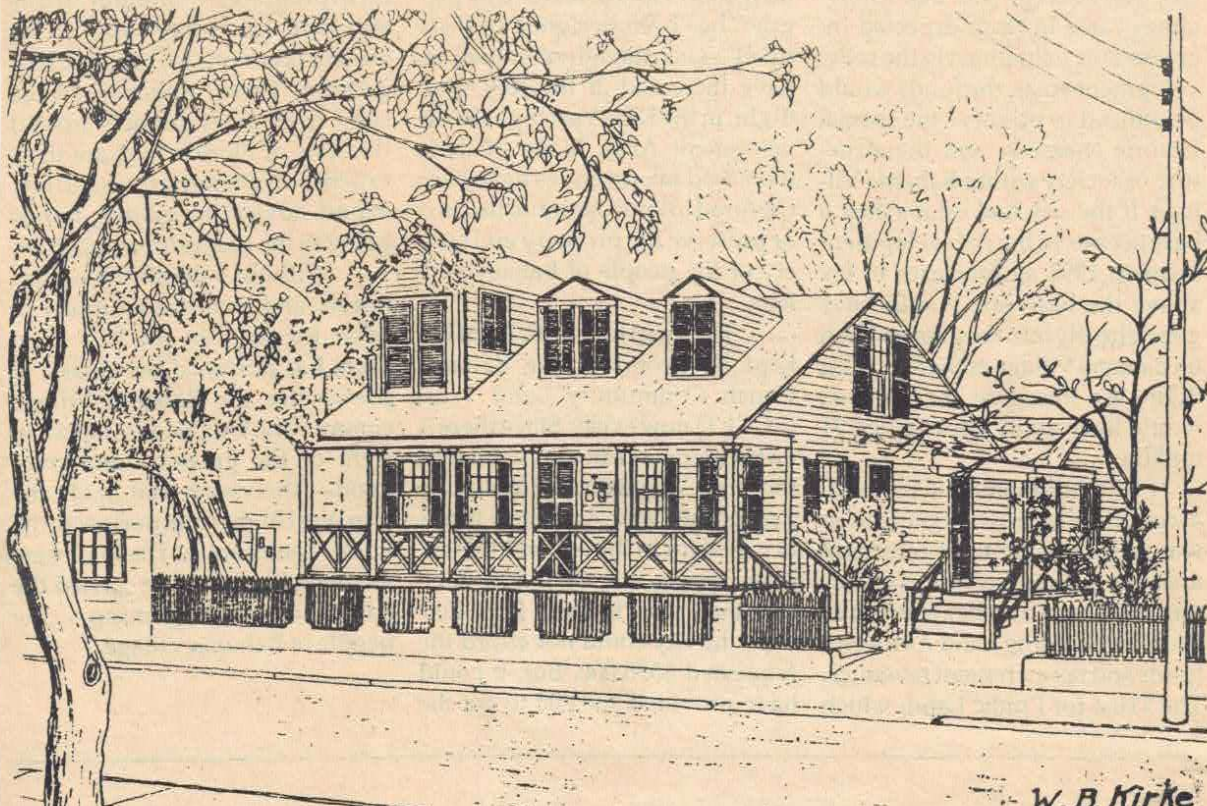


CONCH SMILES

Memories of a Key West Native

The Oldest House and the Almost King of Norway



by Jeane Porter

The Oldest House (The Wrecker's House) on Duval Street was the home of Captain Watlington and his family. I remember, as a little girl, visiting the two spinster sisters still living there who were always very kind to me as a child, showing me fascinating objects including a portrait done by Audubon of Captain Watlington, I believe, and giving me lemonade to drink.

But there was also another name: Captain Cole, who had lived in that house as well. His great granddaughter, a woman my age, came to see me several years ago and told me this delightful story.

She said the name Cole, like

the nursery rhyme "Old King Cole," was really an adaption of the Norwegian name Kohl—that maybe 'Old King Cole' was really a Viking chieftain who had come into England from Norway. Anyway, Captain Cole's granddaughter told me that in the late 1800s, when her great grandfather was alive and living in the Oldest House, a contingent from Norway arrived and anchored in the harbor.

It seems that their country was fresh out of kings and they had been sent officially to find Captain Cole, who was really Captain Kohl, and a direct descendant in line for the crown of Norway. They had come to invite him to return with them to become their king.

Her story goes that the captain invited them all to a sumptuous dinner in his home. During it, they toasted, Scandinavian style, everything and each other and then he thanked them most graciously for the honor they would bestow on him. But, thank you very much gentlemen and, with all due respect, he preferred, he admitted, to remain and go on living in Key West.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jeane Porter is a sixth-generation Key Wester. She's currently working on *Conch Smiles*, a book of stories about island life. Info: Heritage House Museum, 296-3573.