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THE OLDEST HOUSE:
AN HISTORICAL RECORD
IN KEY WEST

Prepared for
The Historic Key West Preservation Board

by

Sharon Wells

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INTRODUCTION

This study focusing upon a single Key West Conch dwelling known as The Oldest House was researched under the auspices of the Historic Key West Preservation Board and funded by a National Park Service grant authorized through the Division of Archives, History and Records Management. It comprises one section of a threefold investigation into the archeological, historical and architectural aspects of the Oldest House. Donated in 1974 by Mrs. Rosemary W. Austin to its present owner, the Historic Key West Preservation Board, The Oldest House presently is operated as a museum by the Old Island Restoration Foundation.

This historical assessment was conducted by the author over a three-month period and incorporates documentary research from the National Archives and the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., the Research Department of the Monroe County Public Library, and the Monroe County Courthouse. Source material from New York to Nassau to Key West was sought in an effort to fully document the site of 322 Duval Street and lay to rest the romantic conjecture and historical rumor that so often evolves. This study represents the first complete historical evaluation and compilation of records and biographical data pertaining to persons and events associated with the Oldest House. In a broader context, it illumines the earliest decades in the life of the island-town of Key West. It is hoped that material derived from this analysis will serve as a factual guide for future

narratives and expand the present knowledge of Key West's cultural heritage.

In particular the author wishes to acknowledge the singular contributions of Historian Betty Bruce whose collection of historical material and priceless Notebooks was an invaluable asset and served as a point of departure for this account.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This historical documentary of The Oldest House Museum in Key West, Florida, is intended to raise questions and seek answers about the structure itself and its inhabitants. A subsidiary aim is to provide a catalog of available source materials for the beginning decades in Key West's history. The object is to offer an accurate presentation of extant historical evidence and to formulate evaluations where possible. Documentation regarding the original erection and possible subsequent relocation of the dwelling, however, is negligible and unlikely to be unearthed. Material pertaining to the varied occupancies and title transactions of the building is scattered. Thus, to compile the available data into a cohesive body the following questions were posed:

- 1) What were the activities of Commodore David Porter's West India Anti-Pirate Squadron in Key West? What construction was undertaken by the naval force? Did Richard Cussans have any connections to the maritime troops?
- 2) When did Richard Cussans arrive in Key West and what were his business transactions? To identify his background, his career, his tenure on the island and his links to the Oldest House were major objectives.
- 3) What are the earliest references to the Duval Street property found in the local county records? Was the

Bahama-style house originally erected on the present site? Does evidence exist to substantiate the theory of its removal from the corner of Whitehead and Caroline Streets to Duval Street? What does inspection of the physical structure reveal? What was the settlement pattern for square 25 on William Whitehead's Plan of Key West?

- 4) When did the Watlington family first inhabit 322 Duval Street? To more fully define the Watlington family genealogy and to focus critically upon the biography of Francis Watlington were main points of consideration.

To clarify such inquiries extensive bibliographic references were consulted. The varied collection of primary source materials included: U.S. naval records for the 1822-1828 period of the West India Squadron under Porter, the Mobile Squadron records for the Civil War years, and U.S. Census records dating from 1790. Biographical information was gleaned from contemporary newspaper accounts, almanacs, ships' passengers lists and wills. Local Deed Book entries, assessment rolls, church and cemetery documents and Sanborn maps supplemented an examination of contemporary and secondary written accounts. Thus, the aim has been to set forth the chronology for the site of 322 Duval Street and to present the microcosmic world of a single Key West dwelling.

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KEY WEST--A BRIEF CHRONICLE

On May 1, 1819, the Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser carried the following notice: "Several wrecking vessels from the United States were on the Florida coast and others were expected. Settlement will, in all probability, soon be made on the most convenient and habitable places along that shore, in anticipation of the occupancy of the Province by the American government."¹ This article reflected the early interest of Bahamians in the southern tip of Florida's archipelago, which dates its earliest inhabitation by whites from this period.

Prior to American acquisition of Key West, ownership of the island was transferred by a Spanish land grant to Juan P. Salas. On August 26, 1815, Salas requested a grant of land from the Governor of Spanish Florida, Don Juan de Estrada, in return for his services in the artillery of the St. Augustine garrison during the 1812-1814 insurrection. Salas specifically asked that Cayo Hueso (Key West) be given him. In August of 1815 Governor Estrada granted the island to Salas in the name of the Spanish government.² Salas retained possession of the cay until December 20, 1821, when proprietorship of the island came under U.S. jurisdiction.

In 1819 ownership of Florida was transferred by treaty from Spain to the United States. Although ratification of the agreement did not occur until 1821, the island had already attracted the attention

of American merchants who trafficked the coastal waters off the Keys. On January 19, 1822, John W. Simonton, a New Jersey native with shipping interests in Mobile, New Orleans and Havana, purchased the island from Salas for \$2,000.³ Simonton arrived in Key West in January, 1822, and later reported that there was then "no living person." Subsequently, Simonton laid his claim for the island before the Spanish Land Grant Commission, an agency set up to adjudicate the validity of ownership of Florida lands granted to individuals by the Spanish crown prior to 1921. Simonton's claim countered that of John Geddes. On December 14, 1825, however, the Commission found for Simonton. Three years later on May 23, 1828, that decision was confirmed by an Act of Congress.⁴ Shortly thereafter, Simonton sold a one-quarter share to John Warner and John Mountain, U.S. government agents in Havana; these gentlemen later sold their 25% interest in Key West to Pardon C. Greene.⁵ The second and third quarters went to John Whitehead and John W.C. Fleeming (later Fleming), both from Mobile.⁶

Concurrent with Simonton's acquisition of Key West, the U.S. Congress initiated steps to halt piracy in the Caribbean. On February 7, 1822, Secretary of the Navy Smith Thompson ordered Lt. Commander Matthew C. Perry to take possession of the island and to survey its potential as a naval depot.⁷ Perry's report concluded that Thompson's Island, as he called Key West, "possess many advantages as a naval rendezvous," and particularly commented upon the existing capacious harbor and deep water channels.⁸ A subsequent survey by Captain Daniel Patterson in 1823 provided the first descriptive and geographic account of the natural resources on the island, i.e., the soil, timber, salt pond and five fresh water springs.⁹

The strategic importance of Key West in suppressing piracy in the West Indies and in the Carribbean was demonstrated by Commodore David Porter in the 1820s when he made the island his active base to combat the privateers. As commander of the West India Anti-Pirate Squadron in 1823, Porter directed a fleet of 3-gun schooners which patrolled the southern waters. In February, 1823, Porter's expedition had sailed from Norfolk and approached Key West by early May. The Niles Weekly Register reported on May 3, 1823:

Commodore Porter erects temporary battery of eight guns, under command of Capt. Grayson, Marine. When the guns were mounted, a salute was fired and the town called Allentown, in memory of the late Lieutenant Allen of the Navy.¹⁰

At first, the island proved a convenient spot from which to superintend operations along the Cuban coast. Supplies and naval stores shipped aboard transports and schooners arrived frequently. By summer, however, the expedition was plagued by yellow fever and Porter returned to Norfolk in October to be replaced by Commander John Rodgers.¹¹

During Porter's military rule in Key West buildings were erected and carpenters and blacksmiths as well as cargo were consigned there. A contemporary noted that the commodore:

landed on the island a large quantity of naval stores, Provisions, ordinance, building materials, etc.... The commander also proceeded to erect a number of buildings, which extended from a few feet of the proprietors' premises, then occupied by them, along the harbor south to what is now called the custom-house lot, it being that on which was subsequently built the commanding officers' quarters.

On the south side...the commodore placed a hospital and surgeon's quarters, and about a quarter mile distant from them, on the same side of the island, he placed marine officers' quarters and barracks for the pirates.¹²

Naval documents contain sparse information regarding the actual location of frameworks, although building materials were supplied to the Key West depot. An August dispatch from Commander John Rodgers listed the cargo for the southward bound schooner Hebe: "50 barrels beef, 50 barrels pork, 500 barrels bread and 1000 cases concentrated soup. P.S. If these articles will not fill up the Hebe -- then you will fill her up with lumber, of the parcel...lately sent to Thompson's Island."¹³ Inventories of supplementary provisions for Key West included: paint, "200 lbs. white lead, 50 lbs. verdigris, 20 gal^s spirits turpentine, 800 lbs. black paint, 80 gal^s linseed oil, 3 casks lamp oil."¹⁴ Food-stuffs for the sailors included barrels of pork and beef, raisins, bread, cheese, rice, molasses and whiskey.¹⁵ The present research uncovered a single reference to actual house-building. On March 2, 1825, a letter to Commander Warrington at Thompson Island requested information, "dimensions, and purpose for which house is required, and bill for stuff required for its erection."¹⁶ No further data existed. Extant pay rolls and personnel lists for the West India Squadron contain no reference to a Richard W. Cussans. No records document any connections or business transactions between Cussans and the military force stationed on the island. The earliest mention of Cussans living in Key West post-dates naval inhabitation by several years, and no military records note the sale or dispersment of property or buildings to civilian personnel in the 1820s period.

Thus a thorough survey of all available naval documents for Commodore David Porter's West India Squadron has revealed an abundance of information pertaining particularly to the thirteen schooners and sloops of war assigned to the squadron. Materiel and supplies, ship-building and sail-making provisions were specified in the data. These reports were studied in an effort to discover any link between the Navy and Cussans and to seek evidence which would verify the often-heard rumor that The Oldest House was originally part of the 1820s naval construction. The facts herein discussed tend to dispel that theory. No plans of construction or primary evidence of naval building sites support the theory that The Oldest House was originally built by the Navy.

Although the initial plans of the proprietors of Key West for the development of the town were jettisoned with the arrival of the strong-willed Commandant David Porter, the sea-faring community steadily coalesced during the decade of the 1820s. The establishment of a U.S. Customs house at Key West in 1822 gave impetus to the commercial and wrecking activities, particularly after Key West became the port of entry for southern district of Florida.¹⁷ The town itself, incorporated in November, 1828,¹⁸ and mapped by William Whitehead in 1829, housed the federal court established in 1828 when Key West became the county seat of Monroe County.¹⁹

Development of the newly emerging fishing village was restricted in the 1820s and 1830s to the area of the harbor, along Front Street between Simonton and Whitehead Streets. Two wharves and two warehouses owned by P.C. Greene and A.C. Tift fronted the wharf section.²⁰

Frame residences dotted the waterfront area and housed the five hundred Key West inhabitants of 1830.²¹ During the 1830s a Key West resident would write about the: "...eighty dwelling houses, in eight or ten groceries, ...three large warehouses..."²² Existing on the island which by then had been cleared of trees and underbrush as far south as Fleming Street and as far east as Elizabeth Street.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE OLDEST HOUSE

Typifying a New England style Bahamian house, the one-and-one-half story, two-bay building measures 40' X 45'. Architecturally, the frame dwelling at 322 exhibits several unique characteristics. It sits upon three-foot piers, which are unusually tall in Key West. These foundation piers are composed of quarried limestone and brick. Examination of the understructure of the building reveals that no floor joists run the length of the building, and existing beams are of varying widths on each side of the house. The interior walls exposed on the second floor are of unsized lumber; the planks measure sixteen inches. Such lumber may have been an exterior wall, and dates from pre-1840. Also, the interior finish work and the type of moldings around window openings are different in each half of the house suggesting that the carpentry work took place on two separate occasions. It is likely that the northwest half of The Oldest House Museum pre-dates the southern half; that the building was erected in two sections, additions being appended as finances became available to the owner. The house has been gradually enlarged over a span of nearly one hundred and fifty years. The 1912 Sanborn Insurance Map reflects a major expansion to the rear of the 1889 structure.

The three large disproportionate dormers, the dominant feature of the Cussans-Watlington House, were added during Francis Watlington's tenure there, circa 1840. Wooden shutters shield the interior from the tropical heat, as does the low porch which lines the facade.

Thus, thorough documentation for the Oldest House Museum is lacking. No actual drawings, plans, specifications or manuscripts exist. From material available to research and from inspection of the building, it seems likely that the Cussans-Watlington House is actually two houses joined together at an early period, probably some time prior to 1840, and enlarged in subsequent years.

RICHARD W. CUSSANS---A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A burgeoning economy dominated by sea-based industries took root, and townspeople migrated to Key West from the northern states and from the Bahamian islands. One such emigr  was Richard W. Cussans. The son of a New Providence carpenter Richard Cussans and his wife Amelia, Richard W. Cussans was born in Nassau on December 11, 1806, and baptized at St. Matthews Church on February 21, 1810.²³ Earliest records indicate that Cussans, a youth of twenty-two, came to Key West some time before January, 1828. On January 4th of that year Cussans' signature appears on a Petition to Congress by Key West Inhabitants arguing against recently imposed restrictions on "Florida Ports dealing with Foreign Nations."²⁴ That same month Cussans was one of Twenty-three signers of a Memorial to Congress which sought "from the increased number of inhabitants and business of the Island, the establishment of a mail between this place and the main (land)...."²⁵

The island on which Richard Cussans chose to settle was aptly described in October 1828 by Cussans' future neighbor, Judge James Webb, in a letter to Joseph M. White, Florida's Territorial Delegate:

For the last two weeks, I have been a resident of the Island, & am highly gratified at the prospect it presents of health, comfort & convenience---the island is formed of a hard limestone rock, covered with a fine rich mould, from six to twelve inches in depth, & sufficiently elevated---it is thickly set with evergreen timber... & beautifully variegated with flowering shrubs and vines, the harbor is excellent, the breezes fresh & apparently pure, the fish abundant & good---upon the whole I think it a pleasant healthy residence.... The town is handsomely situated

& contains at present, about six hundred souls, & will no doubt increase rapidly in size and commercial importance."²⁶

Cussans, a carpenter and joiner by trade, commenced his career as a Key West merchant and builder soon after his arrival. The February 26, 1829, edition of the Key West Register and Commercial Advertiser carried the following notice:

Richard W. Cussans, House Carpenter and Joiner. Having located himself at Key West, and feeling grateful for past favours, hopes by particular attention to merit, a share of public patronage. R.W.C. will contract for building and repairing houses...²⁷

Judging from the property acquisitions and personal transactions that ensued during the 1830s decade, Cussans was one of the first successful town contractors as well as an enterprising merchant. Shortly after launching his carpentry activities, Cussans made his first real estate purchase: that part of Lot 4 in Square 15 located on the northwest corner of Caroline and Whitehead Streets. On April 14, 1829, Cussans sold a "1 story frame house, kitchen and out-houses erected by me,...now occupied by Pinkham and Macon attorneys as an office, and between the house occupied by myself as a grocery, and the house occupied by Thomas Saunders as a dwelling house."²⁸ At this time buildings were centered in the area north of Caroline Street as seen in Figure 1. Cussans' grocery likely served as the neighborhood center for a time. The local newspaper carried the following as on September 3, 1829: "R.W. Cussans. Having opened at the corner of Caroline and Whitehead Streets, intends keeping constantly on hand a General Assortment of Dry Good, Groceries, and Crockery Ware, which he will dispose of on reasonable terms."²⁹

In succeeding years Cussans bought and sold various tracts of

property in Key West. A small frame house facing Caroline Street situated on portions of Lots 2 and 3 in Square 25 was sold to Anna McKennon in May, 1831.³⁰ Between 1834 and 1838 Cussans owned land on the northeast corner of Caroline and Duval on which he made capital improvements,³¹ erected structures on Front Street (Lot 2, number 2, Squares 2 and 3),³² and bought and sold the southwest corner lot at Elizabeth and Eaton Streets.³³ On July 1, 1839, Cussans paid \$1,800 for a dwelling "having two flyghts of rooms and known as the Old Billiard House," complete with a brick cistern and detached kitchen; the complex was situated on Fitzpatrick Street (Lot 5, Square 8).³⁴

Cussans, a bonded auctioneer in Key West, was also named Port Warden in 1840, as were Francis Watlington, P.A. Randolph and William H. Wall. Cussans' interest in the community is reflected by his signature upon two 1832 petitions sent from Key West to Congress-- the first sought the annulment of an act to tax foreign fishermen on the Florida Coast, and the second petition called for a lighthouse to be erected at Key West.³⁵ Local documents also record \$400 payments made to Cussans by P.C. Greene, Fielding A. Browne and Antonio Giraldo at various times. Each purchase was for a "Certain Negro Woman, a Mulatto,...a Slave for Life."³⁶

Cussans remained in Key West with his wife Rafaela Arnau Cussans during the 1830s. A mariner, Cussans continued to seek new lands, and in 1840 this zeal for discovery took him to Texas. References in Key West documents that pertain to Richard Cussans cease about this time. It is likely that Cussans sought new vistas to explore in the southern Republic and that subsequent journeys to Key West were but short forays.

Division of the Duval Street property (part of Lot 1, Square 25), future site of The Oldest House Museum, occurred in 1834. All of Lot 1 in Square 25 was acquired by Asa Tift and Thomas A. Townsend from the Estate of John W. Simonton on April 9, 1834.³⁷ The mortgage for the deed was witnessed by Mr. Cussans. Thus familiar with the property, Cussans, a friend of Tift's, likely purchased that part of Lot 1 beginning one hundred fifty feet from the intersection of Duval and Eaton Streets and running eighty feet to the line dividing Lots 1 and 2 at some time between April, 1834 and early 1836. No record of the actual property transfer to Cussans exists, however.

At this point, Richard Cussans, a thriving Key West merchant, either constructed a small, two-room Bahamian-influenced frame structure or moved one to the Duval Street site. No direct evidence supports either alternative. It seems more likely that Cussans put his carpentry skills to work on his new property rather than moving an already successful grocery from Whitehead Street. One can only surmise as to whether the original construction occurred or a building was transplanted to the site. That a house existed at this early time there is no doubt.

An instrument whereby Cussans appointed Oliver O'Hara as his attorney lists personal and real property which Cussans claimed as collateral for a loan. The document dated August 24, 1838, describes: "All my house and lot situate in the rear of a house and lot owned by James Webb...."³⁸ The Webb property at the corner of Caroline and Duval Streets, is presently the site of the Joseph Yates Porter House. An 1847 deed by which Webb sold his corner lot to Porter also is useful in dating the 322 Duval Street structure and Francis Watlington's

residency there. In describing Webb's property, the deed contains this description: "...being bounded on the Northwest side by Caroline Street, on the Northeast side by Duval Street, on the Southeast side by the lot occupied in 1836 by Francis Watlington and on the Southwest side by lands now or lately occupied by William Marvin."³⁹ Although W.A. Whitehead's 1838 pencil sketch of structures on the island (Figure 2) denotes a "House begun by Judge Webb, unfinished," Cussans' framework behind it is not visible. The deed book entries, nonetheless, substantiate its existence by 1836.

FRANCIS WATLINGTON: PORTRAIT OF A SEA CAPTAIN

Captain Francis Watlington, a sea-faring pilot born in St. Croix on April 1, 1804,⁴³ became familiar with the island of Key West on his journeys along the triangular trade route between New York, Nassau and Key West. Newspaper records indicate young Watlington's first acquaintance with Cayo Hueso occurred in 1829, concurrent with Cussans' arrival. The Key West Register reported a list of persons, among them a Francis Watlington, for whom letters were being kept in August, 1829.⁴⁴

Watlington's family which traced its early ancestry to Devon, England and Bermuda had migrated to New York at the turn of the eighteenth century. Francis' father Thomas Watlington, a shipmaster, took up residence with his wife Sarah at 20 Franklin Street in New York City.⁴⁵ In time their son Francis bought several schooners with which he engaged in shipping and wrecking along the eastern coast and Caribbean islands.

Watlington returned in 1830 bringing his young bride Emeline Johnson Watlington to settle in Key West. The youthful Mrs. Watlington was born in New York in 1812,⁴⁶ the daughter of Charles and Hannah Johnson, 7 Thames Street on Staten Island.⁴⁷ A shipmaster, Charles Johnson owned considerable New York property; upon his death in 1828 Johnson's assets were bequeathed to his wife and thence to be distributed among their five children: John W., Charles, Amelia, Emeline (Watlington) and Louisa (Herder.) (A copy of the 1828 will is included in the Appendix).

Francis Watlington, a master seaman, was appointed Pilot for Monroe County by the State Legislative Council in 1834,⁴⁸ served as Inspector of Customs at the Carysfort Lighthouse in 1838,⁴⁹ and was named Port Warden for Key West in 1840.⁵⁰ He operated the schooners Black Hawk⁵¹ and Caroline,⁵² collecting salvage and transporting passengers and goods to Nassau.

A regular parishoner at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Watlington's seven daughters were baptized there.⁵³ The eldest, Hannah, married Edward Howe, Sarah married Judge Joseph B. Wall of Tampa, and Emeline married William H. Ward in 1858. Maria wed Joseph C. King in 1867, while Mary resided in Key West as the wife of Dr. Charles S. Johnson. Judge Ramon Alvarez, special deputy collector of customs at Key West, claimed Florence Watlington as his wife. Miss Lillie never married and resided at the family home until her death in 1936.⁵⁴

While Watlington's growing family remained in Key West, their home became something of a social center in town. The structure itself was owned by Cussans who leased it to his fellow mariner Francis Watlington until 1839 when it was sold to William H. Wall.⁵⁵ Jefferson B. Browne in Key West: The Old and the New records that "Duval Street was only cleared about half way between Eaton and Fleming Streets as late as 1836, and the only house on it at that time, after crossing Caroline Street, was on belonging to Francis B. Watlington...."⁵⁶ In fact, on December 10, 1839, Cussans sold to Wall for \$750 "All my House and lot situated in the rear of a house and lot owned by James Webb...."⁵⁷ The Wall family held title to the frame dwelling for a little over two years before it was sold to Emeline Watlington's brother-in-law Nicholas D. Herder from New York City.⁵⁸ Herder and his wife, the former Maria

Louisa Johnson, maintained title to the property until August 30, 1869, when it was deeded to Emeline Watlington.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, city tax rolls dating from 1845 assess Francis Watlington for property taxes. The assessed valuation fluctuated from \$600 in 1845 to \$1,000 in 1847; it declined in the 1850s to \$800. The Reconstruction period following the Civil War marked a further decline in the valuation of the Duval Steet site to \$400.⁶⁰ By 1886, however, the property value had risen to \$600. The 1895 tax roll for Key West shows the Watlington House site valued at \$1500. Improvements and personal property together with the lot totalled an aggregate worth of \$2,000 in 1895.⁶¹

Francis B. Watlington's career as Key West mariner and wrecker was supplanted by his brief tenure as state senator in the years prior to the firing on Fort Sumter. Subsequently, Watlington's secessionist beliefs compelled his participation in the South's Confederate Navy. In 1859, the voters of Monroe County supported Watlington's bid to become state senator from the 21st District.⁶² The January 14, 1860 edition of Key to the Gulf noted: "Our Senator, Honorable Francis Watlington, arrived at his house in this city on Sunday last" to report to the townspeople on the legislative session.⁶³ Only a single letter dated April 17, 1861, from Watlington to Florida's Governor Perry remains extant. In that dispatch Watlington described somewhat chaotic conditions in the city when Union steamers docked at Fort Taylor. Watlington wrote: "We are living under great mortification, but we are satisfied that...it is for the best that you did not take the forts or send arms here."⁶⁴

The 1860 Census finds no mention of Francis Watlington as a Key West resident. It can be surmised that by late 1861 Watlington had resigned as senator and begun service for the Confederate cause in Alabama. Confederate forces of the Mobile Squadron operated as a bulwark to impede Unionist penetration at Mobile Bay throughout the war years. Flotillas of ironclad gunboats fought to curtail Federal control there; the southerners proved successful until 1864. At the Battle of Mobile Bay on August 5, 1864, the Confederate gunboats Gaines and Selma were beached, the Tennessee was captured, though the Morgan escaped.⁶⁵ Such events signalled the fall of the city of Mobile. The remainder of the squadron fled via the Alabama River toward Selma but Union blockades forced a surrender. On May 10, 1865, Commodore Farrand, C.S.N., surrendered at Nanna Hubba Bluff on the Tombigbee River. Union forces claimed the following ships, Nashville, Morgan, Baltic, Black Diamond and Southern Republic, together with 112 officers, 285 enlisted men and 24 marines.⁶⁶ Among the officers was an "F. Watlington, Lieutenant." Watlington was also listed on the Register of Commissioned and Warrant Officers of the Provisional Navy of the Confederate States.

The letterbook of Admiral Franklin Buchanan and the ledger and cashbooks of the Mobile paymaster reveal Watlington's service; they do not pinpoint, however, the ship on which he served. According to these sources, the Key Wester is first noted on July 27, 1863, as a lieutenant. By August 31, 1864, Watlington was promoted to first lieutenant. His monthly pay averaged \$315.00⁶⁷

Thus, existing information substantiates Francis Watlington's Civil War service--not as a confidant of Jefferson Davis or Stephen

Mallory, nor as Engineer of the Mobile ship yard--such claims are mere conjecture. Yet Watlington, a versatile and significant Key West citizen, maintained his public service record and acted upon his beliefs during the wartime era.

Watlington, now in his sixties, returned to his Duval Street home at the close of the Civil War to re-join his family in Key West. His death in 1883 was mourned by the community. Descendants of this sea pilot continued to inhabit the lovely Bahamian frame house at 322 Duval Street for a century thereafter.

SUMMARY

The foregoing historical account of events and personages linked to Key West's Oldest House Museum represents an attempt to introduce and evaluate existing evidence. Definite conclusions as to the original construction date and the actual architect/builder are difficult to draw. One can offer a judicious assessment based upon recorded documents. In the future perhaps additional data will be generated to complete or finalize the history of this Conch dwelling.

Certain observations based upon the archival material herein discussed, however, may be noted. A thorough search of U.S. military records pertinent to Key West in the 1820s has revealed no connection between Porter's Squadron and Richard Cussans. The notion that the Oldest House was originally erected on Whitehead Street by naval forces and subsequently relocated to the present site has no factual basis. The building complex erected by Commodore Porter was of a temporary type and no documents record any transfer of military property to civilian islanders.

Secondly, historical research supports the claims that Richard Cussans was the earliest Key Wester associated with the Duval Street property. That he acquired the land between 1834 and 1836 is no mere supposition. Given Cussans' carpentry skills it seems likely that he constructed at least a portion of the extant structure upon procurement of the property. Cussans rented the house to his friend and fellow

mariner, Francis Watlington, by 1836. Inspection of the dwelling supports the idea that as the Watlington family expanded, a second structure was enjoined which created the cohesive unit which exists today. Thus, the Watlington family chain's link to the 322 Duval Street site remained unsevered from 1836 to 1974. As such, it is perhaps the longest tie of a Key West family to a homesite.

NOTES

- ¹Royal Gazette and Bahama Advertiser. May 1, 1819. Microfilm, Monroe County Public Library (hereinafter cited as MCPL).
- ²U.S. Congress, House Document, 29th Congress, 1st Session, H.R. 792, pp. 5-6.
- ³Brown, Jefferson B. Key West: The Old and the New. Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 1973. A Facsimile Reproduction of the 1912 Edition.
- ⁴Browne, p. 7.
- ⁵Monroe County Deed Book A, pp. 21-29. Monroe County Public Library, Key West, Florida.
- ⁶Ibid., pp. 13, 15.
- ⁷American State Papers VI: Naval Affairs, 4:963-964. Washington: Government Printing Office.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Ibid.
- ¹⁰Niles' Weekly Register, Volume XXIV, p. 130. National Archives, Washington, D.C.
- ¹¹Paullin, pp. 314-325.
- ¹²U.S. Congress. H.R. No. 189. February, 9, 1848, p.2.
- ¹³Letters to Commandants, Volume IX, p. 10. Record Group 45, National Archives.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 51.
- ¹⁵Ibid., Volume II, p. 623.
- ¹⁶Letters to Officers, Volume I, p. 292. Record Group 45, National Archives.
- ¹⁷Browne, pp. 99-100.
- ¹⁸Carter, Clarence, ed. Territorial Papers of the United States. Territory of Florida, Volume XXV, Washington: The National Archives, 1959, p. 196.

- ¹⁹Browne, p. 50.
- ²⁰Key West Register and Commercial Advertiser, September 3, 1829.
Microfilm, MCPL.
- ²¹Fifth Census of the United States, 1830. Monroe County, Florida.
Washington, D.C.: National Archives microfilm.
- ²²Scott, Kenneth. "City of Wreckers," Florida Historical Quarterly,
Volume XVII, p. 193.
- ²³Records, St. Matthews Church, Nassau, Bahamas. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ²⁴Territorial Papers, Volume XXIII, p. 989.
- ²⁵Ibid., XXIV, p. 135.
- ²⁶Ibid., pp 112-113.
- ²⁷Key West Register and Commercial Advertiser, February 26, 1829.
Microfilm, MCPL.
- ²⁸Monroe County Deed Book A. p. 143-144, April 14, 1829. Deed books
located at MCPL.
- ²⁹Key West Register and Commercial Advertiser, September 3, 1829.
Microfilm, MCPL.
- ³⁰Monroe County Deed Book A, p. 313.
- ³¹Monroe County Deed Book B, p. 105.
- ³²Monroe County Deed Book A, p. 166, 192.
- ³³Monroe County Deed Book B, pp. 326, 297, 496.
- ³⁴Monroe County Deed Book C, p. 111. Located at MCPL.
- ³⁵Territorial Papers, Volume XXIV, p. 680-2.
- ³⁶Monroe County Deed Book A, p. 513; B, p. 69, 131, 149.
- ³⁷Monroe County Deed Book B, p. 96.
- ³⁸Monroe County Deed Book B, p. 515.
- ³⁹Monroe County Deed Book D, p. 465.

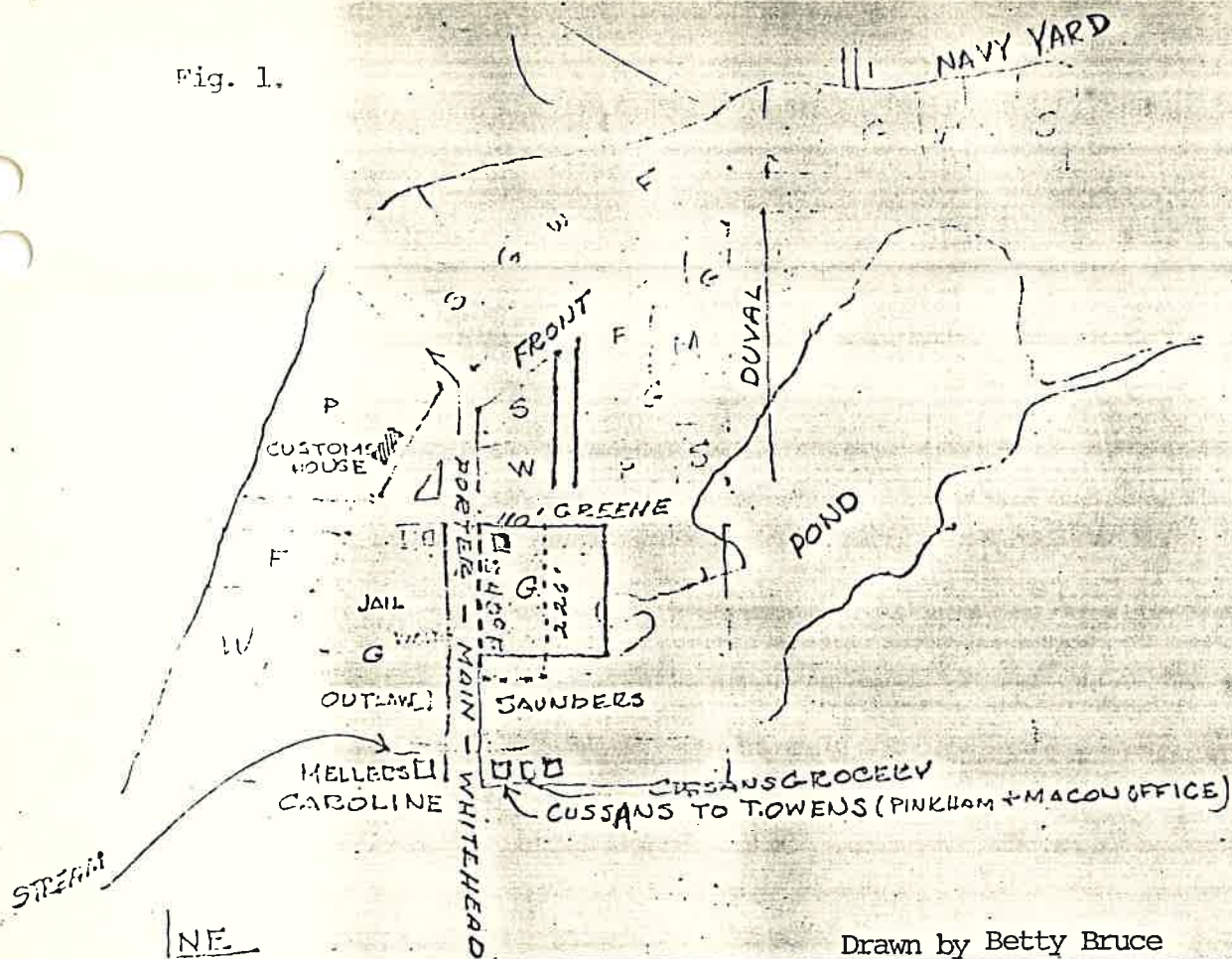
- ⁴³ Tenth Census of the U.S., 1880. Florida. Schedule 1, Monroe County.
- ⁴⁴ Key West Register and Commercial Advertiser. August 13, 1829. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁴⁵ Correspondence from The New York Public Library, June 27, 1928. Data from 1828 New York City (Manhattan) Directory.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Will of Charles Johnson. Surrugate's Court, Richmond County, St. George, Staten Island, New York. Volume C, p. 1120-1123.
- ⁴⁸ Monroe County Deed Book B., p. 93.
- ⁴⁹ Letters, Secretary of Treasury from Customs Collector, Key West. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁵⁰ Territorial Papers...., vol. XXVI, p. 65.
- ⁵¹ Key West Enquire, Dec. 20, 1834. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁵² Royal Gazette, July 22, 1835. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁵³ St. Paul's Episcopal Church Records, vol. 1 Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁵⁴ Browne, p. 192, Deed Book E-466, F-229, G-57,68: Individual Record of Burial, Key West Cemetery. Filed at MCPL.
- ⁵⁵ Deed Book C., pp. 27, 62-63.
- ⁵⁶ Browne, p. 11.
- ⁵⁷ Deed Book C, p. 62.
- ⁵⁸ Deed Book C, p. 213.
- ⁵⁹ Deed Book C p. 441.
- ⁶⁰ Monroe County Assesment Rolls, 1845-1880. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., 1886, 1895. Located at MCPL.
- ⁶² The People of Lawmaking in Florida, 1822-1975. Compiled by office of the Clerk, Florida House of Representatives, Tallahassee 1976, p. 14.

- ⁶³ Key to the Gulf, January 14, 1860, p. 1. Microfilm, MCPL.
- ⁶⁴ The War of the Rebellion..., Series I, Vol. LII, Part 2, p. 51.
- ⁶⁵ Scharf, J.T. History of the Confederate States Navy. Albany: Joseph Mc Donough, 1894, pp. 592-6.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., and War of the Rebellion, vol. XX, Series 1, p. 705.
- ⁶⁷ Ledger and Cashbook of Paymaster at Mobile, 1862-1865. Record Group 45, National Archives; pp. 102-210.

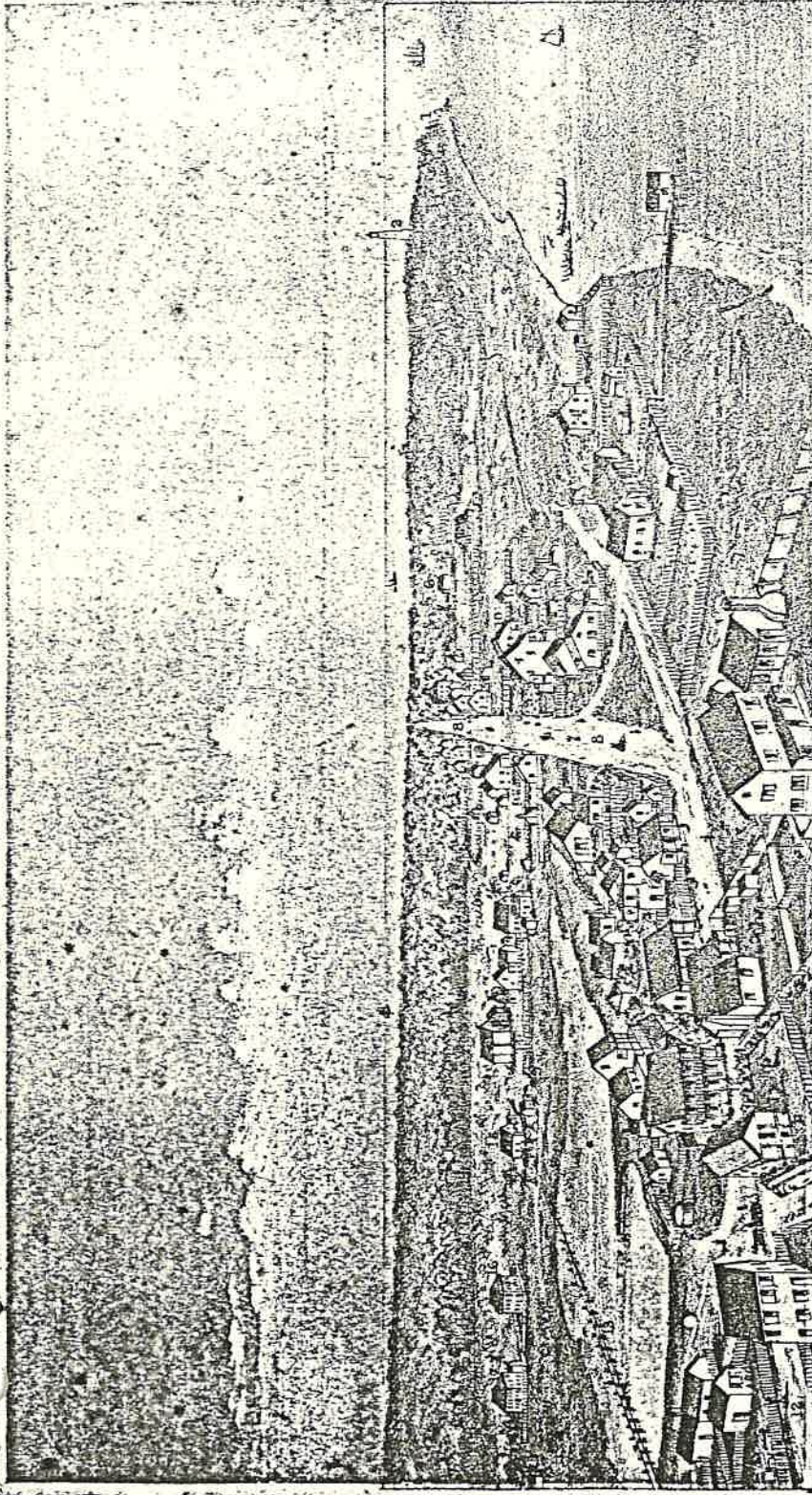
APPENDIX

- Figure 1.
Drawing. Location of Cussans' grocery on Whitehead Street.
- Figure 2.
1838 Pencil Sketch of Island of Key West by William Whitehead.
- Figure 3.
Portion of 1912 Sanborn Insurance Map that details layout of 322 Duval Street property.
- Figure 4,5
Cemetery plats of Watlington Family in Key West Cemetery.
- Figure 6.
Map showing effects of fires to portions of Key West.
- Figure 7.
Extract from will of Charles Johnson, 1828.
- Figure 8.
Copy of baptismal record of Richard W. Cussans (Baptismal Register, St. Matthew's Church, 1807-1884, p. 48).
- Figure 9.
Marriage Record of Richard Cussans to Amelia Evans--27 February 1800 (Book of Marriages, Christ Church Cathedral 1792-1805, p. 136).
- Figure 10.
Death record of Richard Walter Cussans (Christ Church Cathedral, Register of Burials 1829-1843, p. 9).
- Figure 11.
The Oldest House. Photograph by Wright Langley, Director, Historic Key West Preservation Board.
- Figure 12.
Genealogy Table of Francis Watlington Family

Fig. 1.



Drawn by Betty Bruce

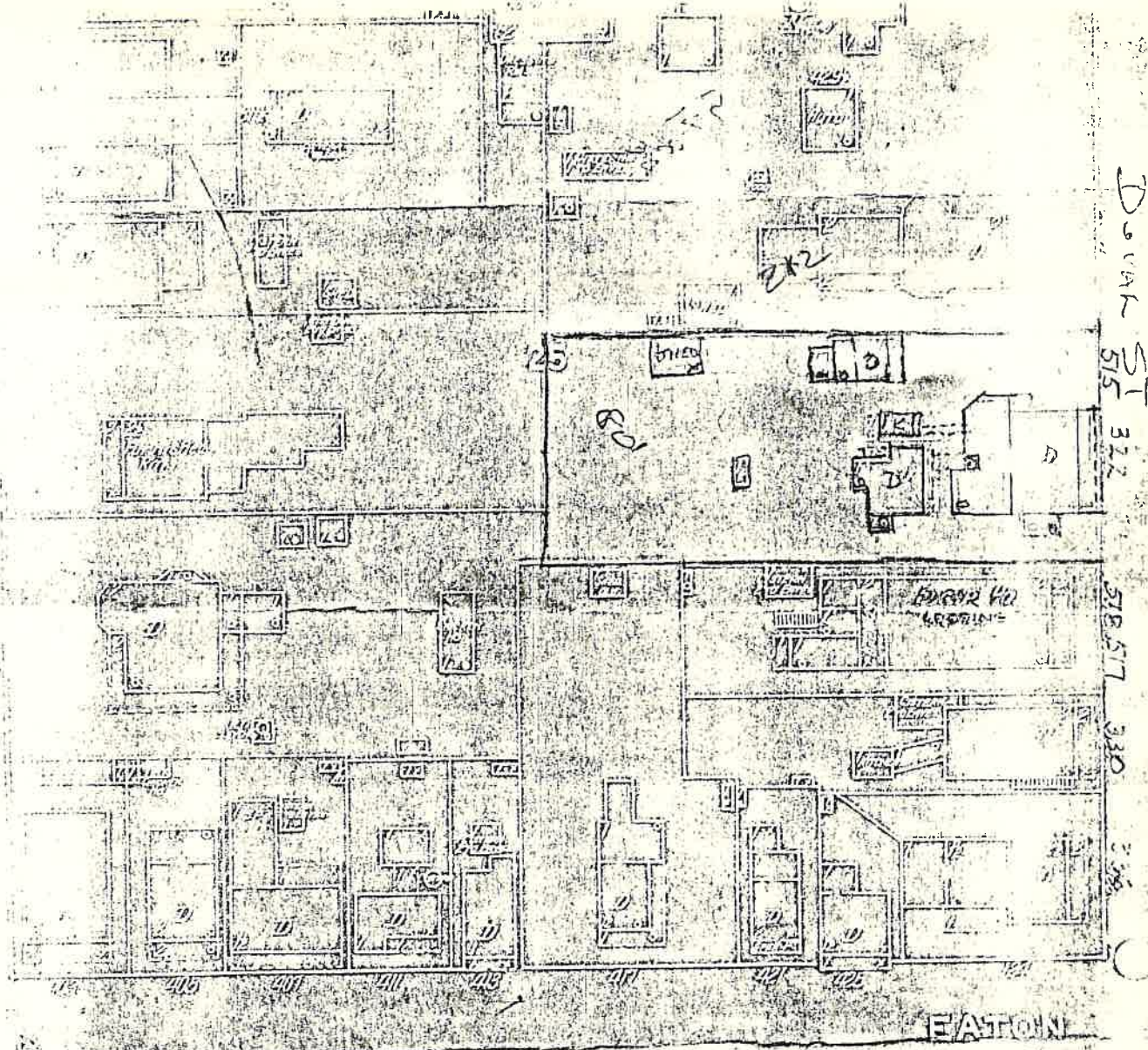


- 1. Whiteheads' Point. 2. Light-house. 3. Old Grave Yard. 4. Residence of F. A. Browne. 5. Custom House and Collector's Residence. 6. Jail. 7. Court House.
- 8. Whitehead Street. 9. Caroline Street. 10. Residence of A. Gordon. 11. Clinton Place. 12. Front Street. 13. Foot-bridge across a Pond on the line of Duval Street.
- 14. House begun by Judge Webb, unfinished. 15. Residence of Judge Marvin. 16. Residence of P. J. Fontane and Patterson, (one behind the other.) 17. Residence of Mr. Weaver.

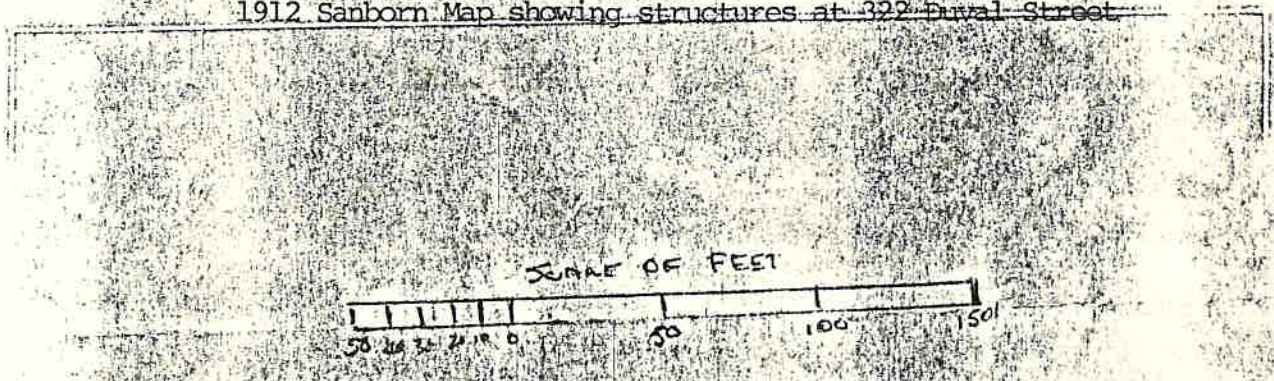
KEY - WEST.

Looking South-East. Reduced from a pencil sketch by W. A. Whitehead taken from the Oppols of the Warehouse of Messrs. A. C. Tift & Co., June 1838.

Fig. 2.



1912. Sanborn Map showing structures at 322 Duval Street



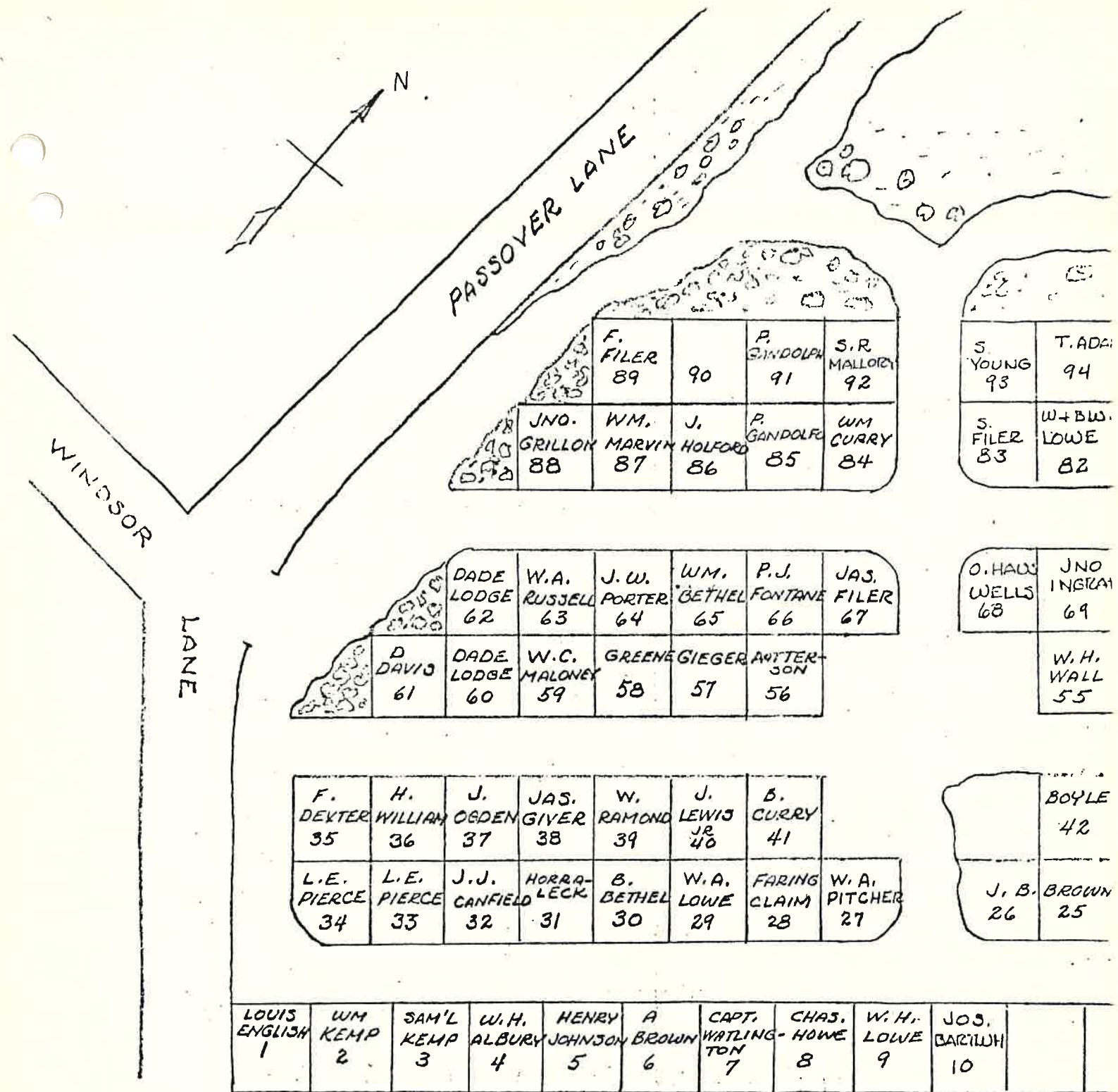


Fig. 4.

KEY WEST CEMETARY

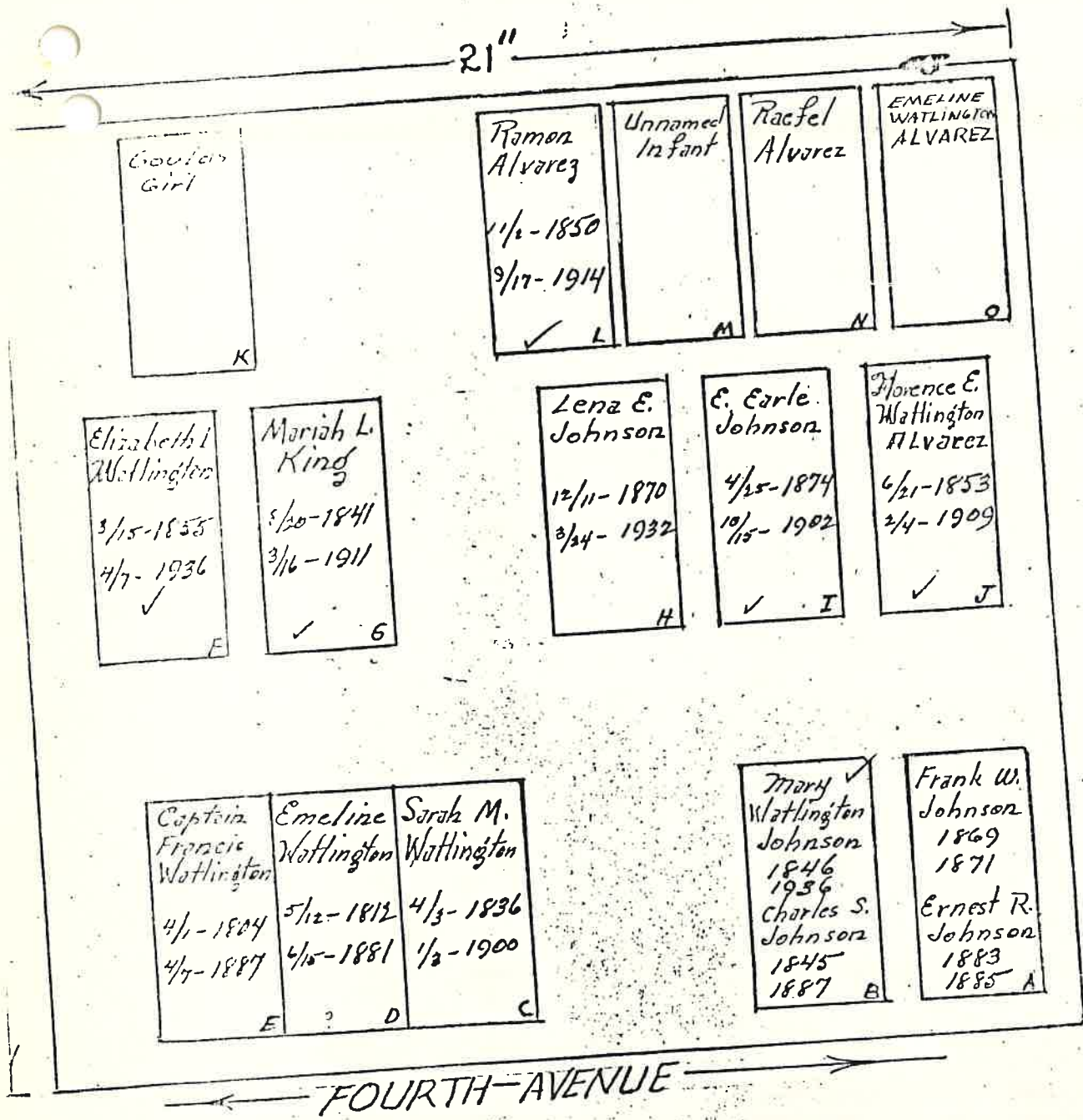
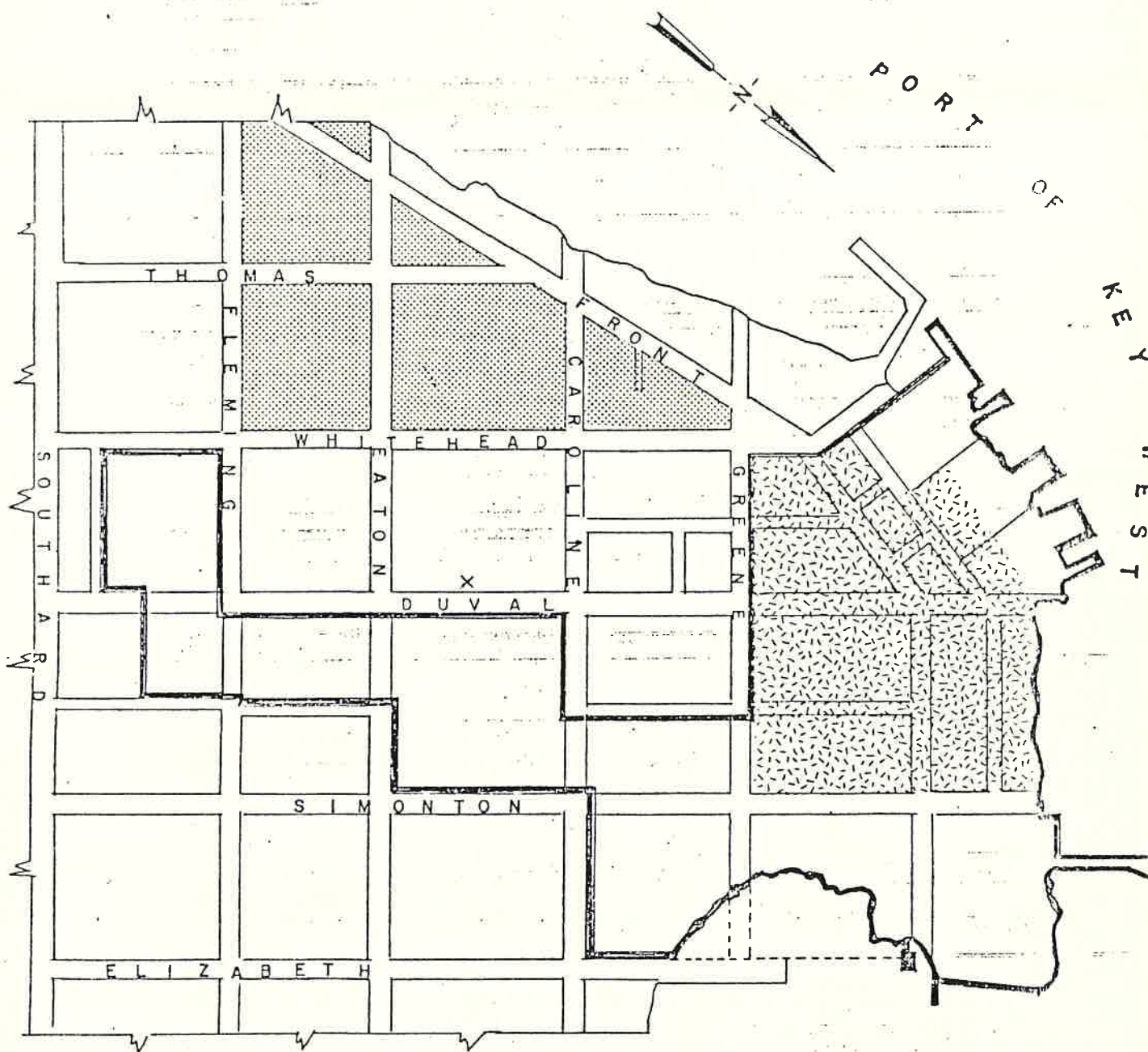


Fig. 5.

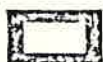
LOT #7
TRACT #5



LEGEND



DESTROYED BY FIRE 1859



DESTROYED BY FIRE 1886



RAZED BY NAVY 1902

scale 1/4 in = 100 ft

Fig. 6.

Courtesy of Department of Archives, History and Records Management

21st Thomas James - born 15th June 1804 -

Richard Walter born 11th Dec^r 1800

* Ann. Sarah Elizabeth Mary 3rd March 1800
 2 sons & 1 Daughter of Richard and
 Amelia Cyprians Baptized 21st May
 1810

March 17th
 4th Henry Thomas son of William and

Mary Jane Jones - born 22nd January
 1810 - Baptized 4th March 1810

4th Joseph son of John & Sarah Bethel

James Beck
 James Perkins

Richard Cousins Bachelor & Amelia Evans of the parish of Christ Church in the city of St. Providence were lawfully married in accordance according to the latest ceremonies of the Church of England this 27th day of February 1800 by me John Richards Rector of Christ Church

and his marriage was solemnized between us

Richard Cousins

Amelia Evans

In the presence of

Wm James & Mary Hearn

BURIALS in the Parish of *St. John*
 in the *City of New Providence* in the Year 1833

Name.	Abode.	When buried.	Age.	By whom the Ceremony was performed.
1832 <i>Hugh George</i> <i>Chalmers</i> <i>Slave</i> <i>Male of 39 years</i> <i>mine, Capt. Joseph Nassau</i> <i>No. 65 in Pottersfield</i>		<i>Decr 10th</i>		<i>Wm. [unclear]</i> <i>Wm. [unclear]</i>
<i>John Horace St</i> <i>Pay, son of Robt</i> <i>Halduze</i> <i>Slave</i> <i>from Bogota, on</i> <i>his way home, died</i> <i>No. 66 in do</i>	<i>Do</i>	<i>" 13th</i>		<i>Do</i>
<i>Abigail, wife</i> <i>of Mr Longley</i> <i>Edw. native of</i> <i>Do</i>	<i>Do</i>	<i>" 24th</i>		<i>Do</i>
<i>No. 67 in do</i>				
1833 <i>Richard Cus</i> <i>Sim, Cooper</i>		<i>1833</i>		<i>Do</i>
<i>No. 68 in do</i>		<i>Jul 27th</i>		<i>Do</i>



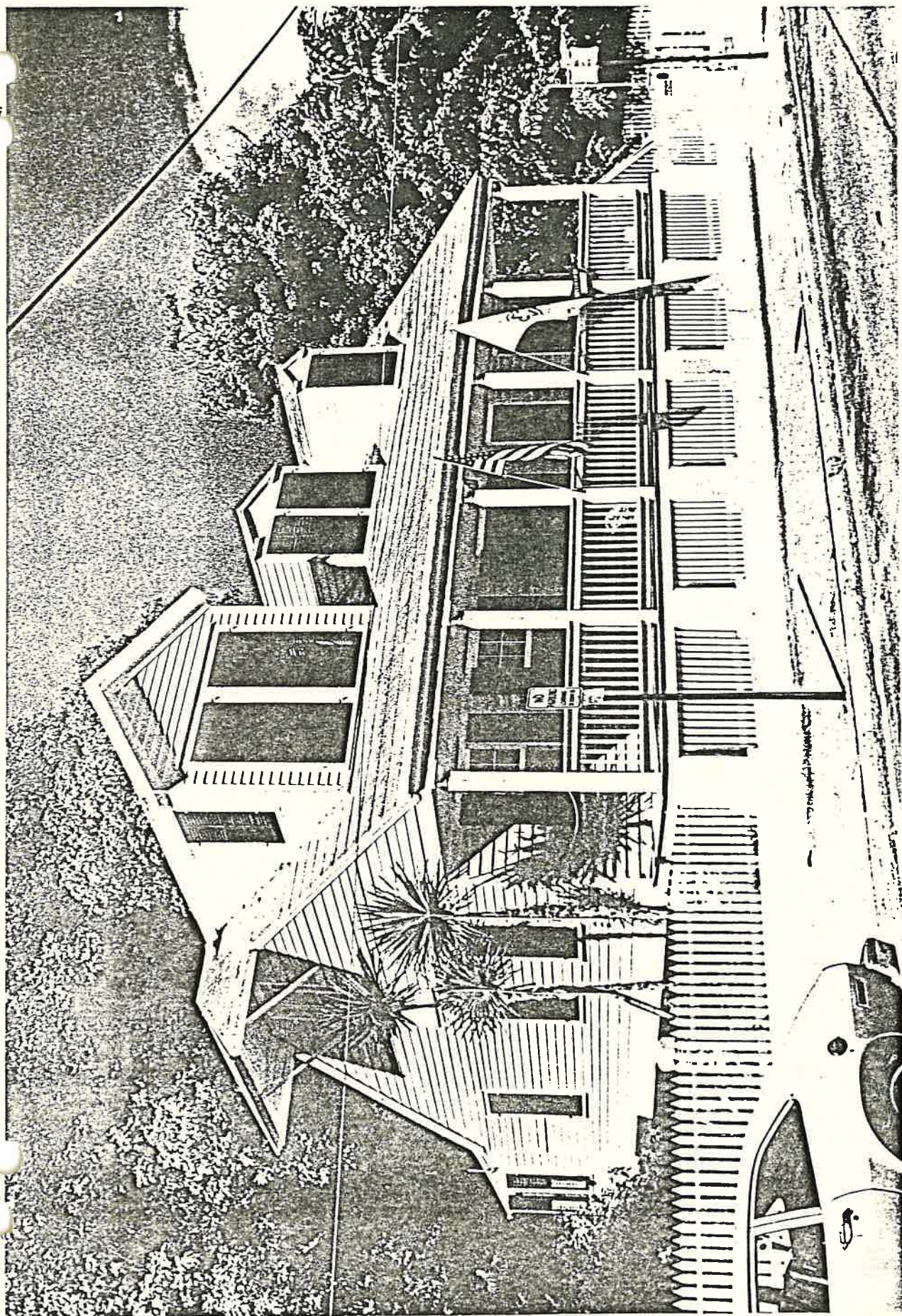


Fig. 11.

24. 5

CAPTAIN FRANCIS BENJAMIN WATLINGTON

Born St. Croix, April 1, 1804
Died Key West, April 7, 1887

M.

Emeline Matilda Johnson

Born N.Y. City, May 12, 1812
Died Key West, June 15, 1881

CHILDREN

1. Hannah Amelia
Born N.Y. City
Mar. 20, 1834
Died Newton, Mass.
Oct. 30, 1912
M.
Edward Cole Howe
Born Indian Key, Fl.
June 3, 1831
Died Key West
Mar. 10, 1880
2. Sarah Maria
Born Key West
Apr. 30, 1836
Died Key West
Jan. 3, 1900
M.
Percy G. Wall
Tampa, Fla.
Died Gainsville
Feb. 19, 1895
3. Emeline Frances
Born N.Y. City
Oct. 26, 1837
Died Key West
May 1, 1903
M.
Lt. Wm. Henry Ward
Born Syracuse
also M.
Joseph P. Roberts
Born Bahamas
Sept. 29, 1826
Died Key West
Apr. 30, 1874
4. Maria Louisa Herder
(Lolla)
Born Key West
Aug. 20, 1841
Died Key West
Apr. 16, 1911
M.
Joseph C. King
Born Canada
Died Detroit
May 24, 1881
5. Susan Quereau
Born Key West
Oct. 8, 1844
Died Key West
Aug. 17, 1850
(Yellow fever epidemic)
M.
Dr. Chas. Johnson
Born Nassau
Jan. 13, 1844
Died Key West
Dec. 13, 1887
(Yellow fever epidemic)
son
Edwin Earle Johnson
Born Key West
Apr. 25, 1874
Died Key West
Oct. 15, 1902
M.
Nellie Blanch Saunders
Born Key West
Jan. 1, 1876
Died Newton, Mass.
Dec. 8, 1928
son
Earle Saunders
Johnson
Born Key West
Aug. 21, 1902
Died Key West
May 2, 1972
6. Elizabeth Lillie
Born Key West
Mar. 15, 1855
Died Key West
Apr. 7, 1936
N.M.
7. Ellen Mallory
Born Key West
Feb. 4, 1850
Died Key West
Oct. 18, 1851
8. Florence Earle
Born Key West
June 1, 1852
Died Key West
Feb. 4, 1909
m.
Ramon Alvarez
Born Cuba
Died Key West
Feb. 4, 1919
daughter
Sarah Watlington
Born Key West, Dec. 22, 1882
Died Key West, Aug. 22, 1953
m.
Ross C. Sawyer
Born Key West, Aug. 26, 1888
Died Key West, Dec. 13, 1957
daughter
*Florence E. Sawyer
son
Ross C. Sawyer, Jr.
Robert W Sawyer Ronald A. Sawyer
9. Elizabeth Lillie
Born Key West
Mar. 15, 1855
Died Key West
Apr. 7, 1936
N.M.

daughter
*Elizabeth W. Matthews
Earl W. Matthews Camille A. Matthews

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