

THE KING HOUSE

Mayport (Jacksonville), Florida

By Donald J. Mabry

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King House, pre-1982

Courtesy of Beaches Museum

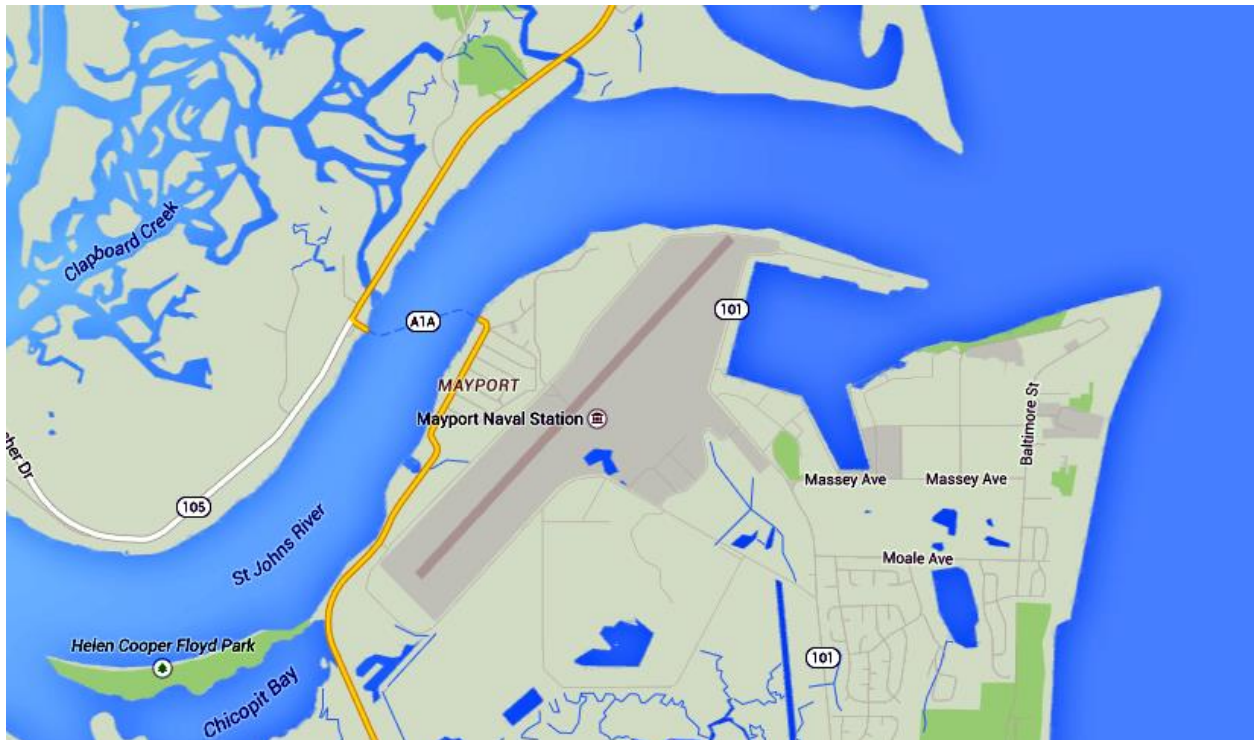


King House, 2001

Photo by Don Mabry

Twenty-two-year old William Joseph King, sailed into the St. Johns River to Mayport, Florida in 1878 and met his destiny. He was ship's cook on the schooner which was guided into the river by a St. Johns River Bar pilot. In 1881, he married sixteen-year-old Clara "Polly" Arnau, the daughter of Estebán "Stephen" Arnau, Senior, and his second wife, Francesca Juana "Pancha" Pons, both Minorcans from Saint Augustine, Florida. She was the granddaughter of Captain James Arnau, a founder of the Bar Pilots Association and a man of means. Her father was a Bar Pilot.¹

¹ She was born April 10, 1865 in Charleston County, South Carolina.



Google map St. John's mouth, Mayport, Naval Station Mayport

The St. Johns Bar Pilot Association was established by Captain James Arnau, Frank Majones, Captain Timothy Wightman, Peter Masters, Phillip DeWees, John Floyd, and Andrew Floyd in 1820. It erected a seventy-five feet watch tower so the pilots could see ships at sea waiting to enter the river. Sand bars formed in the river in different places and, thus, changed the channel. Ships needed pilots to guide them through. Bar pilots earned a very good living. Arnau built a fine house on Ocean Street with some of his money.²

King had little money but was willing to work. In 1870, at age 14, he helped support his family as a common laborer in Seaford, Delaware. His father had died at sea. He lived with his mother and three siblings: Mary (17 years old), Edward (8 years old) and Ida (4 years old). At some point he, too, went to sea, an event which changed this landlubber's life. Polly's

² Dyle R. Johnson, "History of the Lighthouse Service in Mayport, Florida, 1830-1929." Document 83-29-5, Dyle R. Johnson Collection, Beaches Museum and History Park; National Park Service, *Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve, Napoleon Bonaparte Broward House, Historic Structure Report*, 2010.

father insured that he was trained as a bar pilot; he obtained his license in 1882 and began a lucrative career.³

By 1885, the couple was living in a one-story house on Ocean Street at the corner of Julia Street (now Roxie); her grandfather Arnau had built it in 1857. Captain Joe would build the King House in front of it in 1913. In 1885, they lived alone, not with family members. Their neighbors were the Andrew Floyd and Joseph Houston families. Also on the same census sheet were the John Arnau and Louis Arnau families.⁴

There is some confusion about where the young married couple lived. Wayne Wood, a professional historian, said it was a pre-Civil War structure, built in 1857 by Clara Arnau's grandfather. Dyle Johnson, a local amateur historian, wrote that Captain Joe built the house for Clara in 1880, which would have been a year before he married her. Another says the home burned in 1881. Some accept the story that it was a boarding house for sailors and burned to the ground on April 25, 1885. However, that was the date when his parents married! John King told this as a joke.⁵

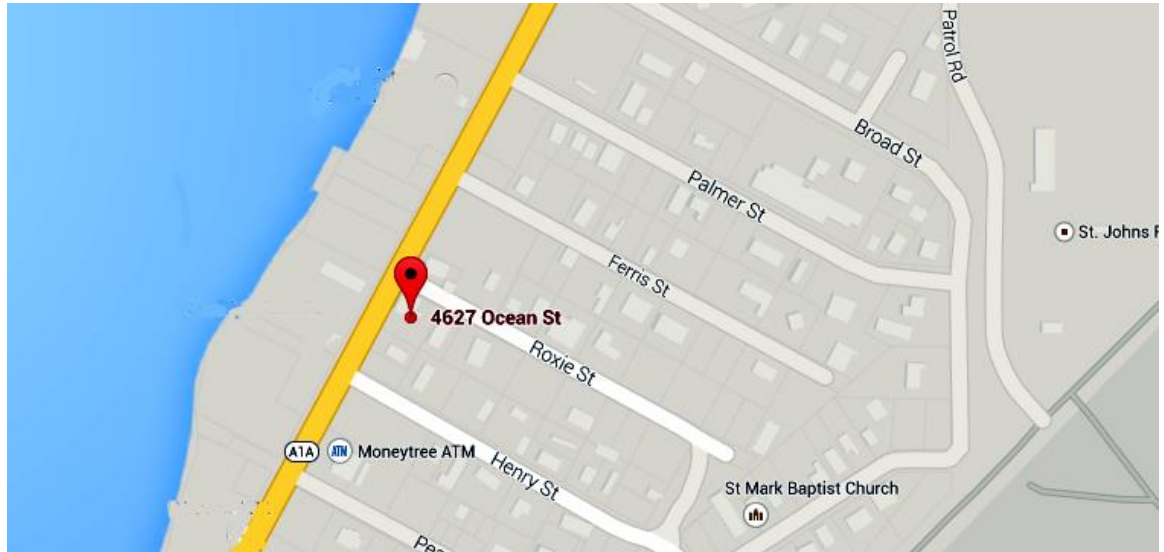
What happened was that, in 1913 or 1914, Captain Joe King built a second, two-story white house in front of the old house. For its day, the King House was massive. Two porches, one for each floor, wrapped the house on three of its four sides. Each balcony had 1040 square feet of total space, that is, 2080 square feet. They are deep enough to shield occupants from all but driving rain. Since Mayport enjoys mild winters and hot summers, the porches are usable most of the year. Inside, each floor had 656 square feet of living space for a total of 1,312 square feet. In 1950, the average home in the United States had 983 square feet. Although the King House had only seven rooms, this was ample when space was shared and people did not have their own space as they

³ Goddard Design Associates, *Historic Resources Survey, Mayport Village* (Jacksonville, Florida. June 30, 2000). p. 34.

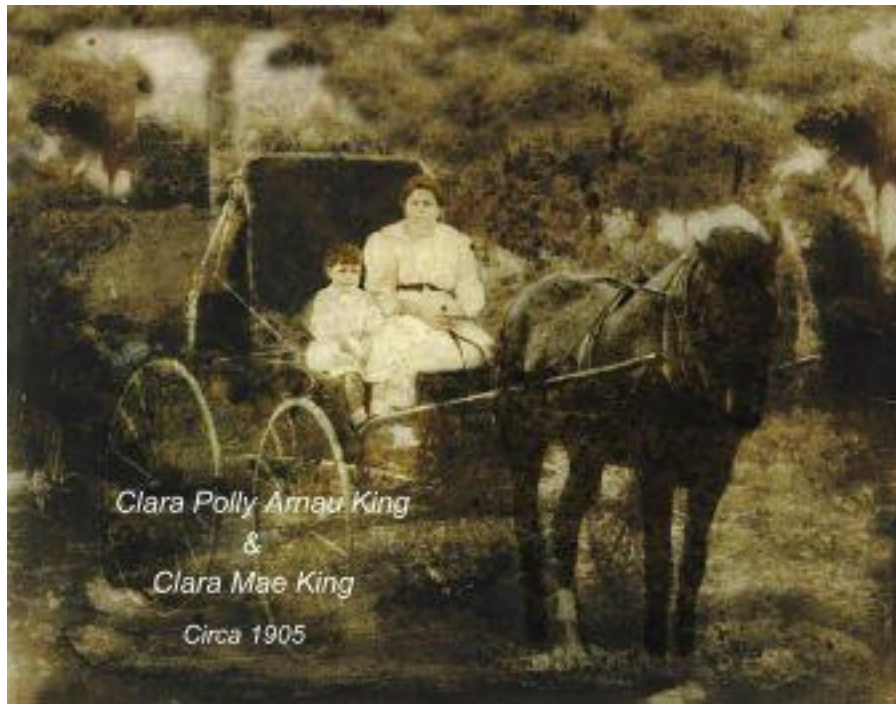
⁴ State of Florida, Census of 1885, Inhabitants of Lone Star in the County of Duval, State of Florida, June 30, 1885.

⁵ Wayne Wood, *Jacksonville's Architectural Heritage: Landmarks for the Future*, p. 328; Dyle R. Johnson Collection of Mayport History, 1562 -1980 (83-29-5), Beaches Museum; and Anonymous, "King House (Mayport)", Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_House_\(Mayport\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/King_House_(Mayport)). "Florida, Marriages, 1837-1974," index, FamilySearch (https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/FW3Z-JXH : accessed 10 February 2015), William J. King and Clara Arnan, 25 Apr 1881; citing Duval Co., Florida; FHL microfilm 960,470.

generally do now. Modern conveniences such as bathrooms and electricity were added later. Electric power reached Mayport in 1936.⁶



Google map, 2015 4627 Ocean Street



Courtesy of Suzanne Coffey Bland

⁶ Property Appraiser, City of Jacksonville (http://apps.coj.net/pao_propertySearch/Basic/Detail.aspx?RE=1690290020) says the house was built in 1916.

The Kings entertained on a grand scale at times. Helen Cooper Floyd wrote of one such instance. Their daughter Clara Mae married Fuller D. King, who was no relation but whose last name allowed her to keep her father's name, on January 16, 1924. It was befitting a prominent family. The marriage service was conducted in St John's Catholic Church in Mayport after which everyone retired to the King House. The reception was held on the lower floor and was decorated with greenery. Of course, the wedding cake, sitting on a lace table cloth and surrounded by geraniums and ferns, occupied the place of honor. Guests visited in the room and the lower porch until such time as the bride was ready to toss



her wedding bouquet. The toss was made from the staircase to a young, single woman lucky enough to catch it. Marguerite Andreu as the one.⁷

All three King children lived in both houses. Clara was the youngest and only female of the three King children. The oldest, Joseph Roland King, Sr. (1887-1960) was raised in the old house but moved when he

married Viola Rachel Singleton on March 28, 1909. He worked for the Florida East Coast Railway in Mayport until it went bankrupt in 1932. As a young man he pitched for the Mayport baseball team. On the top row, he is the third from the left.

The second son, John Franklin King (1896-1977) lived mostly in the new house. His siblings had established their own homes. His mother died in 1927; his father died in 1940 at age 84. He inherited it at age 44.

John Franklin King served in the United States Navy during World War I, from July 14, 1917 until March 21, 1919. He was trained at the Navy Training Camp in Charleston, SC where he served as a Seaman for 93 days. Then he served as a Coxswain assigned to submarine chasing for 392 days. His last base was Key West, Florida.

⁷ Helen Cooper Floyd, "Mayport's King House Has Always Been Center of Local Social Scene," *Beaches History, Florida Times-Union*.

Name KING JOHN FRANKLIN Service Number 184-85-08
 Enlisted at NAVY RECRUITING STATION JACKSONVILLE, FLA. Date 7-14-17
 Age at Entrance 21 YRS Rate SEAMAN Town MAYPORT U.S.N. R. F.
 Home Address - County State F.L.A. Served as

L	Served at	County	From	To	State	Served as	No. Days
	NAVY TRAINING CAMP					SEAMAN	93
	CHARLESTON S.C.		7-28-17	12-3-17			
	US SUB CHASER 151		12-3-17	5-2-18		COXSWAIN	392
	RECEIVING SHIP						
	CHARLESTON S.C.		5-2-18	5-30-18			
	US SUB CHASER 204		5-30-18	11-11-18			

Remarks

NAVY STATION KEY WEST FLA.
 Date Discharge 3-21-19
 Place Inactive Duty

COXSWAIN
 Rating at Discharge



John King in World War I uniform.

Fire destroyed most of the Village of Mayport in 1917, including many fine houses. The four-year-old King House survived. The little tourist industry did not survive except [Wonderwood by the Sea](#) a few miles east of the village. Community members became even more dependent on the St. Johns River for income. Fishing and piloting ships entering the river had been important for a century but became even more important. The Florida East Coast Railway provided jobs until its bankruptcy in 1932. A fertilizer plant using menhaden helped. Dredging the river provide a few jobs. The ferry between Mayport Island and Ft. George Island created jobs when it began operations in the late 1940s.



L to R: Joseph King, Gloria King, Mabel Squires MacCarter, Clara King, Vern MacCarter, Althea Ford, and John King. 1935.

Source: State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory, <http://floridamemory.com/items/show/4709>

The Kings associated with other longstanding Mayport families. Captain Joe is standing with his daughter Clara Mae, her daughter Gloria, his son John, and three friends. Vern MacCarter married Mabel E. Squires, the daughter of Eddie Squires, a sea captain, and Florida Julia "Foddie" Daniels. Foddie Daniel was a daughter of John Vincent Daniels, the first lighthouse keeper and a bar pilot. Althea Estell Ford and Mabel Squires were half-sisters through their mother, Julia Daniels. John King was a fisherman. The King family relationships were extensive.⁸

In the early 1960s, John King began to tell ghost stories to high school students and their dates. John Gavagan, one of those students and a neighbor, tells the story how he and his friends started the legend unintentionally but then furthered it because for their own amusement. King, when he was not at sea as a Merchant Mariner, "thrilled" youngsters with ghost stories about the "now-creaking old house." Joseph R. (Skip) King, III told me that his uncle "said the house was haunted and had tales of many sightings including "the grey lady" and the "old sea captain." People came from miles around to hear the raconteur, especially around Halloween." For a small donation, John would take them on a tour of the house. Cynthia Parks reported in the Jacksonville newspaper that there were lots of ghost and horror stories but Gloria King Wilson, niece of John King and granddaughter of Captain Joe, lived in the house. She thinks John was lonely and that people encouraged him to make up ghost stories. Wilson said that she and her family lived in the house continually from Captain Joe's day and there was no violence, whores, murder or decapitations.⁹

Some people added that the original house and, by extension, the 1913 house sat atop a Spanish cemetery although the evidence contradicts this belief. Joseph Picket, concluded that the Spanish cemetery was elsewhere. The Spanish cemetery dating back to April, 1568 was in the Marine Sciences Building neighborhood not where the King House is.¹⁰ The cemetery story persists, however.

⁸ See the appendix for a genealogical chart from the Beaches Museum archives.

⁹ Skip King email to Don Mabry, February, 2007; Cynthia Parks, "Horror Stories," *Florida Times-Union and Jacksonville Journal*, May 1, 1982.

¹⁰ Joseph Picket, "Spanish Cemetery—Continuation" *Jaxpoliticsonlinecom*, January 21, 2009, (continuation of an article he did for the *Mayport Mirror*, October 27, 1989)

King must have loved the stories he spun and the embellishments he added in the retelling. He was becoming a legend in his own time, so to speak. The story goes that he said his first experience with spirits was in 1966 when he saw a "female apparition" and that he had lived with twenty-two spirits over the course of ten years. He spoke of the little butler dressed in red livery who played tricks on him by turning the water on and off while King was taking a shower, pulling bed sheets down, and letting people into the house without his permission. He asserted that people would enter the room in which he sat and, upon being asked how they got in, would reply that the butler did it. Other apparitions would bring him paper. Another was a bride killed on her wedding night whom King had seen washing in dishes in his kitchen; still another was the person murdered in the very rocking chair in which a guest was sitting. He loved to tell his listeners that the original house had been a boarding house for sailors but burned down but not before the woman who ran it was murdered while asleep by a former lover wielding a pitchfork. Of course, he did not remind them that his parents lived in the original house behind the King House which they had built and lived in since 1913. That would spoil the fun.¹¹

Paranormal researchers visited the house in 1968 when the elderly King was living there. In December, they imported Douglas Johnson, a medium from England, to have him contact the dead. The paranormal people said none of Johnson's statements could be verified but that they did not conflict with what others had said. Johnson said a man who was short, stubby, named William, and a relative of King once lived in the house and had something to do with the sea; John's father was William J. King but known as Joe. He spoke of a weeping teenage girl and a gray-haired woman wearing a shawl. He heard voices and sounds of someone coming down the stairs. William T. Joines of the Psychical Research Foundation and previously an electrical engineering professor at Duke University spoke in 1982 of this investigation, lamenting the lack of scientific

¹¹ "Strange Ghost Stories are Plentiful at King House," *Times-Union and Journal*, May 1, 1982; "King House Looks Better Than Ever," *Florida Times-Union and Journal*, May 1, 1982; Maynard Ellers, "Ghostly Mayport House Has New Spirit," *Florida Times-Union and Jacksonville Journal*, May 1, 1982; "Renovator to Chase 'Spirits?'" *Beaches Leader*, October 27, 1982; Joyce Rasimas, "Haunted House, the Beaches Neighbor," *Florida Times-Union*, 1983.

instruments capable of verifying Johnson's experiences as well as those of others throughout the world.¹²

King moved from the house in 1974, and it was sold on April 18, 1978 for \$33,000 to Gene Nordan, the famous pianist who had played at [LeChateau Restaurant](#) until it closed. Nordan removed Arnau house and the watch tower in preparation of converting the house into a restaurant. When his surveyor informed him that the site lacked the required space for parking and, thus, he could not get a liquor license, he "quickly sold the house to Ray Dillmon (Harbour Lights Restaurant) and an attorney for \$36,000." He earned a small profit.¹³

King died in 1979, but people continued the legend of it being a "haunted" house. They, too, wanted some fun, and legends are slow to die. They remain to haunt.

The ARN-BEN Corporation bought the King House on January 27, 1982 for \$42,500 and planned to spend \$100,000 on the building and the lot to convert it into corporate offices. The corporation, owned by Wayne Bennett, managed government contracts for maintenance work in several states. Proximity to Naval Station Mayport was an advantage. Bennett and his wife hoped to have the work completed by March, 1983. At least they did not have to deal with the much older Arnau house which had been connected to the back side of the King House. It had been torn down by a group who wanted to build a restaurant, an unreach goal.

The contractor and sub-contractors faced many challenges in renovating the old house and bringing it up to code. Still, it was cheaper than building a new building. The Bennetts originally planned to cover the outside with aluminum siding but backed off when others pointed out that doing so would degrade an architectural gem. Removing the exterior paint required sand blasting because there were so many coats of paint. They workers finally got down to the heart pine. Five coats of Minwax were then applied. Removing the interior paint was not as difficult but six coats of Minwax had to be used on the walls to preserve the beauty of the

¹² "Strange Ghost Stories. "By 1963, the Institute for Parapsychology of the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man was completely independent of Duke University which had only given it small grants previously. Duke University Library, Parapsychology Laboratory Records, 1893-1984. <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/findingaids/paralab/>.

¹³ Gene Nordan to Don Mabry, March 2, 2015. This information was provided after the essay was first published.

wood grain. To repair the back of the house where the Arnau house had been, heart pine had to be milled to match the rest of the wood.

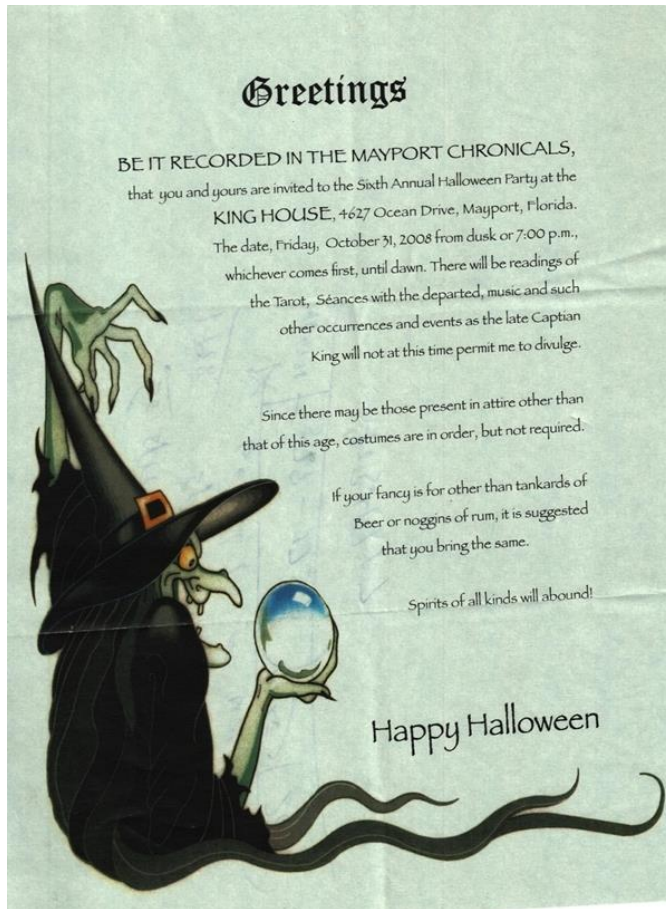
The house had not been kept in good repair. Every window was rotten or broken. Half the pickets on the porches were broken. The floor had started to buckle. The asbestos roof was replaced with cedar shake to make it more authentic. There was no plumbing, so the first ever two bathrooms had to be added. New sheetrock was installed with a special quarter inch sheetrock used to make the windows stand out. Carpenters re-nailed the floors and installed new baseboards and doors. In the process of working on the wood, they noticed a shadow on the wall; the staircase had been reversed. Electricians had to install new conduit; the Bennetts decided on overhead lighting because it would be an office building. At the end, the house contained three small rooms, two small baths, and a slim hallway downstairs and four rooms upstairs. The Bennetts planned to enlarge the porches and create a spiral staircase in a second floor conference room to lead to the widow's walk in the future.¹⁴

To see some of the house's interior, public media sources exist. *First Coast Magazine* published two interior photographs by Michael LeGrand in its article on "The King House." One is the beautiful staircase; the other is a glimpse into a bedroom. The first part of "Local Haunts at The King House, Part 1 of 4" on YouTube show images of the house.¹⁵

Lioncrest Ltd., Inc. (aka the ARN-BEN Corporation) sold the house on May 17, 1994 to the Millar Family Trust. The value had increased to \$85,000, reflecting the work the Bennetts had done. Albert Millar used it for his law office. He obtained a Historic Designation for the property, thereby reducing the taxes on it. Millar had some fun with the haunted house myth as well.

¹⁴ Maynard Ellers, "Ghostly Mayport House Has New Spirit," *Florida Times-Union and Jacksonville Journal*, May 1, 1982; "King House Looks Better Than Ever," *Florida Times-Union and Journal*, May 1, 1982; and "Renovator to Chase 'Spirits'?" *Beaches Leader*, October 27, 1982.

¹⁵ Sarah Clarke Stuart, "The King House," *First Coast Magazine*, 2015, <http://firstcoastmagazine.com/news/the-king-house>; Local Haunts, "Local Haunts at The King House, Part 1 of 4," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10P3wHT0vPY>.



Halloween, 2008

Courtesy of Beaches Museum

Al Millar of the Millar Family Trust gave up the property after sixteen years in exchange for the unpaid balance on the mortgage owed to King House, LLC, which is Frank Hunter, John D. Tipton, and Robert C. Tipton. That same year in two separate transactions, King House, LLC bought the north half of the lot on which the house sits from Clara King Andrew and the south half from Richard Karsten Millar. The King House, LLC owned the property in February, 2015.



Courtesy of the Beaches Museum



The King House, 2000

Photo by Don Mabry

The King House value has risen in the last five years. In 2014, it was \$161,876 in 2014 and projected to be \$160,850 in 2015 but the property

seems to be deteriorating, at least at a casual glance. Perhaps that is just an artifact of a cloudy winter day.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the house still is an important piece of the history of Mayport, Florida. The little village lost so much of its unique identity. The U. S. Navy bit off a chunk to build a base and continued the nibble as it got hungry for more land. The government of Jacksonville-Duval County turned it into just another neighborhood. One of its agencies, JAXPORT, bought a lot of its waterfront (tearing down buildings and dock facilities) to build a cruise ship terminal. The plan was thwarted and the village is on hold. The historic village is threatened by the forces of modernization but the King House, especially if restored to its former glory, does not threaten modernization. Presumably, the ghosts, if they exist, don't care either way!



January, 2015

Photo by Don Mabry

¹⁶ Property values and other pertinent information about the King House, 4627 Ocean Street, Jacksonville, Florida may be found in the Property Appraiser's records at http://apps.coj.net/pao_propertySearch/Basic/Detail.aspx?RE=1690290020.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Without the Beaches Museum and History Park, histories such as these cannot be written. Its archives are indispensable. So, too, are Sarah Jackson, Archives & Collections Manager, Robert Sanders, Information Technology Manager, and Christine Hoffman, Director.

Several people from Mayport were helpful. Years ago, Joseph R. (Skip) King, III gave me information about his Uncle John when I was researching World War One veterans. Suzanne Coffey Bland supplied more than a photograph; her enthusiasm for preserving Mayport history is contagious. Alec Newell lives at the foot of the St. Johns River lighthouse in Mayport and is a constant source of information and insight. His collection at the Beaches Museum was invaluable. John Gavagan gave me insights and information; he was a neighbor of John King.

As the list of sources indicate, I am beholden to census bureaus, property appraisers, custodians of searchable data on individuals, and the like.

Janet Macdonell, an attorney, helped with legal jargon and proofread.

Once again, my wife Paula was patient as I mused aloud about research and writing issues. No one could have a more supportive spouse.

Whatever errors exist are mine. I hope there are none, of course.

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APPENDIX

Click on APPENDIX to access the King Family genealogy. Use your photo viewer to enlarge it.