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Old Island Restoration
Foundation, Inc.
HABS Key West Project
November 1966

PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

These records were prepared in 1967 during a summer project jointly sponsored by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. of Key West, and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Twenty-two structures were recorded, ranging from commercial structures, residences and hospitals to a convent, a lighthouse, and the Memorial to the Victims of the Disaster of the U.S. Battleship Maine.

The project was under the direction of F. Blair Reeves, AIA, Associated Professor, Department of Architecture, University of Florida. Measured drawings were prepared by student architects John D. Davenport and John F. Grimm of Texas A. and M. University, and John O. Crosby of the University of Florida. Mrs. Betty M. Bruce of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc., and Professor Reeves were responsible for the historical and architectural data. They were assisted by members of the Foundation. J. Franks Brooks, Photographer, of Key West, supplied the photographs.

Captain Francis Watlington House
322 Duval Street
Key West
Monroe County
Florida

HABS No. FLA-192

HABS,
FLA,
44-KEY,
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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

9-1

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TIME OF RECORDING, THIS MATERIAL DOES NOT
CONFORM TO CURRENT HABS STANDARDS.

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. FL-192

CAPTAIN FRANCIS WATLINGTON HOUSE

Location: 322 Duval Street, Key West, Monroe County, Florida.

USGS Key West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse
Mercator Coordinates: 17.418540.2715970.

Present Owner
and Occupant: Mr. Earl Johnson

Significance: Traditionally called the oldest house in Key West, this building is said to have been built as early as 1825 and moved by Richard Cussans from Whitehead Street to its present location in 1832. Later, it became the home of Captain Watlington and has remained in his family until this date.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Said to have been 1825.
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners: John W. Simonton sold all of Lot 1, Square 25, to Thomas A. Townsend and Asa F. Tift in 1834 (Deed Book B, p. 96). No record has been found of Cussans' purchase of part of this lot. In 1839, Richard W. Cussans sold to William M. Wall his house and lot, part of Lot 1, Square 25, consisting of 80' on Duval, beginning on the line dividing Lot 1 and Lot 2, and running 197' 9" deep. These are the present dimensions of the property (Deed Book C, pp. 62, 63). The house was moved to its present location in 1832. Wall sold to Nicholas D. Herder in 1842 (Deed Book C, pp. 213, 215). Herder retained the property until 1869, when it was deeded to Emeling Watlington (Deed Book G, p. 441). It has remained in the Watlington family since that date.
4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: One legend is that this house was built by the United States Government as quarters for naval officers of Commodore David Porter's Anti-Pirate Squadron. However, in an issue of The Key West Advertiser of 1829, Cussand placed an ad as being a carpenter and joiner (Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., microfilm copy in Monroe County Public Library, Key West, Florida). The County records show that in 1829, Cussans owned property on Whitehead Street.

5. Original plans and construction: None.
6. Alterations and additions: A number of alterations have occurred through the years, but no records of these are known and alterations are of no great importance.

The three dormer windows on the street or front side of the house have been modified. Each dormer is now unequal in size. Originally, the center dormer was double the width of the two end dormers; and the two end dormers were of equal size.

On the first floor, an office was built for Captain Watlington by enclosing part of the back porch and adding a bay to the side. A small outside porch provided private entrance to the office from the street. Later, the other end of the porch was enclosed. A second porch (screened) was later added on the other side.

Originally the front porch rail had rectangular ballusters, but these have been replaced by simple cross supports.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Captain Watlington, whose home was in this house, was one of the early settlers and a prominent figure in maritime activities. A fine pilot, he was in command of not only merchant ships but wrecking vessels as well.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

Monroe County Court House Records and Deed Books, County Clerk's Office, Key West, Florida.

U.S. Census, Monroe County 1839-1880; Monroe County Tax Rolls 1845-1860, 1866-1876, Microfilm Monroe County Public Library, Key West, Florida.

2. Secondary and published sources:

American Guide Series, A Guide to Key West, Hastings House, New York, second edition, 1949, p. 83.

Browne, Jefferson, Key West: The Old and the New, The Record Company, St. Augustine, Florida. 1912, p. 192.

Cappick, Marie, The Coral Tribune, Key West, Florida. August, 24, 1956, p. 5, Chapter XV, p. 4, 1957.

Gilfonds, M.E., Bernard De Witt, Eds. Key West in Transition, Key West Administration, WPA, December, 1934, p. 20.

Pratt, Dorothy and Richard; A Guide to Early American Homes South,
Bonanza Books, New York, 1956, p. 119.

3. Interviews:

Mr. Earl Johnson, Owner, 322 Duval Street, Key West, Florida.

Prepared by: Betty M. Bruce
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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Typical Island housing style known as a conch cottage scaled to the 5 1/2' stature, with three large disproportioned front facade dormers.
2. Condition of fabric: Poor.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 40' x 45'; five bays; one and one-half story; rectangular.
2. Foundations: Quarried lime rock and brick piers, interstices filled with wooden slats.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Lapped cedar siding, weathered.
4. Structural system: Wood frame.
5. Original plan and construction: A one-and-a-half story frame house with a full one-story veranda across the facade and the rear, and three front gabled dormers. The balustrade had a molded hand rail and turned balusters. The central dormer was double; each end dormer was single.
6. Alterations and additions: Part of the porch was enclosed and a bay added to the side to form an office for Captain Watlington. A small outside porch provided a private entrance to the office from the street. Later the remaining part of the rear porch was enclosed. A second porch, enclosed with screens, was added later.

The southernmost dormer on the facade was enlarged, giving the dormers their present disproportionate appearance. The turned balustrade on the front veranda was replaced by simple crossed supporting boards.

7. Porches: Front veranda extending full length of front facade, square posts, composite capitals, molded wood hand rail, simple crossed supports.
8. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Simple paneled doors with double-leaved shutters.
 - b. Windows and shutters: Double hung windows with double-leaved shutters.
9. Roof:
 - a. Shape, covering: Gable,terne metal shingles.
 - b. Dormers: Three large disproportioned dormers conflicting with scale of front facade form the dominant feature.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans:
 - a. First floor: Small central hall with all rooms entering thereon.
 - b. Attic: Half-story, similar.
2. Flooring: Wood, tongue and groove.
3. Wall and ceiling finish: Exposed siding, painted.
4. Doorways and doors: Large, rectangular doorway with sliding paneled doors between stair hall and main room. Other doorways have simple, paneled doors.
5. Hardware: Simple, period hardware, much of original retained.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The house faces northeast on Duval Street. Building elevated on its piers. Large trees in rear.
2. Outbuildings: Utilitarian buildings including servants' quarters and kitchen. Wood frame kitchen has large brick chimney.

PROPOSAL FOR THE USE OF THE OLDEST HOUSE

Over the last 3 years, the Oldest House has undergone major maintenance projects. After years of neglect, the exterior of the house was painted, leaks repaired and a security system installed. More recently, we have secured the house against hurricanes; shored up the floors; repaired the side porch and stairs; repaired and painted the restrooms, other out-buildings, and fence; and most recently have replaced rotted floorboards and refinished the floors and painted the entire interior.

At this time, the Board of Directors will need to consider the use of the building and its message. Factors to consider include the cost of repairing and cleaning furnishings, the number of visitors, cost of operating the building as a museum, and the best use of our limited resources while meeting the goals of our mission.

The Oldest House/Wreckers' Museum

Until recently, the building displayed furnishings and objects depicting the life of the Watlington family and the ship wrecking industry during the nineteenth century. Consultants have commented that the dual message is confusing.¹ Suggestions for a new message for a museum and other uses of the Oldest House are to:

- Depict life in 19th century Key West (the Watlington family), displaying appropriate furniture, art and accessories.
- Feature the architecture of Key West using the Oldest House as an example with displays of other architectural styles.
- Open for education programs focusing on the architecture, culture and history of Key West and for special events inviting Key Westers to enjoy and appreciate the historical building and the adjacent garden.
- Install changing photo exhibits of the history of Key West in partnership with the Monroe County Library and keep furnishings at a minimum.

The following information is presented to help the Board decide the future direction of the Oldest House.

Condition of the Furnishings

Through years of neglect and lack of climate control, much of the Oldest House furniture and art work are of a condition that does not warrant their being displayed. Consultants

¹ "Exhibits in the Oldest House and the associated cookhouse reflect the multiple purposes used as the name for this facility: the oldest existing residential structure, the historic island wreckers phenomena and the Watlington family. Exhibit labels provide information on artifacts but little insight into the significance of the item or its relationship to the house, Watlington family, etc. Considering the limited floor space available, these divergent exhibit goals tend to confuse visitors, especially with out a more dynamic interpretative program."

made observations about the deterioration of the contents.² When furnishings were moved for painting and floor refinishing that observation were made clearer. Table I lists furniture by room and categorizes pieces as to whether they are presentable for displayed. The damaged pieces can be stored and restored over time for a considerable amount of money in both storage and restoration fees. However, there are no qualified restorers locally. Another option is to loan pieces to other organizations or homes in Key West. However, their condition may limit this option.

TABLE I
MUCH OF THE FURNISHINGS ARE DAMAGED

CURRENT CONDITION WARRANTS DISPLAY BUT NEEDS CONSIDERABLE CLEANING	DAMAGED TO THE POINT OF NOT BEING PRESENTABLE
<u>SMALL PARLOR</u>	
Large Table – 1875 base with fake marble top (should be white Corraera marble)	Chairs w/ large table – walnut, mid to late 1860's
	Settee – 1850-55
Rocker – late 1850's	Small table (tilting top) – mahogany, 1830's
Armoire – walnut, 1870's (replacement handles)	Rug – antique
	Fainting sofa – 1860's
<u>DOWNSTAIRS HALL</u>	
Table – 1880's	
Desk – 1910-20	
Kitchen table – 1840's	
<u>LARGE PARLOR</u>	
Sofa – 1840's If it can be cleaned without fabric damage	
Eastlake rocker – 1880	Game table – 1840's (1 of 2)
Game table – 1840's	Chairs around gaming table – 1895
Cupboard – 1835	Upholstered chair (given by John Galliger) 1855-60
Small chair 1850	
Small table (marked #1) 1830's	
<u>DINING ROOM</u>	
Small table (marked #2) – Eastlake 1870's	Dining chairs – 1840's 5 are Gothic, 8 in total
Corner hutch – country, cherry 1830's	Dining table – 1930's (Duncan Fife reproduction) not damaged but inappropriate for display
Buffet/side board – 1840's	

² “The existing exhibits are not well maintained and the materials contained are visibly deteriorating from lack of care and environmental fluctuations, i.e. exposure to sunlight, moisture and changes in temperature and humidity.”

Corner shelves – 1870's	
Cane office chair 1890's	
<u>UPSTAIRS HALL</u>	
	Eastlake dresser – 1880's
<u>LARGE BEDROOM</u>	
Bed – 1870's	Chest of drawers – 1830
Pitcher and basin – 1900	Bureau – 1890's
Wash stand – 1840's	Eastlake chair – 1870's
Mirror – 1890's	Eastlake rocker – 1870's
Towel rack – 1890's	Chair – 1830's
Side table 1890's (oak)	Wicker rocker – 1890's
Sewing Machine	
<u>SMALL BEDROOM</u>	
Chair – 1880's	Twin Beds – 1930's
Dresser – 1870's	Armoire – 1840's
Single bed – French day bed	Eastlake washstand – 1890's
	Trunk – 1890's
<u>CAPTAIN'S OFFICE</u>	
Desk chair – 1890's	
Desk – 1830's cherry	
Chest – 1880's	
Rocker – 1840's	
Oriental trunks – WWII	

Most of the artwork is in need of professional cleaning and some pieces such as family portraits are damaged with holes and flaking paint. (The Mario Sanchez paper bag sketch and wood carving will be cleaned and preserved pro bono by the Gallery on Greene). All of the ship models need cleaning and some need major restoration work.

Lack of Visitors

In the recent past, visitation to the Oldest House has been declining, perhaps due to other tourist attractions in town, the tourists currently coming to Key West and the condition of the Oldest House and its contents. Table II shows monthly revenue as well as the daily average number of visitors for the last fiscal year.

TABLE II
FEW PEOPLE VISIT THE OLDEST HOUSE

Month	Monthly Revenue	Average Daily Attendance
April 2005	\$ 2,016	13
May	\$ 1,870	12
June	\$ 1,426	9
July	\$ 1,451	9
August	\$ 1,082	6
September	\$ 570	4
October	\$ 722	5

November	\$ 1,094	7
December	\$ 994	6
January 2006	\$ 1,603	10
February	\$ 1,518	11
March	\$ 1,825	12
TOTAL INCOME & AVERAGE ATTENDANCE	\$16,171	8 to 9

These figures are in sharp contrast to the environment in 1984. An April 1, 1984 Old Island Restoration newsletter states "...the tourists were generous to the Museum, which netted a nice profit during the season. There were a lot of visitors this year..." Currently, the revenue from visitors does not offset the expenses of operating the building as a museum. Expenses include utilities and compensation for the docents. Another factor to consider is the difficulty of finding docents. Even as a paid position, people are not interested in working there. In the past volunteers operated the museum, unlike today. Table III shows the expenses associated with operating the Oldest House as a tourist attraction.

**TABLE III
OPERATING EXPENSES ARE CONSIDERABLE**

Month	Docent Salaries and Expenses*	Advertising	Utilities**
April 2005	\$ 1,130.24		\$ 837.46
May	\$ 1,130.24		\$ 434.63
June	\$ 753.62		\$1,009.44
July	\$ 528.94		\$ 336.46
August	\$ 1,618.84		\$1,212.90
September	\$ 1,472.81		\$1,448.43
October	\$ 886.16		\$ 587.80
November	\$ 990.15		\$1,233.31
December	\$ 1,197.16		\$1,092.97
January 2006	\$ 1,167.42		\$ 664.96
February	\$ 1,046.76		\$ 557.22
March	\$ 1,145.03		\$1,810.19
TOTALS	\$13,067.37	\$4,710.00	\$11,225.77
GRAND TOTAL	\$29,003.14		

* Does not include UC Fund nor payroll taxes.

**Utilities include electricity, telephone, water, waste management, and security system.

This does not include increased maintenance costs due to being open to the public daily. This also does not include a portion of the Director's salary for managing the docents and the property as a museum. It is clear that the limited attendance revenue does not cover the cost of operation.

Conclusion

With the interior work at the Oldest House reaching completion, this is an opportune time to make a decision on the future of the Oldest House. The number of visitors has declined over the years and the revenues are not keeping up with expenses. Further, it is not in our best interest to continue a tourist attraction when it is clear that very few of the thousands of visitors to Key West are interested in the Oldest House as most recently configured. We need to consider the best use of the building and how we can best serve the Key West community. Therefore, I suggest that we not try to replicate the Watlington family story but consider having a more community rather than tourist based focus. Using the Oldest House for educational programs and special events or having changing photo exhibits, in my opinion, seems to be the best use of the property.

Respectfully submitted,
Roy Hogberg
Chair
Buildings and Grounds Committee

October 5, 2006