TEST EXCAVATIONS AT THE OLDEST HOUSE IN KEY WEST, MONROE COUNTY, FLORIDA

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ABSTRACT

Archaeological test excavations were conducted at the Oldest House in Key West, Florida (8Mo1143). These excavations revealed the presence of a carriage house, as well as documenting that most of the central area of the back yard contains little material of historical significance.

INTRODUCTION

An archaeological test excavation project was conducted by the author in the back yard of the Oldest House in Key West, Florida (8Mo1143) to determine if proposed landscaping activities would effect significant archaeological resources associated with that structure. This site which is located at 322 Duval Street in Key West, Florida is owned by the State of Florida and is managed by the Key West Historical Preservation Board.

HISTORIC BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1822, John Simonton and his partners came to the island of Key West to establish a colony. In that same year the United States laid questionable claim to the islands of the Florida Keys

by having Lt. Perry raise the flag of the United States over the island of Key West.

In 1828 Richard Cussons, a gentleman from Nassau, became the owner of the structure now known as the Oldest House in Key West, Florida. It is unclear whether Mr. Cussons actually built the house himself or purchased it from an earlier owner. However, Mr. Cussons was a carpenter and a joiner by trade and, thus, capable of having constructed the subject house.

Less than a decade after the construction of the Oldest House in Key West, the island boasted a population of about 800 people. While some have questioned its validity in the past, it is now known that the Oldest House in Key West did indeed survive the great fire of 1886.

The Oldest House in Key West had four subsequent owners after Mr. Cussons before being acquired by the State of Florida. Currently, the management of the house and associated property is the responsibility of the Key West Historical Preservation Board.

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE OLDEST HOUSE

The house is situated upon what appears to be limestone pillars, which elevate the house to at least three feet above the present ground level. The property is not level and slopes toward its front along Duval Street. A rain water cistern is located under the house. The wood used in its construction appears to be cypress; although, no tests have been made to verify this observation.

Today the house is dominated by a porch which covers the entire front of the structure, and three gables protruding from the roof. The gables are all of different sizes. The one on the south side of the house is visibly larger than the more western one, which is the smallest of the three. With the exception of the west wall, the sides of the house are straight and interrupted by an occassional window. The rear of the house has a small centrally located porch with two rooms which accompany the porch to its width. The roof of the house is high pitched and typical of Bahamian structures of the early 1800's -- except for the gables.

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

Older maps in the possession of the Key West Historical Preservation Board indicated that there were a number of structures located near the edges of the property occupied by the Oldest House; although, it is somewhat uncertain whether the structures represented on some of these maps were actually constructed or only planned for construction.

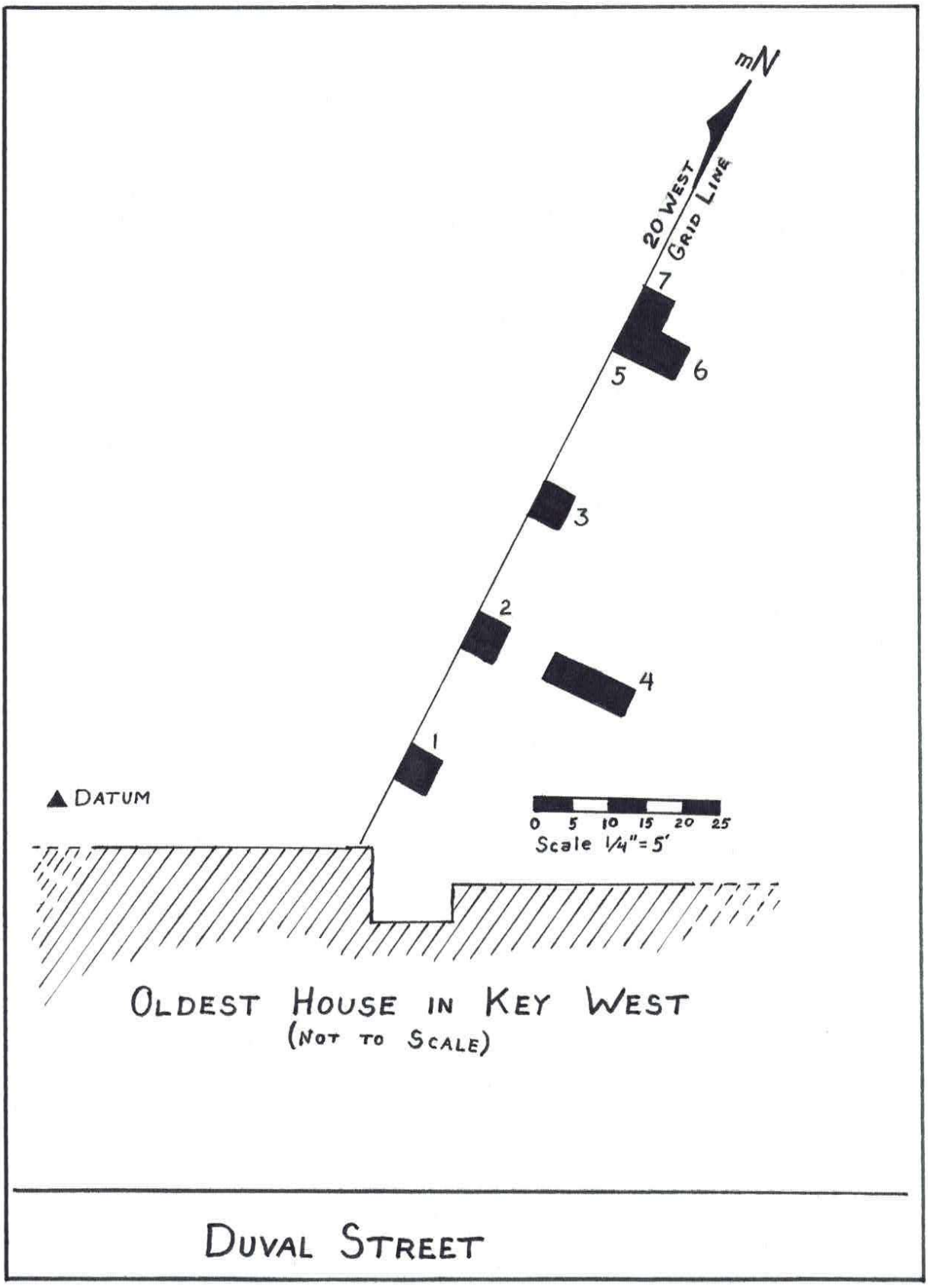
The following assumptions were made prior to initiating test excavations: (1) there may have been several associated structures located in the area of what is today the back yard of the Oldest House in Key West; and (2) the artifacts expected to be recovered from any excavations around the house and associated yard should reflect the marine salvage economy existing in Key West at the time the house was occupied.

The objectives of the test excavations reported in this paper were threefold. First, to determine the validity of the early plat maps depicting the Oldest House. Second, to recover artifacts of the period for use in interpreting the kinds of activities which occurred at and around the subject structure. Third, and of primary importance to future work at the site, to identify historically significant areas in the back yard of the Oldest House so that appropriate management decisions can be made.

EXCAVATION METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Archaeological field investigations were begun at the Oldest House in February of 1978, and lasted for six workdays. It perhaps need not be stressed that the excavations conducted during this project are preliminary in nature owing to the limited area in the back yard which was tested. Evaluation of the recovered artifacts has the same bias. Much more lengthy and detailed work would be necessary to provide a more complete interpretation of the features associated with the study area.

The excavation methodology consisted of dividing the entire yard area into a five-foot square grid system with a zinc metal rod driven into the ground to form a permanent datum in the southwestern corner of the resulting grid. The grid is oriented to magnetic north and lies diagonally across the back yard, rather than parallel to the property lines. A Brunton compass and a chain were used to establish the grid.



Map 1. Map of February, 1978 Excavation Units in the back yard of the Oldest House in Key West, Florida.

Seven test units were excavated. Six of these were five-foot square grid units, while the seventh was a 3' X 9' test trench. Five of the seven units were placed along the centrally located 20 West grid line (See map 1). The location of the excavation units was determined on the basis of existing exposed ground area and the project's focus on determining whether any significant archaeological features would be affected by development of a scenic garden walkway complex in the central area of the yard.

During field work the excavation units were designated by their grid coordinates, and recovered artifacts bagged accordingly. However, to facilitate this discussion they are simply designated as units one through seven (See map 1).

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Excavation was generally conducted in two arbitrary levels: 0-6"BS and 6"-12"BS. Artifacts recovered from each level were analysed separately in order to determine if temporal distinctions could be made. An artifact inventory is presented with the discussion of each test unit.

The excavation units are discussed in numerical order beginning in the south near the house and proceeding toward the yard's interior.

Test Pit 1:

Test Pit 1 is a five foot square unit located in the south-central area of the back yard and near the Oldest House. Two abitrary levels were excavated: 0-7" and 7"-11". Excavation was terminated

when the underlying limestone bedrock was reached. No culture features were noted. A list of the recovered artifacts is presented below.

Artifacts	Level 1	Level 2	Total
White China	16	48	64
White China with Painted Green Flowers	-	2	2
White Ceramic Handle Frag	-	1	1
Green Transfer Ware	-	1	1
Blue Transfer Ware	-	1	1
Clear/Green Glass Bottle	6	26	32
Window Pane Glass	5	8	13
Roofing (?) Slate	1	-	1
4-hole Ceramic Buttons	-	2	2
Cow (Bos) Bones:			
Long Bone Frag	-	1	1
Vertebra	-	1	1
Total	28	91	119

Table 1. Site 8Moll43, Test Pit 1,Artifact Inventory.

Test Pit 2:

Test Pit 2 is a five-foot square unit located fifteen feet north of Test Pit 1. Excavation occurred in three levels: 0-7", 7"-12" and below 12". The last level was the contents of a shallow pocket depression in the limestone bedrock. Table 2 lists the artifacts recovered from Test Pit 2. While the total number of artifacts recovered from the two pits is nearly identical, Pit 2 contains a much greater variety.

Artifacts	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Total
White China	18	10	17	45
White China with Green/Blue Flowers	1	-	-	1
White China with Blue Chevron	1	-	-	1
Blue on White Transfer Ware	1	-	6	7
Blue Transfer Ware	-	2	-	2
Brown Transfer Ware	-	-	1	1
Glazed Earthenware	-	-	1	1
White Ironstone	1	-	-	1
Blue Carnival Glass	1	-	-	1
Green Bottle Glass	1	3	2	6
Dark Green Bottle Glass	-	-	4	4
Blue Bottle Glass	-	-	1	1
Brown Bottle Glass	-	-	1	1
Clear Glass Vessel	3	-	-	3
Clear Bottle Glass	16	3	2	21
Window Pane Frags	5	-	-	5
4-hole Ceramic Button, Blue	1	-	-	1
4-hole Ceramic Button, White	1	-	-	1
Ceramic Insulator	-	1	-	1
Clay Bricks (Frags)	-	5	1	6
Wire Nail	-	1	1	2
Cut Nail	-	-	1	1
Bone Knife Handles	-	2	-	2
Shell Fragments	1	1	4	6
Animal Bone (Possibly Bos)	-	5	2	7
Peach Pit	-	1	-	1
Total	51	34	44	129

Table 2: Site 8Mol143, Test Pit 2, Artifact Inventory.

Test Pit 3:

Test Pit 3 is a five-foot square located fifteen feet north of Test Pit 2. This pit was excavated in two levels: 0-6" and 6-12". Artifact density is much less than in Pits 1 and 2. Of note is a one cent United States coin dated 1864; although, its condition makes it difficult to read the date with certainty.

Artifacts	Level 1	Level 2	Total
White China	6	5	11
White Ceramic Lug Frag.	-	1	1
Yellow Ceramic Frag.	1	-	1
Blue on White Transfer Ware	1	-	1
Green Bottle Glass	-	2	2
Brown Bottle Glass	-	1	1
Clear Bottle Glass	3	-	3
Cut Nail	1	1	2
Metal Cake Decorator Tip(?)	-	1	1
Crimped Metal Strip	1	-	1
Large Metal Object (Unidentified)	-	1	1
1864(?) U.S. One-Cent Piece	-	1	1
Animal Bone	1	-	1
Gray Pebble	-	1	1
Total	14	14	28

Table 3. Site 8Mo1143, Test Pit 3, Artifact Inventory.

Test Unit 4:

Test Unit 4 is an East-West oriented trench located East of Test Pit 2. This trench was specifically placed in an area where a historic structure associated with the Oldest House was believed to have been located. Only one level, (0-6") was excavated as this area of the yard is marginal to the proposed project impact area.

Artifacts	Total
20th Century Cosmetic Rouge Case	1
White China	48
Green Transfer Ware	1
Blue Transfer Ware	8
Purple Transfer Ware	1
Maroon Transfer Ware	1
Yellow Ceramic	1
Iron Ware	2
Green Glass Bottle Shards	5
Dark Green Glass Bottle Shards	12
Pink Glass	1
Corrugated Window Glass	1
Clear Glass	17
Pear Shaped Christmas Tree Glass Bulb	1
Marble Fragment	1
Clay Brick Fragments	2
Miscellaneous Iron Fragments	2
Bird Femur	1
Shells	3
Total	109

Table 4. Site 8Mol143, Test Unit 4, Artifact Inventory

Test Pit 5:

Test Pit 5 is a five-foot square located twenty feet north of Test Pit 3. Only one level was excavated. Artifact density is less than in previous units.

Artifacts	Total
White China	11
Blue Transfer Ware	2
Brown Transfer Ware	1
Pink Transfer Ware	1
Green Bottle Glass	7
Bottle Glass with "DIOPRIO" Embossed	1
Wine Bottle Base	1
Corrugated Window Glass Sheet	1
Large Metal Hinge	1
Brick	1
Ceramic Button	1
Oyster Shells	3
Animal Bone (Unidentified)	3
Total	34

Table 5. Site 8Moll43, Test Pit 5, Artifact Inventory.

Test Pit 6:

Test Pit 6 is a five-foot square adjoining the east side of Test Pit 5. Two levels, 0-6" and 6-12", were excavated in this unit. Of significance, is the presence of a number of bird bones, believed to be from domestic fowl, possibly chicken or turkey.

Artifacts	Level 1	Level 2	Total
White China	29	10	39
Blue Transfer Ware	3	1	4
White/Green Painted China	1	-	1
Earthenware	-	1	1
Iron Stone	-	2	2
Green Bottle Glass	12	6	18
Green Cut Glass	1	1	2
Brown Bottle Glass	-	1	1
Pink Glass	-	1	1
Clear Bottle Glass	3	5	8
Clear Glass Vial (Complete, Weathered Top)	1	-	1
4-hole Button	1	-	1
Cut Nails	5	1	6
Belt Buckle	-	1	1
Metal Strip	-	1	1
Oyster Shells	4	1	5
Animal Bones (Mostly Bird)	36	15	51
Total	96	47	143

Table 6. Site 8Mo1143, Test Pit 6, Artifact Inventory.

Test Pit 7:

Test Pit 7 is a five-foot square adjoining the north side of Test Pit 5. Four levels (0-6", 6-12", 12"-24", and below 24") were excavated. This unit indicated evidence documenting the location of the carriage house believed to have been in this area of the yard. A Whitish plaster-like zone was encountered at 22" below the present ground surface. This whitish zone, which covers much of the excavation unit, was found to be culturally sterile. The fourth excavation level is the soil below this feature

to the limestone bedrock.

Artifacts	Level 1	Level 2	Total
White China	12	30	42
Blue Painted China	6	2	8
Earthen Ware	2	1	3
Brown Transfer Ware	-	1	1
Ginger Beer Bottles	-	3	3
Ceramic Lug	-	1	1
Ceramic Insulator	1	-	1
Green Bottle Glass	1	5	6
Dark Green Bottle Glass	-	12	12
Clear Glass	2	2	4
Medicine Bottle Neck	-	1	1
4-hole Button	-	1	1
Metal Washer	1	-	1
Metal Rod	-	1	1
Metal Rod with Ring Hook	-	1	1
Hinge	-	1	1
Cut Nail	-	1	1
Metal Objects (Unidentified)	2	4	6
Coal Lump	-	1	1
Animal Bones (Cow?)	1	21	22
Conch Columella	1	-	1
Total	29	89	118

Table 7. Site 8Moll43, Test Pit 7, Artifact Inventory.

CONCLUSIONS

The remains of a portion of what is believed to have been the carriage house were recovered in Test Pit 7. Based on the test results in Test Pits 5 and 6, it is suggested that the majority of

the carriage house remains are located north of Test Pit 7. The carriage house remains are recommended for preservation.

The remaining six test units indicate a general scattering of artifact clusters throughout the yard area. These clusters are characteristic of backyard trash pits -- a feature common to most Key West residences of the period. The artifacts recovered during this project span the period from around 1840-1940. While no diagnostic artifacts clearly associated with the 1820's were identified, it is possible that some of the non-diagnostic glassware dates from this period.

The Oldest House and its associated yard are historically significant elements in Historic Key West. They should both be managed so as to maximize both their preservation and appreciation as valuable cultural elements. Based on the results of this study, it is concluded that the upper 6" of soil in the backyard area does not contain any significant cultural remains. Indeed, nearly all of the culturally significant finds encountered during this project came from 9" or more below the present ground level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The location of the proposed brick walkway and associated "tropical garden" landscaping is such that significant cultural resources associated with the Oldest House in Key West are unlikely to be effected. The most sensitive project impact area is in the

area immediately north of Test Pit 7. This is the area believed to contain the remains of the carriage house. However, impact to these remains can be avoided by restricting landscaping activities to the upper 12" of soil, except within the backfilled test pits which are already disturbed to bedrock. Furthermore, it is the author's opinion that the proposed brickwork walkways will serve as a protective layer to seal the artifactual remains located beneath them. It is, thus, the author's recommendation that the proposed work be allowed to proceed.

However, it is again stressed that the focus of this report is the impact area of the proposed brick walkway and tropical garden, and NOT the backyard in its intirety. Any proposed construction or landscaping in the remaining areas of the yard should be individually reviewed, and subjected to archaeological test excavation by an historic archaeologist when such work is deemed appropriate by the Historic Key West Preservation Board in consultation with the Division of Archives, History and Records Management in Tallahassee, Florida.