

***Boca de Ratones:***  
***An Etymological Reassessment***  
by  
**Humberto E. Ruiz and Manley F. Cobia**

**Introduction**

The origin and meaning of our City's name has always been something of a mystery. Even today, one may be reminded of the legends that our inlet was once used by pirates as a base of operations. Actually, the Spaniards found their Boca de Ratones, an inlet fraught with dangers hidden beneath the water's surface, some fifty miles to the south in Miami Beach. Anyone contemplating a visit to Boca Raton might first go to our City's official web site. There, they will notice the official seal of the City portraying a Spanish Galleon entering an inlet with the words *Boca de Ratones* printed on a scroll in the foreground. If they are curious about the origin and meaning of our City's atypical name, they could click on "Visitor," "About Boca Raton," and then, "History." In the opening paragraph they can read that Boca Raton does not mean "rats' mouth," but instead, "The Spanish word *boca* (or mouth) often described an inlet, while *raton* (literally mouse) was used as a term for a cowardly thief." The reader will learn that *Boca Ratones*, the name which appeared on eighteenth century maps, actually meant "Thieves Inlet." <sup>1</sup> Although the association with bandits is clearly an improvement over the mouth of a rat, such an inauspicious origin is in sharp contrast with the image of our community as envisioned by its famed architect, Addison Mizner.

The definition of Boca Raton cited above was predicated on an article titled, *The Legends of Boca Ratones*, by Daniel F. Austin and David M. McJunkin. The article appeared in the *Spanish River Papers*, published by the Boca Raton Historical Society in May of 1981. As with the names of many places and population centers, "There seems never to have been a time in the history of Boca Raton in which the name has not generated controversy." So wrote the

publication's editor, Donald W. Curl, in the epigraph to the Austin and McJunkin article. Writing in the most unambiguous terms, Curl announced that the article's authors had "put the argument to rest."<sup>2</sup>

### *A Legendary Beginning*

In their article, Austin and McJunkin focused primarily on the various locations named *Boca de Ratones*. They speculated as to how the name was originally given to an inlet near the existing Eden Roc Hotel in Miami Beach, later transferred to a second inlet further south, and finally, migrated north into present day Palm Beach County. The writers discussed legends associated with pirates and the different sites on old maps where the names *Boca de Ratones* and *Boca Ratones* appeared. They stated that three of the earliest maps of the Biscayne Bay area, Jefferys (1763), Gibson (1763) and Kitchen (1765), "appear to have been based on a single source; the latter two were perhaps copied from Jefferys."<sup>3</sup> All three cartographers labeled the site as *Boca de Ratones*.

Aside from their primary concentration, Austin and McJunkin addressed the controversy surrounding the meaning of the name. In the section titled, *The Name*, the authors asserted that "All past students" seemed to have translated the name as "rat's mouth," while "most" were convinced that the City's name is derived from an "archaic nautical term." At the Greater Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce, they found material indicating that *Boca de Ratones* meant "harbor of hidden rocks." They also cited an article by Ann Waldron wherein she defined it as meaning a "hidden rock that gnaws and frets a ship's cable."<sup>4</sup> However, Austin and McJunkin researched these claims and concluded that "No etymological source has been found to support these interpretations."<sup>5</sup> Having dismissed any connection with rocks, they pursued another angle to explain why the Spaniards named this particular inlet *Boca de Ratones*.

While Austin and McJunkin confirmed that *raton* means “rat,” they noted that it also referred to a *ladron cobarde*, or a “cowardly thief.” Briefly alluding to Dr. Roland E. Chardon’s discussion of the geological composition of the *Boca de Ratones* inlet as having been suitable only for small boats, Austin and McJunkin suggested the translation could mean a “hauling inlet.” Not certain as to the exact meaning, they proposed three possible interpretations; “mouse’s inlet,” “hauling inlet,” and “thieves’ inlet.” The authors stated that “Although the evidence is still highly circumstantial, there seems to be more support for the third translation or ‘thieves’ inlet.’”<sup>6</sup>

The admittedly conjectural quality of the support which served as the basis for Austin and McJunkin’s decision to ultimately settle on the “thieves’ inlet” “as the most probable definition came from two stories. In 1565, General Pedro Menendez de Aviles, the officer in command at Saint Augustine, sent a ship north which was hijacked by pirates and diverted southward ending up in Biscayne Bay, the original site of *Boca de Ratones*. Upon landing, the missionaries discovered a village of European settlers which was “apparently” comprised of some “mutineers and thieves.” In the second story, Menéndez dispatched another missionary expedition two years later specifically to establish a mission among the Tequesta Indians living near Biscayne Bay. One of the missionaries, a Brother Villareal, left a report complaining about the Tequesta’s culture of stealing. Since his report was very similar to another missionary report issued almost two centuries later, Austin and McJunkin deduced that it was probably either Brother Villareal, or the accompanying soldiers, who had christened the location as *Boca de Ratones*, or the “thieves’ inlet.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Etymology Reconsidered*

The stories about the various missionaries certainly seemed plausible, but still left us unconvinced. Not being in full agreement with Austin and McJunkin’s conclusion, we began our research with Jeffery’s 1763 map of Florida. Jeffery’s map clearly shows an inlet on Biscayne

Bay labeled as *Boca de Ratones*. Next, we turned to Dr. Roland E. Chardon's article titled, *Northern Biscayne Bay in 1776*, published in 1975.

According to Dr. Chardon, two Jesuit missionaries, accompanied by soldiers attempted to establish a mission near the Miami River in the summer of 1743. One of the missionaries, Joseph Xavier de Alaña, referring to the local Indians whom he came to convert, reported that it was the Spaniards who "gave them the name of 'Boca Raton,' after the inlet of that name located about two leagues (roughly six miles) to the northeast."<sup>8</sup> We now have the association of "Boca Raton" with *Boca de Ratones*.

Dr. Chardon also recounted the work of two land surveyors. In 1770, Bernard Romans referred to what is now the Miami River as *Rio Rattones* while marking out boundaries. Romans designated a land clearing on his survey map as the "old field of Pueblo Ratton Town." That same year, William Gerard De Brahm noted the existence of an opening between Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean which had been known to the Spaniards as *Boca Ratones* for at least 50 years.<sup>9</sup>

The *Boca Ratones* inlet is clearly shown on the De Brahm map. One can easily see on this map that the opening to the inlet on the Atlantic side is permeated with markings. According to the map's Legend, these markings signified the presence of "Rocks above water."<sup>10</sup> Dr. Chardon made the following observation; "Boca Ratones had been named by the Spaniards, not for rats as is commonly supposed, but for the sharp, submerged rocks found off the Atlantic entrance to the passage, which made the opening, according to both De Brahm and Romans, 'only fit for boats,' this even though the depth of the channel inside was at least six feet."<sup>11</sup> As of the 1760s, both English surveyors understood that the name originated from the dangers presented to the larger ships by the existing rocks.

Dr. Chardon, an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography and Anthropology at the Louisiana State University, studied the northern Biscayne Bay area for the purpose of discovering what coastal conditions were like, prior to the onset of modern urban development. While concentrating on the geological characteristics of the area's coast line, it is worth mentioning that Dr. Chardon, who had an interest in the etymology of the names of places, actually delved briefly into the original meaning of *Boca de Ratones*.

Obviously, there was no need to find the meaning of the word *boca* as evidenced by the general consensus that it was definitely used to describe an "inlet." Therefore, we considered it imperative to begin our research with the Spanish (Castilian) language going as far back as possible to find the first time *ratones* and *raton* appeared and the different contexts in which they were used. In order to accomplish this task, our travels took us to Madrid, Spain, home of the *Real Academia Española* (RAE) or the Royal Spanish Academy. Unlike English, which does not have an official institute to determine and regulate the proper usage of the language, the RAE was founded in 1713 precisely for the purpose of establishing "the voices and vocabularies of the Castilian language with propriety, elegance, and purity."<sup>12</sup> For the Spanish language, the RAE is the final authority.

We initially started with the basic definitions of the words using RAE's extensive dictionary resources. In their 1803 standard dictionary, we found that *raton* had two meanings. One was the previously noted "cowardly thief" [El ladron cobarde] and the other was "The sharp-pointed and cutting rock that is at the bottom of the seas and scrapes the cables" [La piedra puntiaguda y cortante que esta en el fondo del mar y roza los cables].<sup>13</sup> What we are concerned with here is how *raton* and *ratones* were used by certain group of Spaniards; not what was understood in the vernacular of the general populace. It seemed reasonable therefore to expect that as trained navigators, these particular Spaniards were almost certainly thinking in terms

meaningful to their profession. If so, it would be consistent to expect their use of *ratones* to compliment the already accepted meaning of the word *boca*.

Turning to the RAE once again, we asked if they were aware of any viable alternate definitions of these words. Their initial response was to state that the use of *raton* in the maritime context sprang from a metaphoric extension of its normal meaning. They explained that this expression was probably derived from either the fact that rats used to gnaw and scrape the ship's cables, or the sharp-pointed cutting rocks which could cause such imperfections. We then asked the RAE if they were aware of the existence of any old maritime dictionaries. The response was immediate, and to further our research, they provided us with links to several old Spanish maritime dictionaries.<sup>14</sup>

The *Spanish Maritime Dictionary* of 1831 defines *ratones* as “rugged rocks or stony ground on the bottom of some ports and coastal outlets, where the cables rub against, and that is where the denomination came from. They are also called *rats*.” [Las peñas o pedriscos escabrosos en el fondo de algunos puertos y surgideros de la costa, en que rozan los cables, y aqui les vino la denominacion. Tambien se llaman *ratas*.] In addition, it defined the related verb, *ratonar*, “To rub against or make indentations in the cables the rocks or stones at the bottom called *ratones*.” [Rozar o hacer roeduras en los cables las piedras del fondo llamadas *ratones*].<sup>15</sup> We found these same definitions in a subsequent maritime dictionary dated 1864.<sup>16</sup> The 1849 edition of the *Spanish-English Marine Dictionary for the Use of the Naval College* provided its own English translation and carried the variant, *ratones del fondo*, meaning the “Detached stones by which the cables are chafed.”<sup>17</sup> The *Pirate's Dictionary*, dated December, 1996, defined *ratón* as the “Sharp-pointed and cutting rock that is at the bottom of the sea and scrapes the cables” [Piedra puntiaguda y cortante que está en el fondo del mar y roza los cables].<sup>18</sup> This is the same definition found in the 1803 standard dictionary.

Since literal translations from Spanish can frequently result in awkward and sometimes unintelligible paraphrases for English speakers, we approached Dr. Guillermo A. Rodriguez, a professional translator working here in Miami, to see if he could help us come up with a more “user-friendly” rendering of the definition of *Boca de Ratones*. Mr. Rodriguez examined the various definitions we extracted from the RAE’s dictionaries and produced a clear, concise, and abridged translation defining *Boca de Ratones* as “a shallow inlet of sharp-pointed rocks which scrapes a ship’s cables.”<sup>19</sup>

Unlike their standard dictionaries, the maritime dictionaries at the RAE do not carry dual meanings, nor do they make any mention of cowardly thieves, or inlets named after thieves. The fact that the Spanish maritime dictionaries consistently define *ratones* within a geological context strongly suggests that this usage was limited to a group of professional navigators and may have even been foreign to the common vernacular in Spain. It was a small group of professionally trained, seafaring Spaniards exploring the southern coast of Florida, who decided to name the inlet, *Boca de Ratones*, precisely because of their concerns about the dangers posed by its rock formations. Any interest the Spaniards may have had in the social habits of the local populace was totally irrelevant in their selection of this name.

We wondered if there were any other examples of *ratones* being used to name a physical location and we found this application was not entirely unique to Florida. In the Bay of Santander, there is the tiny Spanish Island of *Isla de los Ratones*. It is described as “flat and with noticeable rocky topography”[es llana y con destacado pedregal].<sup>20</sup> There is also an island named *La isla de los Ratones*. Located in the Arabian Sea, this island is described as a large elevated rock in the sea [un peñasco en el mar]. The most interesting aspect about this island is that its name has been traced back to about 1618.<sup>21</sup> These islands, no doubt named by mariners, are two

more examples of the word *ratones* being used to describe a physical location where rocks were a prominent feature.

### ***Conclusion***

Austin and McJunkin's speculation as to the origin of the name had a direct impact on how our City's story is told. Following the publication of their article, their revised definition of *Boca de Ratones* gradually gained acceptance making its way into history books about our city. Local organizations adapted the new meaning for presentation to the public. The web sites belonging to the City of Boca Raton and the Greater Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce, both explain that the name, *Boca Ratones*, really means "Thieves Inlet."<sup>22</sup>

In the opening paragraph of this article, we briefly mentioned that the official seal of the City of Boca Raton depicts a large ship entering an inlet. The words on the scroll, *Boca de Ratones*, permits us to imagine the ship entering the inlet was exploring the New World at the behest of the Spanish monarchy. However, as Dr. Chardon pointed out, according to the surveyors, Romans and De Brahm, the Spanish explorers determined that it would not be safe to attempt taking their large ships into the waterway they named *Boca de Ratones*. Furthermore, the information found in the old standard and maritime dictionaries at the RAE confirms beyond any doubt that the modern name of *Boca Raton* has an etymological record in the Castilian language that is centuries old. Ann Waldron, Dr. Chardon, and according to Austin and McJunkin, most of the students of Boca Raton history in the 1970s, who believed that *Boca Raton* was derived from antiquated maritime nomenclature warning of rock formations in shallow waters which could damage ships, were correct. While this definition may not induce the twenty-first century mind to conjure up romantic images of pirates and buried treasure, it should be recognized that the name once served a very simple, yet practical function for the Spanish mariners. Based on our research and related



commentaries set forth, we now believe that the controversy surrounding the meaning of *Boca de Raton* can, as Donald W. Curl proposed in 1981, finally be put to rest.

### **Acknowledgments**

We wish to thank the folks at the Real Academia Española in Madrid, Spain, for having taken the time and interest in answering our questions. Dr. Joseph Hodges Fitzgerald of Miami tipped us off to the work of Dr. Roland E. Chardon and provided us with copies of a number of crucial maps. Dr. Fitzgerald is the creator of Old Florida Maps.com, former Chairman of the Board, History Miami, and founder of the Miami International Map Fair. We appreciate his encouragement in our pursuit of the original meaning of Boca de Raton. Dr. Guillermo A. Rodriguez, B.S.Ae. M.B.A., D.B.A., Founder and CEO of Intellect Group Corp., for his professional translations from Castilian (Spanish) to English.

### **Notes**

1) *Official Site of The City of Boca Raton*. <http://www.ci.boca-raton.fl.us>

2) Austin, Daniel T., and David R. McJunkin. "The Legends of Boca Raton." *The Spanish River Papers*. Vol. IX, No. 3. (May 1981) p. 3. The original article did not have numbered pages. Here, we are following the numbering currently assigned to the article as displayed on the Boca Raton Historical Society web site.

3) IBID, p. 3.

- 4) IBID, p. 3; Waldron, Ann. "The Origin of Place Names." pgs. 309-351. *The Florida Handbook*. Compiled by Allen Morris. Tallahassee. Peninsular Publishing Company. 1971-1972. On page 316, Ms. Waldron wrote, "the Spanish words mean 'rat's mouth' - a term used by seamen to describe a hidden rock that gnaws or frets a ship's cables." Unfortunately, she did not identify her sources.
- 5) IBID, p. 3; D. Austin to Humberto E. Ruiz. October 24, 2006. In this memo, Mr. Austin stated that his research into the word's etymology had exhausted all the sources then available.
- 6) IBID, p. 3.
- 7) IBID, p. 3.
- 8) Chardon, Roland E. "Northern Biscayne Bay in 1776." *Tequesta: The Journal of the Historical Association of Southern Florida*. Number XXXV, (1975). Pgs. 37-74. <http://ufc.ufl.edu/uf00101446/00035> Source Institution: Historical Museum of Southern Florida. Holding Location: Florida International University. Florida History and Heritage. P. 39.
- 9) IBID., p. 53.
- 10) IBID. p. 51. De Brahm Map. *Northern Biscayne Bay in 1770*.
- 11) IBID. p. 53.
- 12) *Real Academia Española* <http://www.rae.es> Actividades\_Breve Historia. p. 1 of 2.
- 13) *Diccionario De La Lengua Castellana Compuesto Por La Real Academia Española*. Madrid. 1803.
- 14) Humberto E. Ruiz to *Consultas lingüísticas Real Academia Española*, July 30, 2008; *Consultas lingüísticas Real Academia Española* to Humberto E. Ruiz Costales, July 31, 2008.
- 15) *Diccionario Marítimo Español*. Madrid En La Imprenta Real, Año De 1831. *Real Academia Española*.

- 16) *Diccionario Marítimo Español*. Madrid. Establecimiento Tipográfico De T. Fortanet, calle de la Libertad, núm. 29. (1864) *Real Academia Española*.
- 17) *Diccionario Marino Español-Ingles Para El Uso Del Colegio Naval*. Madrid. Imprenta De J. Martin Alegria. Gallejon De San Márcos, Núm. 6. (1849).
- 18) Estrada, Rafael. *Diccionario Pirata*. (1996). <http://rafaelestrada.jimdo.com/libros/juvenil/>.
- 19) Guillermo A. Rodriguez to Humberto E. Ruiz, February 12, 2012.
- 20) [http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isla\\_de\\_los\\_Ratones](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isla_de_los_Ratones)
- 21) Garcia Silva y Figueroa. *Manuel Serrano y Sany Sociedad de bibliofilos españoles*. Madrid. (1903-1905).
- 22) The City of Boca Raton <http://www.ci.boca-raton.fl.us/> and The Greater Boca Raton Chamber of Commerce <http://www.bocaratonchamber.com/>. Both web sites, including the previously cited City of Boca Raton, devote one paragraph to explaining the meaning of *Boca Ratones*. Both sites present the same paragraph almost verbatim.

February 14, 2012





Cape Cannaveral

Delmar

Tortosa

Rio de Ayca

Rio de San Juan

Rio de San Pedro

Rio de San Mateo

Rio de San Carlos

Boca de San Juan

San Pedro de Florida

Phonetro

los Teles

Cayo Largo de Doce Lagunas

San Juan

Cayos Viejos

CAYOS DE LOS MARTIRES

Cayo Honda

Cayo de Mass

Boca Grande

Lampas Bahua

San Spiritu Santo

Bahia de Carlos

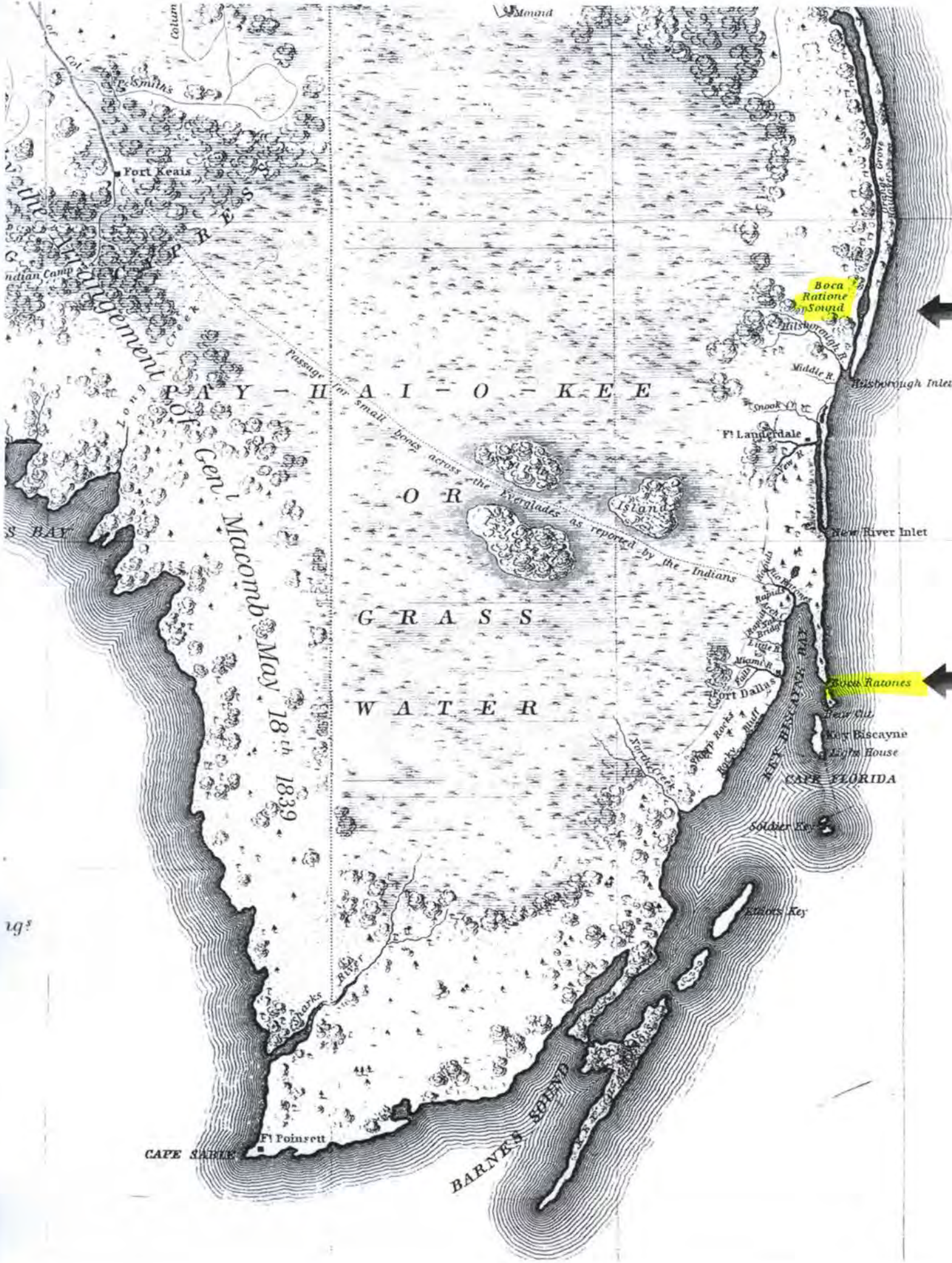
Cabo del Aguada

San de Asien

San de Ianche

Cayo Martines

Little



# NORTHERN BISCAYNE BAY IN 1770

↗ Where De Brahm anchored during the Survey

⋯ Shoal, bare at low water

⋈ Rocks above water

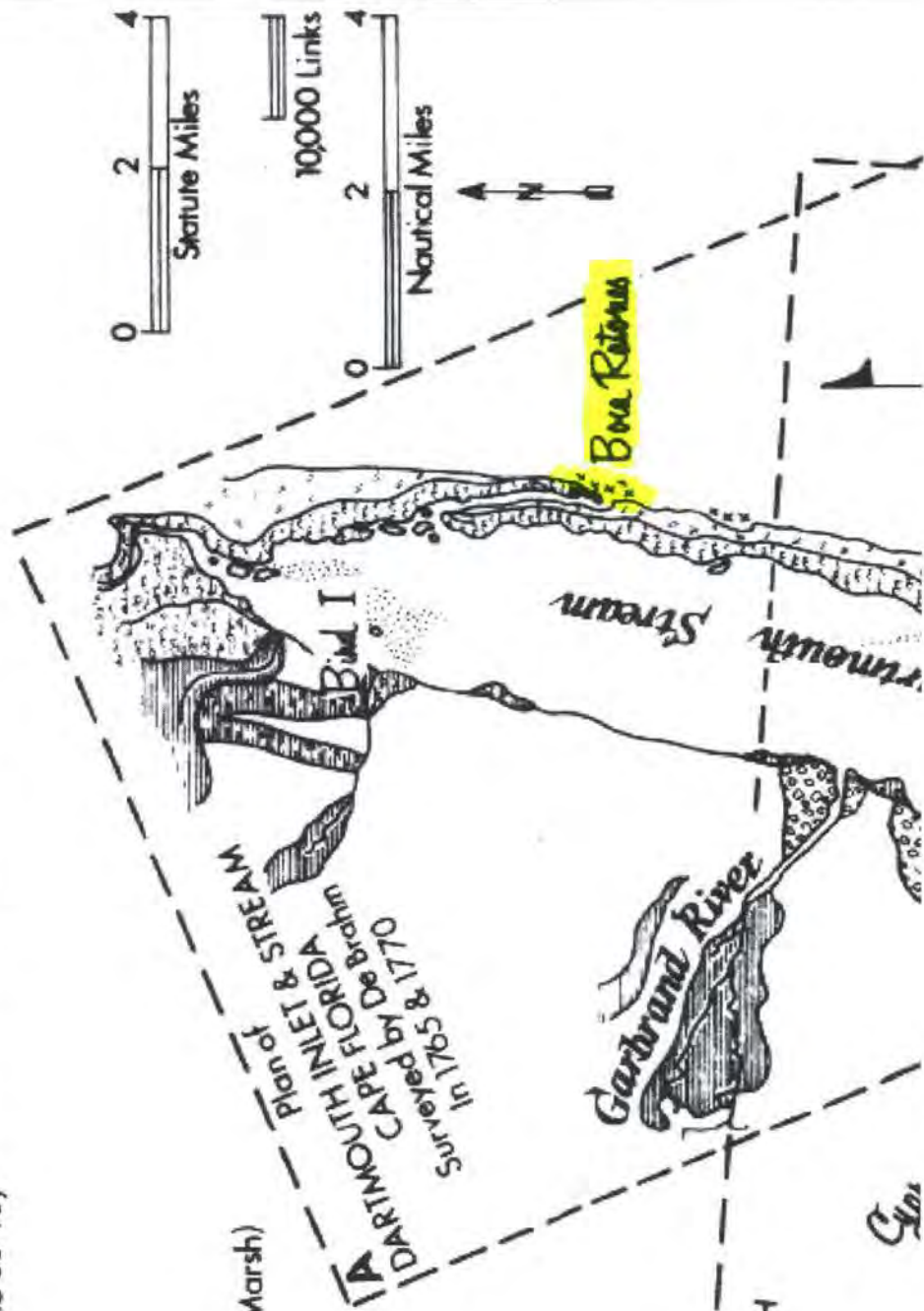
▨ Mangrove

▨ Marsh or Flats (SWM - Salt Water Marsh)

▨ Hammock Vegetation

▨ Sand Beach Vegetation

▨ Tall Grass with scattered trees,  
subject to inundation



**B** MAP DRAWN FOR LORD DARTMOUTH  
By De Brahm, March, 1773

"RATONES"

