

Lake Worth's Oldest Houses

Introduction

In a community famous for its residential architectural heritage – from Pioneer Cottages to Mid-Century Modern and everything in between – little information has previously existed regarding the oldest houses in Lake Worth. This project endeavored to utilize the 1912 Census data in order to locate the oldest remaining houses in Lake Worth that still display much of their original 1912 architectural character.

Original Lake Worth Development

The first pioneers came to the area as early as the 1870s where they homesteaded waterfront lots around the Lake Worth Lagoon. The Pierce family took up residence on Hypoluxo Island in 1873 and the Bradley family moved to Lotus Cove (now Lantana) in 1877. Fannie and Samuel James were the first settlers within the city limits of the future Town of Lake Worth, moving here from Cocoa in 1885. Under the federal Homestead Act, they took ownership of 187 acres along the waterfront, south of the current Lake Worth Bridge, where they built a small house and planted crops. Four years later, they opened the Jewell Post Office to serve other homesteaders who were moving into the area -- as documented by Ted Brownstein in "Pioneers of Jewell." In the waves of speculation that began to wash over South Florida in the 1890s, lots were sold for winter homes and investment purposes. Few of these early houses, stores or farm buildings survived.

In 1910-1912, a developer known as the Palm Beach Farms Company, bought out homesteaders to create the site for the Town of Lake Worth, including over 700 acres that had previously belonged to the Jameses. This land was then divided into 7,000 house lots of 25' x 135' and paired with 5-acre to 40-acre farmland plots, largely to the west of the Town. Each "combo" of farm and house lots was sold for \$250, with \$20 down and monthly payments of \$10, with location determined by a lottery. As their advertising touted:

"Why not? – Live in or near Lake Worth and enjoy the same climate, scenery, sea bathing, and outdoor life for which the millionaire will pay a small fortune at Palm Beach............. For small monthly payment you can own an orange grove or truck farm near Lake Worth, and combine enjoyable living conditions with profitable occupation."

The 1912 Census

The first official record of structures built within the original Town of Lake Worth was the census printed in the December 1912 *Lake Worth Herald* – just 6 months before the formal founding of the Town. The Census recorded the lot and block of the first property owners within the original town boundaries, which stretched from approximately 12th Avenue South to 13th Avenue North and from the Intracoastal to just west of the route of I-95. The Census detailed the name of the property owner, use of the property, whether a structure was "built (and presumably occupied) "building" (under construction), as well as information on the type of construction and roofing materials. As of December 1912, there were 308 residents in town. The Census also provided information on family composition, occupation and the location of their former homes. Surprisingly, there were

very few farmers and a large proportion of the first houses were owned by married men who came from the Midwest, likely attracted by the aggressive advertising noted above.

By the time of the 1912 Census, 77 buildings had been completed and 48 other buildings were still under construction (including tents). The 77 "original" buildings were mostly frame construction, although a few were made of concrete. At the time, the typical residence was usually comprised of only two rooms with a few of 4 rooms. These frame houses were often built board-by-board -- as funds and materials became available. Many of the early residents were in the building trades, and may have built "spec" houses for incoming settlers.

Identifying Surviving Buildings

The Historical Society of Lake Worth took on the task of identifying which of the 77 original buildings still survive with much of their original architectural elements. Tracking the remaining buildings from 1912 was a complex process, plagued by vague or incomplete records, files lost to the 1928 hurricane, and missing building permits. The process involved cross correlations between the original Census lots and blocks, the City's plat maps, city directories (that provide property owner's names by address) and the Sanford insurance maps that show building outlines on lots and blocks. This process utilized the collective judgments of a "team" headed by Marion Cone, Vice President of the Historical Society, with input from the City's Division of Planning, Zoning & Historic Preservation, Vickie Joslin at the Library, and Helen Greene at the Historical Museum.

Of the original 77 "built" lots, 18 do not contain houses today; they are vacant, parking lots, apartments or newer commercial buildings. Although the original Census listed several stores and even a "movie" theatre, none of the commercial structures remain today. For the remaining 59 lots with houses, a visual survey was used to eliminate those that were obviously "modern" -- built or substantially reconstructed since 1912 – as reflected in their architectural styles and materials, some of which include Mediterranean Revival, Mission, Masonry Vernacular, Colonial Revival, Mid-Century Modern, Split Level and Ranch.

Eliminating these obviously "modern" constructions left 30 prospective oldest houses. These 30 potential oldest houses still existing on "built" lots at the time of the 1912 census and matched the lot/block/address on the 1918 Sanborn maps were then thoroughly investigated.

How much of an old house is "original"?

Given the lack of continuous building permit records for many properties, a determination had to be made in terms of how much of each of the 30 houses are "original". A few of these houses looked "original" but building records indicated they were more recent. In addition, to qualify as being substantially original, houses on original lots had to retain *at least several of* the architectural features characteristic of a house built in 1912. To make this judgment, a visual architectural assessment had to be used to determine how much "original" house remains. While some houses on 1912 lots may retain certain of their original elements, such as the original foundations or floor structures, many of these houses have substantial later modifications and additions. These houses do not exemplify the architecture of the period and have significant components that are not original to the house.

The characteristic features of 1912 architecture used to make these determinations included:

- The original hip or side gable or front gable roof line
- Original foundation (typically brick or rock pedestals for wooden frame floor– not concrete slab)
- One story with front porch

- Original vertical window style that are proportionally taller in scale, 2 over 2 windows
- Original siding, typically wood lapped siding
- Limited architectural ornamentation

The Oldest Houses

A series of visual surveys was again undertaken by the team to identify houses that preserved the most of these original characteristics. The research process revealed seven remaining houses that correspond to the 1912 Census and also appear to have retained the most architectural features from that period. These oldest houses are identified in the table below.

CURRENT ADDRESS*	1912 CENSUS INFORMATION				
	Owner	Occupation	Block & Lot	Material	Status
109 S. Federal Hwy	Mrs. Post	Rooming house	43/11	Frame	Built
106 S. M St.	Leon S. McGill and Miss Audrey	Carpenter Bookkeeper	43/7	Frame	Building**
102 S. M St.	James M. Love and Theressa	Contractor-(1st elected mayor in 1914)	43/8	Frame	Built
229 N. F St.	Thomas Greer, Jr.	Carpenter	60/18	Frame	Built
403 N. L St.	L.G. Welton	Clerk	112/21	Frame	Built
1106 N. H St.	John Klots	Contractor-builder	342/2	Frame	Built
406 S. B St.	E. D. Cramer	Farmer	137/6	Frame	Built

^{*}Utilized Sanborn maps and confirmed by City plat maps **In this case it simply meant that the windows were not installed yet as evidenced by two personal interviews by the children who occupied the house.

These architectural survivors from 1912 represent an important part of Lake Worth's history. The identification of these seven original houses is, necessarily, a judgment call based on the available archival and visual evidence. Anyone with additional information on the earliest Lake Worth residences is encouraged to contact Marion Cone: historicalsocietylakeworth@gmail.com