

Antebellum houses

A recent book on the antebellum homes of Florida focuses almost exclusively on the northern part of the state. Yet Key West was the largest and wealthiest city in Florida during this period, and people built significant buildings to match their numbers and affluence.

Antebellum architecture in the South has long been the subject of nostalgic retrospectives, revered for its association with "gracious living." Of course, this view depended entirely upon one's perspective: Slavery was legal and thriving in the Keys before the Civil War — so Africans and their descendants had a different experience. Poor whites also would have little reason to romanticize their lot.

Indeed, life must have been hard: Sailing to and from the Keys was slow, unpredictable and dangerous. And while winters may have been relatively comfortable, summers were certainly difficult with mosquitoes, yellow fever and unmitigated heat.

At the time, the Keys had a salty, maritime flavor, with people working in fishing, wrecking, sea-salt making, shipbuilding, hemp manufacturing, turtling, commerce and sponging.

An early magazine reported the presence of 650 houses in 1851, while another publication in 1862 noted 800 houses in Key West. Many of these have not survived, as hurricanes, fires and demolition took their toll. Some, however, remain and offer hints of life in the Keys before the Civil War.

Common features include wood construction, placement on stone piers, gable roofs, front porches and simple rectangular massing. Additionally, they were either one and a half or two and a half stories. They also often featured a central-hall floor plan, allowing for cross ventilation.

One of Key West's earliest carpenters, Richard Cussans, built what we now know as the Oldest House at 322 Duval St. Wrecking captain Francis Watlington and his wife Emeline occupied the property at least as early as 1836. Over the years, the family gradually expanded their accommodations. In the backyard stands a surviving cook house with an open fireplace.

The building at 336 Duval St. was possibly constructed circa 1838 at another location and moved to this lot, which Alexander Patterson acquired in 1847. The Baldwin family bought the property in 1860, which



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also seems to have been used as a school. The scrollwork decoration was probably added after the Civil War. Today, the structure houses Prudential Knightside Properties.

Judge James Webb — the first federal judge serving this area

of Florida — is believed to have built the house at 429 Caroline St. in 1838. Joseph Porter, a merchant from Charleston, S.C., bought the property in 1845. His son and namesake — who later became a celebrated physician — was born in the house. In 1896, Dr. Porter made extensive alterations, adding the mansard roof, Victorian trim

and balconies.

An Englishman, Capt. George Carey, built the house at 410 Caroline St. Jessie Porter Newton bought the property in 1934 and remodeled it. Now known as the Heritage House, it is open to the public. John Bartlum is said to have moved the house now at 730 Eaton St. from the Bahamas in

1847. This noted shipbuilder constructed the only clipper ship built in Florida, the Stephen R. Mallory, launched in 1856.

Also moving from the Bahamas in 1847, John Bartlum's brother-in-law, wrecking captain Richard Roberts, is said to have made a similar journey with his house, now at 408 William St.

Capt. John Geiger, a successful wrecker and harbor pilot, built the house at 205 Whitehead St. between 1846 and 1850. At the time, his family was one of the 10 wealthiest in Key West, owning a number of slaves. The property is now known as the Audubon House.

John Curry — born on Green Turtle Cay, Bahamas — came to Key West around 1840, building the house at 311 William St. about 10 years later.

A house now at 615 Olivia St. may have built by Adam Gordon circa 1850 — at 619 Simonton St. A later owner moved it in 1910 to its present location. It exhibits fine Greek-revival detailing.

The building at 514 Elizabeth St. seems to date to 1855. Over the years, a succession of owners bearing familiar Bahamian names — Knowles, Saunders,

Russell — owned the property. St. Paul's Church, at the corner of Duval and Eaton Streets — built its rectory in 1857, originally facing Eaton Street. The Rev. and Mrs. Osgood Herrick were the first occupants. In 1914, the house was moved to face Duval Street.

Capt. John Lowe Jr., built the large and handsome house at 620 Southard St. circa 1857-1865. He married Mary Lowe in 1858 and worked for the firm of Bowne and Curry. Later, he made a fortune in sponging. Finally, this picture of ante-

bellum homes in the Keys will be more complete if we remember that Pigeon Key was also settled at this time. There, Henry Perrine — a noted botanist studying tropical plants — lived in a two-story house on the water, clearly depicted in an early view. The settlement was destroyed in 1840 in a raid during the Second Seminole War.

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