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Our Mission: Celebrate and sustain Key West’s unique architecture, culture and history.

From OIRF Administrator, Chris Hamilton
Hi OIRF Members, Docents, Sponsors and Friends – Welcome to summer! For many of us here in Key West, summer is the “off-season”. A time when there’s a few less cruise ships, tourists and snow birds, and as a result, everything gets a little bit more relaxed, slow and quiet. Well, a little bit anyway. For the staff here at OIRF, summer is an opportunity to plan and fine tune our events for next season. If you have a suggestion for ways we can improve on our Key West Home Tours™, Key West Conch Shell Blowing Contest, stewardship of the Oldest House Museum or if you have an idea for something the Foundation should be getting involved in, now’s a good time to let us know.

For the season that just ended, our 58th, we had some good news and some worries such as:

- Ticket sales for last Home Tour season surpassed the previous year, despite a 20% downturn in the hospitality sector. Over 4,000 people attended the tours.
- For 8 months in a row, we’ve been able to keep the Museum open every hour and day it is supposed to be open because we’ve had an awesome crew of volunteer docents helping us out.
- Our volunteer researchers have unearthed old documents and photographs that are helping us paint a richer history of the Oldest House, the Watlington family and Key West history.
- We had a very successful Conch Shell Blowing Contest, Appreciation Party and grant awards giveaway to three deserving recipients.
- We’ve added an additional part-time staffer, Administrative Assistant Matt Hon.
- We just received a $10,000 grant from the Community Foundation of the Florida Keys for an “Artwork and Photographic Preservation at the Oldest House” project.
- One of our challenges is that despite our progress, Hurricane Irma’s impact was felt. Our garden rentals and donation box revenues were down this past season as a number of weddings were canceled and fewer people came through our doors and offered donations. So our budget is extra tight.

Our OIRF staff is working with the Board of Directors over the summer on both the 59th and 60th annual season’s offerings. We’re in the process of revamping our Garden Rental offerings, updating our websites, rolling out a Sponsorship Package so businesses can better participate in Key West Home Tours™ figuring out how to bring back the Christmastime Gingerbread Party, and much more. Next season begins on Thursday, November 15 when we’ll hold the annual Season Kick-Off Party and reveal our poster contest winner.

Until then, the best way to keep in touch with what is happening at OIRF is to follow our website at www.oirf.org or our Facebook page at www.Facebook.com/OldestHouseandGardensKeyWest.
Treasure In A Box by Karl Reutling

The Oldest House recently had a visit from Key West’s Mark Langley. He donated a cardboard box to OIRF and it was full of historical treasures. So, what was Mark Langley’s connection to the Watlington/Johnson family home?

In 1972, Mark’s father Wright Langley was a writer for the Miami Herald, and had been with the Key West Citizen. He loved to learn and write about history. On a visit to 322 Duval St. with ten year old Mark tagging along, he was invited to go through the house and take some things that interested him. The packed box was then stored in his home on Margaret Street from 1972 until present day.

The box was filled with photos from the 1800s, documents, writings, and items collected by Earle S. Johnson, (the last of the blood line to live at 322 Duval). It includes a journal kept by William H. Ward, who was husband to young Emeline Watlington from 1858 until his death during the Civil War. There is a diary from a third generation of the family, a couple of dozen “cartes de visite” photos of unknown persons from the Civil War era, a love letter written by Steve Douglass, the young suitor of May Johnson, and other curious items too numerous to mention.

Since receiving this wonderful gift from Mark Langley, we have been carefully going through all the photos and other items. Many of the photos are in need of restoration. All of the items need to be digitized and correctly preserved. Our volunteer historian Karl Reutling and Docent Coordinator Andy Herdan are seeking expert help for this process. Monroe County Historian Tom Hambright has been consulted.

Among the photos is our first real look at Emeline Matilda John- son Watlington, mother of the nine daughters! There are photos of several of those daughters, as well as sons-in-law to the Wat- lingtons, with an emphasis on Mary Amanda Watlington’s family. These photos trace the lineage of Earle S. Johnson. Apparently Earle was spending considerable effort at reconstructing his heritage and genealogy during the 1960s. All of this material, taken together, will enable us to be more accurate in interpreting the history of this family to visitors of the Oldest House. A wonderful gift indeed.

As an example, there is a single piece of paper which is a state- ment from a pharmacy. With our understanding of already known facts, this piece of paper tells a fascinating story of three generations of the family:

Here are the facts: Mary Amanda Watlington, the sixth of nine daughters of Francis and Emeline Watlington, 322 Duval St., married pharmacist Dr. Charles S. Johnson in 1867. In 1874 they had a son, Edwin Earle Johnson, their fourth of six children. Around 1900 E. Earle Johnson married Nellie Blanche Saunders, and on 21 August 1902 they had a son named Earle Saunders Johnson. So, this statement from the family’s pharmacy covers items needed by E. Earle and Nellie concerning the birth of Earle S. Johnson. What an artifact to keep and for us to find! Tragically and almost unbelievably, E.Earle Johnson would die just **two weeks later** while working as an electrician, on 15 October 1902.

The picture (right) may well have been taken at the funeral of E.Earle Johnson, with Lillie Watlington in mourning dress, holding baby Earle Johnson.

This story is from one piece of paper in a box full of photos and papers. Photos will be displayed in the Oldest House as they are restored and framed. There will be more stories forthcoming from these treasures, and we look forward to sharing the history with everyone.

**The Statement on Account is from a pharmacy named “Charles, S. Johnson & Co., Dr.,” 109 Duval Street, Key West, Fla. and dated 10/1/1902. It documents purchases from July through September by customer E. Earle John- son. They include some prescriptions, and several over the counter items. Most every item can be related to symptoms of labor, child birth, and associated discomforts. Listed are purchases of bottle nipples and a breast pump. Someone had a baby!**
Our Current Archiving Activities, under the expert guidance of Sue Huffaker, have unearthed the following fascinating article which enabled the Oldest House staff to identify two historic portraits of Watlington family members.

Emeline Watlington Ward’s Portrait to greet guests of Cocktail Party
From The Key West Citizen, 24th April, 1979

Emeline, the third child among the fabled nine daughters of Captain and Mrs Francis Watlington, who romped in the Duval Street residence now known as “The Oldest House” more than 100 years ago, has finally come home.

Emeline married her first husband, Lt. William Ward and lived with him in the house. After her husband’s death, she married Joseph B. Roberts and moved from the house. Emeline died in 1903.

No candle in the window, no burning gas light greeted Emeline, but modern electricity and the welcoming smile of Mrs. Francis Smith, chairman of the Oldest House Committee. “Mag” Smith received Emeline’s portrait with open arms.

If Emeline could gaze from her framed portrait over the once familiar backyard, she would not see her father’s coach house, or the old time “privy”, or chickens pecking in the dirt. She would be amazed to behold broad, brick-paved areas, great arching trees, flowers and shrubs in the newly designed garden of The Oldest House Museum.

Much has changed since Emeline was a little girl in the 1840’s. She would probably feel shy to notice tourists peeking into the family parlor which displays her silver “baby cup” with “Emeline” engraved upon it. And upstairs she would see a doll’s house furnished in the period when Willie Ward was probably courting her.

The portraits of Emeline Watlington Ward and Lt. William Henry Ward have been donated to the museum by Garth Cold Sr. of Coconut Grove, the grandson of Emeline and Lt. William “Willie” Ward.

The two paintings will be on display inside The Oldest House Museum during the evening of Friday, April 27th, during the celebratory cocktail party welcoming Emeline and her husband back home!

Following some restoration work, the two paintings (shown below) will once again be placed on display after 40 years of neglect, and hopefully celebrated by a similar cocktail party as the one held in 1979.

Oldest House Preservation

Thanks to a grant from the Monroe Tourist Development Council and funds from our OIRF supporters, all sixteen of the downstairs windows in the Oldest House Museum are being restored. The work is painstaking but the results are rewarding.

Each window is removed and taken to an offsite location for the restoration process. Each pane is carefully removed to preserve the original wavy glass.

The sashes are disassembled as needed and new wood is fabricated from river recovery heart pine to replace muntins, rails and stiles that are damaged or rotted. The sash is sanded and primed, the glass is replaced and glazing is installed to hold the glass in place and provide a good seal against the wind and rain. Finally a topcoat is applied and the sash is returned to its original location to complete the process.

In April, a crew of contractor Fred Finohr and volunteers David Rooney and Dave Hubert attacked the rotting deck and structure of the ramp that provides access to our visitors at the Oldest House Museum.

The support structure was reinforced and the old decking was completely removed and replaced. Now all it needs is several coats of paint.

It’s projects like this that keep the Oldest House looking its best. If you have skills to do jobs like this and are willing to volunteer your time and talent please give us a call at 305-294-9501, send an email to oirf@oirf.org or go to www.oirf.org and fill our volunteer form.

Are you a member of OIRF?

Through private donations and memberships from individuals, business, and public agencies we are working to raise funds to preserve and maintain the Oldest House in south Florida, provide innovative programming, and provide grants for significant and worthy historical restoration projects in Key West. You can help us make it happen here: www.oirf.org
Our Newest Docent Volunteers for The Oldest House

We are happy to announce our two latest docent volunteers for The Oldest House. Both are fulltime residents, which certainly helps to alleviate our summertime shortages of help. They have completed their initial orientation, and have been provided with the initial draft of the new Docent Manual.

I was born in Wilmington, Delaware, but grew up in the western suburbs of Philadelphia. I graduated from Lafayette College with a degree in History. Most of my working career was in Insurance and Reinsurance Underwriting with occasional stops as Philadelphia tour guide and 2010 Census taker. I have been retired to Key West since 2012, but work part time at the front desk of a small Key West resort.

I look at history as a continuum with individuals and events. When I visit a historical site, whether it be the Colosseum in Rome, Independence Hall in Philadelphia, or the Oldest House in Key West, I try to see them as those in the past did and imagine what their lives were like.

I am a Jersey girl who moved to Key West when my husband, Andy, retired five years ago. All my working life I have had a career as a Registered Nurse, while rearing three children in my spare time! I am now proud to be a great-grandma!!

I have a deep interest in Old Key West, and my first exposure to the colorful history of the island was when I worked as docent at The Hellings House which is now under the auspices of The Key West Women’s Club. I am looking forward to continuing my docent work, and having the opportunity to share more of the Key West history with visitors to The Oldest House in S. Florida. I also have decades of experience in the handling and identification of early American and European furnishings, making me feel right at home surrounded by antique Watlington family possessions.

Grants Help Key West Organizations

In April, we awarded grants totaling $28,500 to three deserving recipients: Key West Art Center, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church and St. James First Missionary Baptist Church. This year our selection process gave emphasis to repair of damage caused by Hurricane Irma.

The Key West Art Center will be using the funds to repair damage to the outside of their building, install new flashing, replace a corner of the roof and shutter damage from Hurricane Irma. According to Rev. Hooper of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, our grant so inspired their Board that it is now the seed money to completely refurbish the parsonage. St. James is replacing their roof which was badly damaged in the hurricane.

Giving grants to sustain Key West’s unique architecture is an important part of our mission, and your membership or donation will help us achieve that goal. For more information on our grants program, and to find out how we can direct your philanthropic efforts to deserving causes go to www.oirf.org, call us at 305-294-9501 or stop by the Oldest House at 322 Duval Street, Key West.

We still have many vacant slots in our weekly schedule for additional Oldest House docents, so anyone interested in following the generous examples of Mary and Al, please contact Andy Herdan at dc@oirf.org. All or any additional volunteers would be most welcome. Docent work hours are either 10am – 1pm or 1pm – 4pm, any days except Sunday or Wednesday.

Our Tropical Garden: The perfect setting for your special event

Key West’s Oldest House Museum and Garden offers the perfect setting for your memorable event, whether it is a grand, lavish affair or a perfect private ceremony. This secluded paradise is ideal for weddings, vow renewals and commitment ceremonies; birthdays and anniversaries; and special events for organizations and companies.

A private setting in the heart of historic Old Town. Our garden can accommodate an elegant and extravagant event or a small intimate occasion. We can serve up to 120 seated diners or 300 for a cocktail party.

The facility includes our large garden with lawn, brick pathways, gazebo, clean modern restrooms, and magnificent mature tropical foliage. Tables, chairs and linens are available. For more information call 305.294.9501, e-mail admin@oirf.org or go to www.oldislandweddings.com.