

Baas Finds Oldest House In Key West; Was Built In 1825

Structure, 125 Yrs. Old, Was Home For U. S. Seamen

By ALEXIUS BAAS

KEY WEST, Fla.—I have grown so used to preparing "old house" columns for Saturday's issues of The Capital Times that I find myself looking for specimens wherever I go. Imagine my surprise and joy upon getting up this morning to find, next door to my hotel, the oldest building in Key West, 322 Duval st., a picture of which accompanies this article.

In 1822 Lt. David Porter, of the U. S. navy, later to achieve lasting fame during the Civil War as Commodore Porter, put in at Key West and was so impressed by its strategic location that he called it the Gibraltar of the Caribbean. He communicated his opinion to Washington. The navy department was interested.

In 1825 a Capt. Coussens, of the sloop-of-war, the Shark, sent to New England for the materials and men to construct six houses as living quarters for officers and men. The lumber was cedar and mahogany. The houses were built by ship's crews at the foot of Whitehead st.

IN 1829 A Capt. Francis Watlington and his wife came to Key West. The captain purchased one of the six houses and had it moved to its present location. That house still stands on stone pillars, a precaution deemed necessary when it was moved, because Duval st. was only a cowpath and in severe storms the water threatened to wash it away. It is the only house remaining of the original six.

Nine daughters were born to Capt. Watlington and his wife in this old home, but no sons. The daughters are all deceased. But a child of one of them, named Mary, married a naval officer, Stephen W. Douglas. This woman lives in the old home and it was she and an assistant of hers who showed me about the old place. Her husband and two children are long since deceased and she is the last of the direct line of the Watlingtons.

TO GO BACK FOR a moment—Capt. Francis Watlington joined the cause of the Confederacy when the Civil War broke out and became one of the successful



Shown here is Key West's oldest building described in today's "old house" feature by Alexius Baas.

blockade runners off Charleston. He was sent later to Mobile to supervise the building of the Confederate ram, the Tennessee.

When the war ended, he resumed his career as sea captain and made many voyages to the far corners of the earth—Spain, Italy, Portugal, Japan and China, to mention a few countries. On these cruises, he picked up a variety of priceless curios, as did Stephen Douglas in later years. These treasures have all been preserved and the old house is a museum worthy of a month's study.

I was permitted to see, examine and admire bronze cases, incense burners, Japanese Samurai swords, a scribe's outfit from Japan, Cloisonne vases, a Japanese album of views, Chinese dishes, a virgin's lamp from Pompei, exquisite Chinese laces and silks, a wonderful hand-painted punch bowl and cups, some beautiful Florentine statuary, and antique tables, couches, glass bottles and furnishings of all kinds brought down from New England by clipper ship in 1829.

PERHAPS THE most priceless piece of the whole wonderful collection is a Chinese vase of the Ming dynasty. The picture of the original Watlington, Capt. Francis, also is of great value. It was painted by the great Audubon himself, who, as he said, "painted people's portraits for a living, and birds and flowers because he loved them." The spacious high-ceilinged rooms of the old house make a fitting setting for all these wonders.

The house itself is a fine speci-

men of the simple dignity and beauty which early American architects knew how to put into their structures. A wide porch runs across its entire front, covered by the sloping extension of the house roof which is supported by six square, Doric-capped pillars.

A central door flanked on either side by two large windows leads from the porch to the cool spacious interior. Unique feature of construction lies in the three gabled dormers which break the expanse of the roof—they are of different sizes.

Tradition has it that three different ship's crews, who took part in building the house, expressed their individual preference in this manner.

A GREAT YARD runs back of the house and here one may see the roomy detached kitchen with its mammoth fireplace and Dutch oven used by the slaves in the old days to prepare meals for their white masters.

The slaves quarters were in the back yard. They have been removed. In one corner of the yard one may see the broken remains of an old well reported to have been one of the places where the notorious pirate, Captain Kidd, hid a part of his misgotten loot.

The cedar and mahogany that went into the old house are imperishable. It stands on its stone pillars as sturdy as the day it was built 125 years ago. A most interesting assignment, Mr. Editor, even if I had to travel nearly 1,800 miles to cover it.