

The “Kapoks” of Key West, Florida, 2018

A brief reconnaissance of Key West in April 2018 uncovered eight *ceiba* trees in six sites. Locally, the *Ceiba pentandra* tree is known by its Indonesian name, “kapok.” Seven of the trees seem to be about 100 years old; only one seems to be of private origins. Given the history of the Key as a military stronghold, hosting navy and army bases during the period of World War II (and before), it might be reasonable to expect the ceiba to be called “kapok” because of the U. S. military’s use of the term for the silk-cotton fibers surrounding ceiba seeds that were used in the water-repellant life jackets used by the military.

1) The only grouping of trees is in front of the former Truman School at 1200 Truman and White, now The Harvey Government Center. The three ceibas here were probably planted in 1915 when the Division Street School was constructed. It was later named for the 33rd president, who frequently vacationed in the Key.



2) Perhaps the best known tree is the one planted at the Monroe County Courthouse (Southard and 519 Whitehead) where U. S. Highway 1 officially begins. According to a 2010 blog of the National Tree Society the tree was planted in 1905. When measured by the NTS it had a circumference of 17 feet just above the “root flare,” was 51.5 feet tall, and with a crown spread of 173 feet. (<http://www.ents-bbs.org/viewtopic.php?f=72&t=7777>)



3) The ceiba at 812 Southard (and Margaret) was probably planted in 1909 when the Jephtha Vinning Harris School was dedicated. Named for the Confederate General and educator, the beautiful yellowish masonry building was the only public school in the Key for years. After years of abandonment, it was sold to a developer in 2009, still awaiting utilization.



4) Today, between apartments 136A and 138C of Peary Court, at the north end of Southard, a playground has been placed beneath a large ceiba. That large property was previously the army base and barracks of Key West. The base was closed after the Second World War. Today, a large apartment complex occupies the property.



5) The youngest ceiba on the Key was planted “about 13 years ago” (2005) at the southwest corner of the Waterfront Playhouse at Mallory Square at the northwestern end of the Key. Perhaps because its roots are so confined by the surrounding concrete, and it has little chance for rainfall, the tree’s chance of survival is questionable. For its age, it is very small.



6) The only private ceiba, which perhaps was planted by a government official, can be seen at 612-14 Fleming in the backyard garden of Del Brixey who operates a bed-and-breakfast. According to Tom Hambright, Monroe County Historian, this ceiba was probably planted by Navy Commander Henry B. Haskins, a previous owner of the property. Haskins was long-time Asst. Superintendent of Lighthouses.



Originally from Salt Lake City, the current owner (Brixey) passed through Chicago before settling in Key West, some 30 years ago. The largest ceiba of the Key is his prize landscape feature.

Hambright also recalls a friend of his, the son of William Wells, gardener of the Key West Naval Station, told him that his father planted some of the kapoks in Key West. Hambright also suggested that Key West plantings were influenced by the famous USDA botanist and "plant explorer" David Fairchild (1869-1954) of southern Florida.

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I have seen no previous study of Key West vegetation that mentions ceibas or kapoks before 1900. For examples, see:

W. C. Maloney, "A sketch of the history of Key West," 1876

de Pourtales, L. F., "Hints on the flora and fauna of the Florida Keys," *The Americanist Naturalist* 11 (3), March 1877: 137-144.

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