, step-daughter to John Gomez who D.B. McKay relates in an article "More Accounts of John Gomez, Who Drowned" from the *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, Sunday, February 24, 1952

⁵¹ Russell Doubleday, *A Year in a Yawl: the log of the Gazelle*, captained by Kenneth Ransom in 1898, Cruising Guide Publications, Dunedin, FL. 1995.115

boats in general and John's knowledge became rather apparent. The curiosity got the best of Ransom and he asked John if there was a story he wanted to share, "to put into the log in remembrance of the visit".⁵² Ransom was hoping that Gomez might reveal his history and in a way, John did just that. He told them, "If I live 'til Christmas, as I hope I shall, I'll be 123."⁵³

The Kenneth Ransom and the crew of *Gazelle* heard of John Gomez's death over a year after their visit to Panther Key. The litany of tales that went with the name John Gomez "from Mobile to Key West could fill a book." Ransom remarked in the ship's log:

"Gomez's general appearance did more than a little to give credence to these stories. His looks were certainly of the piratical order. His complexion was brown, dark rich (in) color as century old mahogany. His voice was clear and full and he gestured freely as he talked with the animation of a young man. His lean sallow face, keen piercing black eyes, gold rings in his ears and a watchfulness that never wearied were characteristics which he had in common with light fingered gentlemen of seafaring tastes."⁵⁴

Not long after Kenneth Ransom and the crew of *Gazelle* visited Panther Key in 1898, Gomez's full life ended suddenly. It came as no surprise to those who knew him. He was old. It was how he died that seemed so very strange and ironic. Gomez's body was discovered on Friday, July 13, 1900. He had drowned, presumably, falling from his skiff and becoming

⁵² Doubleday, 117

⁵³ Doubleday, *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Doubleday, *Ibid.*

entangled in his fishing lines.⁵⁵ The circumstances of his death, much like his life, paralleled his legendary protagonist and doppelganger, Gaspar. An inescapable death brought by the waters that supported such a timeless life. Perhaps it was an accident. John loved to fish and John Kendall quoted his wife, Sarah, on a visit to the island in the late 1880s as saying:

“Oh, my old man, he’s gone tar-a-pin (meaning terrapin as in turtle or possibly tarpon) fishing. He’s got tar-a-pin on the brain my old man has.”⁵⁶

In the end, Gomez like Gaspar, found his fate in the absinthe green waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Some suspect a little rum was involved in the incident that brought the curtain down on a life that had seen Florida under three of its five flags.⁵⁷ Still others believe that John, tired from a long and full run in this world, pushed the sweet dish of life away instead of eating that last bite. That is to say, John may have been a victim of his own hand.⁵⁸ One thing was certain after that hazy, hot July in 1900. A legend had crossed over to the other side of our perception. Gomez, like Gaspar had left the company of men and entered the company of legends.

Both Gaspar and Gomez were emblematic of their place and time. Manifest destiny and the expansion of North America created a perfect environment on the fringe of civilization for captains of opportunity that were resourceful, bold and fearless against the meager authority present in the territories of the early republic. “Wherever there was a population with a need not adequately supplied by conventional means of commerce, they flourished. And once the vacuum of laws and regulations was filled, they disappeared and moved on, unable and unwilling to

⁵⁵ Forest and Stream, a Weekly Journal of the Rod and Gun., 1900., Doubleday, 118,

⁵⁶ Gonzalez, 124.

⁵⁷ McKay, D.B. editor, “Last of the Pirates” *Pioneer Florida, Vol. II*, The Southern Publishing Company, 1959. 314 Forest and Stream, a Weekly Journal of the Rod and Gun. 1900. a-i; Doubleday, 118, Hurley, 32.

⁵⁸ D.B. McKay, “More Accounts of John Gomez, Who Drowned”, *Tampa Sunday Times, February 24, 1952 10-C.*

adapt to existence in the new environment.”⁵⁹ This was the story Gaspar and Gomez on the Gulf Coast of Florida, of the Lafittes and the Baratarians of Louisiana, of James Bowie and the land frauds in Louisiana and Arkansas in the 1820’s and of Samuel Mason of the famed “land pirates” of the Ohio Mississippi valleys.⁶⁰ They could not have appeared at any other time or place in America’s history and when the conjunction of history that created them disappeared, so did they.⁶¹

⁵⁹ William C. Davis, *Pirates Lafitte: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005. 475.

⁶⁰ Davis, *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Davis, *Ibid.*

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