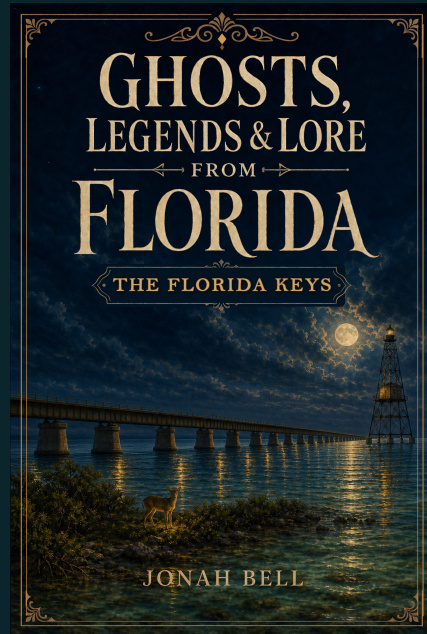


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Ghosts, Legends & Lore from Florida: The Florida Keys

Chapter 24: The Bat Tower That Failed

One complete chapter by Jonah Bell

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Chapter 24: The Bat Tower That Failed

Location Guide

Where the story takes place: The experiment belonged to Perky Key on Sugarloaf Key, where Richter Clyde Perky had a wooden bat tower built in 1929.C24.1

A good place to begin: Start with the historic record and photographs, not an attempt to approach the site. The tower stood on private property, and the surviving architectural description records its intact condition around 1980 rather than its present condition.C24.1

What to look for: Read the structure from the ground upward. Tapered concrete piers supported four heavy pine posts secured with iron straps. Metal rat shields interrupted the posts, the lower bay stood open, and the enclosed roost narrowed toward a shallow hip roof.C24.2

The shortest version of the Sugarloaf Key bat-tower story sounds like a joke with a thirty-foot setup. A man built a large wooden home for bats, waited for them to arrive, and got none. The documented story is better because it shows how much planning stood behind that empty result. This was not an ornamental tower that later acquired a bat legend. It was a purpose-built attempt to persuade wild animals to occupy a manufactured roost, eat mosquitoes, and leave behind a useful byproduct. The experiment failed, but it failed at a more precise point than the punch line suggests.C24.1C24.3

A Resort Problem and a Promising Design

Richter Clyde Perky had the tower built in 1929. Dr. Charles A. R. Campbell conceived the roost system, and Fred L. Johnson supervised construction on Perky Key. Perky did not adopt the proposal casually. He sent Stephen Singleton to inspect Campbell's work in Texas before proceeding. Campbell then supplied plans without charge, asked \$175 for a secret guano-based bait, and requested a photograph when the tower was finished.C24.1C24.3

The arrangement joined two promises inside one frame. Layered lath in the upper chamber was intended to give bats roosting space. Beneath it, a hopper would collect guano as a potentially marketable byproduct. The bats, under Campbell's theory, would also control mosquitoes. If all parts worked together, the tower would turn a persistent nuisance into an asset: bats would occupy the structure, feed in the surrounding area, and produce material that could be collected below.C24.1

That sequence is important because only part of it could be built. Carpenters could raise posts, enclose a roost, install lath, and fit a hopper. They could prepare bait and leave it in place. The living component still depended on local bats choosing the structure. Every promise about mosquito control and guano collection rested on that first act of voluntary occupancy.C24.3

Reading the Tower from the Ground Up

The National Register description, prepared in 1980, allows the intact tower to be followed almost one measured stage at a time. Four tapered concrete piers met four pine posts, each twelve inches square. Iron straps secured the timber to the piers. About five feet above the ground, each post carried a metal rat shield. Above those barriers, the bottom ten feet of the tower remained open. Only then did the enclosed chamber begin, rising and tapering inward in a truncated pyramidal form beneath a shallow hip roof.C24.2

The Sugarloaf Key Bat Tower in 2011, before Hurricane Irma destroyed it.

Credit: Ebyabe, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

The progression gave the building more logic than its stark silhouette alone revealed. Concrete and iron anchored it. Heavy posts lifted it. Rat shields marked an effort to obstruct climbing predators. The open lower bay separated the ground from the enclosed chamber. Higher still, the narrowing upper structure contained the intended roost. The tower's height was conspicuous, but height was not the whole design. Its supports, barriers, open space, and protected chamber show an effort to shape the conditions around the hoped-for colony.C24.2

At roughly thirty feet high and twelve feet square at the base, the tower made that effort visible across the property. Yet the most important mechanism was not a moving part. It was animal choice. The structure could embody Campbell's theory in lumber and hardware, but its success could not be fastened down with another strap or strengthened with another post.C24.1C24.2

The 1980 description documents how the intact structure then appeared, not what a reader would find now. The sources cited here do not establish the site's present condition. Its private-property setting makes the documentary view the useful one: the historic measurements explain the experiment without turning the place into an access invitation.C24.2

The Colony That Never Formed

Johnson's recollection, preserved in the National Register file, supplies the clearest account of what followed construction. The guano-based bait was activated and left in place for about a year. It had a foul smell, but it did not attract local bats to occupy the tower.C24.3

That account differs from the livelier tale in which imported bats were installed and promptly flew away. The official file inspected for this chapter offers no support for that version. No shipment of bats is needed to explain the failure. The documented plan was to lure local bats into a new roost, and that effort did not establish a colony.C24.3

Careful wording matters. The National Register nomination reported that the tower was not known to have housed even one bat. That is a strong statement about the surviving record, but it is not a claim of all-seeing certainty about every instant of the tower's existence. The evidence supports saying that no colony was known to have formed. It does not require claiming that no individual bat could ever have crossed the structure for a moment.C24.4

The limit also defines what the Sugarloaf experiment did not prove. Because no colony formed, the tower never reached the stage at which any effect on mosquitoes could be measured. Its failure therefore did not demonstrate that bats were ineffective mosquito predators. It demonstrated that this structure, using this attraction attempt, did not secure the resident animals required to test the larger proposition.C24.3

Whether bats would move in was the decisive question. The system required three steps: attract bats, allow an established colony to feed, then observe whether mosquito numbers changed. Sugarloaf stopped at step one. The later steps did not produce negative results. They never began. The guano side of the plan stalled for the same reason. Without known residents, there was no functioning cycle of occupancy and collection.C24.1C24.3

The Price Perky Put on the Attempt

Perky later claimed that the tower cost \$10,000. The amount survives as his figure, not as an independently audited construction total. That attribution protects the difference between a historical claim and a verified account book. It also shows how Perky represented the scale of his investment in the project.C24.5

The smaller documented request for \$175 belongs to a different part of the undertaking: Campbell's secret bait. Campbell provided the plans without charge but placed a price on the substance meant to bring the essential occupants inside. The contrast is telling without requiring speculation. The large tower could be planned, inspected, financed, and built. The crucial invitation to the bats came down to a purchased lure whose reported year in place produced no known colony.C24.3C24.5

It is easy to read the claimed \$10,000 only as comic extravagance. The architecture makes the episode more human. Perky's confidence took material form in concrete piers, iron straps, foot-square posts, metal shields, lath, and a hopper. Each element answered some part of the proposed system. The builders did not merely put a box on a pole and hope. They constructed a specialized environment around a theory, then encountered the point where preparation ended and animal behavior began.C24.1C24.2

Failure Becomes the Landmark

In 1982, the National Register of Historic Places recognized the bat tower for its significance in science and architecture, identifying 1929 as the significant year. Recognition did not convert the failed experiment into a successful one. It acknowledged that the structure itself had become historically meaningful: an architectural expression of a scientific idea, preserved long enough for its dimensions and design to be formally recorded.C24.2

That pairing of science and architecture suits the tower. The scientific claim depended on bats that did not settle there. The architecture remained available to show exactly how seriously the claim had been taken. By the time of the nomination, the empty roost was not merely evidence of failure. It was evidence of an organized attempt, complete with supports, predator barriers, a protected chamber, collection equipment, and bait.C24.1C24.2

The tower's place in Keys memory rests on that tension. Its silhouette invited a broad comic verdict, while the record supports a narrower account. Sugarloaf did not conduct a working mosquito-control trial and discover that resident bats made no difference. It built the setting for such a trial and failed to recruit the residents. The difference leaves Campbell's wider claims outside the local result and keeps Perky's experiment from proving more than it actually tested.C24.3

What remains is a story about confidence meeting a living world that could not be ordered into place. On Sugarloaf Key, people investigated a design, raised an elaborate roost, paid for bait, and waited. The tower was ready. The hopper was ready. The bats were not persuaded. That absence made the structure famous, but the measured timbers tell the deeper story: before the failure became a punch line, it had been built with remarkable care.C24.1C24.2C24.3

Sources and Notes

C24.1 National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Bat Tower-Sugarloaf Key" (prepared 1980; listed May 13, 1982; NRIS 82002377), for the 1929 construction, location, dimensions, Perky, Campbell, Johnson, layered roosting lath, guano hopper, and combined mosquito-control and guano-collection plan. □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

C24.2 National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Bat Tower-Sugarloaf Key" (prepared 1980; listed May 13, 1982; NRIS 82002377), description and asset metadata, for the circa-1980 intact condition, concrete piers, iron straps, twelve-inch-square pine posts, five-foot-high rat shields, open lower ten feet, tapered upper roost, shallow hip roof, and 1982 recognition for science and architecture. □ □ □ □ □ □ □

C24.3 National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Bat Tower-Sugarloaf Key" (prepared 1980; listed May 13, 1982; NRIS 82002377), including Fred L. Johnson's oral-history account in the file, for Singleton's Texas inspection, Campbell's free plans and \$175 bait request, the completion-photograph request, the bait's odor and year-long failure to attract local bats, the lack of support for an imported-bats tale, and the evidentiary limit of the failed colonization attempt. □ □ □ □ □ □ □ □

C24.4 National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Bat Tower-Sugarloaf Key" (prepared 1980; listed May 13, 1982; NRIS 82002377), for the finding that the tower was not known to have housed a bat. □

C24.5 National Register of Historic Places nomination, "Bat Tower-Sugarloaf Key" (prepared 1980; listed May 13, 1982; NRIS 82002377), for Perky's claimed \$10,000 cost and Campbell's \$175 bait request. Perky's figure is not treated as an independently audited total. □ □

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