



THE WRECKERS' MUSEUM

(The Oldest House in Key West)
322 Duval St., Key West, FL 33040

This was sent to Linda Stewart
of American Heritage who
asked for Watlington's picture
a little information on
Capt. Francis Watlington
by Nancy Lawson Sep. 30, 1996

We do not believe that Captain Watlington ever "made a fortune" in the wrecking business. He mostly worked for the government (Treasury Dept) as Customs Inspector, Lightship captain, coastal pilot, harbor pilot; he was several times hired by the U S Navy as Fla west coast pilot during the Second Seminole War ~~or~~ on indian searches. Wrecking was an avocation.

He was elected to the Fla. Legislature in 1859. He resigned his seat in 1861 to join the Confederate Navy. He was appointed "Lieutenant for the war" by his old friend from Key West and Secretary of the Navy for the Confederacy, Stephen R. Mallory.

He served in the Mobile Squadron under Adm. Franklin Buchanan. He first served aboard the Steam Jumboat "Gaines" (a new experience for the 57 year old mariner). He received orders in May 1864 that he was detached from the U.S.Steamer "Gaines" and would "take charge of the general Conduct of affairs at the Navy Yard". ~~(Personnel staff)~~ This is where he was serving at the Battle of Mobile Bay and why his name was not on the list of prisoners of war. The famous U.S. Stmr. ~~USS~~ "Tennessee" whose main works were built in Selma Ala. and finished in the Navy Yard at Mobile may well have come under his scrutiny. He was in a highly respected position there , second in command. ~~NWEEK~~

He was raised to rank of first Lieutenant in June 1864. Surrendered in May 4, 1865, paroled on May 10, 1865

But back to the early wrecking days. As a young pilot in New York harbor, he became acquainted with one Capt Charles Johnson who worked as a wrecker in Key West. Whether ~~he~~ she associated with him because Johnson was in the same profession or because he had several attractive young daughters is a matter of conjecture. But he ended up marrying 16 year old Emmeline Johnson in 1828. In the meantime we assume Johnson had introduced the Keys area and the excitement of "wrecking" to his prospective son in law. And it is fairly reasonable to assume that any "wealth" which the young Watlington's accrued was no doubt from the coffers of the successful wrecker Capt. Charles Johnson after his demise.

Johnson was pilot and wrecker for the warehouse firm of Pardon Green and his partners John Whitehead and John Simonton (all Founding Fathers of Key West). Johnson worked with ^{two} two sons, John W. and Charles (Jr).

In 1825 the senior Capt Charles Johnson was indicted in New York on ten counts of fraud for his misconduct in the wrecking incident of the brig "Hercules" which wrecked on Carysford Reef. As wreckmaster he misrepresented the facts claiming poor condition of the cargo which he was believed to have ripped open and soaked with salt water and then ~~bought~~ at a "bargain" rate. It was believed he knew in advance that the ship was going to wreck on the reef and was guilty of not fore warning them, among other things. This story drew tremendous publicity for its day. It appeared in all publications on the East coast. It was even mentioned in ~~the Key West Gazette~~ Mayor Maloney's 4th of July speech 50 years later!!
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Johnson was never sentenced because he died before the trial was completed. His death, no doubt, was brought on by the stress and strain. And in the back of his mind was....."wreckers beware..."

...Luring or decoying a ship to its doom was still punishable by death in the Territory of Florida between 1823 and 1828 ~~when~~ ^{under} the rules were rewritten by an admiralty court appointed in 1828.)

This case did a lot to magnify the "scoundrel" aspect of the wrecking industry and certainly must have left a mark on the 24 year old Watlington, who proceeded to build a reputation of trust and responsibility which served him well in his career.

The Watlingtons and sisters in law waited 10 years before probating Captain Johnson's will. I suspect they were waiting for the scandal to die down so that the division of property would not be eyed too closely/.. Johnson was a very well to do man with property in Manhattan and farmlands in Staten Island. So, if Watlington had any hint of a fortune it surely must have come from his wrecker father in law.

It was after the "inheritance" that Watlington had his portrait painted

just like the rich folks.....