

## HISTORIC FLORIDA KEYS PRESERVATION BOARD

Old City Hall, 510 Greene Street, Key West, FL. 33040

Management Plan for Properties - Lease # 3893

### OLDEST HOUSE/WRECKERS MUSEUM

#### I. General Information

A. Common name - Oldest House

#### B. Site history

John W. Simonton sold Lot 1 of Square 25 to Asa Tift and Thomas A. Townsend in 1834 with Richard Cussans, as witness. Cussans, a Bahamian born carpenter and joiner who had immigrated to Key West about 1828, was living on the property with his wife Rafaela Arnau Cussans prior to 1836.

At that time Captain Francis Benjamin and Emeline Johnson Watlington occupied the property. Captain Watlington's family heralded from Devon, England, prior to immigrating to Bermuda and finally settling in New York City. Watlington was a master seaman, wrecker and lighthouse keeper operating throughout the Caribbean. He served in the Florida Legislature prior to the Civil War, at Which time he joined the Confederate Navy.

The building's construction appears to indicated that the main block was assembled during two different periods with what would have been a hall-parlor plan becoming a five-bay , center hall plan following the addition of two left bays. This construction evidence appears to explain the early occupancies by Cussans and Watlington. The Watlington family purchased the property in 1869 and occupied it until 1974, altering and adding to the house and site over many years.

#### C. General location

The property is located at the Duval Street in the middle of the block between Eaton an Caroline Streets in the downtown commercial core of the Key West.

D. Boundaries and existing structure, adjacent land uses

The boundaries correspond to the legal description printed below. A map has been included which illustrates the house, cook house, restrooms, exhibit pavilion, shed and garden areas.

E. Legal Description

The property is approximately 1/7 of an acre in size.

Part of Lot 1, Square 25, on the island of Key West, Monroe County, Florida, more particularly described as follows:

Commencing at a point on the Southwesterly side of Duval Street and running thence along the Southwesterly side of Duval Street in a Northwesterly direction 80 feet; thence at right angles in a Southwesterly direction 197 feet, 9 inches; thence at right angles in a Northeasterly direction 197 feet, 9 inches to the point or place of beginning.

F. Length of waterfront - None

G. Access points

The property is accessed solely from Duval Street.

H. Development constraints

The property is land locked.

I. Geographic significance and distance from parks and conservation areas.

The property is located on the city's main commercial thoroughfare about ¼ mile from the terminus of US1. It is about ¾ mile northeast of the Ft. Zachary Taylor State Park and ½ mile southwest of the Key West Bight community redevelopment area.

J. Degree of title interest held by Board of Trustees (IITF)

The property is held in fee simple and has been managed since its acquisition in 1974 by the Old Island Restoration Foundation.

#### K. Land Acquisition program

The property was owned and occupied by the Watlington family descendants until 1972. Rosemary W. (Mrs. Robert) Austin of Islamorada, Florida, acquired the property intending to donate it to the Old Island Restoration Foundation (OIRF), an unincorporated local historical organization. In 1974, Mrs. Austin donated the property to the Historic Key West Preservation Board which, due to a change in state law, transferred title to the Internal Improvement Trust Fund.

#### L. Proposed use management

Through management by the Old Island Restoration Foundation, the property regained the house museum use which had been initiated in 1947 by a Watlington family descendant. This use is proposed to continue and under the same management.

The property is undergoing a transition period, i.e. substantial rehabilitation to the house, proposed rehabilitation to the summer kitchen, ADA compliance activities, site improvement and heightened exhibit areas as well as considerations for additional solicitation of funds.

As programming is refocused to complement site improvements, fees and fundraising efforts will be restructured to ensure more equitable competition with other local house museums.

#### M. Designated/proposed area of critical state concern

The city of Key West has been designated as an area of critical state concern.

### II. Management Authorities and Constraints

#### A. State and local authorities and local ordinances

The property is located within the boundaries of the Key West Historic district and is recognized as a contributing structure. All changes to the building and site are required to be approved by the Historic Architectural Review Commission prior to initiation of activity (F.S. 266.0037). Also, the Key West Tree Commission has jurisdiction over pruning or planting of trees on the property. These regulations are in addition to local building code and zoning regulations.



B. Legislative and executive constraints - None

III. Resource Base

A. Natural resources

See attached information from the Florida Natural Areas Inventory.

B. Cultural resources - known and unknown resources

The focal point of the property is a one-and-a-half story frame dwelling on limestone piers exhibiting Bahamian/New England colonial influences. It features a veranda and dormers, the latter of which are of various sizes and ages. The roof is terne metal shingles, though was most likely wood shingles originally.

Under the rear porch is a cistern which is actively used. Behind the house is a summer kitchen which requires authentic restoration.

These resources sit toward the front of the property with the house covering most of the street frontage. The lot is deep and at the rear is an exhibit pavilion constructed within the past five years.

A cursory archaeological investigation was performed by Dr. Donald Crusoe in 1978. The subsequent report provides little information which can assist in interpretation of the site. Artifacts were collected with apparently no provenience established.

The investigator considered the site to have included a carriage house based on recovered materials, but provided no further explanation. Additional research could be performed, though the contemporary garden undoubtedly disturbed the extant artifacts.

IV. Recreational Activities

A. Description of existing facilities

Passive recreation is available incidentally as a component of the house and grounds tour.

B. Alternative activities - None considered

V. Resource Assessment

A. Carrying capacities - Not applicable

## B. Surplus property determination

No portion of the property should be declared surplus.

## VI. Conformance with State and Local Plans

### A. Compliance with Conceptual State Lands Management Plan

The property is open to the public from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. every day of the year. It is also available during special celebrations, i.e. Hemingway Days Festival, Fantasy Fest, etc.

## VII. Management Responsibilities, Needs and Problems, Objectives, Policies, and Procedures

### A. Responsibilities

The property's management is handled by the Old Island Restoration Foundation with oversight by the Division of historic Resources through quarterly reports provided by the Preservation Board Manager. The Site features historic resources.

All restoration/rehabilitation activities receive prior approval from the Preservation Board and the Division after development and planning by OIRF.

### B. Needs and Problems

The property has had two uses, a single family residential parcel and a house museum reflecting the Watlington family's occupancy.

Threats to the property include, as with any site in Monroe County, danger from a hurricane. Also, the direction of tourism along Duval Street may impact the property, either positively through publicity and enhanced revenues, or negatively through property damage and trespass.

### C. Objectives, Policies and Procedures

Parking is not available on-site. A handicapped parking space will, most likely, be designated on Duval Street in front of the property. Restroom facilities, though antiquated, are on-site. Improvement to this situation is forthcoming as funding permits.

Interpretation of the Watlington family and the wrecking industry is the focus of the museum. Enhanced programming is anticipated following incorporation of additional historical detail.

The property does not have a security system, but does have a full-time caretaker who lives on the premises.

The chairman of the Old Island Restoration Foundation and the executive director of the museum have access to the property.

#### VIII. Public Involvement in Plan Development

The property is governed by a museum committee composed of citizens. This committee's decisions are ratified by the Board of Directors of the Old Island Restoration Foundation. These decisions are made in concert with the Preservation Board which retains final authority in the event of a dispute, of which there have been none.

#### IX. Executive Summary

See attached form.

#### X. Compliance with State and Local Comprehensive Plan

See attached letter from Tricia Wrenn, Planning Department, City of Key West.