

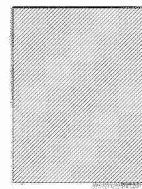
In many countries, the custom house, where government officials negotiate import and export goods, as well as currency and passport dealings, is one of the most important and historic buildings. In Key West, which considers itself its own entity away from the United States, it is no different. Its custom house exhibits a pictorial look at the past.

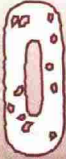
*Living Past  
in a Vibrant  
Future*

by Lauren Gibaldi

Key West's

**Custom House**





In a path once traveled by wreckers, pirates and politicians sits Custom House. The old red brick building was built in 1891 as a post office, and then a court house. Not long after the island's bankruptcy in the 1930s, the building was boarded up and abandoned. Years later, the Key West Art & Historical Society restored the building after a nine-year, \$9 million restoration project.

Key West Art & Historical Society has been collecting and preserving Key West's history since 1949. All the remnants are stored within the Custom House, on display for locals and tourists.

Find famed author and adventurer Ernest Hemingway's bloodstained WWI uniform, as well as other personal items. A short video, entitled "Fishing, Friends & Family," can be viewed, which discusses the author's life.

Folk artist Mario Sanchez's colorful wood paintings showcasing the city's heritage are on display. Each woodwork painting portrays a sense of time and place. View internationally acclaimed painter Paul Collins's work, as well. His modern portraits of Key West's most famous characters, from Henry Flagler to Hemingway, can be seen throughout the building.

Drawings, sketches, prints, paintings and brochures from the 1930s are displayed, each presenting a downtrodden Key West. This "Coping with Depression," exhibit was put together by the Works Progress Administration.

Aside from permanent collections, Custom House has rotating exhibits, including its current *Babar's USA*, which features drawings from Key West resident Laurent de Brunhoff's book. The famous cartoon elephant was originally

created by Brunhoff's father in 1931, and is now brought to life in more than 30 books. Brunhoff draws Babar onto real photographs. In this exhibit, Babar is featured in various Key West locations.

Opening in June is *Seascapes: Large-Format Photographs* by Alan Kennish. Each beautiful photograph captures the tropical turquoise waters surrounding the Florida Keys. In July, *Hemingway in Havana* will be displayed at Custom House. The exhibit features remnants of Hemingway's time in Cuba. In conjunction with the exhibit, two performances of *Hemingway on Stage: Hemingway's Hot Havana* will be performed at the Red Barn Theatre on July 22 and 23.

Aside from the artifacts and artwork, the house itself is a remnant of yesteryear. Tour the room where the United States decided to go to war with Spain, or discover how pirates hid themselves and their loot around the inlets of Key West. Custom House is a little nook on the island allowing visitors to learn about the city's important past, while enjoying its vibrant present.

For more information, visit [kwahs.com](http://kwahs.com) or call (305) 295-6616.

Photographs courtesy of the Alan Kennish exhibit

