

Key West's Oldest House Newsletter

March 2018



The Oldest House in Key West, built in 1829, is located at 322 Duval Street. Tours of the house are free and is open daily 10:00 am to 4:00 pm. Closed Sunday and Wednesday.

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Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. is a non-profit 501C(3) organization.

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

March Home Tour

The theme for our March Home Tours is "March of Time: Springtime brings renewal, especially after last year's hurricane". Join us on March 16 & 17 from 10:00 am to 4:00 pm to see this great lineup of homes and enjoy the architecture and the diversity. Purchase tickets online at www.oirf.org or KeysTix.com, in person at the Oldest House (322 Duval Street) or during the tour at any of the houses. For more information go to www.oirf.org.

New Board Member, Nance Frank

We are pleased to welcome Nance Frank as the latest addition to our OIRF Board. Nance is the Director of the *Gallery on Greene* in Key West where she displays the art of Mario Sanchez and other museum quality artists,



Nance describes works in her gallery

native and local. She was born and raised in an historic home in Key West and was a founding member of *Community Foundation of the Florida Keys*, *Arts Council- Monroe County*, *The Studios of Key West* and *Art in Public Places-Monroe County*.

She is the author of five catalogs on Cuban-American folk artist Mario Sanchez and two on renown artist Peter Vey. A WPA catalog of Key West artists is in the works as well as one on the first public artist in Florida, Joaquin Barroso. Nance has a background on the curatorial side of museum in Switzerland and Chile where she lived for some years and she assembled retrospective Mario Sanchez exhibits in conjunction with *Museum of the City of New York*, *American Folk Art Museum*, *National Museum of Fine Art Cuba*, and *Key West Art and Historical Society*.

On top of all that she says she's a "bit of a sailor" too! We are proud to welcome Ms. Frank to our Board!

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Francis B. Watlington The Man We Thought We Knew by Karl Reutling

"Captain Watlington" he was called, in written histories of Key West, in the family's stories, in the lore of the Oldest House. A mariner, husband of Emeline Johnson Watlington, father of nine daughters, a state legislator, a Confederate Naval officer, and a prominent member of the community. He was born on 1 April 1804, on the island of St. Croix, a Danish colony. He died in Key West on 7 April 1887, and is buried in the Key West cemetery, where his tombstone indicates he was born in New York.

The digital age gives us new opportunity to look at the past. Research and analysis of prime source data done in the last two years verifies much that we did know, corrects some things we thought we knew, and clarifies

some questions about who he really was.



Francis B. Watlington

For example, according to the 1840 census enumeration, we can now confirm that there was at least one female slave owned by Watlington at 322 Duval Street. In the 1850 census he states his birthplace as "West Indies," a correct appellation for St. Croix. In the 1860 Census he claims "New York" as his birthplace (and

wife Emeline claims ownership of the real estate we know as 322 Duval St.) Did Mr. Watlington 'naturalize' himself as a U.S. born citizen? We have been unable to find any records indicating an official change. In subsequent years' census his daughters still assert their father's birthplace as St. Croix. Could he have run for, been elected, and serve as a state senator without being a U.S. Citizen?

We know that he was appointed Port of Key West Harbor Warden for the Territory of Florida in 1843. He was also appointed Auctioneer at that same time. He was a principal in at least one salvage claim heard by the Federal Court in Key West. These three facts taken together bolster his involvement in the wrecking industry here in Key West.

Florida seceded from the United States on January 10, 1861. At that same time, Federal authorities took control of the island and the City of Key West. President Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4. War broke out with the firing on Ft. Sumter on April 12. As proof of Watlington's sympathy for the Confederate cause, he wrote a letter on April 17 to Confederate Florida Gov. Perry detailing ship and Federal troop movements in Key West, Ft. Taylor and Ft. Jefferson, along with statements about the Federals appropriating slaves without consent of their owners. A smack (fishing boat) was hired for \$100 to deliver this intelligence via Cedar Key to Tallahassee. Corroboration of this espionage is found in the correspondence of J.C. Walton, a Confederate and former Key West postmaster, to L.P. Walker, the Confederate Secretary of War, which specifically mentions Senator Watlington's efforts. (These "important dispatches" as Walton referred to them, are found in the National Archives' War of the Rebellion volumes.)

Francis Watlington then sailed to Mobile Alabama and was commissioned into the Confederate Navy. He was promoted from Lieutenant to First Lieutenant in 1863, by order of Stephen Mallory, Sec'y of the Navy. We believe he served on two warships, the CSS Gaines and CSS Tennessee. Both were involved in the Battle of Mobile Bay in 1864. The Gaines was damaged and scuttled, while the Tennessee was seized by the Union Navy with Admiral Farragut's victory. Lt. Watlington was eventually captured by Union forces and interred. He was paroled after the end of the Civil War in May 1865, while still in Alabama.

We now know that he did not return to Key West, as records show he took residence in Mobile throughout the 1870s. This means that he was estranged from his family from the civil war until after his wife Emeline died in 1881, over twenty years. By 1885 Francis Watlington had again taken residence at 322 Duval St., Key West. Aged 81, he was likely under the care of his youngest daughter Elizabeth Lily until he died two years later at age 83, 7 April 1887.

Why did he leave his wife and family? Did something happen in the household prior to his departure? Was he persona non grata as a result of his actions on behalf of the Confederacy? (Some Key Westers were, Stephen Mallory for example). As we continue our research, we may find answers to these and other questions, or we may never truly know.

(Mr. Reutling is a historian and docent at the *Oldest House*, 322 Duval Street, Key West)

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Docent of the Quarter

Mary Jo Rooney started her life with OIRF as a Home Tour Docent, an activity in which she was involved for over 9 years. She joined the Oldest House as a winter season docent 3 years ago, and every year takes on the exciting task of decorating the house for the Christmas Season, ably assisted by her husband, David.



In her past life, before retirement, Mary Jo led a truly diverse existence, initially as a teacher, then moving into various aspects of the Real Estate Business. Together with her husband, she next opened and operated an art and framing studio, and then moved on to the operation of a seaside inn.

Apart from her interest in historical buildings,

architecture, and genealogy, Mary Jo has a passion for travel, Gourmet Cooking, and Gardening.

Farewell to Ann Hansen

On her last day here, we say a fond farewell to Ann Hansen who has served for 10 wonderful years as a Volunteer Docent at *Oldest House*. In the photo below she is accompanied by Chris Hamilton (Administrator) and Andy Herdan (Docent Coordinator). Ann also served 6 years on OIRF's Board of Directors.

Ann and her fellow volunteers are the lifeblood of our organization. We say thank you and wish her well as she moves to Naples, FL, while spending her summers in Minnesota. Want to volunteer? Visit here: www.oirf.org/volunteer



Farewell to our longest serving Oldest House docent

Thoughts From OIRF Administrator Chris Hamilton

Hi OIRF Members, Docents, Sponsors and Friends,

The 2017-2018 58th Annual Home Tour season has gotten off to a better than expected start. In the aftermath of Irma, the military bases were slow to re-open and we worried about shortages of volunteers to docent at the homes. Post Irma hotel occupancy numbers have been lower and we worried about the affects this would have on tour sales. As you may know, the annual home tours are OIRF's largest fundraiser of the year, so they are crucial to carry on the organization's mission. So far we're happy to report that through the first three tours we've been able to find enough volunteers and that sales are running ahead of last year's numbers.



We're lucky that we've had an amazing group of owners who have opened up their fantastic homes to share with everyone. We've witnessed big crowds delighted by the variety of architectural styles and settings. We're also very cognizant that it takes nearly 200 volunteers to put on each tour. For the volunteers and our generous group of sponsors we are very thankful, because without them, none of this is possible.

The Oldest House Museum and Gardens have been

buzzing with activity with the influx of tourists and snowbirds. Many of our Museum docents have returned and we have multiple people volunteering on each shift. Our Museum docents have also received new button up, polo and t-shirts and name tags so everyone looks spiffy as they're engaging tourists with the history of the home and Key West. There are multiple parties each week in the garden from weddings, to happy hour mixers, art and book shows and fund raising gala dinners. It is heart-warming to see happy tourists learning by day and cheery event goers partying by night here in our wonderful facility.

It's fulfilling for our staff and volunteers to be caretakers of such a wonderful old house and of traditions going back 58 years.

Thank you,
Chris

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

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OIRF Receives Unsung Hero Award

The *Community Foundation of the Florida Keys* annually recognizes "unsung heroes" who donate their time and talent to non-profits in the Keys. This year they honored organizations who helped with hurricane Irma related recovery, and OIRF was among those who received an award at their 8th annual Unsung Hero Luncheon. You can find more on our grant giving on our website at www.oirf.org.



Emcee Danny Weathers and CFFK President Dianna Sutton flank OIRF Board members Parlin Meyer and John Johnson.

Grant Awards

This year's grant awards were presented at our annual Appreciation Party on March 4. Recipients were: Key West Art Center, \$6,000; St. Paul's Episcopal Church, \$11,500; St. James First Missionary Baptist Church, \$11,000.



Left to right: Kelly Friend OIRF Board President; Dr. Brian Wagstaff and Wendy Niven, St Paul's Episcopal Church; Jane Grannis and Lois Songer, Key West Art Center; Reverend Derrick Anderson and Deacon Mitchell, St James First Missionary Church; Parlin Meyer, OIRF Board Member and Grants Committee Chair

Conch Shell Blowing Contest

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OIRF's 58th annual Conch Shell Blowing Contest was held in the garden of the Oldest House on March 3rd to a standing-room only crowd, and was emceed by Lea Fox of US 1 Radio. The participants this year included four college students on spring break, Santa Claus and an on-stage marriage proposal.



Here, Rick Race proposes to Mary Lou Smith. She said "YES!", and they plan to marry later this year.

Vintage Play Day

In conjunction with the Key West Art & Historical Society, a highly successful event was held with 60 young children on the grounds of The Oldest House. The highlight of the visit was a class in Quill Pen cursive writing, using actual Indian ink. The results were truly impressive, and generated a high level of enthusiasm. The children also participated in an Oldest House tour and scavenger hunt, in which they learned a great deal about life during the early 19th century. A number of period games were available, in which our young visitors were happy to get involved. A fun time was had by all who were, constantly entertained by "Dead-Eye", a Civil War reenactor.



"Dead Eye" and students practice writing with quill pens