

Oldest House Museum restores its beehive oven

By CAROLE HEINLEIN
Contributed to The Citizen

KEY WEST — Restoration of the oldest beehive oven in South Florida was recently completed in the cookhouse of the Wreckers Museum/Oldest House at 322 Duval St.

Brick masons of Bramon Masonry carefully made the finishing touches on the 167 year old chimney, fireplace and beehive oven of this historic wrecker's home, circa 1829.

Long ago, it was the residence of Capt. Francis B. Watlington, a wrecker, coastal and harbor pilot. The museum boasts the oldest detached cookhouse known in South Florida. Unique to this kitchen is its beehive oven. The dome shape of its interior traces its origins to the 1600s, according to museum director, Nancy Jameson. She has located only one other beehive oven in Florida, at the Ximenez-Fatio house in St. Augustine built in the 1790s. There are none in Pensacola.

"Sometimes referred to as a 'Dutch oven,' the beehive oven became important to baking because the round dome forced the heat to rotate, thus baking bread evenly on all sides," said Jameson, who has also located an early 1800s iron door for the oven in Washington, Maine.

The restoration of the brick work is part of an ongoing project of improvements at the Wreckers Museum/Oldest House, according to Old Island Restoration Foundation Executive Director Betsy Dietz. She cited roof repairs and a handicapped entrance, in addition to the cookhouse restoration which will receive new siding.

"We restore what we know," said Dietz, who credited state grants and local fund raising as a means of financing it all.

Years ago in a storm, a tree fell on the cookhouse chimney and it was hastily repaired rather than restored. Since then, leakage and water damage inside, along with settling of the structure, required that something be done very soon.

Since the focus was on restoration of the chimney and fireplace at this time, brick mason Bill Kreci pointed out that the resto-



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The Old Cookhouse at the Wreckers Museum/Oldest House got a facelift from brick masons Steve Bramon, left; Bill Kreci and Mark Mulcahy. They are shown with the restored chimney and beehive oven. The long-overdue restoration work was made possible by a state grant.

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ration required three weeks — as opposed to three days — if the objective was simply to reconstruct. He was assisted by Mark Mulcahy, a descendant of Irish bricklayers.

Kreci exhibited some bricks known as "clinkers" used during the period of the original construction, and claimed that only 10 percent of the brick used in the restoration is new.

"We were able to clean most of the original bricks and turn them around," says Kreci. "Work was slow, as parts of the fireplace only had one layer of bricks, while other parts had two layers."

Steven Bramon, head of the

firm and in the masonry business for three generations, was obviously proud of the project. "It's harder to do it the way they used to do it," he said. "Now, you have to study it, use the same tooling, the same mortar mixture, and similar brick." Not an easy task, as brick was handmade until the 1880s.

The Wreckers' Museum/The Oldest House, operated by volunteers and maintained by Old Island Restoration Foundation, is owned by Historic Florida Keys Preservation Board. It is open to the public daily from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. It tells the story of 19th Century wrecking in the days of wooden sailing ships.