

THE OLDEST HOUSE:
AN HISTORICAL RECORD
IN KEY WEST

Prepared for
The Historic Key West Preservation Board

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.	1
Research Design	3
Table of Contents	5
Key West--A Brief Chronicle	6
Architecture of The Oldest House	12
Richard Cussans--A Biographical Sketch	14
Francis Watlington: Portrait of a Sea Captain	19
Notes	26
Appendix	30
Bibliography	43

INTRODUCTION

This study focusing upon a single Key West Conch dwelling known as The Oldest House was researched under the auspices of the Historic Key West Preservation Board and funded by a National Park Service grant authorized through the Division of Archives, History and Records Management. It comprises one section of a threefold investigation into the archeological, historical and architectural aspects of the Oldest House. Donated in 1974 by Mrs. Rosemary W. Austin to its present owner, the Historic Key West Preservation Board, The Oldest House presently is operated as a museum by the Old Island Restoration Foundation.

This historical assessment was conducted by the author over a three-month period and incorporates documentary research from the National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the Research Department of the Monroe County Public Library, and the Monroe County Courthouse. Source material from New York to Nassau to Key West was sought in an effort to fully document the site of 322 Duval Street and lay to rest the romantic conjecture and historical rumor that so often evolves. This study represents the first complete historical evaluation and compilation of records and biographical data pertaining to persons and events associated with the Oldest House. In a broader context, it illumines the earliest decades in the life of the island-town of Key West. It is hoped that material derived from this analysis will serve as a factual guide for future

narratives and expand the present knowledge of Key West's cultural heritage.

In particular the author wishes to acknowledge the singular contributions of Historian Betty Bruce whose collection of historical material and priceless Notebooks was an invaluable asset and served as a point of departure for this account.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This historical documentary of The Oldest House Museum in Key West, Florida, is intended to raise questions and seek answers about the structure itself and its inhabitants. A subsidiary aim is to provide a catalog of available source materials for the beginning decades in Key West's history. The object is to offer an accurate presentation of extant historical evidence and to formulate evaluations where possible. Documentation regarding the original erection and possible subsequent relocation of the dwelling, however, is negligible and unlikely to be unearthed. Material pertaining to the varied occupancies and title transactions of the building is scattered. Thus, to compile the available data into a cohesive body the following questions were posed:

- 1) What were the activities of Commodore David Porter's West India Anti-Pirate Squadron in Key West? What construction was undertaken by the naval force? Did Richard Cussans have any connections to the maritime troops?
- 2) When did Richard Cussans arrive in Key West and what were his business transactions? To identify his background, his career, his tenure on the island and his links to the Oldest House were major objectives.
- 3) What are the earliest references to the Duval Street property found in the local county records? Was the

Bahama-style house originally erected on the present site? Does evidence exist to substantiate the theory of its removal from the corner of Whitehead and Caroline Streets to Duval Street? What does inspection of the physical structure reveal? What was the settlement pattern for square 25 on William Whitehead's Plan of

Key West?

- 4) When did the Watlington family first inhabit 322 Duval Street? To more fully define the Watlington family genealogy and to focus critically upon the biography of Francis Watlington were main points of consideration.

To clarify such inquiries extensive bibliographic references were consulted. The varied collection of primary source materials included: U.S. naval records for the 1822-1828 period of the West India Squadron under Porter, the Mobile Squadron records for the Civil War years, and U.S. Census records dating from 1790. Biographical information was gleaned from contemporary newspaper accounts, almanacs, ships' passengers lists and wills. Local Deed Book entries, assessment rolls, church and cemetery documents and Sanborn maps supplemented an examination of contemporary and secondary written accounts. Thus, the aim has been to set forth the chronology for the site of 322 Duval Street and to present the microcosmic world of a single Key West dwelling.