

Wells

THE OLDEST HOUSE:
AN HISTORICAL RECORD
IN KEY WEST

Prepared for
The Historic Key West Preservation Board

by

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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.

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KEY WEST--A BRIEF CHRONICLE

On May 1, 1819, the Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser carried the following notice: "Several wrecking vessels from the United States were on the Florida coast and others were expected. Settlement will, in all probability, soon be made on the most convenient and habitable places along that shore, in anticipation of the occupancy of the Province by the American government."¹ This article reflected the early interest of Bahamians in the southern tip of Florida's archipelago, which dates its earliest inhabitation by whites from this period.

Prior to American acquisition of Key West, ownership of the island was transferred by a Spanish land grant to Juan P. Salas. On August 26, 1815, Salas requested a grant of land from the Governor of Spanish Florida, Don Juan de Estrada, in return for his services in the artillery of the St. Augustine garrison during the 1812-1814 insurrection. Salas specifically asked that Cayo Hueso (Key West) be given him. In August of 1815 Governor Estrada granted the island to Salas in the name of the Spanish government.² Salas retained possession of the cay until December 20, 1821, when proprietorship of the island came under U.S. jurisdiction.

In 1819 ownership of Florida was transferred by treaty from Spain to the United States. Although ratification of the agreement did not occur until 1821, the island had already attracted the attention

of American merchants who trafficked the coastal waters off the Keys. On January 19, 1822, John W. Simonton, a New Jersey native with shipping interests in Mobile, New Orleans and Havana, purchased the island from Salas for \$2,000.³ Simonton arrived in Key West in January, 1822, and later reported that there was then "no living person." Subsequently, Simonton laid his claim for the island before the Spanish Land Grant Commission, an agency set up to adjudicate the validity of ownership of Florida lands granted to individuals by the Spanish crown prior to 1921. Simonton's claim countered that of John Geddes. On December 14, 1825, however, the Commission found for Simonton. Three years later on May 23, 1828, that decision was confirmed by an Act of Congress.⁴ Shortly thereafter, Simonton sold a one-quarter share to John Warner and John Mountain, U.S. government agents in Havana; these gentlemen later sold their 25% interest in Key West to Pardon C. Greene.⁵ The second and third quarters went to John Whitehead and John W.C. Fleeming (later Fleming), both from Mobile.⁶

Concurrent with Simonton's acquisition of Key West, the U.S. Congress initiated steps to halt piracy in the Caribbean. On February 7, 1822, Secretary of the Navy Smith Thompson ordered Lt. Commander Matthew C. Perry to take possession of the island and to survey its potential as a naval depot.⁷ Perry's report concluded that Thompson's Island, as he called Key West, "possess many advantages as a naval rendezvous," and particularly commented upon the existing capacious harbor and deep water channels.⁸ A subsequent survey by Captain Daniel Patterson in 1823 provided the first descriptive and geographic account of the natural resources on the island, i.e., the soil, timber, salt pond and five fresh water springs.⁹

The strategic importance of Key West in suppressing piracy in the West Indies and in the Carriibbean was demonstrated by Commodore David Porter in the 1820s when he made the island his active base to combat the privateers. As commander of the West India Anti-Pirate Squadron in 1823, Porter directed a fleet of 3-gun schooners which patrolled the southern waters. In February, 1823, Porter's expedition had sailed from Norfolk and approached Key West by early May. The Niles Weekly Register reported on May 3, 1823:

Commodore Porter erects temporary battery of eight guns, under command of Capt. Grayson, Marine. When the guns were mounted, a salute was fired and the town called Allentown, in memory of the late Lieutenant Allen of the Navy.¹⁰

At first, the island proved a convenient spot from which to superintend operations along the Cuban coast. Supplies and naval stores shipped aboard transports and schooners arrived frequently. By summer, however, the expedition was plagued by yellow fever and Porter returned to Norfolk in October to be replaced by Commander John Rodgers.¹¹

During Porter's military rule in Key West buildings were erected and carpenters and blacksmiths as well as cargo were consigned there. A contemporary noted that the commodore:

landed on the island a large quantity of naval stores, Provisions, ordinance, building materials, etc.... The commander also proceeded to erect a number of buildings, which extended from a few feet of the proprietors' premises, then occupied by them, along the harbor south to what is now called the custom-house lot, it being that on which was subsequently built the commanding officers' quarters.

On the south side...the commodore placed a hospital and surgeon's quarters, and about a quarter mile distant from them, on the same side of the island, he placed marine officers' quarters and barracks for the pirates.¹²

Naval documents contain sparse information regarding the actual location of frameworks, although building materials were supplied to the Key West depot. An August dispatch from Commander John Rodgers listed the cargo for the southward bound schooner Hebe: "50 barrels beef, 50 barrels pork, 500 barrels bread and 1000 cases concentrated soup. P.S. If these articles will not fill up the Hebe -- then you will fill her up with lumber, of the parcel...lately sent to Thompson's Island."¹³ Inventories of supplementary provisions for Key West included: paint, "200 lbs. white lead, 50 lbs. verdigris, 20 gal^s spirits turpentine, 800 lbs. black paint, 80 gal^s linseed oil, 3 casks lamp oil."¹⁴ Food-stuffs for the sailors included barrels of pork and beef, raisins, bread, cheese, rice, molasses and whiskey.¹⁵ The present research uncovered a single reference to actual house-building. On March 2, 1825, a letter to Commander Warrington at Thompson Island requested information, "dimensions, and purpose for which house is required, and bill for stuff required for its erection."¹⁶ No further data existed. Extant pay rolls and personnel lists for the West India Squadron contain no reference to a Richard W. Cussans. No records document any connections or business transactions between Cussans and the military force stationed on the island. The earliest mention of Cussans living in Key West post-dates naval inhabitation by several years, and no military records note the sale or dispersement of property or buildings to civilian personnel in the 1820s period.

Thus a thorough survey of all available naval documents for Commodore David Porter's West India Squadron has revealed an abundance of information pertaining particularly to the thirteen schooners and sloops of war assigned to the squadron. Materiel and supplies, ship-building and sail-making provisions were specified in the data. These reports were studied in an effort to discover any link between the Navy and Cussans and to seek evidence which would verify the often-heard rumor that The Oldest House was originally part of the 1820s naval construction. The facts herein discussed tend to dispel that theory. No plans of construction or primary evidence of naval building sites support the theory that The Oldest House was originally built by the Navy.

Although the initial plans of the proprietors of Key West for the development of the town were jettisoned with the arrival of the strong-willed Commandant David Porter, the sea-faring community steadily coalesced during the decade of the 1820s. The establishment of a U.S. Customs house at Key West in 1822 gave impetus to the commercial and wrecking activities, particularly after Key West became the port of entry for southern district of Florida.¹⁷ The town itself, incorporated in November, 1828,¹⁸ and mapped by William Whitehead in 1829, housed the federal court established in 1828 when Key West became the county seat of Monroe County.¹⁹

Development of the newly emerging fishing village was restricted in the 1820s and 1830s to the area of the harbor, along Front Street between Simonton and Whitehead Streets. Two wharves and two warehouses owned by P.C. Greene and A.C. Tift fronted the wharf section.²⁰

Frame residences dotted the waterfront area and housed the five hundred Key West inhabitants of 1830.²¹ During the 1830s a Key West resident would write about the: "...eighty dwelling houses, in eight or ten groceries, ...three large warehouses..."²² Existing on the island which by then had been cleared of trees and underbrush as far south as Fleming Street and as far east as Elizabeth Street.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE OLDEST HOUSE

Typifying a New England style Bahamian house, the one-and-one-half story, two-bay building measures 40' X 45'. Architecturally, the frame dwelling at 322 exhibits several unique characteristics. It sits upon three-foot piers, which are unusually tall in Key West. These foundation piers are composed of quarried limestone and brick. Examination of the understructure of the building reveals that no floor joists run the length of the building, and existing beams are of varying widths on each side of the house. The interior walls exposed on the second floor are of unsized lumber; the planks measure sixteen inches. Such lumber may have been an exterior wall, and dates from pre-1840. Also, the interior finish work and the type of moldings around window openings are different in each half of the house suggesting that the carpentry work took place on two separate occasions. It is likely that the northwest half of The Oldest House Museum pre-dates the southern half; that the building was erected in two sections, additions being appended as finances became available to the owner. The house has been gradually enlarged over a span of nearly one hundred and fifty years. The 1912 Sanborn Insurance Map reflects a major expansion to the rear of the 1889 structure.

The three large disproportionate dormers, the dominant feature of the Cussans-Watlington House, were added during Francis Watlington's tenure there, circa 1840. Wooden shutters shield the interior from the tropical heat, as does the low porch which lines the facade.

Thus, thorough documentation for the Oldest House Museum is lacking. No actual drawings, plans, specifications or manuscripts exist. From material available to research and from inspection of the building, it seems likely that the Cussans-Watlington House is actually two houses joined together at an early period, probably some time prior to 1840, and enlarged in subsequent years.

RICHARD W. CUSSANS--A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A burgeoning economy dominated by sea-based industries took root, and townspeople migrated to Key West from the northern states and from the Bahamian islands. One such emigr  was Richard W. Cussans. The son of a New Providence carpenter Richard Cussans and his wife Amelia, Richard W. Cussans was born in Nassau on December 11, 1806, and baptized at St. Matthews Church on February 21, 1810.²³ Earliest records indicate that Cussans, a youth of twenty-two, came to Key West some time before January, 1828. On January 4th of that year Cussans' signature appears on a Petition to Congress by Key West Inhabitants arguing against recently imposed restrictions on "Florida Ports dealing with Foreign Nations."²⁴ That same month Cussans was one of Twenty-three signers of a Memorial to Congress which sought "from the increased number of inhabitants and business of the Island, the establishment of a mail between this place and the main (land)...."²⁵

The island on which Richard Cussans chose to settle was aptly described in October 1828 by Cussans' future neighbor, Judge James Webb, in a letter to Joseph M. White, Florida's Territorial Delegate:

For the last two weeks, I have been a resident of the Island, & am highly gratified at the prospect it presents of health, comfort & convenience...the island is formed of a hard limestone rock, covered with a fine rich mould, from six to twelve inches in depth, & sufficiently elevated--it is thickly set with evergreen timber... & beautifully variegated with flowering shrubs and vines, the harbor is excellent, the breezes fresh & apparently pure, the fish abundant & good--upon the whole I think it a pleasant healthy residence.... The town is handsomely situated

& contains at present, about six hundred souls, & will no doubt increase rapidly in size and commercial importance."²⁶

Cussans, a carpenter and joiner by trade, commenced his career as a Key West merchant and builder soon after his arrival. The February 26, 1829, edition of the Key West Register and Commercial Advertiser carried the following notice:

Richard W. Cussans, House Carpenter and Joiner. Having located himself at Key West, and feeling grateful for past favours, hopes by particular attention to merit, a share of public patronage. R.W.C. will contract for building and repairing houses...²⁷

Judging from the property acquisitions and personal transactions that ensued during the 1830s decade, Cussans was one of the first successful town contractors as well as an enterprising merchant. Shortly after launching his carpentry activities, Cussans made his first real estate purchase: that part of Lot 4 in Square 15 located on the northwest corner of Caroline and Whitehead Streets. On April 14, 1829, Cussans sold a "1 story frame house, kitchen and out-houses erected by me,...now occupied by Pinkham and Macon attorneys as an office, and between the house occupied by myself as a grocery, and the house occupied by Thomas Saunders as a dwelling house."²⁸ At this time buildings were centered in the area north of Caroline Street as seen in Figure 1. Cussans' grocery likely served as the neighborhood center for a time. The local newspaper carried the following as on September 3, 1829: "R.W. Cussans. Having opened at the corner of Caroline and Whitehead Streets, intends keeping constantly on hand a General Assortment of Dry Good, Groceries, and Crockery Ware, which he will dispose of on reasonable terms."²⁹

In succeeding years Cussans bought and sold various tracts of

property in Key West. A small frame house facing Caroline Street situated on portions of Lots 2 and 3 in Square 25 was sold to Anna McKennon in May, 1831.³⁰ Between 1834 and 1838 Cussans owned land on the northeast corner of Caroline and Duval on which he made capital improvements,³¹ erected structures on Front Street (Lot 2, number 2, Squares 2 and 3),³² and bought and sold the southwest corner lot at Elizabeth and Eaton Streets.³³ On July 1, 1839, Cussans paid \$1,800 for a dwelling "having two flyghts of rooms and known as the Old Billiard House," complete with a brick cistern and detached kitchen; the complex was situated on Fitzpatrick Street (Lot 5, Square 8).³⁴

Cussans, a bonded auctioneer in Key West, was also named Port Warden in 1840, as were Francis Watlington, P.A. Randolph and William H. Wall. Cussans' interest in the community is reflected by his signature upon two 1832 petitions sent from Key West to Congress-- the first sought the annulment of an act to tax foreign fishermen on the Florida Coast, and the second petition called for a lighthouse to be erected at Key West.³⁵ Local documents also record \$400 payments made to Cussans by P.C. Greene, Fielding A. Browne and Antonio Giraldo at various times. Each purchase was for a "Certain Negro Woman, a Mulatto,...a Slave for Life."³⁶

Cussans remained in Key West with his wife Rafaela Arnau Cussans during the 1830s. A mariner, Cussans continued to seek new lands, and in 1840 this zeal for discovery took him to Texas. References in Key West documents that pertain to Richard Cussans cease about this time. It is likely that Cussans sought new vistas to explore in the southern Republic and that subsequent journeys to Key West were but short forays.

Division of the Duval Street property (part of Lot 1, Square 25), future site of The Oldest House Museum, occurred in 1834. All of Lot 1 in Square 25 was acquired by Asa Tift and Thomas A. Townsend from the Estate of John W. Simonton on April 9, 1834.³⁷ The mortgage for the deed was witnessed by Mr. Cussans. Thus familiar with the property, Cussans, a friend of Tift's, likely purchased that part of Lot 1 beginning one hundred fifty feet from the intersection of Duval and Eaton Streets and running eighty feet to the line dividing Lots 1 and 2 at some time between April, 1834 and early 1836. No record of the actual property transfer to Cussans exists, however.

At this point, Richard Cussans, a thriving Key West merchant, either constructed a small, two-room Bahamian-influenced frame structure or moved one to the Duval Street site. No direct evidence supports either alternative. It seems more likely that Cussans put his carpentry skills to work on his new property rather than moving an already successful grocery from Whitehead Street. One can only surmise as to whether the original construction occurred or a building was transplanted to the site. That a house existed at this early time there is no doubt.

An instrument whereby Cussans appointed Oliver O'Hara as his attorney lists personal and real property which Cussans claimed as collateral for a loan. The document dated August 24, 1838, describes: "All my house and lot situate in the rear of a house and lot owned by James Webb...."³⁸ The Webb property at the corner of Caroline and Duval Streets, is presently the site of the Joseph Yates Porter House. An 1847 deed by which Webb sold his corner lot to Porter also is useful in dating the 322 Duval Street structure and Francis Watlington's