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To: Ed J. and Wright L.

From: Dabney

Re: Oldest House, title clearing and restoration

12-15-84

A few years ago when Bart and I were in Key West, we paid our dollar and took a "tour" of the Oldest House, with a guide from the Historical Society. She didn't know us, and we were amused to hear the story of the Watlington family with a few alterations in it since we left the real history of that family with Rosemary Austin, for the Historical Society's use. She concluded her little talk with, "after it left the hands of the Watlington descendents, it came into the hands of the Historical Society in deplorable condition." I kid you not, she really ~~■~~ said that, and the look that Bart shot to me across the room, should only be on record in a photograph or something. We said to her "well, didn't some people named Moore have it at one time?" She said that she believed that was right, however, they didn't do anything to the house and it had to be restored when the Society got hold of it.

Typical Key West. But, here is what really happened:

When Bart and I were ready to ~~■~~ take on a Conch House, we found that no lending institution in Key West would finance anything that needed work. At that time, they were not far-sighted enough to see that the integrity of the town could only be continued (as far as restoration went) if enough people like us took on the job of true restoration with the help of local banks and things; and if you wanted to buy a Conch House, you were pretty much on your own. We had about given up hope of getting one, when Grace Johnson matched us up with Marion Bentley Wall of Delray Beach, Florida, who wanted to do something for Key West in memory of her ~~father~~ father, who used to spend time there. The Oldest House was on the market, being sold by the Estate (the last descendent, Earle Johnson, had died). The Historical Society, ironically enough, had had a chance to buy the place, but had turned it down because (a) it really was in sad condition and required a lot of work and money, and (b) because there wasn't a clear title to the place and every attorney in town was saying that it probably couldn't be cleared (well, almost every attorney, except you, Ed). In fact, Hugh Morgan told me that somebody would have to be crazy to buy anything like that, as he had looked into the matter and there was no way the title could be cleared. Nevertheless, with Marion Wall willing to finance the place, and with Ed telling us it could be cleared, we bought the thing.

Words can't describe the condition of the house. The man who ran the Southern Cross Hotel, next door, ~~■~~ had the keys to the house and agreed to show it to us. He was already bragging that he planned to buy it up, tear the house down (he had already taken a small porch affair off the side next to him, without asking anybody's permission, which to date has not been replaced). I am giving you (lending, actually, I would like to have it back) the album showing pictures of the inside of the place, with faulty wiring, furniture piled up and trash everywhere, floors half out and

very unsafe to walk on, etc. I saw the place two more times before we bought it, and each time there were more and more items missing from the place; in fact, after the key was taken away from the Southern Cross man, he pitched a fit, threatened to burn the thing down, and we found a large bag upstairs with more small items in it, ready to be taken out. Unfortunately I am afraid that the china and stuff was included in the items that were stolen; when some of the heirs showed up later on to claim it, it just wasn't there. This is sad, as there is no way to get these things back and no inventory was ever taken to even show just what was missing.

At any rate, with the help of our carpenter Antonio Barcelo, we began restoration, and title clearing. With Ed's guidance and supervision, we began to write letters to all known heirs and connections, explaining what we were trying to do there, and asking if they would take a small check for their share in the place and quit any claim to it; Ed, you probably have the file on this, as I don't, but slowly the letters ~~started~~ came back from everybody and slowly we got the thing straightened out. When the title was finally cleared on it, it was because of Ed; I think a lot of mouths dropped open within ~~the~~ the legal community when it was finally accomplished, and we began to hear complaints from the Historical Society that they hadn't gotten the place, and that "outsiders" were restoring it instead!

Well, anyway, as you know, restoration--and I mean true restoration--is much harder and more expensive to do than remodeling. But we tried to make the place authentic; where boards had rotted away in the dining room wall, for instance, I had Antonio make some to match, no matter how difficult it was. Lumber in those days was wider and better quality than we can get now, but I think I did the best that anybody could do to keep from spoiling the place with anything that was not authentic. The dining room floor had to be completely replaced, as it had rotted away; sections of walls had done the same; the front porch floor had to be replaced, for the same reason; ~~xxx~~ wiring had to be done to keep the place from ~~from~~ burning down; and the entire back of the house, which was open to the elements except for some sections of carpeting nailed up on plywood, had to be finished off so that we could really close the place up. The ~~house~~ house ate up time and money, of course, but we kept at it and I think we did a pretty good job. Newspaper from the insides of the walls, used as insulation, could still be read and that, and many other family items, were saved for display. The mountains of trash and furniture were sorted; trash was piled up in the yard again and again and taken out by the truckloads, and I do mean TRASH like old magazines and clothing (not old enough to be interesting), rusted pots and pans, and god knows what all else, were thrown out; anything antique was kept, and heirs arrived daily to claim things or else just look. I gave Rosemary Austin a list of what was taken out of the house by family, so that it could be requested again at a later date, for loan to the museum. Miss Jessie took the uniform of Capt. Watlington for safe-keeping, but I later saw it on display at HER house, as Porter's! I have no idea how they handled that, if indeed they did approach her about it.

Grace took one picture of me sitting on top of a trash pile in the yard (see album). Rotted bedding, mildewed pillows, and other evil-smelling stuff came out of the house in quantities like this about every week for several months, and the Southern Cross guy was phoning the city, the paper, and anybody else he could think of to make problems for us. At one point he called that section of the paper they used to have, where some reporter went to bat for people who were having problems as consumers, or whatever; he wanted her to write us up as running down the community by having trash in the yard, so I had to explain to her that it was being taken away every time it reached a certain amount, like a truckload; we lived in fear that that man would come over and set fire to the place, and we consider ourselves very fortunate that he didn't

do anything worse than yell bad things at us from his place, when he would see us out in the yard.

Frequent comments about "outsiders" doing the house, would reach us; we were putting our last dollars into the place, making an effort to improve our section of Duval Street, and generally trying to ~~the~~ get the ^{HOUSE} ~~place~~ in shape to be a museum, and I used to wonder what a non-outsider would have done that we didn't, to improve things. Finally I quit being bothered by all of that, and by the time we did open up as a museum for a few hours a day, the place was looking really good again, and there was a lot of interest shown in it.

When we left there and it was time ~~to~~ to sell, ~~it~~ it now had a clear title and was not in danger of falling down; it had been saved by Grace, Ed, and us, from being a parking lot for the hotel; and don't forget, it was WE who arranged for Rosemary Austin to have it, so that it would be donated for use by the Historical Society.

True, the Society did a little more after they got it, like ~~■~~ tearing off part of the back kitchen so that only what they thought that original part must have been, would be left standing; and I think they did a different treatment to the back porch. But that was only the icing on the cake, compared to what we had to do to literally save the place. I mean, just take a look at the pictures, if you want to see what it was really like!