

Key West's Oldest House Newsletter

March 2018

Page 2

Francis B. Watlington
The Man We Thought We Knew
by Karl Reutling

"Captain Watlington" he was called, in written histories of Key West, in the family's stories, in the lore of the Oldest House. A mariner, husband of Emeline Johnson Watlington, father of nine daughters, a state legislator, a Confederate Naval officer, and a prominent member of the community. He was born on 1 April 1804, on the island of St. Croix, a Danish colony. He died in Key West on 7 April 1887, and is buried in the Key West cemetery, where his tombstone indicates he was born in New York.

The digital age gives us new opportunity to look at the past. Research and analysis of prime source data done in the last two years verifies much that we did know, corrects some things we thought we knew, and clarifies

some questions about who he really was.



Francis B. Watlington

For example, according to the 1840 census enumeration, we can now confirm that there was at least one female slave owned by Watlington at 322 Duval Street. In the 1850 census he states his birthplace as "West Indies," a correct appellation for St. Croix. In the 1860 Census he claims "New York" as his birthplace (and

wife Emeline claims ownership of the real estate we know as 322 Duval St.). Did Mr. Watlington "naturalize" himself as a U.S. born citizen? We have been unable to find any records indicating an official change. In subsequent years' census his daughters still assert their father's birthplace as St. Croix. Could he have run for, been elected, and serve as a state senator without being a U.S. Citizen?

We know that he was appointed Port of Key West Harbor Warden for the Territory of Florida in 1843. He was also appointed Auctioneer at that same time. He was a principal in at least one salvage claim heard by the Federal Court in Key West. These three facts taken together bolster his involvement in the wrecking industry here in Key West.

Florida seceded from the United States on January 10, 1861. At that same time, Federal authorities took control of the island and the City of Key West. President Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4. War broke out with the firing on Ft. Sumter on April 12. As proof of Watlington's sympathy for the Confederate cause, he wrote a letter on April 17 to Confederate Florida Gov. Perry detailing ship and Federal troop movements in Key West, Ft. Taylor and Ft. Jefferson, along with statements about the Federals appropriating slaves without consent of their owners. A smack (fishing boat) was hired for \$100 to deliver this intelligence via Cedar Key to Tallahassee. Corroboration of this espionage is found in the correspondence of J.C. Whalton, a Confederate and former Key West postmaster, to L.P. Walker, the Confederate Secretary of War, which specifically mentions Senator Watlington's efforts. (These "important dispatches" as Whalton referred to them, are found in the National Archives' War of the Rebellion volumes.)

Francis Watlington then sailed to Mobile Alabama and was commissioned into the Confederate Navy. He was promoted from Lieutenant to First Lieutenant in 1863, by order of Stephen Mallory, Sec'y of the Navy. We believe he served on two warships, the CSS Gaines and CSS Tennessee. Both were involved in the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864. The Gaines was damaged and scuttled, while the Tennessee was seized by the Union Navy with Admiral Farragut's victory. Lt. Watlington was eventually captured by Union forces and interred. He was paroled after the end of the Civil War in May 1865, while still in Alabama.

We now know that he did not return to Key West, as records show he took residence in Mobile throughout the 1870s. This means that he was estranged from his family from the civil war until after his wife Emeline died in 1881, over twenty years. By 1885 Francis Watlington had again taken residence at 322 Duval St., Key West. Aged 81, he was likely under the care of his youngest daughter Elizabeth Lily until he died two years later at age 83, 7 April 1887.

Why did he leave his wife and family? Did something happen in the household prior to his departure? Was he persona non grata as a result of his actions on behalf of the Confederacy? (Some Key Westers were, Stephen Mallory for example). As we continue our research, we may find answers to these and other questions, or we may never truly know.

(Mr. Reutling is a historian and docent at the Oldest House, 322 Duval Street, Key West)