

Key West History – 1975 Oldest House Museum Opens



Oldest House in Key West c1930s

The Oldest House on Duval Street officially opened as a museum. The house was restored by the Historic Key West Preservation Board and the Old Island Restoration Foundation, which managed the museum.

Richard Cussans is credited with building the Oldest House. He was born in Nassau in 1806 and came to Key West in 1828. A builder and merchant, he constructed a one-story house about 1829 on Whitehead Street (Duval Street did not exist at the time). It's likely the house was moved to its current location at 322 Duval St. by 1836.

For decades it was the home of Captain Francis Watlington, his wife Emeline, and nine daughters. Although primarily regarded as a sea captain engaged in the booming maritime enterprises of the period, Watlington also served as Harbor Master and as state legislator beginning in 1859, then in 1861 he joined the Confederate Navy. After the war he returned to Key West, where he died in 1887. Emeline Watlington died in 1883.

Lily Watlington, the Captain's youngest daughter, never married and lived in the house until her death in 1936. Earl Johnson, the last member of the Watlington family to live in the house, died in 1972. In 1974 Mrs. Robert Austin of Islamorada purchased the house and, in order to preserve it, deeded this important historic property to the Historic Key West Preservation Board (later renamed the Historic Florida Keys Foundation). In 1975 the

Board negotiated a management contract with the Old Island Restoration Foundation to restore the house and keep it open to the public.

The house has survived fires, hurricanes, economic hardships, and the occupation of Union troops. It serves as a physical chronicle of the history of Key West and its people from the earliest days to the present

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