

APALACHICOLA HISTORY

APALACHICOLA AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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The Coombs House circa 1900. The photograph shows the extensive porches that no longer exist on the front of the structure. Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Archives

The Key House/Villa Rosa and The Coombs House Inn: Homes to Remember By Deanna Quick

Within the historical district of Apalachicola, Florida, there lies a magnificent home that is known as The Key House. According to Alexander Key Faq, the Key House, built in 1894 by August Mohr, superintendent of the Cypress Lumber Company, is of Late Victorian architecture consisting of only Heart Pine and Black Cypress. On the inside are an astounding circular staircase, five intricately carved fireplaces, and ten beautiful rooms. On the outside are a wrap-around porch, a gorgeous balustrade, a witch's hat roof, and also a curved roof. This is a stupendous house with an interesting past to match it.

In the 1920's, the land and home was

purchased by Anna Riscilli, who named the home Villa Rosa. In the late 1930's, Villa Rosa changed owners. The new occupants were well-known authors, Alexander and Margaret Key. A list of Alexander Key's works includes *The Forgotten Door*, *The Wrath and the Wind*, *The Incredible Tide*, and *Escape to Witch Mountain*. Margaret Key wrote a plethora of articles for various magazines and also served as a reporter for several newspapers.

Born on September 21, 1904, Alexander Key had originally lived in La Plata, Maryland. But after his father died, the Key family moved to Jacksonville, Florida. The Key family lived peacefully until Alexander's mother was killed when he was fifteen. After his mother's death, Alexander and his younger brother Robert moved in with their uncle Steven Key in Quincy, Florida. Alex-

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ander attended a military school in Georgia until he was seventeen. At this time, he went to the Chicago Art Institute. It was here that he met his first wife, Margaret Key. After they married, they moved to Apalachicola, Florida and purchased Villa Rosa. But, the couple divorced in the 1940's. Not many years after moving into the Victorian home, Alexander Key went to serve in the Navy during World War II (1942-1945). In the Navy he had reached the ranking of Lieutenant Commander. He served as a Navy boarding officer in San Francisco, where he met his second wife, Alice Towles Key.

But, when the new couple came back to Florida, they decided that the area was growing too quickly, and moved to Smokey Mountains, North Carolina. Margaret Key and her sister Bess Lee continued to live in The Key House well into their late 90's. On July 25, 1979, Alexander Key died in Eufaula, Alabama.

The Coombs House Inn, like The Key House, is also a beautiful masterpiece. Along with an intriguing past, the Inn also has a very interesting present. From the home of a successful entrepreneur to documented ghostly encounters, The Coombs House Inn is truly one of Apalachicola's most invaluable treasures. According to the Coombs House Inn webpage, The Coombs House Inn was originally built in 1905 out of exotic timber that the owner James N. Coombs had collected from around the world. And according to an article on visitflorida.com, a quite interesting fact about James N. Coombs is that he was good friends with Teddy Roosevelt, and was said to have turned down the vice presidency and governorship of Florida when it was offered to him.

James N. Coombs was born in Oldtown, Maine on August 15, 1842. He grew up working in the sawmills and hauling lumber until he was in his early twenties. When he was twenty-one, he signed up for a nine-

month tour of duty during the Civil War. He joined the 28th Maine Volunteer Infantry Regiment. The tour brought his to New York, down to New Orleans, over to Port Hudson, then back to New Orleans, back to New York, and then, again, back over to Maine where he was discharged. Soon after getting out of the military, James Coombs married his childhood sweetheart, Maria A. Starrett. Soon the young couple moved down to Pensacola, Florida in 1871, where James found work in the timber business. In 1877, the couple moved to Apalachicola, Florida, where they bought into the Sunny South saw-mill. The Coombs made a great advance in their economic status, and decided to have a home built to show their new status. The house was beautiful, but in 1911, tragedy struck the Coombs couple. At midnight on March 6th, a fire broke out in the attic of the fine house. Much was destroyed, but the couple survived the fire. They moved into the Franklin Hotel (now The Gibson Inn) for several weeks, believing that they would stay there until their house could be repaired. But just ten days later, Mrs. Coombs passed away. Three weeks after her death, Mr. Coombs also passed away.

For the next fifty years or so, various relatives lived in the house. But in the 1960's the house was closed down. In 1978, however, its current owners (Lynn Wilson and Bill Spohrer) made their first visit to Apalachicola, Florida. They showed special interest in The Coombs House, and after much searching for the previous owners, buying the property, and finally renovating it to its incredible standing today. The Coombs House became the The Coombs House Inn in August of 1994. Today, the Inn is in beautiful condition with wonderful service and accommodations. But not only does it have great service, it also has documented ghostly encounters. Written about in the Apalach Times, during the month of January, profes-

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ditional ghost hunters were called to The Coombs House Inn to prove or disprove the existence of paranormal entities in the Inn. After a weekend of staying at the Inn, the ghost hunters came to the conclusion that The Coombs House Inn was indeed haunted. Since this new revelation of the Inn, the possibility of having a ghostly encounter has attracted many newcomers, young and old alike.

The Key House and The Coombs House Inn are just two of the wonderful historic homes/inns that we have in our friendly Franklin County. We are so proud to be the home of the two awe-inspiring homes. Franklin County is truly a place of preserved history, that small-town charm, and true southern hospitality.

Deanna Quick was the winner of the Apalachicola Area Historical Society's 2010 essay contest.

The Key House/Villa Rosa at the corner
of 14th Street and Avenue B.



The Coombs House in 2010, at 6th Street and Avenue E.



Market Street in Apalachicola prior to the street being paved. This view is looking north from Avenue D. Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Archives.



Market Street after it was paved with concrete. This view is looking south from in front of the Raney House. The intersection of Market Street and Avenue E is in the middle of the picture. Photograph courtesy of the Florida Photographic Archives.

PAVING IN APALACHICOLA

Most of the streets in Apalachicola are paved, but that has not always been the case. Early descriptions of the city frequently commented on the sandy streets. Horace Dodd, writing home to his girlfriend in the North in 1858, stated that in Apalachicola "the streets are all a heavy white sand, very deep & all the roads leading out of town are the same only more so."

The city government tried to improve the streets by spreading oyster shells over them. This helped provide a firmer surface, but dust, rutting and mud holes were still a problem. The situation did not receive much attention, however, until the introduction of automobiles.

As early as 1913 a "Good Roads" meeting was held in Port St. Joe. By the early 1920s the entire nation was swept up in a road building craze. The Lincoln Highway, the first road from the east coast to the west coast, had been marked out, and a plethora of named highways followed, including the Dixie Highway and the Old St. Augustine Trail, both of which had their terminus in Florida.

Franklin County followed suit. Every issue of *The Apalachicola Times* contained updates on the local roads that were being improved. In 1925 the Florida Legislature authorized the Franklin County Commission to grant a franchise to an individual or corporation to build a toll bridge across Apalachicola River and Bay from Apalachicola to Eastpoint, although it would be another decade before the bridge was open to traffic.

In 1926, the City of Apalachicola adopted an ordinance to provide for the pavement of certain streets in the business district. The plan was to have the property owners on each side of the street to be paved pay for the pavement in front of their property. That did not sit well with the property owners. Although the city went ahead and selected a

contractor for the paving, the property owners vehemently objected to shouldering the entire cost of the project, even going to court to stop the program.

The City Commission, consisting of Mayor J. P. Coombs and Commissioners S. E. Teague, H. G. Fannin, and C. T. Lanier, reconsidered their options. Instead of having the property owners pay for the entire project they called for an election to approve the issuance of \$75,000 in bonds to pay for the project. The election, held on June 28, 1927, approved the bonds by a wide margin of 131 to 19. The streets to be paved were Commerce Street from Panton Street to Avenue G, Market Street from Avenue C to Avenue F, Avenue E from Water Street to Fifth Street, and Avenue D from Water Street to Fourth Street.

The city lost no time in advertising for bids. The contract was awarded at the end of August to the firm of Noonan and Lawrence from Pensacola for \$56,820 to pave the street with concrete. Nine firms in all bid on the project. The only local bidder was George H. Marshall, who bid \$64,063.42.

Construction started on Monday, October 10, 1927. Market Street, between Avenue C and Avenue D, was the first street to be torn up. The project included curbs and drainage for the street, so the first order of business was to bury the drainage pipes and grade the streets. The excess dirt that was dug off the streets to be paved was spread on streets in the residential areas of town. Seventh Street was one of the streets improved in this manner.

Actual paving of the street with concrete commenced on Monday, November 28, and was completed in early January 1928. Once the streets were paved the contractor extended the sidewalks outward from the existing businesses to the newly laid curb. The

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THE CIVIL WAR IN APALACHICOLA 150 YEARS AGO

When Florida seceded from the Union in January 1861 everyone realized that war between the states would be the eventual outcome. Apalachicola found itself in a totally defenseless position. In early March an Alabama politician wrote a letter to the newly appointed Confederate Secretary of War pointing out the helpless condition of the city. "Unless some of our companies are sent to Apalachicola it will be burned up and our cotton taken if war is declared." He went on to state that there were no forts or guns at Apalachicola to defend the position. There were two companies of volunteers there, but they had no ammunition.

Daniel P. Holland, a prominent local attorney and politician, added his own plea later in the month. He reported to Stephen R. Mallory, the Confederate Secretary of the Navy and a Floridian, that there were four volunteer companies organized at Apalachicola, comprising two-thirds of the able-bodied men in the town. They had no artillery to defend the town with and only 200 muskets and 60 rifles.

One of these companies was the Franklin Rifles. This infantry company was one of the ten companies from around the state selected by Governor Madison Starke Perry to be organized into the First Florida Infantry Regiment when the unit was formed. On the eve of their departure from Apalachicola the soldiers were treated to a supper by Mrs. D. P. Holland at her house facing Battery Park. After the meal the company was presented with a flag, which was kindly accepted but never carried, being a white banner with blue trim.

The next morning, March 26, 1861, the company of 90 men boarded the steamboat *Wm. H. Young* for Chattahoochee. At the recently captured federal arsenal there the

other companies that would make up the regiment were gathering to be organized. For their own captain the Franklin Rifles elected William E. Cropp, who in civilian life was a clerk at the Buckman Cotton Press. William T. Orman, Charles F. Babcock and Nat Hunter were elected as the lieutenants of the company.

Since there was no railroad across the panhandle in 1861 the men took a circuitous route to reach their first posting at Pensacola. First they took steamboats up the Chattahoochee River to Columbus, Georgia, where they were entertained by a local military company for two days. Then, after being ferried across the Chattahoochee, they took the railroad, first to Montgomery and then to Pensacola. The line between Montgomery and Pensacola was not completed, however, and the men had to march across the intervening 18 mile gap. When they finally arrived at Pensacola they were formally mustered into the Confederate States Army for twelve months.

Another military company formed at Apalachicola in 1861 was the Perry Artillery. In early April a committee appointed by the company wrote to the Secretary of War and once again pointed out the undefended position of Apalachicola, and requested cannons with which to protect the port. In reply the Secretary asked that they be patient. Men and weapons would be sent when they were available.

It was around the first of June when Apalachicola received its first armaments, two old 32-pounder cannons made available by the governor. The citizens of the Apalachicola paid to transport the guns to the town and mount them in a battery commanding the water approaches to the town.

The guns arrived at approximately the same time the enemy did. On June 11, the U.S.S. *Montgomery* arrived in Apalachicola Bay to begin the blockade of the port. T. D. Shaw, the commander of the *Montgomery*,

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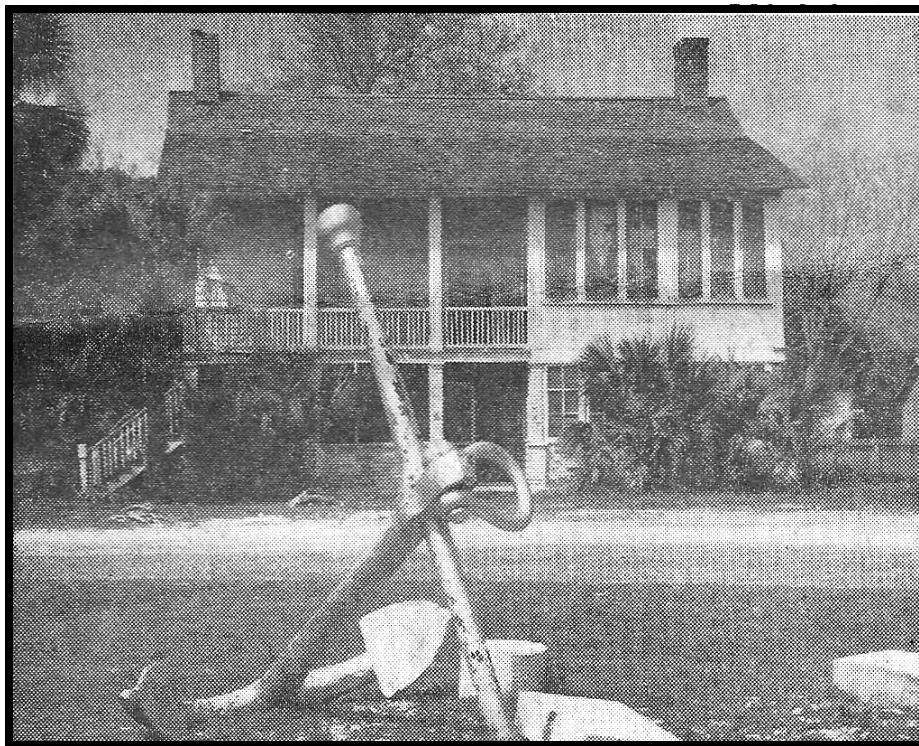
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cautiously maneuvered his ship into the bay and dropped anchor. The 15½ feet draft of the vessel prevented it from approaching the town. The next day a pilot boat approached the *Montgomery* under a flag of truce. A pilot and three unnamed gentlemen came aboard to ascertain the purpose of the warship's visit. Commander Shaw delivered to them the blockade proclamation, which stated that no American vessels could enter or leave the port and all foreign or neutral vessels now in port must leave within ten days. He requested that they give copies of the proclamation to the mayor, the post master, the collector of customs, and to the commercial reading rooms. The pilot promised Commander Shaw the copies would be delivered.

In his report back to his superior Commander Shaw noted that there were two

widely-separated entrances into Apalachicola Bay that made it imperative that at least two vessels be assigned to the blockade at this point. He also recommended that the second blockader be a light draft steamer to allow it to operate effectively in the shallow waters of the bay.

The U.S.S. *R. R. Cuyler* was ordered from Tampa to Apalachicola in August to assist the *Montgomery* in blockading Apalachicola. This vessel, however, was even larger than the *Montgomery*, having a draft of 16 feet. Captain Ellison of the *Cuyler* noted that he could not pursue small vessels close to the shore due to the danger of running aground. It would be several months before there were enough suitable, shallow draft vessels available in the U. S. Navy so one could be assigned to duty off Apalachicola.



The Cullen/Hickey House was located at the corner of Avenue B and 5th Street facing Battery Park. Dating from before the Civil War, the home reportedly had cannon balls fired through it from Union warships during the war. The house was torn down in the early 1960s.

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sidewalk elevated several steps above the street on the west side of Market Street between Avenue D and Avenue E was installed at this time.

The paving program was so wildly popular in the city that the City Commission

immediately issued a call for another election to approve a \$100,000 bond issue to extend the paving program to additional streets. The voters gave their approval to this new project by a margin of nearly 4 to 1.

You are invited to join the Apalachicola Area Historical Society. Individual dues are \$10 per year, and the membership year runs from June through May. Please complete this application, make your check payable to "Apalachicola Area Historical Society" and mail to P.O. Box 75, Apalachicola, Florida 32329.

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