

# House History

## Kenan House History

Researched and written by Natalie Pitzer for  
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## KENAN CENTER



To learn more about the Kenan family, William Rand  
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The Home of  
Mr. & Mrs.  
William R. Kenan, Jr.  
1912-1965



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*A 'living' center for a regional community*

## William Rand Kenan, Jr.

**Mr. William R. Kenan, Jr.** born, raised, and educated in North Carolina, maintained life-long ties with the place of his birth. Educated at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, he participated in the discovery of calcium carbide which is the basis for the manufacture of acetylene. Upon graduation from the university, he came to Niagara Falls to build and help operate a calcium carbide plant for the Carbide Manufacturing Company later known as Union Carbide. During the next five years, he circled the globe in connection with the carbide and acetylene industries.

In 1901, Mr. Kenan's sister, Mary Lily Kenan, became the third wife of Henry Flagler who was the partner of John D. Rockefeller in Standard Oil Company. Mr. Flagler invited Mr. Kenan, because of his knowledge of electricity, to join him in developing his railroad enterprises in Florida.

During the spring of 1904, Mr. Kenan married Alice Pomroy of Lockport. He and his bride enjoyed a most agreeable relationship until her death in 1947.

When Henry Flagler died in 1913, he left an estate worth millions to his wife. And when Mary Kenan Flagler passed away in 1917, the Flagler fortune was left to Mr. Kenan and the surviving Kenan sisters, Jessie and Sarah. (It is interesting to note that at one point, Mr. Kenan, Henry Flagler, and Mr. Kenan's sister owned approximately one-eighth of the land area in the state of Florida.)

Mr. Kenan served as an executive in dozens of Florida companies. At the time of his death, he was chairman of the Flagler system, which still operates hotels, resorts, land companies, and the P&O Steamship lines. Locally, he was the owner and board chairman of the Western Block Company. At the age of 85, he was described as the only millionaire to go to work at 7:00 a.m. (Reputedly, this was a little hard on the help because they were expected to be there as well.)

At one time or another, he served as executive of 28 different companies. He authored a six-volume history of Randleigh Farm, an experimental dairy farm on Lockport's east side, where he conducted research in scientific farming. The work has endured as a textbook for dairy breeders and scientists.



Alice Pomroy Kenan

Mr. Kenan, astute financier and active industrialist, was also a most generous philanthropist. Over the years, he gave millions of dollars to schools, churches and organizations such as the YMCA. The stadium at the University of North Carolina, his alma mater, bears his name. He presented gifts to the Salvation Army and DeVeaux School, among others, to help fund their building drives. He provided land upon which Camp Kenan is situated and gave Lockport Memorial Hospital the Kenan-James residence.

In the summer of 1963, Mr. Kenan offered the 24 acres of land surrounding the Kenan house to the First Presbyterian Church. The offer at this time did not include the residence which he reserved as a life estate. After his death, however, the house itself was turned over to the church as well and became a cultural facility for the community we now know as the Kenan Center. With funds pledged by Mr. Kenan before his death and those raised during a church-operated campaign, a recreational facility—the Kenan Arena—was constructed on the Kenan estate. In 1967, the management and direction of the Kenan Center was turned over to a duly-elected and non-denominational Board of Governors.

A significant part of William Rand Kenan's estate became the William Rand Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, a part charitable and part noncharitable perpetual trust.

**B**uilt by George W. Rogers, a native of Massachusetts, the foundation of the Kenan house was laid in 1850. But four years later when the house was nearly completed, wood shavings and flame from a workman's glue pot erupted into a blaze which destroyed all but two walls.



The remaining walls were retained, and by 1859, the house was entirely rebuilt.

Mr. Rogers, merchant, shipper, and later first cashier of the Canal Bank, lived there until his death in 1877. After that, it was the residence of his daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Josiah H. Helmer, until 1893. They in turn sold the house to William Wells, Charles Townsend and Herbert Harrison, who resided there from 1909 to 1912.

### The Kenans at Locust Street

In March of 1912, Mr. and Mrs. Kenan purchased the Locust Street house, known simply as "The Hill," for \$18,500. Extensive remodeling took place during their first year of ownership. Mr. Kenan, who was an engineer at heart, participated in the renovation himself. He offers his personal perspective of the house and its subsequent changes in his memoirs, *Incidents Along the Way*:

"It was a brick house of Central New York architecture, well-constructed with all main partitions of brick: outside walls consisted of 13-inch brick, 8-inch air space and 8-inch inside walls, the plaster being attached to the inside wall.

Heating was done by means of fireplaces, and there was one, including marble mantelpiece, in each room, including the kitchen. There were two in the living room, one at each end.

I started work almost immediately. I did not have any architect or contractor, but simply employed several carpenters, two plumbers and helpers, and several painters.

The house is 50 feet front and 96 feet deep, with a side entrance and a main hall running through the house. There is a vestibule at one end and a conservatory at the other.

There was a cellar under the house with a good high ceiling. The main brick partitions go down through the cellar, making the same duplicate of the first floor arrangement. The first floor ceiling was 12 feet 8 inches, the second floor 11 feet 4 inches, and the attic, 5 feet 4 inches at the eaves. The general plan of the building could not have been improved upon.

The two bathrooms were large but not modern and all the pipes were lead (we removed more than two tons). I converted two closets between the two front bedrooms into a grand bath, and put a bath for the servants, also running water in two servants' rooms and modernized all the bathrooms.

I also put in a vapor heating system with automatic stoker, which has been entirely satisfactory for over thirty-two years. All gas piping was renewed, as well as all electrical wiring with attractive modern fixtures from Caldwell's in New York City.

All windows are extra large, and on the first and second floors extend from floor to ceiling. The living room contained seven such large windows.

The construction of the house was such that it was cool in the summer and easy to heat in the winter.

I installed all brass pipe for water with brass fittings and used gate valves everywhere so as not to reduce the pressure. Each fixture had shut-off valves and a drain valve in the cellar. This made it possible to repair any fixture without shutting off the water from any other part of the house.

I installed an Audiffren Refrigerating machine, and the sulfur dioxide gas placed in the machine is still there, giving satisfactory results.

The changes, repairs and modernizing, including hangings, carpets and furniture, cost \$14, 510.95.

We moved in on June 14, 1913, and have resided there ever since. Sometime later I purchased eight and three quarters of unimproved land to the rear and adjoining on Beattie Avenue. This was used to produce feed for the chickens, ducks and turkeys raised on the place."

(As it turned out, the land also furnished simple pasturage for the family cow named "Daisy." She was the first of such animals Mr. Kenan would buy. As his interest in Jersey's grew, he purchased more cows, each one better than the last. Before he realized it, he was on his way to collecting a whole herd of Jerseys in the backyard of the Kenan house.)

### House Exterior

Sheltered by century-old hemlocks, the stately rose brick house well deserves its classification as an Italian villa. Four levels of rooftop culminate in an observatory offering a panoramic view of the landscaped grounds. The home's exterior is hung and surrounded with balconies and porches. Ornamental cast-iron balconies give an airy, nest-like appearance to the main section. Four porches provide winter shelter and summer shade. And above, the three-foot overhang of eaves is edged with wide molding and supported by massive sawn wood brackets.



Cast-iron balustrades with heavy, ornate newel posts, typical of Victorian era homes, lead to the impressive front porch. The massive, foliage-carved wooden pillars, topped with woodtracery of English Gothic influence, are repeated in porches at the rear.

### House Interior

The marble vestibule has paneled doors which swing back to form sides of a recess. A decorative fan-shaped window, part of the home's restoration, crowns the paneled entrance door, shedding subdued light upon the white marble floor and woodwork.



### Main Entrance

The main hallway features the massive woodwork characteristic of the 1850's, and is distinguished by an 18" wide plaster cornice carved and pierced with foliage design. An imported mahogany veneer newel post anchors the gracefully curved staircase. At the end of the hall, tucked behind the stairs, is a small but airy conservatory with a white marble floor and—at one time—an Italian dipping basin.

In Mr. Kenan's day, a glass-encased table stood in the main hall near the thick mahogany living room doors. It displayed an oriental idol which sat above an ivory-sheathed sacrificial sword and other hand-carved mementoes.

### Living Room

To the right of the main hall, spanning the western façade of the first floor, is the living room. Originally an oasis of pale green and muted gold, it was styled in the popular Adam manner.

In January 1929, the room was redesigned and decorated to feature the Gainsborough portrait and two Poussin "Religious Figures" paintings acquired by Mr. and Mrs. Kenan the previous year. Leonard Schultz, a New York City architect, was consulted to perform the renovation.

Mr. Schultz borrowed from the Neo-Classic theme of the paintings to create the room's décor. Classical busts set into carved niches watched over the bookcases, built as display areas for artwork. The south fireplace was fitted with a mantelpiece of carved white Italian marble accented with tawny yellow striations. A fireplace at the room's north end was removed. Whenever possible, the elaborate fresco work had been preserved.

Floor-to-ceiling windows, seven in all, flood the room with natural lighting. Each is deeply recessed and has three-section interior shutters. Brass hardware and hinges accent the double mahogany doors, crowned with a fresco of mythological theme.

### Ladies' Parlor

To the left of the main entrance is a reception room, once used by Mrs. Kenan as her sitting room. An intimate alcove of bay windows overlooks the peaceful vista of the north lawns, drive and shrubbery. Italian Renaissance in flavor, the room features one of the most elaborate fireplaces in the house. The mantelpiece, formed of Italian statuary marble, is delicately carved with figures of children, fruit and flowers. Its central medallion depicts a woman kissing a dove.



### Dining Room

Located just across the hall, the dining room overlooks the south lawn and flower gardens. Featured are the fireplace with its strikingly handsome black mantelpiece and the dark bronze crystal candelabra. Once exquisitely decorated and hung with original works of art and reproductions of the masters (as were most of the large rooms in the house), this area is used as gallery space today.

### Mr. Kenan's Study

Down the hall, tucked next to a rear entrance, is the site of Mr. Kenan's study (now the Gift Shop). Originally decorated in red, its walls displayed his honorary degrees and photographs of his many philanthropies. Included was a replica of the stained glass window depicting the Great Commission, which he presented to the First Presbyterian Church of Lockport in memory of Mrs. Kenan after her death.

### Bedrooms

Abovestairs, the 11-foot ceilings rise in picturesquely romantic chambers once called "The Green Room" and "The Pink Room." The six-paneled doors are original, as are the Victorian mantelpieces of gray or white marble. Only the former Pink Room has a wooden one, carved in an apple blossom motif. Echoing the woodwork of the first floor, the cornices are intricately multi-molded.

### Master Bath

Conveniently located between the two main bedrooms is the elegant master bath. Originally the site of two large closets, it was installed by Mr. Kenan during 1912 and remodeled by Leonard Schultz in 1929. Features are the vaulted ceiling and cool tan marble fixtures. Exotically appointed in the Egyptian revival style, its lotus petal lamp columns and turquoise and gold aura hint at the luxury once enjoyed within the household.

Arched passageways on both floors lead to the servants' quarters—sleeping, sitting, bath and laundry rooms—which oversee the rear expanse of the estate. Today these quarters house offices.

### Carriage Houses

A Victorian style carriage house and stable stand directly behind the Kenan house. Refurbished and renovated, the structures now accommodate the Education Building and Taylor Theater. The conversion into a theater was made possible by a donation from Nan and Dora Taylor, trustees for the Mary Tucker Hoard and Sarah Tucker Wilson Memorial Fund (under the will of Nellie H. Weaver). The remaining outbuilding is a greenhouse which once flourished with exotic blooms.

### Gardens

Formal gardens, an orchard and a grove of nut trees lent further enchantment to what trend-setters of the day would have called Mr. Kenan's "ferme ornee"—a small farm just outside a city or town, designed more for ornamental than agricultural purposes. (Such places flourished during the Victorian era.)



### Attic & Observatory

Like most houses, though, the history of Kenan house is whispered in its attic. Circling around the observatory, with its arch-topped, paired windows, are the accoutrements of a lifetime of domestic living, travel, interests and celebrations.

Here was a house of great beds, chaise lounges, wardrobes and Saddle etchings. Of a player piano, phonographs, tall vases. Great wardrobe trunks, flowered hat boxes, baskets, hampers, bric-a-brac and furniture all tell of a life well lived.

The Kenan family crest, which once hung in the downstairs hall, was embellished with the motto "Vive ut Viva." Translated it means "Live that you may live." And it was with grace and splendor that Mr. and Mrs. Kenan lived by that motto.