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Photo by Pete Bacheler

Garden Club of the Upper Keys

*Francis Tracy Garden Center
50th Anniversary Celebration
November 18, 2014*

- 2:00 pm **Gala in the Garden**
Appetizers & beverages in the club house gardens
- 2:30 pm **"From the beginning, and who was Francis Tracy?"**
Jerry Wilkinson,
President, Historical Society of the Upper Keys
Club house meeting room
- 3:00 pm **Proclamation by Monroe County Board of**
Commissioners Mayor Sylvia Murphy *Lois statement*
Club house meeting room
- 3:15 pm **Champagne toast and cake cutting**
Edna Waldorf,
President, Garden Club of the Upper Keys
Club house meeting room and side room
- 3:45 pm **Commemorative photo taken**
All Garden Club of the Upper Keys members
Club house front porch
- 4:00 pm **Event concludes**

A LOOK BACK AT THE FRANCIS TRACY GARDEN CENTER

The history of the Francis Tracy Garden Center (FTGC) started well before its construction did. You could say it all started in June, 1952 when ten ladies met at the home of Mrs. Everett Perkins and formed a club "of civic and cultural advantage to native plant growth in the Keys" named the Key Largo Garden Club. By 1954 the club had grown so large that it split into two clubs - the original one to serve Key Largo area and the new Upper Keys Garden Club to serve Islamorada, Matecumbe and Plantation Keys. There were 15 charter members of this new club, including Francis Tracy and Margaret Bond, whose contributions to the club, as you'll see, have been everlasting.

By 1962, the Upper Keys Garden Club had grown to 60 members and needed larger meeting space. A decision was made to build a clubhouse. In 1963, Dr. Fred Bond and his wife Margaret offered an acre parcel of property on State Road No. 5 (Overseas Highway) in Sunset Gardens to be used for the new building. The Bonds stipulated that it be named the Francis Tracy Garden Center to honor long-time member Francis Tracy for her many contributions to the Garden Club, her conservation leadership, and her dedication as the county's nurse. She was officially proclaimed "Angel of the Keys" in 1957 by the Florida Keys Clinic and by settlers whose ailments, injuries and heartaches she had ministered for 30 years, frequently using native plants. Also stipulated was if the FTGC should cease to operate for Garden Club purposes, the land would revert to the grantors. Mildred "Millie" Gasser was club president at that time and the first of 30 presidents who have presided over the club and the clubhouse since its inception.

Building a clubhouse was a major undertaking for the small, nonprofit organization. Only those people involved know how many hours and how much work went into all the money-raising events—bake sales, rummage sales, etc.—needed to start the building. An \$8,000 mortgage was secured from the Bank of Florida in Homestead for the balance to complete the financing.

George Coffin of Islamorada donated drawing plans for the building, a one story CBS club house with screened porch. General contractor D.

L. Skidmore of Islamorada was the builder, and subcontractors included, among others, Dixie Aluminum Products, Renuart-Bailey-Cheely Labor Company, and Naranja Rock Company. Many of them donated supplies and labor. The club's board of directors dug the first shovels of dirt during the ground-breaking ceremony in early 1964. Typical of older Keys' architecture, the clubhouse design was Bahamian cottage look, built among the now towering Wild Tamarind, Mahogany and Gumbo Limbo trees on the property.

The first meeting in the new clubhouse was held September 1964 but the official dedication and public opening wasn't held until November 1964. Over 200 members and friends were present to celebrate the event. Several donations of furnishings and equipment were received, including tables from Arthur Miller in memory of his wife Alma, one of the original members. Each club member was asked to purchase one chair for \$3.75 and 100 were purchased. After three years of extensive and creative money-raising efforts, the club had raised the \$8,000 to pay off the debt and received an official "Satisfaction of Mortgage." In December 1967, for her 90th birthday, Francis Tracy lit the flame to burn the mortgage papers for the building named in her honor. Fund raising projects continued for several years thereafter for furnishings and developing the grounds.

In her 1966 "History of the Upper Keys Garden Club," Tracy had said, "A garden club is not a money-making organization primarily, but building a club house seemed a worthwhile cause for the Keys as well as the club."

Keeping with that thought, the Upper Keys Garden Club (now Garden Club of the Upper Keys) continued to improve and expand the uses of the property. The club's archives show numerous flower shows, art shows, quilt shows, and design classes were held, often including other clubs in the Florida Federation of Garden Clubs. In 1968, the property was designated a Wild Bird Sanctuary. To this day the club continues to support the FL Keys Wild Bird Center with routine donations. In 2010, the gardens were declared a Community Peace Park by Keys for Peace, providing space for people to reflect on nature. A peace bell--a painted, modified scuba tank--hangs in one of the gardens.

The FTGC looks today pretty much as it did in 1964 as there have been no additions or major renovations. It started as a yellow building with white shutters and a white front door; it's now yellow with green shutters and fuchsia front door. A granite cornerstone, salvaged by Rodney Albury from the 1874 wreck of the Mohawk off a reef near Tavernier, was placed in the southeast side wall. It contained, among other documents, the names of all the members who had help build the clubhouse. This time capsular would later be opened, reviewed, added to, and resealed in 2007 with the assistance of local historian Jerry Wilkinson.

The gardens at the FTGC have evolved over the years into a place of beauty under the supervision of numerous dedicated club members. Some of the native trees planted by the charter members now tower over the property.

The most recent planting renovations were started in 2013 with the implementation of an updated property master plan. There are over 50 species of plants and trees planted on the grounds, each identified with both a botanical and common name as well as country of origin. Pathways lead you into the different areas and to the front door, which originally was flanked by hibiscus filled trellises. There's the palm circle, with Spindle, Bottle, and Bucaneer palms. There's the succulent garden where full sun is available and another garden that butterflies can enjoy. Among the trees are benches to sit and enjoy the view. And there are native trees and bromeliads everywhere, providing shade and a truly tropical feel to the property.

Maintenance costs have risen as the building has aged. There have been new roofs, paneling, painting inside and out, carpeting, updated electrical system, flooring and appliances to name a few. The FTGC has been and is currently used by several other organizations who appreciate the beauty of the property and whose donations help offset maintenance costs. The Garden Club also hosts a popular Garden Walk every year, with part of the proceeds used to maintain the FTGC as a part of Upper Keys' history for now and for the future.

The Garden Club of the Upper Keys members take pride in the meaningful history of the Francis Tracy Garden Center, as we should!

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Garden Club of the Upper Keys
50th Anniversary Celebration of the
Francis Tracy Garden Center
November 18, 2014

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| 200 pm | Gala in the Garden
Appetizers & beverages in the clubhouse gardens |
| 230 pm | "From the beginning, and who was Francis Tracy?"
Jerry Wilkinson,
President, Historical Society of the Upper Keys
Clubhouse meeting room |
| 300 pm | Proclamation by Monroe County
Sylvia Murphy,
BOCC and Mayor
Clubhouse meeting room |
| 315 pm | Champagne toast and cake cutting
Edna Waldorf,
President, Garden Club of the Upper Keys
Clubhouse meeting room and side room |
| 345 pm | Commemoration ^{ve} photo taken
All GCUK members
Front porch of FTGC |
| 400 pm | Event concludes |



Garden Club of the Upper Keys

Francis Tracy Garden Center
50th Year Anniversary Celebration
November 18, 2014

2:00 pm

Gala in the Garden

Tea sandwiches and punch
Club house gardens

2:30 pm

"From the beginning, and who was Francis Tracy?"

Jerry Wilkinson, President,
Historical Preservation Society of the Upper Keys
Club house meeting room

**Presentation: Proclamation by Board of County
Commissioners Mayor Sylvia Murphy,**

Lois Stormont ,
Friend of Dr. Fred and Margaret Bond
Club house meeting room

Champagne toast and cake cutting

Edna Waldorf, President
Garden Club of the Upper Keys
Club house meeting room

3:45 pm

Commemorative photo taken

All Garden Club of the Upper Keys members
Club house front porch