

HISTORICAL DIG: RESEARCH ARCHAEOLOGISTS DIG INTO 1800S LIFE IN KEY WEST

By **Mandy Miles** - July 19, 2021



Nance Frank and Mayor Teri Johnston examine the artifacts. TERRY MARTIN/Contributed

Digging a 2-foot hole in one's backyard usually wouldn't warrant a team of student archaeologists from the University of Miami. But then, most backyards don't date back to 1829 — and they don't conceal centuries-old dishes, tools, cooking instruments and other common household items that provide a glimpse into Key West's past and the lives of those who called it home.

Key West's Oldest House, 322 Duval St., built in 1829, is now a museum and headquarters of the Old Island Restoration Foundation, which operates the house for the state of Florida, which owns the historical resource.

University of Miami anthropology professor Monica Faraldo brought a small team of students to the house on July 10-11 for a preliminary excavation of the large backyard behind the Oldest House.

"This was a preliminary dig, so we dug test holes, just to ensure that there was something to find," said Tom Greenwood, a historical consultant for the Oldest House who worked with Faraldo 20 years ago, when she did the same excavation on the Audubon House grounds.



Careful digging, sifting and rinsing reveal Key West's past. TERRY MARTIN/Contributed

The artifacts found there led to the creation of a new exhibit that recreated the outdoor cook houses that were common in Key West in the 1800s, when the oppressive heat and lack of air-conditioning would have made indoor kitchens, with their open fires, unbearably hot.

"After such an exciting and successful project at the Audubon House, here we are 20 years later doing it again at the Oldest House," Greenwood said. "It's really eye-

opening to discover tangible, real-life objects that were used by real people so long ago."



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The test pits proved quite productive, with the unearthing of numerous early to mid-19th-century pottery and china shards, he said.



Pottery, glassware and other artifacts were found during a recent preliminary archaeological excavation in the backyard of Key West's Oldest House, which was built in 1829 and is now a museum. TERRY MARTIN/Contributed

"Some of them are a very similar blue and white pattern to what was found during the Audubon House dig. These clues show us the economic status and lifestyle accoutrements of the first American settlers in Key West in the 1820s and '30s," Greenwood said.

The goal is to match the recovered shards to actual intact antique objects. Those items can be added to the Oldest House's interior.

"For example, we'd love to set the dining room table in the same way the American settlers in Key West did," Greenwood said. "We are also planning to restore the interior rooms and furnishings back to their original 19th-century splendor, with period furniture and textiles."

Greenwood and Faraldo will seek approval from the state to conduct a full excavation of the backyard next month.

Stay tuned, Greenwood said.



The recent preliminary findings will likely lead to a full excavation next month. TERRY MARTIN/Contributed

MANDY MILES

Mandy Miles drops stuff, breaks things and falls down more than any adult should. An award-winning writer, reporter and columnist, she's been stringing words together in Key West since 1998. "Local news is crucial," she says. "It informs and connects a community. It prompts conversation. It gets people involved, holds people accountable. The Keys Weekly takes its responsibility seriously. Our owners are raising families in Key West & Marathon. Our writers live in the communities we cover - Key West, Marathon & the Upper Keys. We respect our readers. We question our leaders. We believe in the Florida Keys community. And we like to have a good time." Mandy's married to a saintly — and handy — fishing captain, and can't imagine living anywhere else.

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