



# Watlington House, formerly 31 Parsons Lane



Figure 1: Watlington House was the Ocean View club house when it was photographed in 1980.

## **BUILT HERITAGE | MAY 2022**

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*This is part of a series of architectural articles by the Bermuda National Trust that will highlight some of Bermuda's endangered historic buildings.*

Watlington House has been much altered and it not known exactly when it was built. However a house on the site is believed to have been built by Francis Watlington whose grave is located behind the house. The inscription on the tomb reads 'Sacred to the memory of Francis Watlington – Native of Wales – 1679'. Francis' father came to Bermuda in 1622 as Provost Marshal (an early term for chief of police). By the early 1800s it was the home of mariner William Watlington and his wife Elizabeth.



Figure 2: The old tomb of Francis Watlington.

In 1867 the Watlingtons, along with many other Devonshire families, had to sell their ancestral home to the War Department under the Bermuda Defence Act of 1865. Benjamin William Watlington's house and 11 $\frac{3}{4}$  acres of wood and arable land was just one of the many Devonshire properties that appeared in *The Royal Gazette* of 17 December 1867. Many more followed and although properties were taken throughout Bermuda, Devonshire, the most centrally-located parish, was the most heavily affected. John Cox, in his book *The Best of Old Bermuda*, shares a letter by Aubrey Cox in which he wrote "about a third of the parish was taken by the War Department for the use of its garrisons and the families concerned loyally gave up all they had had for the betterment of the empire and tried to build their lives afresh in



Figure 3: Watlington House before 1867 when it was expropriated by the British military. The couple in the foreground were the last Watlingtons to live in the house. From *The Best of Old Bermuda* by John Cox.





new places.... It was the beginning of the end.” John Cox explains that this expropriation effectively split the parish and had a tragic impact on Devonshire’s whole make-up, both physically and socially.

Known as Watlington House throughout the long military occupancy, it served as the home of a succession of officers from the Army Medical Department. One was Surgeon Major George Nicol Irvine MD who suffered an unfortunate and fatal accident in 1882 when he fell from a hammock slung from trees in front of the house. He had been entertaining friends at his farewell dinner and afterwards had gone for his customary nap. There followed officers from the Royal Berkshire and Worcester Regiments. A portion of the Garrison Golf Links separated Watlington House from Fort Langton. It was during this period that Watlington House went through several alterations that included raising the roof and adding a chimney and front verandah.



Figure 4: Watlington House after the first of the military alterations. Internet image.

Watlington House continued to be used by the British military until 1953 when the UK announced it would sell surplus War Department property to the Bermuda Government for £650,000. It was during this time that the heavy concrete two-storey verandah replaced the earlier one. In 1950 the Ocean View Golf Course opened. The following year the recently-built wooden club house was destroyed by fire and Watlington House became the clubhouse until a new purpose-built one was opened in 1994. Since then the house has been allowed to deteriorate and was slated for demolition until it became known that the house has a connection to National Hero, Mary Prince.

Mary as a child (with her mother) was given to Betsy Williams by her



paternal grandfather George Darrell. Betsy was of about the same age as Mary (both born about 1788) and the two girls were playmates as Mary recounted in her narrative: "This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow." When Mary turned 12 she was sent to the Prudden family in Paget to help care for their newborn son and Mary's mother went to Watlington House, the home of Betsy's aunt Elizabeth Watlington. However after three months Betsy's father sold her to finance his second marriage and it was to Watlington House that Mary went to say farewell to her mother before being sold at auction the following day. (For the full account see *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* was published in 1831. Copies can be found at Bermuda Archives and Bermuda National Library. Margot Maddison-Macfadyen's book, *Mary, A Story of Young Mary Prince*, was published in 2017 and can be found at local bookstores.)



Figure 5 & 6: Watlington House today.

**Sources:**

Bermuda's Architectural Heritage Devonshire, published 1995 by the Bermuda National Trust. As well as *The Best of Old Bermuda*, John Cox has written a number of books, all of which provide an insight into life in Bermuda in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Issues of *The Royal Gazette* between 1867 and 1961 were also consulted.