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.
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Key West, FL 33040
305-294-9501

Website
Main Site: oirf.org
Home Tours: KeyWestHomeTours.org
Garden Rental: TheGardenAtTheOldestHouse.org
Oldest House Museum:
Old Island Restoration Foundation, Inc. is a non-profit 501C(3) organization.

59th Home Tour Kickoff Party
The 59th Annual Key West Home Tours Kick Off Party for the 2018-2019 Season will be held on Thursday, November 15, 2018 at 5:30 pm in the backyard garden of the Oldest House Museum. Members, volunteers, sponsors, tour home owners and friends are all invited for nibbles, drinks and much festivity.

At the party we will reveal the winner of this year’s Poster Contest.
Old Island Days

Old Island Days all started when the Audubon House opened as a museum in 1960, and 500 people came from Miami to enjoy the festivities. The first person to tour the museum was President Harry S. Truman who, it is said, so loved Key West that he wished he could move the Federal Government here. This captured the attention of people all over the United States.

A small group of prominent Key West women, anxious to preserve and restore the buildings of Old Town, capitalized on this interest. They planned to attract as many visitors as possible to the island, both to raise money for preservation and also to raise money for the sagging local economy.

Jessie Porter Newton was the spark which set it all off. She bought the building that is now Clinton Square Market, to save it from destruction, and she convinced her friend Frances Wolfson to save The Audubon House from demolition to make way for a gas station. Miss Jessie’s passion for preserving Old Town, and her extraordinary storytelling skills quickly ignited others to the cause. These civic-minded women became the founding members of Old Island Restoration Foundation (OIRF). The first OIRF Board Members included such illustrious names as Joan Thompson Knight, Rita Sawyer, Ruth Holtzberg, and Mary Graham.

The enthusiasm associated with the OIRF soon spread. Mailers were sent to travel agents throughout the United States, describing the history, architecture, and tropical beauty of Key West. Airlines and motels offered package deals that included restaurants, attractions, and fishing tournaments. The Key West Citizen printed numerous inserts describing the events of Old Island Days; soon these inserts became as thick as the newspaper itself.

Because Cuba was closing to visitors in the early 1960’s, one of the first projects spearheaded by OIRF was the restoration of Mallory Square. Cruise Lines hoped to lure the formerly Cuba-bound cruise ships to Key West instead, and refurbishing the surroundings to the old freight docks was a first step.

Old Island Days festivities started with a parade down Duval Street. The month-long events are almost too long to list, but included costume balls at East Martello, dancing under the stars at Mallory Square, square dancing at Bayview Park, Beauty Pageants, Antique Shows, Wreckers Auctions, Art Shows, Flower Shows, and even performances by The Lipizzaner Stallions who came all the way from Austria. The Women’s Club, The Waterfront Theatre, The Boy Scouts, and The US Navy all contributed to the festivities. Old Island Days culminated in a particularly spectacular event known as “La Noche de Alegría” (Night of Joy). Street Cars sold bolos, Cuban sandwiches, and other Latin foods. Local bands played while Conga and Rhumba Lines snaked through the streets, dancing the night away!

OIRF to Donate Bahama Village Photos

Our collection of 30 photographs depicting unrestored houses in the Bahama Village section of Key West was taken in 1999 and will be donated to the City for placement in the recently renovated Douglas Gym. At the time the photos were taken, some of the homes were inhabited by the descendants of settlers from the Bahamas in the 1800s.

Right is an example, taken of 904 Emma Street.

Our New Websites

We’ve been busy this summer developing four new OIRF websites. Our new sites are themed around each segment of our business:

Oirf.org: This is our main site, focused on our overall mission which includes stewardship of the Oldest House, philanthropy and historic preservation. There, you can become a member and find information about our Board and staff as well.

KeyWestHomeTours.org: This site is dedicated to our annual Key West Home Tours™, and is the place to find all information about the tours including where and how to purchase tickets. Check out our new Home Tours video on homepage of this site too.

OldestHouseMuseum.org: Here we tell you all about the Oldest House Museum in south Florida. Find out about the history of the house and the people who lived there as well as the history and architecture of Key West. You can download our Pelican Path walking tour guide as well.

TheGardenAtTheOldestHouse.org: Behind the Oldest House is a tropical garden that is the perfect setting for your special event. Whether you are planning a birthday party or a wedding, the Garden is a great venue. See page 4 of this newsletter for more information, or go to the website.

Become an OIRF Supporter

Help Us Achieve Our Goals

Old Island Restoration Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization founded in 1960 and dedicated to preserving and promoting the architecture and cultural heritage of Key West. Through private donations and memberships from individuals, business, and public agencies the Foundation is 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. There are three ways you can help.

Become a Member - Support us with an annual membership and enjoy membership benefits.

Cash Donation – Your donation will be used to maintain the Oldest House and further historic preservation in Key West.

Volunteer – Your time and talent can be utilized in a variety of ways. Become a docent at the Oldest House Museum on Duval Street and tell the story of Captain Watlington and his family who lived in the house in the 1800s. It’s a great opportunity to meet and talk with visitors from all parts of the world.

We welcome your participation! For more information about becoming a member or donating go to oirf.org/join and click on the Support Tab.
Who was William Henry Ward?

Researched and written by Karl Reutling

During our archiving activities, Karl Reutling unearthed a truly priceless document: the handwritten journal of William Ward, accounting for some of his travels as a young naval midshipman. Below is a brief overview of his life, much of which has been extracted from this journal.

When we began updating the genealogy of the Watlington John- son family who resided in the Oldest House, a few pieces of information mentioned William H. Ward. We knew that the third daughter of Francis and Emeline Watlington, Emeline Frances, had been married twice. Family history had it that her first hus- band, a “Wm. H. Ward” died during the Civil War (1861-1865). His portrait remained in the family, and descendants donated it to The Oldest House when 322 Duval Street became a museum. That’s all we knew. So, who was he, where did he come from, what happened? In the past three years intensive research has been done on the family, and we now know much more about the enigmatic Mr. Ward. (A journal he kept, recently donated to OIRF by Mark Langley, helped answer some questions). It makes a very interesting story, a concise version we offer here.

William H. Ward was born about 1830 in Onondaga County, New York. He grew up in Syracuse. When he was but fifteen, he desired to become an officer in the U.S. Navy. With support from local leaders, he was appointed to the U.S. Navy School (later Academy) at Annapolis. As a Midshipman he served on two warships, the ship of the line USS Ohio, and the sloop of war USS St. Marys, and partici- pated in several operations during the Mexican-American War (1846-48). He sailed the north and south Atlantic Oceans, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean. His time in the Navy spanned from 1845 to 1852 at which time he resigned his commission. Stepping ashore at Key West, he met young Emeline Frances Watlington. A very talented writer, he wrote a poem titled “My Emeline.”

By 1857, Ward had revived the newspaper The Key To The Gulf and continued as Editor-publisher into 1861. In 1858 Emeline became Mrs. Ward. The married couple took residence at 322 Duval St., “The Oldest House.” By early 1861, they had a daugh- ter.

The Key to the Gulf newspaper advocated secession long be- fore Florida’s secession from the United States in January 1861. Ward was undoubtedly in league with his father-in-law Francis Watlington and well acquainted with lawyer and politician Ste- phen Mallory. As Key West stayed in control of the United States, Mr. Ward was warned by U.S. Army Major French more than once to cease the rebellious writings in the newspaper. He did not cease, and The Key to the Gulf was suppressed. William Ward then left Key West “Laying aside the weapon of the sage for that of a soldier, to try the issues... on the field of battle.”

By 1862, Lt. William H. Ward was a Confederate States Naval officer engaged in the defense of New Orleans on the Mississip- pi River, serving on the unfinished ironclad CSS Louisiana. That gunboat was floated down the river, in among Union vessels by Fort St. Philip which were negotiating under the white flag of truce.

The Louisiana violently exploded; it appeared to be intentional. He was arrested and taken prisoner, accused of committing “an infamous act” by US Navy Commander David D. Porter. Ward and other rebel officers were transported to Ft. Warren, a prison in Boston Harbor. By 1864, he had been paroled and prisoner- exchanged back to the Confederates. Serving on the commerce raider CSS Chickamauga, Lt. Ward became its last Captain. In early 1865, the Chickamauga was on Cape Fear River defending the port of Wilmington from Federal assault. It went up the river as the Union Navy advanced, incurring horrific casualties in the retreat. The main battery exploded. The cruiser was scuttled across a narrow part of the river, where it remains today. Lt. Wil- liam Henry Ward was missing in action and presumed dead.

In 1866, young widow Emeline married widower Joseph Pilot Roberts. They enjoyed a good family life in Key West.

My Emeline

My Emeline! My bird of love!
My beautiful, my gentle dove!
Oh that again on rapture’s wings
Thou to my heart set fluttering.

My Emeline, Sweet Emeline!
Wherever thou art, thou still art mine!
Though parting years between us roll,
No years can sever soul from soul.

My Emeline! The pain, the care,
The solitude, the soul’s despair,
All I endure, one moment sweet
Repays the moment that we meet.

My Emeline! Though dark my lot,
So time be fair. I heed it not.
Midst fortune’s storms I turn afar
To hail thy love, my only star!

My Emeline! If prayers be heard,
All bliss awaits my beauty’s bird.
For by the heart that loves the best
I’ll bless thee and thou shalt be blessed.

My Emeline! Though truth my fail,
Though friends be false, though love be frail
Though every heart may change but time
Forsake me not, Sweet Emeline.

William H. Ward

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, pro- vide 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/join
New Docent Volunteer

We welcome the latest addition to our docent staff at the Oldest House. Fred P. Slack tells us a little about himself:

I was born in Philadelphia, PA and received both my undergraduate and graduate degrees from Drexel University. We moved to West Chester, PA and helped manage a company which manufactures Portable Land Based Drilling Rigs.

Our rigs are sold world wide for water, mineral, geothermal, mine rescue and oil exploration. In fact, it was one of our rigs and personnel which saved the trapped miners in Chile.

During my 42 years in West Chester, I owned and restored a farmhouse which was originally part of a summer estate for the President of Pennsylvania Railroad. I’ve always had an affinity for understanding old houses and the people whose lives were lived there.

We have lived full time in Key West for 4-1/2 years and enjoy the sense of community. My wife and I volunteer with the Historical Society, Studios of Key West, and the Coconut Castaways and she also volunteers at the Key West Theatre and Tropic Cinema.

What’s Pecky Cypress?

We were fortunate recently to have a very knowledgeable old-time carpenter as a visitor to the Oldest House. He instantly recognized the timbers used in the construction of our cookhouse. The description below, from Encyclopedia Britannica, tells us about timber known down here as “Pecky Cypress”, and clearly this was the timber used here.

From the Encyclopedia Britannica: Bald cypress, (Taxodium distichum), also called swamp cypress, ornamental and timber conifer (family Cupressaceae) native to swampy areas of southern North America. The wood of the bald cypress is valued for its water-resistance and is known as pecky, or peggy, cypress in the lumber trade when it contains small, attractive holes caused by a fungus. The tree is grown as an ornamental for its colorful fall foliage and can be cultivated far north of its native range.

Bald cypresses are long-lived and slow-growing; old trees are usually hollow. A young bald cypress is symmetrical and pyramidal. As it matures, it develops a coarse wide-spreading head. Its tapering trunk is usually 30 meters (about 100 feet) tall and 1 meter (3.3 feet) in diameter. The reddish brown bark weatherers to an ashy gray. A tree growing in wet soil is strongly buttressed about the base, and its horizontal roots often send conical woody projections called “knees” above the waterline. The presumed function of the knees is still poorly understood; they may help oxygenate the roots or provide support in the soft muddy soil. The flat needlelike leaves are arranged alternately in two ranks along small twigs. The trees are deciduous, though the leaves can persist year-round in warm climates. The seed cones are green and globular and are typically no larger than 3.5 cm (1.4 inches) in diameter.

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 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 the 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.TheGardenAtTheOldestHouse.org.

OIRF 2018-19 Event Calendar

Fantasy Fest Parade Porch Party: October 27 Tickets
Home Tour Kickoff Party: November 15 More
Key West Home Tours™ Tickets
December 28-29, 3 pm – 6 pm
January 18-19, 3 pm – 6 pm
February 15-16, 10 am – 4 pm
March 15-16, 10 am – 4 pm
Conch Shell Blowing Contest: Saturday, March 2, 12 noon at the Oldest House