

Key West's Oldest House Newsletter

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The Watlington Goblets

Sometime in the early 1800's, perhaps as a romantic gesture to his new bride Emeline, Captain Francis Watlington took two coconut shells to New York's premier silversmith, William G. Forbes. He asked that they be made into goblets.

Forbes turned the project over to Joseph and Teunis D. Dubois, rural silversmiths who made exquisite silver items to be sold in New York shops like Forbes'. They carefully carved coconut palm trees and pineapples into the shells. On the other side they carved the captain's initials in such an elaborate, swirly pattern that a descendent had trouble recognizing the middle initial: "B" for Benjamin. The Dubois brothers polished the coconut shells until they gleamed. They added rims of silver, and set them onto silver stands. Alongside Forbes' hallmark, they proudly stamped their own pseudo-hallmarks on the silver bases.

The newlyweds took the goblets with them when they sailed south to Key West, where Emeline's father had a few wrecking vessels; it was the promise of a new life in a frontier territory which must have dazzled their imaginations. The goblets took pride of place in their newly-built home, which eventually became "The Oldest House In Key West". Although they had nine daughters together, Francis and Emeline apparently became estranged over the years. After the captain sailed north to Mobile, to fight for the south during the Civil War, he never returned to Emeline.

Emeline died in 1881. In August 1936, descendant Sallie Sawyer wrote to her cousin, Edward Howe II: ***"Captain Watlington wrote from Mobile to Aunt Sarah, telling her that since her mother had died he gave her full authority over, and full possession of the household and personal belongings....., and she was to do for Aunt Lillie and she was to give her whatever she wished, especially the goblets....."***

Sarah and Lillie were two of Francis' and Emeline's surviving daughters. Lillie was the youngest and only unmarried daughter; she wanted Edward to have the goblets. In a later letter of the same year, Sallie wrote: ***"Please don't give the goblets up to anyone, but enjoy them, and hand them down to your children and their children after them."***

In February 1941, Edward wrote to his son, Edward Howe III: ***"I am glad the coconut cups arrived in good condition..... the cups stood on the mantel in the house as long as anybody could remember, and were the family's most prized possession. When I went to see your grandmother in 1885, I was shown the cups and was told that as I was the oldest male descendant, they would come to me eventually....."***



The goblets remained in the Howe family for 64 more years. In April 2005, Robert and Susan Howe Hutchins travelled from Massachusetts to present the goblets to The Oldest House. They donated the goblets on their behalf, and also two other great-granddaughters, Barbara Howe Philips, and Florence Howe Murat. ***"These goblets have been in my family for generations",*** said Susan. ***"We feel it is time that they return to the home where they belong."***

Often overlooked by visitors, the goblets now stand in the old corner cabinet in the dining room, testament to young love lost and a carefully preserved heritage.

Are you a member of OIRF?

Through private donations and memberships from individuals, business, and public agencies we are working to raise funds to preserve and maintain the Oldest House in south Florida, provide innovative programming, and provide grants for significant and worthy historical restoration projects in Key West. You can help us make it happen here: www.oirf.org/join