

September, 1974

Antiques and other items which were removed from the house before we bought it:

There are many articles around Key West and Miami which should not have been removed from the premises, and which we have been trying to get back.

The Executor of the Estate of Earle Saunders Johnson, who is a Mr. Robert Belgau of Miami, visited Key West and removed a good many things from the house before the estate was anywhere near settled. The most important thing he took was the portrait of Captain Watlington, which was supposed to have been done by Audubon. Mr. Belgau has kindly offered to loan the portrait back to the house along with several other articles he has never enumerated to me, and I am sure that he will do this.

Also, when Mr. Belgau was in Key West, he made the bad mistake of giving Mrs. Jessie Porter Newton, of 410 Caroline Street, several articles out of the house for safekeeping. He gave her a navy uniform, a very handsome long blue frock coat with gold epulets, braid and chain; a brass hanging light from the dining room; and a horseless carriage outfit including a duster, goggles, and gloves.

When we got the house, Mr. Belgau sent me a letter addressed to Mrs. Newton and instructing her to return the items to me. (This was in May of 1974.) Mrs. Newton, upon receipt of the letter, returned the navy frock coat but not the gold braid and epulets off of it, and is now displaying them under the portrait of Commodore Porter (actually no relation to her) in her own home at 410 Caroline Street, and two different friends have told me that she is now passing these off as having belonged to Porter himself. She returned the horseless carriage outfit but kept the brass light and it is now in her front downstairs hallway at 410 Caroline Street. When Bart approached her again about this she got very sputtery and started telling him about what an old Key West family she is from and so on, and we finally sort of gave up on the brass light and the uniform decorations. Belgau has promised me several times to speak to her but he seems afraid of offending her, and has not done so. I now regard these items as nothing short of stolen, and I hope that someone in the future can recover them for display. They should not, of course, have been taken out of the house in the first place. Mrs. Newton admits that they belong to this house but told Bart about the epulets that "you kids don't need those anyway".

Two other rather strange things happened which resulted in items being stolen from the house. Earle Johnson said, in his will, that any liquor found on the premises at the time of his death was to be consumed by his friends at a big party. They had the party, and people made off with whatever suited their [redacted] fancy. I have heard for months about this party and we can only guess what might have been taken because, typically for Key West, nothing was inventoried and we don't know just what was here.

Also, Mr. Belgau saw fit to give a key to the house to Mr. Jackson of the Southern Cross Hotel next door. The neighbors have told me that [redacted] he made off with all kinds of things and even threw away many items as he saw fit, without having any kind of legal interest in the house or property whatsoever. I have no way of recovering whatever he might have taken, however, because I can't get real proof and I am afraid to accuse him.

So, you can keep this in the "for what it's worth" department.

September, 1974

About the Restoration

When we acquired the house in December of 1973, the condition of the house inside and outside, and the condition of the cookhouse and yard were deplorable. In fact, I found out that it had at various times been condemned while Earle Johnson had it, and that he would fix up this part or that part in order to hold the city off from tearing it down. He did very little to the house in the way of restoration, however, and by the time it went into his estate, it was full of garbage and trash and some of the flooring was unsafe.

Besides a very heavy cleaning job, here are the structural and other basic improvements which have been made:

The side porch on the west side of the house had to be completely replaced. We did this by removing only a few boards at a time, wherever it was possible, and rebuilding the porch as we went. This insured that the new porch would be exactly like the old one, only with new wood. Caulking was used extensively so that the weather would not rot away the new one as it had the old one, and all of the porch as you now see it is an exact copy of the old one.

One interesting point about the foundations under the porch was, that when we got down to the point of replacing or checking the foundations under the porch, we found two pieces of a gravestone which still bear part of the inscription "In Memory Of". I have read that it was hard to get foundation material at that time but whether somebody had an extra gravestone which had been mistakenly inscribed or perhaps broken, and gave it to the owners of this house, or whether a grave in Key West was actually robbed for foundation material, we cannot tell. At any rate, the gravestone pieces get a good deal of attention from the tourists, and they are displayed in the front parlor.

The roof leaked badly in places, and there is a photo in the front parlor showing the many pans and buckets sitting around on the floor to catch the drops from the ceiling. The front roof (tin part) was weather-proofed anew with a sort of metallic coating they use, and seems to be all right now. The back part, however, had to be completely replaced, and the green part of the roof you see back there is new.

The Dining Room was the worst section of the house. The floor was too far gone even to restore, and had to be replaced before the sideboard actually fell through! The new floor starts about 2 1/2 feet inside this room on the hallway side, and you can see where the new floor begins. Because the old original flooring was made from irregular-sized boards, we could not exactly match it and had to use regular pre-cut lumber for the new floor. This new lumber was later stained

so it would not show up any more than was absolutely necessary, and I must say that hardly anybody has noticed it at all.

The dining room ceiling was sagging badly, and had all but fallen in. The plaster had to be taken down from the ceiling and also from the back wall of the house, and a strong beam was then installed at the back of the room for support. We discovered, on doing this, that the plaster used in the house was all horse-hair plaster, reinforced with actual horse hairs when it was made. I have saved several samples of this with the hairs sticking out of it, and they can be displayed in a case at some future date.

Also, when the plaster was removed from the rear wall of the dining room, we confirmed our theory that this back wall was once the end of the original part of the house. We uncovered a window and a door which had originally given out onto the back porch, and these we left exposed, so that the dining room looks the same now as it did in 1823. We also discovered in the wall, irregular-sized boards with a decorative trim in almost a patch-work design in places; this is, of course, original and we left it exposed. There were several of these boards, however, when had been rotted away by the many leaks in this section of the old roof, and we had to replace them as best we could with specially-ordered wide lumber. Where this was necessary, we did our best to make it like the original, and our carpenter even hand-carved the original kind of trim onto the new boards. Today, you can't tell which is which.

Inside this back wall of the dining room, we also found newspaper which was used in the early days as insulation (I have saved pieces of this for display if you can get some glass cases). Interestingly enough, this newspaper was discovered by chance on the 18th of March of this year, and the date on it was March 18, 1888. After this, we knew what date the back addition was made to the house behind the dining room (1888).

Also, in the dining room ceiling we found a pork bone (part of a carpenter's lunch in 1823?) and a small bottle, which I have saved and which can also be displayed.

The exposed ceiling in the dining room confirmed an old legend about the house, that it was made of used ships' lumber. We did find lumber which had the original black-looking pitch on it, from an old boat; and in places, you could still see holes which had been cut into the wood for ropes to pass through on some kind of old ship. I wanted to put glass over at least a portion of this but we couldn't afford it, but this could still be done if you wish. The ceiling is not a pretty one, of course, because of the pitch and the holes; but the tourists seem to find this interesting, and so I leave this up to you.

The dining room is actually pretty much finished, except for places

around the edges of walls and ceiling where some molding or stripping ought to be tacked up to cover up a ragged edge or two.

The downstairs hallway had been altered and was closed-in and crowded. Someone had put doors across it in the middle; these were not original and had to be removed. We also took out the closet under the stairway, as this was not original; and we also re-opened the archway between the hallway and the dining room, where it had been filled in. This area of the house is now original. The Stairs had many layers of various kinds of floor covering and lots of paint; this was all removed and/or sanded, and the stairway is also original.

The floor of the house was supposed to be cedar lumber from New England. It was painted and we had to sand it, and even after 150 years, the sanding machine on that floor sent up an unmistakable cedar smell. After the sanding we applied some stain in order to have the floor not look so "new", and ployurethane was put over the floor to protect it from foot-traffic. The floor in the large living room is a little bit higher than the cedar floor in the rest of the downstairs, and is probably not original although it is quite old.

Wallpaper and old paint had to be soaked and/or sanded off the walls everywhere. The large living room had no less than seven layers of this wallpaper, plus paint in-between in places; I was very careful with this and managed to save enough of the bottom-most, or original, layer so that it can be copied if someone wishes to replace it. There is a firm in Boston which copies old wallpaper. The sample is framed and is located in the front parlor.

The front porch of the house was unsafe, and we had to replace the front steps and the floor of most of it. Originally, there were round "turned" railings on the porch instead of the cross-pieces you see today (refer to the oldest known photo of the house for a good likeness) and the steps had a little railing and picket fence along the front. These should all be replaced.

Upstairs, we removed, again, layers of paint and wallpaper, and painted and cleaned. There is one jalousie door in the back section of the east bedroom; this should now be replaced with the original window with the hand-blown glass. These extra windows are located under the house and this would not be difficult to do.

The addition to the house, in the downstairs rear, is not original but was added in 1888. In the large back room of this addition, there is an interesting feature in the lumber used for one of the walls (the one which backs the dining room). This wall was made from an old piano-case in 1888, and you can still see stamped upside-down on it "Kingsbury Piano, the Cable Company, Chicago". This whole addition replaced a porch which ran the width of the house along the back, and you can still see the porch columns where the porch ended. On the back porch was located the trap-door to the cistern, still there now, and the bucket and ropes could be replaced for the benefit of the

tourists to show how they used to get their water.

The Cookhouse had been rented out, and cedar shingles covered all of the fireplace and bread oven and chimney. We had to remove these and restore the room to its original condition. We did not put fresh paint on the outside of the cookhouse because we think the charm of the wood is in its weathered appearance. The little house originally had one room and a back porch like the front one; the second adjoining room and bath were added in the 40's and can be taken off if not needed.

The rest of the yard had several out-buildings which have been lost, and there is no way of knowing just what they were like in order to have them replaced. The family has told me, however, that there were stables for the Watlington horses along the back of the yard. I believe that this is true because when we dug shallow holes in order to plant plants in the back, we kept uncovering pieces of harness and horse-shoes, and things like that. There's no telling what's under the lawn, but at any rate I have saved and preserved these few items we found so far, for display if desired.

Also, there was an outhouse under the Spanish Lime tree at the east side of the yard (this tree was cut down by Earle Johnson but is growing back). The outhouse, according to a great grandson, had two sections; one for the family and one for the slaves.

Also, there was one other out-building which was on the west side of the yard next to the similar small building on the adjoining property, believed to have served as a slave quarters (I am told by the family that the cookhouse itself also was used as a slave quarters). I have located the whereabouts of this cabin or building on a very old Key West map and you can also find this in the library.

Later on, in the 1900's, the Misses Watlington in the house at the time had an outdoor dining room and washhouse constructed just east of the cookhouse, but these did not last and would not have been original anyway. There was also a covered walkway raised to the level of the floor at the back of the house, leading from the back room to the outdoor dining room, but this too has been destroyed.

Also, on the east side of the house itself, facing the Southern Cross Hotel, there was a porch with a roof over it leading out from the large downstairs living room (the door is still there in the living room). Over this porch was a small balcony which one could use from the bedroom upstairs. Mr. Jacobson of the Southern Cross Hotel tore down the porch and balcony in 1973, because he did not want it next to his property. I questioned him about this when we got the house and he told me that the porch was in bad condition and he felt that it was a fire hazard; still, I feel that he had no right to come onto this property and tear something off of the Oldest House. I have no records of any kind to show that the porch looked like, and because the lumber had been taken away by the time I first saw the property, I cannot tell either whether this porch was old enough to be original.

Furniture which goes with the house:

Upstairs:

In the upstairs West bedroom, there is a "sleigh" style bed from which I have managed to remove the paint. This is a good piece.

Also there is a marble-topped wash-stand and mirror.

The wardrobe in this bedroom is VERY old and was made when there weren't any coat-hangers yet; you simply had to lay your dresses and petticoats down on the shelves. This is in very good condition and still has the original key to the inside drawers.

There is an additional dresser in this bedroom with very nice wood, and an old rocking chair.

The East bedroom upstairs has an old rocking chair, table, and dresser, and a footstool.

Both the upstairs rockers can and should be restored, and they would be very good pieces.

The upstairs bathroom contains a ~~small~~ small dresser and low-backed chair, both painted white.

Downstairs:

The front parlor downstairs should be used mostly for display cases. I am now displaying the Watlington picture, also the one of his nine daughters, and the wallpaper sample from the living room wall, along with swords, Watlington's spyglass, the gravestones from under the house (described in another page in this folder). There is a great deal more which should be shown in glass-covered shelves or cases, and this can very easily be done.

Also in this front parlor at present, are the four chairs with the dipped-back, ~~spindle~~ ^{SPINDLE}-back look. I can't get anybody at all to tell me where these came from, but they are highly unusual, old and valuable, and they get a lot of attention. If you turn the front parlor into your display room, you can and probably should use these four funny chairs as dining-room chairs, as this was undoubtedly their original use.

The large living room downstairs contains two very elaborate, carved wooden trunks from Hong Kong. These are not antiques but they get so much attention that they are good for display. Earle Johnson used to travel a lot and he got these from Hong Kong in the thirties.

Also in this room are a marble-topped table and a huge wicker chair, four captain's chairs (very old), two more matching antique straight chairs, and a candle stand with a hurricane lamp on it. There is also a wardrobe which some enterprising person should probably take upstairs for the

East bedroom, a lovely Empire desk, and a very small child's chair.

The hallway of the house contains a hatrack, a wall ornament with a mirror in it, and a very fine mahogany drop-leaf table.

The downstairs back bedroom contains a Duncan Phyffe style round table with inlay, which has had all paint and varnish removed.

The Cookhouse

In the cookhouse are located the five-legged table which can serve as the dining room table; two chairs; and other small items including andirons in the fireplace, cooking pots, a peg-puller, a carpenter's clamp, a ladle used for the making of bullets, a lead-and-pewter plate, some irons (the kind you had to heat in the fire before they were used on clothing); and the rug, originally found in the large living room of the main house.

Furniture now in possession of Miss Sawyer of Key West:

"Nonnie" Sawyer, actually Miss Florence Sawyer of 1221 Pearl Street here in Key West, is the heir to whom the ^{OTHER}furniture went. (Her phone number, incidentally, is 296-3937.)

She was allowed to come in and take whatever she wanted, and she made off with the following:

The large mirrored bed (this is in one of the pictures which Ida Barron sent to you, Rosemary). The bed is supposed to have come into the family from Norway, where the king of Norway supposedly gave it to the member of the family migrating at that time to the States. The bed had a matching washstand with the same motif and a ladies' dresser, also matching, both of these with marble tops. This set is now being used by Miss Sawyer's teen-age nephew.

The other items chosen by Miss Sawyer are as follows:

- Four marble-top tables (Victorian)
- One corner what-not or bookcase (fancy carving)
- Two china cabinets from the dining room
- One sideboard, heavy mahogany, in the Empire style
- Mrs. Watlington's Queen Anne style chair with the "potty" hidden under the seat, and covered in an old Key-West-style paisley shawl
- One bookcase, oak, with glass door
- One hat-rack, small, wall type