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# FLORIDA

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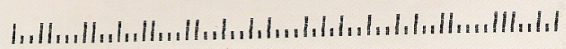
***THE HIDDEN SIDE OF  
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PHOTOS BY KAREN RAGER

# CONCO H Architecture



By Karen Hamilton Rager

One of the most unusual characteristics of Key West houses is the gingerbread design—the wooden millwork encircling the wide porches of the house. Residents often chose the pattern for the gingerbread to reflect their occupation.

Christopher Cox states in *A Key West Companion*, “It was an unwritten rule that each Key West family had its own gingerbread design, selected either by fancy or to suggest the nature of the family business, and it was not to be copied. Discover the gingerbread designs around the island, such as sailing ships, anchors, pies, and, in one house where bootlegged liquor was sold, whiskey bottles.”

The whiskey bottle design adorns a structure named the “Speakeasy Inn” at 1117 Duval Street. The house is encircled by a stringcourse of whiskey and wine bottles, as well as hearts

and diamonds seen on playing cards. Not only did the owner manage to reflect his occupation on the building, he also found the gingerbread a rich source of advertisement for his business.

Key West is home to one of the most diverse and unusual types of architecture found in the United States. Sources of inspiration for early residents included the Bahamas, New Orleans and New England. Homes were built by captains using parts from their ships or parts salvaged from pirate ships that had broken up on the reef off Key West. Many homes were dismantled in the Bahamas and shipped to Key West to be reassembled.

The gingerbread became popular in Key West after the great fire of 1886. With the invention of the scroll saw, elaborate decorations were added to many of the structures. Most of the patterns for the gingerbread were ordered from England and Cuba. A few locals, however, made their living creating millwork for their neighbors.

In the 1880s, John Carroll set up shop and turned a nice profit producing gingerbread designs for his neighbors.



## Key West's Smorgasbord of Gingerbread

Top: The pineapple motif pervades many Key West homes, as does the ship wheels' theme (above).

Cuban Francisco Camellon found an interesting way to cut patterns for Conchs, as residents of Key West were known. He used a blindfolded horse to turn his lathe.

More than 60 different gingerbread designs supposedly can be found on the island, but the most popular variation of gingerbread appears to be the fleur-de-lis, a small flower-like symbol that was used as the emblem of the kings of France and also is the official emblem of the Cub Scouts.

The Wedding Cake House, also known as "The Pink House," "The Gingerbread House" and the "Benjamin Baker House" at 615 Elizabeth Street are examples of gingerbread at their finest. Built in 1866 as a wedding present for his daughter, the Baker house is adorned with an elegant lace-like gingerbread and a wide railing bedecked with the fleur-de-lis design. Placed against a pale pink background, the house epitomizes the charm of the gingerbread.

A common choice of gingerbread stringcourse is the ship wheel. A beautiful display of ship wheels is located at the Cuban Consul House at 1001 Eaton Street.

Not all gingerbread designs are easy to spot. Some ornamentation may be hiding under waving palms and drooping bougainvilleas. By cruising the back alleys of Old Key West, visitors can see some truly inspired millwork.

At 1020 Southard Street, gingerbread men dance across the front porch, the owners having taken to heart the gingerbread name. A jaunt down Frances Street reveals orchid cornices, with a stained glass orchid arrangement on the front door completing the effect.

On tiny, laid-back alleys, apples, palm trees, parrots, and even violins peek out from under the Key West flora. Pineapples, the traditional southern sign of welcome, abound on many Key West homes. At 414 Frances Street, the pineapple motif is in abundance. Pineapples grace the porches and balconies and are even cut into the white picket fence in front of the house.

Many of the old houses are in the process of being restored. Burt Bender, a Key West architect, specializes in renovations and restorations. Restoration guidelines differ from house to house, depending on where the house is located and whether or not the house is "nationally recognized as a significant [historic] structure," Bender states.

If a person is looking to renovate a house with his own designs, it would be advisable to think twice about purchasing a house in Old Town Key West. The guide-



These columns reveal a simple heart design.

lines are in place to keep the structures as close as possible to the original design.

Some residents want to add gingerbread to their homes or remove the existing millwork, but according to Cara Armstrong of the Historic Architectural Review Commission, a homeowner "can't make existing houses into different styles" if the house is of historical significance.

By enforcing the commission's guidelines, the city is able to suspend

time, maintaining the charm and ambience of an old American town. With the exception of New England, it would be difficult to find such an exceptional and entertaining form of architecture.

For more information on historic homes of Key West, write Historic Florida Keys Preservation Board, 510 Greene St., Key West, FL 33040 or call Leslee Keys at (305) 292-6829. 🌿