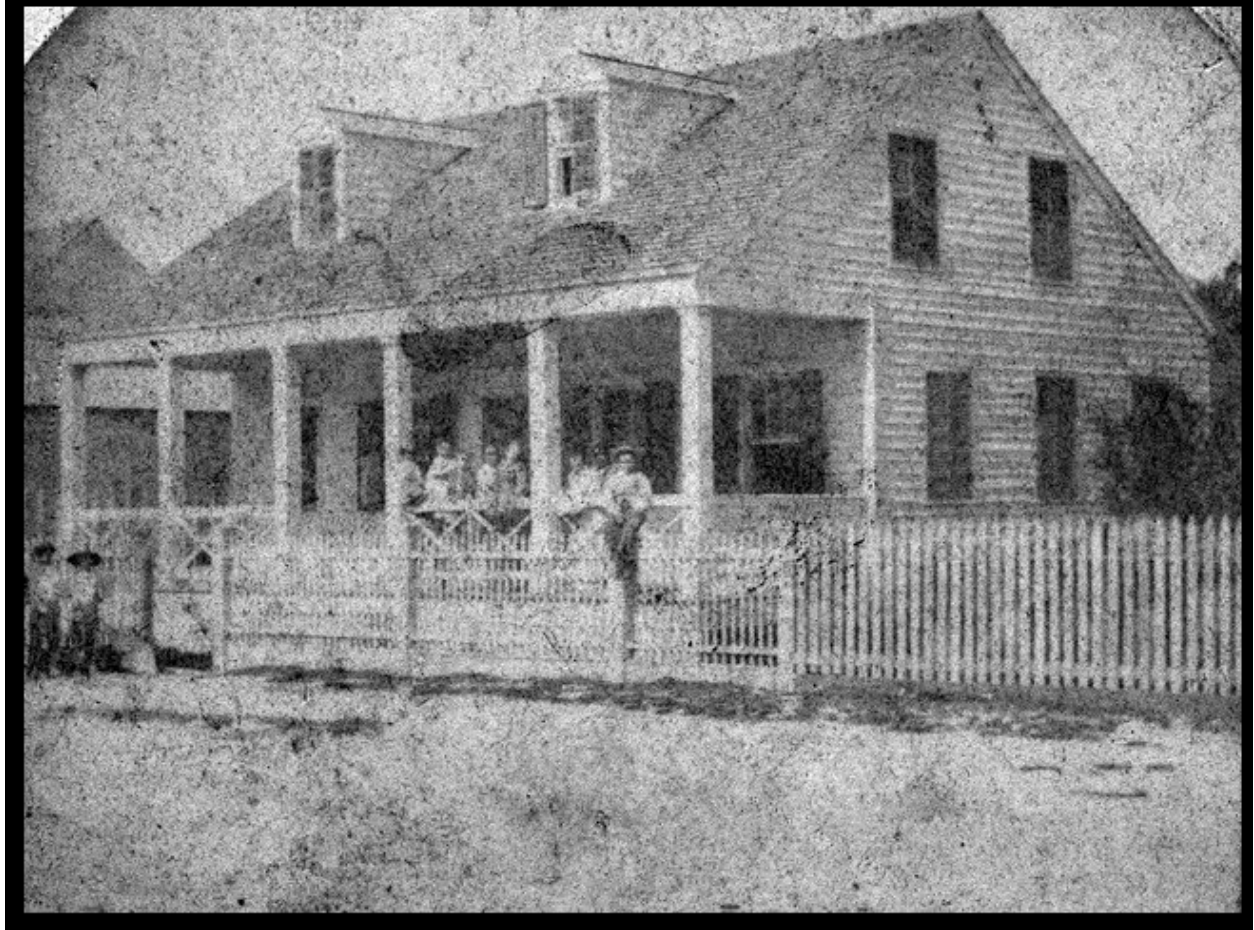


CONSTRUCTION OF THE OLDEST HOUSE

(Oldest House Museum Facebook post October 5, 2018) – added current photo

<https://www.facebook.com/OldestHouseandGardensKeyWest/posts/construction-of-the-oldest-house-the-builder-of-the-house-was-richard-cussans-who/2106615702684830/>











1930's



2015



2024

The builder of the house was Richard Cussans, who immigrated to the Island of Key West in about 1826 from the Bahamas. He was in his mid-twenties when he built the house. He may have trained and apprenticed as a ship's carpenter but he would not have been a shipwright at that young age. That level of craft was not easily achieved. He owned slaves, and likely used their labors in the construction of the house in 1829. He was an enterprising and talented young man who built several of the original buildings on the island which he either sold or rented out. Several other structures he built have not survived. It is believed he left Key West in the late 1830s and sailed west to the new Republic of Texas. The structure was NOT moved from another location. There is no evidence to support that legend. There is strong evidence that suggests Cussans may have moved one or two cabin size buildings to the 322 Duval St. site from other property he owned and developed. They were likely used as shelter while the house was being built. Those small structures were incorporated into the construction of the house as we know it. It is important to know that Duval Street did not exist in 1829 when the house was built. It was drawn on a survey map done that same year, but was not developed in the 300 block until about 1850, after the salt pond was filled in up to Caroline St. (The pond was not in the 300 block). The 1829 survey was, and still is the basis for all real property descriptions in the original City of Key West.

The house was built from lumber sourced in South Florida. That may have included cypress, cedar, and most certainly Dade County Pine. That virgin growth was harvested out and is no longer available for lumber. Habitat loss insures its scarcity. These wood materials are renowned for their durability in our harsh environment. We know that wood sourced from ship salvage was also used. Even though one or two smaller buildings may have been incorporated in the construction, the methods followed practices of the day for Bahamian

carpenters. A frame was built of large timbers, without the use of nails, which stress the wood and can cause cracks and splits. Joinery, mortise and tenon posts and beams were fitted together mechanically and secured with holes bored and pegged. A method used in wooden ship building, this creates a tight and rigid structure that is unlikely to fail from cracks and breakage due to stresses. Additionally, the framing was sheathed on both exterior and interior supporting walls with one inch thick pine boards using cut nails. This box-in-a-box construction made the building even more rigid and tough.

The style of the house is called Bahamian vernacular cottage with New England touches, or Bahamian colonial. Up north it could be called a 'cape cod.' As a story and a half design, the upper level was originally a single open space, meant for storage and heat escape, not habitation. The growth of the Watlington family and subsequent generations led to the addition of the unique gabled dormers and interior partitions. There were, at one time or another, residential out buildings and appendages which have not survived. These may have included slave quarters. Earle S. Johnson, a great grandson of the Watlingtons died in 1972. At that time, the house was in such poor condition it was at risk of demolition. Saved for preservation, many repairs were essential before it could be opened to the public. A detailed report was written in 1974 regarding the conditions found that needed repair or restoration. Rot found throughout the structure was the result of an ill repaired leaking roof. During repair and restoration, examples of wood and other materials were set aside to illustrate what was found. Unfortunately, those items are long since missing. Some hand fitted wood pieces, carved trim, recycled ships' wood, samples of old wallpaper, several gravestone chunks used as porch piers, and other interesting items have been lost to time and circumstance. It was not a 'gut-rehab' as we see in old town in our modern era. They did not revert anything to make it look old or original. All structural repairs were done on a board-by-board basis wherever practical. Several major projects have been undertaken since then to ensure its survival. The continues to require care and maintenance as does any old structure. It is Key West history, it is the Oldest House.