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"OLD 91" IS HANDSOME KEY WEST LANDMARK

By HAMPTON DUNN

KEY WEST --- The handsome red brick Romanesque building dominates Mallory Square in downtown Key West. The structure is lovingly called "Old 91" for it was built in 1891 as the local Customs and Post Office building.

"Old 91" presently is a part of the Naval Station property and houses the Industrial Relations office. It was used for the Navy’s Administration offices from 1935 to 1947, and during World War I, it also was administration central for the armed forces.

Key West was established as a Post Office in 1829, and the mail was brought here by a small sailing vessel, which plied between here and Charleston, S.C. The community was a busy port in those days, also. In 1831, the Customs Service listed imports worth $115,710 for Florida --- and Key West’s share of this business was 87 per cent!

In the early days, the Key Westers became prosperous salvaging valuable cargo from wrecked ships along the rugged shores of the Florida Keys. It was so lucrative, Key West was said to have the greatest wealth per capita of any city in the United States in 1834.

Salvaged goods were brought to Key West and auctioned off in an old warehouse.

As soon as Florida became a part of the U.S., the Federal government began erecting a network of lighthouses along its long coastline. The lighthouse provided navigational aid for ships and made shipping safe along the Keys. Thus, the wrecking of ships diminished.