

MARITIME LEGACY: THE CAREER OF CAPTAIN FRANCIS B. WATLINGTON

The Early Maritime Frontier

Born in St. Croix in 1804, Francis Benjamin Watlington moved to Key West in the early 1830s to pursue a career on the water. He quickly became an integral part of the island's maritime economy, serving as a **harbor pilot** and **port warden**. Under the guidance of his father-in-law, Captain Charles Johnson, Watlington entered the **wrecking industry**, a legal and regulated system of salvaging cargo from ships that foundered on the hazardous Florida Reef. Despite the industry's controversial reputation, Watlington earned a "handsome living" as a licensed wrecker.

Service to the State and Nation

- **Military Service:** During the **Second Seminole War**, he served as a **Coastal Pilot for the U.S. Navy**
- **Customs & Navigation:** He was appointed an **Inspector of Customs**, a role that included overseeing "light ships"—vessels anchored at dangerous reef locations to serve as floating lighthouses. He also served as the captain of the **Sand Key Lightship** and commanded his own schooner, the ***Activa***.
- **Politics:** Watlington was a prominent figure in Key West's social and political spheres, serving in the **Florida House of Representatives** from 1858 until the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861.

The Civil War: A House Divided

Though Key West remained a Union stronghold, Captain Watlington's loyalties lay with the South. In 1861, he resigned his seat in the Florida legislature to join the **Confederate Navy**.

- **Naval Command:** Holding the rank of Lieutenant (and later Captain), he was stationed in Mobile, Alabama.
- **Warships:** He commanded the gunboat **CSS Gaines** and served aboard the **CSS Tennessee**.
- **Capture:** Following the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864, he was captured by Union forces and remained interned until his surrender and parole in May 1865.

Post-War Years and Return

Following the war, Watlington remained estranged from his family in Key West for two decades, maintaining a residence in Mobile, Alabama. During this time, he continued his maritime activities, navigating the transition from traditional sail power to engine-driven steamships. After the death of his wife, Emeline, in 1881, his adult daughters invited him back to the "Oldest House". He lived his final years at the family home on Duval Street, where he passed away in 1887 at the age of 83.