Across Fortune's Tracks:
William Rand Kenan, Jr. and the Kenan Family
Chapter 3
by Walter E. Campbell, Ph.D.

The Lower Cape Fear Historical Society is thrilled to present this preview of an important new book scheduled to be published by The University of North Carolina Press sometime in 1993. Across Fortune's Tracks: William Rand Kenan, Jr. and the Kenan Family has been meticulously researched and artfully written by Dr. Walter E. Campbell, a Southern historian who makes his home in Durham. This excerpt is printed with special permission of Thomas S. Kenan III who adds, "I think your readers will find it very interesting. I did."

—Susan Block, editor.

"I was born on April 30, 1872, at Wilmington, North Carolina in my father's house at 110 Nun Street" William Rand Kenan Jr. Incidents by the Way

"The people of Wilmington are very industrious, but still it is very much impoverished since the late war, for every body has lost their Negroes which was the principal source of wealth."

Adelaide Savage Meares, 1870s

Buck Kenan began the last day of April 1872 as he did each day, with Indian clubs and sit-up exercises. Like many urban middle-class Americans of the period, the twenty-six-year-old Wilmington bookkeeper had joined the ranks of the postwar physical fitness crusade. He had become a devoted practitioner of "muscular Christianity," the belief that "morality was of function of musculature as well as of piety, and that the best sort of Christians were physically fit." And yet the expectant father touched his toes with more than his morality and piety in mind. He also believed that a daily routine of disciplined, orderly exercise would help him overcome the ill-effects of his sedentary brain work at Willard Brothers.

After a few healthy puffs on a fresh morning cigar, Buck, who smoked nearly all the time, descended the steps of his Nun Street home and began his regular morning trip to the market and work. April 30th was a cool, clear morning, and there was a fresh ocean breeze to lighten his steps down Nun Street to the Cape Fear River. He passed quickly into Front Street, but then stopped near the Dudley mansion on the corner of Nun and Front.

Its new owners, Francis and Lydia Kerchner, had the old place looking much better now; indeed, their renovations suggested a long-term commitment to Wilmington. Yet Buck knew even less about the Catholic couple than he did about the "historic" mansion itself. Francis Kerchner was a wealthy wholesale grocer who had strong ties to Baltimore merchants. He was a good Conservative, an incorporator of the Navassa Guano Company, and he and his wife Lydia were attempting to resplendor the mansion to its former antebellum elegance. Just when another Daniel Webster would visit, though, Buck could not say. And what little more he had heard about the mansion's social and political significance had come to him—all too many times, he puffed—from his sister-in-law, Annie Hill Kenan. Her great uncle, governor Edward Dudley, had not only built the mansion in the 1830s but had fathered

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But Buck did not like the Cape Fear scene that greeted him that morning, for the drought-plagued river had reached a dangerously low level. Wilmington had always struggled with shifting sand bars on the coast, at the mouth of the river, and recent, federally-funded improvements there had done little to alleviate the port city’s other major problem: the depth of its harbor. The only vessels it could accommodate were those that drew less than twelve feet of water, and the largest of these had to wait for flood tide to enter and exit.

Buck shook his head as he pondered what the drought might do to his employer, Willard Brothers. Not only could it cause problems for the naval stores firm upstream, in the interior, where tar, pitch and turpentine were produced, but it could slow the flow of boats and rafts down the Cape Fear River to the port and beyond. And Buck knew all too well that the Willard brothers—J. A. in Wilmington and A. A. in New York—needed no more problems and expenses. Their chief financial backer had recently withdrawn from the firm and had taken the bulk of its means with him, and even more recently, with the collapse of the speculative naval stores market in Europe, the brothers had lost $25 thousand on some 30 thousand barrels of resin.

Buck appreciated what the Willards had done for him, and he hoped their business survived, but he had to put his own family first. He had to think about Mollie, Mary Lily, Jessie and—at any moment; maybe even by now—a third child. It just might be time, Buck thought, to wish the Willards well and be on his way. He could always sell more insurance. Or he could sell some of Mollie’s Chapel Hill holdings—maybe her portion of Guthrie’s Hotel. But he hated to do that; he hated to sell such a potentially lucrative investment. Though the university was still shut down, the political winds were blowing in its favor, and the hotel, two-thirds of which he had secretly purchased with proceeds from Mollie’s estate, might soon prove a wise investment. It might eventually be the money-maker it had been before the war, before he and Mollie...

The opening market bell prodded Buck north down Front Street and into the city’s commercial district. Banks, businesses, stores and offices—he spoke and nodded to a few familiar faces before passing quickly on to the market at Front and Water Street. As his soon-to-be-born son, William, would later recall, marketing was the most delightful part of Buck’s morning ritual. He “loved good food and always had plenty of the best in the market. He always did the marketing each morning... [and] would purchase the most unusual things” there.

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Unfortunately, though, the market was also Buck’s last stop before crossing the street to Willard Brothers and another long day of bookkeeping.7

The ex-Confederate sharpshooter must have found his office work particularly burdensome that morning, however, for in addition to anticipating the arrival of another child, it was the political season in Wilmington and less than a week before the city elections. For the past week or so, the city’s political climate had taken on some of its normal election-season nastiness. Night writers had chalked the windows and doors on water-front stores with the huge initials “K. K. K.” A new black militia company, the Wilmington Rifle Guards, had been organized and had ordered 100 Springfield rifles and new uniforms. And then too the elite white women of the Ladies Memorial Association had announced plans to unveil their Confederate monument at Oakdale cemetery on Confederate Memorial Day—only days after the city elections.8

Buck loved politics almost as much as he admired his oldest brother Thomas Kenan, and like Thomas, who was running for mayor of Wilson, North Carolina, Buck had transferred his political activism from the Duplin County countryside to the city. He had charged headlong into the political world of Wilmington, an urban place of 15,000 people. He was acting as a fourth ward canvasser for the Conservative (or Democratic) party, and the May 6 elections marked his debut in the political life of North Carolina’s largest city.9

Buck and his Conservative allies hoped to win for Wilmington the social and political redemption that other Conservatives had recently bestowed on their constituencies elsewhere in the state: rule by rich white folk. The 1870 elections had scattered the Republican party in the state’s piedmont region; Conservatives had gained a majority in the state legislature; and in March of 1871, the Conservative-controlled legislature had impeached and convicted Republican Governor William Woods Holden, the first state governor to suffer such a fate.

Conservatives wanted Wilmington to march in step: They wanted to redeem it from the Republican ring that had controlled it since 1868. Wilmington “was important to Conservatives as the home of some of their more important leaders and newspapers. But it was even more important to the Republicans: Despite the fact that their strength lay in the more remote rural areas, the Conservatives controlling almost all towns, at least Wilmington was a Republican stronghold.10 Thus Buck and his Conservative cohorts faced a difficult task: They wanted to lead Wilmington into the future by looking at the past.

On the day Buck’s son was born, however, it was not the following week’s municipal elections that most concerned Wilmington’s Conservatives; those elections had already been taken care of. That was the opinion, at least, of Conservative leader John Lyon Holmes, Buck’s cousin. According to Holmes, who had been a member of the state’s Secession Convention, the city races appeared “settled”: Republicans would run six candidates for the ten-member aldermanic board, and Conservatives four—an agreement, Holmes noted, that finally gave Conservatives “a representation at the Board, a most important & valuable necessity for the tax payers of the city.” As for completely redeeming Wilmington from the Republican ring that controlled it, Holmes admitted that Conservatives needed more powerful forces: “I hope & pray that God will send us soon a safe deliverance from this terribly oppressive & unscrupulous [Republican] party.”11

Railroads, saw mills, banks, even the Navassa Guano Company—Buck knew how the Reconstruction was working; the economic deals being made. He hoped to profit from some himself. But he also knew that he had to prove himself in his new urban environment. He had to work for the party and pay his dues. If the city races were already fixed, well then the state elections were in August and those would be followed in November by the congressional and presidential elections. And it was these contests Conservatives considered crucial. “North Carolina having the first election this summer must be carried, if possible,” wrote Conservative congressman Alfred Moore Waddell, “but the Radicals will use all the money and every means including, if necessary, some force to carry it. We ought to go into the fight with coats off & sleeves rolled up, determined to win.”12 Buck’s cousin agreed: “In the state, District & county Elections,” Holmes wrote, “we will work like beavers in this coming elections. . . .”13

NATURE, NURTURE, NATIVITY AND FUTURE

Like its politics, Wilmington’s economic life had reached a turning point during the spring of 1872, one that had immediate and long-term consequences both for the Kenan family and for the city. By 1872, the production of rice, the once-abundant staple of the city’s riverine and littoral hinterland, had reached an all-time low. Where in 1857, Wilmington’s mills and merchants had cleaned and exported half a million bushels of locally-grown rice to Baltimore, New York and foreign ports, in 1871, only a hand-

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ful of planters produced a total crop of 10,000 bushels—less than the amount used in North Carolina alone. The region's rice planters thus remained as the war had left them, lacking adequate labor and capital, and the industry's survival there was very uncertain. According to a New York Tribune correspondent, nowhere in North Carolina could one see "so many evidences of the poverty and ruin brought upon the southern people by the war as along the banks of the Cape Fear River from [Wilmington] to and including Fayetteville. Capital and labor are the great desiderataums needed to retrieve these lands from the ruin which the war brought them to."14

Nor was it clear if Wilmington could maintain its traditional reputation as a leading lumber center and the foremost naval stores market in the world. The production and transportation centers of both industries were shifting further to south, to the ports and pine barrens of Georgia and Florida. Though a few local lumber mills still buzzed with business (and provided profits to the Conservative and Republican partners who owned them), northern capitalists were finding "it much cheaper and easier to purchase lumber farther south."15 And the word from the naval stores industry was even worse. The European market had collapsed; local pine stands had been sucked dry; and it was now more efficient and profitable for operators to send their black woodsmen to virgin timber stands in Georgia and Florida, that is, to untapped forests that oozed a cruder, better-quality sap of amber gold.16

At the time of Buck's son's birth, moreover, Wilmington was also feeling the impact of its strategic position within the "Southern Railway Project." Originally organized at Barnum's Hotel in Baltimore, the project represented the efforts of northern capitalists to buy, lease, merge or consolidate—to do whatever it took, in short, to create a system of interconnected railroads along the Atlantic Coast. The project was led by William T. Walters, a Baltimore liquor and commission merchant, who was "keenly interested in the raising and transportation of fresh vegetables for eastern markets . . ."17 In addition to Walters, the syndicate of investors included other prominent Baltimoreans; a group of New York City capitalists; and the president and vice-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad Company. Although securing the Wilmington & Manchester Railroad was the syndicate's formal goal, this was merely a strategic part of the Pennsylvania Railroad's larger plan to create and control a national rail system, one that dominated every region of the country.18

Two of Wilmington's three railroad companies—the Wilmington & Weldon and the Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta (formerly the Wilmington & Manchester)—lay at the heart of the syndicate's southern project.19 On the one hand, the Wilmington and Weldon offered the investors a standard-gauge outlet to the Pennsylvania Railroad and the cities of the Northeast; its rails ran between Wilmington and the Virginia border, and provided connections there with the standard-gauge Virginia lines also being targeted by the project. On the other hand, the Wilmington, Columbia and Augusta Railroad (W.C.& A.) offered the syndicate a southern connection, a potentially lucrative outlet not only to the ports at Charleston and Savannah but also to the important inland trade centers of Columbia, Augusta and Atlanta.

By creating a Wilmington-centered rail system the syndicate was also hedging its bets; it was keeping an outlet open to the sea at a time when many doubted that an all-rail route to the north could compete successfully with coastal shipping. Put another way, even if syndicate failed to consolidate a north-south rail route, goods from both directions could still be hauled into the city and then transferred to ocean-going vessels bound for northern and foreign ports. The president of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad company, Robert Bridgers, recognized the port's importance to the syndicate's plans. "How far an all rail line can compete for the far-off Southern business," the North Carolina native wrote, "remains a problem to be solved. If this experiment should not succeed we can fall back on the Port of Wilmington and command a full share of the business. The true interest of the line requires both the all rail line and the Port of Wilmington."20

In addition to representing the city's potential as a regional transportation center, the two Wilmington railroads exhibited some of the problems and profits that attended the consolidation of a north-south rail route along the Atlantic Coast. Initially unconnected physically, their track gauges were also incompatible: the Wilmington and Weldon ran on the "standard" gauge common in the North, while the W.C.& A. used the broader five-foot gauge, the "southern" standard. The syndicate had united the roads physically in 1869, however, by building a bridge across the Cape Fear River, and the two companies eventually succeeded in bridging their gauge break with an ingenious invention to change the trucks of rolling stock on regular through trains. And in the meantime, moreover, corporate consolidation had proceeded apace. In January of 1871, the syndicate had moved the officers of the W.C.& A. into

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the Wilmington and Weldon’s office building, and in the spring of 1872, in a move that made the merger even more substantial still, the syndicate decided to lease the Wilmington and Weldon to the W.C. & A.

By 1872, some of the more profitable aspects of the syndicate’s consolidation activities were apparent to both its promoters and Wilmingtonians alike. A new extension into the South Carolina upcountry created a dramatic increase in the W.C. & A.’s business—some 60 per cent in the first eight months of 1872 alone. More appealing to local merchants were the syndicate’s efforts to stimulate passenger travel along the Atlantic Coast. Railroad handbills hawked “The Great Atlantic Coast Line for the movement of freight and passengers via Wilmington & Weldon and Wilmington, Columbia & Augusta Rail Roads and their various connections North & South.”

Encouraging too were rumors of the syndicate’s plans to rejuvenate the moribund Wilmington & Seaside Railroad; to establish a beach at Wrightsville Sound; and to construct an ocean resort for northern invalids and local daytrippers. The potential to profit from such attractions was great. Visitors and travelers would need to eat and sleep, of course, and be carried between restaurants, railroad depots, steamboat landings, hotels and boarding houses. Merchants, shopkeepers, teamsters, hackmen, innkeepers, ferrymen, tavern owners and hotel operators, they all applauded actions (whether rumored or real) that might stimulate the flow of customers through their businesses.

Other signs suggested, however, that the syndicate’s merger mania might hold Wilmington hostage to the goals and policies of the “outsiders” who now controlled the two roads. Like most antebellum railroads, the two Wilmington roads had originally been owned and operated by port people with local goals: to expand the interior trading territory of their port city. And yet the Walters syndicate was controlled by northern capitalists, men who saw Wilmington not as their home, nor as the center of their plans, but instead as a strategic part of their larger scheme for an interstate railroad system. Tend to local traffic and concerns they would, but only if these contributed, like the development of truck farming in eastern North Carolina, to the syndicate’s larger goals of increasing the amount and efficiency of through service at Wilmington. Traffic through Wilmington had replaced traffic to Wilmington as a corporate goal.

Between 1868 and 1872, ownership and control of the two roads passed from local to outside hands. Syndicate members bought stock from individual North Carolinians, from the state of North Carolina, from the city of Wilmington, and from the holdings of the railroad companies themselves. They replaced North Carolinians as officers and directors of the two roads, and they instituted more impersonal, business-like policies, eliminating free passes, for instance, and refusing to publish stockholder names and individual stockholdings in the annual reports. The new owners also adopted firmer employment practices, fixed the duties and salaries of road officers, and merged the offices of the two companies. By 1872, the only North Carolinian with a noticeable managerial and financial position in the two companies was their president, Robert Bridgers, the man who had originally contacted the syndicate in Baltimore.

On April 30, 1872, the day that Buck’s son William Rand Kenan Jr. was born, the Wilmington and Weldon’s largest stockholder was syndicate leader William T. Walters of Baltimore. A strong states’ rights man with railroad and financial interests in the antebellum South, Walters had spent most the war in Paris with his son, Harry, and his daughter, Jennie—all in exile, it seems, for Walters’ pro-Confederate activities in Baltimore. But for the sad exception of his wife’s death from pneumonia shortly after their arrival in France, Walters’ European sojourn had been an exciting one. Before returning to Baltimore with Harry and Jennie in 1865, he had become intimately acquainted with many French and English painters and had embarked upon a second career as a serious collector of European art, especially contemporary French paintings.

Few people had as much impact on the fortunes of Buck Kenan and his family as did Walters and his relatives. The two men almost certainly knew one another by the early 1870s; Walters frequently visited Wilmington and often met there with two men who had served with Buck’s father in the Confederate Congress: Robert Bridgers, the president of the Wilmington and Weldon, and George Davis, the road’s legal counsel and the last Attorney General of the Confederacy.

In the spring of 1872, however, it was the Duplin County Kenans, and not Buck himself, who stood to benefit most from the actions of the Walters syndicate. Buck’s brother James had taken the syndicate’s suggestion and had planted some fruits and vegetables at Lockland, the old family plantation south of Kenansville. Though he and his tenants still concentrated on cotton, corn, tobacco and naval stores, the majority of which continued to be transported south to Wilmington by water, they were also testing Lockland’s suitability for truck

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farming crops, produce that the syndicate could then move by rail to urban centers in the northeast.²²

The syndicate's impact on Owen Kenan, Buck's father, was even more immediate and involved more than the potential profits of truck farming in Duplin County. It involved the future of Owen's new sawmill in Columbus County. Located at Cerro Gordo, a stop on the W.C. & A. line, the new mill depended on the syndicate both to move its lumber and to provide it with business. The mill's largest client was the Harrisburg Car Factory, which made wooden rolling stock for the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, and which was located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the home of syndicate member and future Pennsylvania Senator J. Donald Cameron.²³

In the long-run, however, it was Harry Walters, the syndicate leader's son, who was destined to have the greatest impact on the lives of Buck Kenan and his family. Three years younger than Buck, Harry carried with him a different set of memories and goals than the ex-Confederate officer. Not only had he spent the war years in Europe, marching with his father between galleries and museums, but he and his family were now enjoying much better luck than Buck and the Kenans. The Walters fortune had emerged from the conflict virtually unscathed; it had grown during Reconstruction; and Harry himself was close to accomplishing his goal of becoming an engineer and railroad adviser. A graduate of Georgetown University in 1869, he had received his M. A. there in 1871—at about the very same time, that is, that his father had given him stock in the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad company. Later president of the Wilmington and Weldon's corporate successor, the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Company, Harry, in the spring of 1872, completed his first year of studies in the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University.²⁴

Just when Harry Walters entered the lives of Buck Kenan and his family is not clear. Buck's son William later recalled that Harry Walters came to Wilmington when "I was a very small boy and became a very intimate friend of my family." Not only was Walters "the very first individual" Will Kenan could remember outside of his own immediate family, but he became "a second Father" to Kenan, "the best counselor and friend" he ever had. Indeed, Walters would represent for Kenan many of the things for which Kenan himself wanted to be remembered but for which his own father, Buck, could not be: scientific training, business acumen and financial success. Where Buck would teach his son to shoot a gun, Walters would nourish the young man's interest in science, giving him "many Technical books (from time to time) most of them having been purchased in France, . . ." And where Buck would suffer repeated business failures, Harry Walters would symbolize for Kenan the epitome of business success. "He was a wonderful executive with natural business ability, . . . the most outstanding, all around executive it has been my good fortune to know."²⁵

At the time of Will Kenan's birth, though, Harry Walters was busy fostering a relationship that would have its greatest impact on Kenan some seventy years later, during World War II. While a student at Harvard, Harry introduced his sister Jennie to his friend and classmate Warren Delano. The two young people took to one another almost immediately, but their romance did not set well with either William Walters or the Delanos—the very uppity Delanos, that is, who sniffed at Walters' art-filled Baltimore mansion as "that depressing, dusty museum." With Harry's help, however, Jennie and Warren continued to meet in secret and eventually were married.²⁶

This Walters-Delano merger had important significance for the future. For not only did Warren's sister, Sarah Delano, become the mother of future president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but in 1872 her future husband, James Roosevelt, was a leading investor in the Southern Railway Security Company, a syndicate closely allied with the Walters group.²⁷ Moreover, Warren and Jennie's only surviving son, Lyman Delano, would live in Wilmington in the early twentieth century and become close friends with Kenan and his sisters. Like Kenan, in fact, Delano would be a many-sistered only son who received special attention from Harry Walters. He would succeed his "Uncle Harry" as chairman of the board of the Atlantic Coast Line Company, and then later, in the 1940s, during his cousin Franklin's presidency, Delano would take up with Kenan where Harry Walters had left off. He would give special attention to Kenan's Florida East Coast Railway and its potential merger with the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad company.²⁸

It was through railroads and Harry Walters, moreover, that Buck's oldest daughter, Mary Lily, met her future husband, Henry Morrison Flagler. By the spring of 1872, Flagler was well on his way to accumulating the Gilded Age fortune that would later dominate the lives of the Kenan family. The son of a Presbyterian minister from western New York, Flagler had been John D. Rockefeller's business partner and railroad negotiator since 1867. He had suggested the incorporation of Standard Oil of Ohio in 1870; he had served the company since then as its secretary and treasurer; and he had become critical

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to its expansion as "transportation negotiator, legal expert and communicator with Rockefeller on new ideas." When Standard increased its capitalization from 10,000 to 25,000, shares on January 1, 1872, one day before Flagler's forty-second birthday, he held close to 14 per cent of the company's stock—second only to Rockefeller.29

SUSPENDED BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Flagler and Walters take us too far ahead of our story, however. Of more immediate importance to Buck and Mollie's new son were the day-to-day forces of family and place. William Rand Kenan Jr. was born in the South during Reconstruction. He was raised in a family of political activists and he was swaddled in the Old South stories of ardent Lost Cause believers—men and women whose minds and characters had been shaped by a distinct regional culture.

But while he nursed at the nipple of Nicey, his Negro nannie, and loved to visit Liberty Hall, the old family homeplace in rural Duplin County, Will Kenan grew to manhood in a different world. He matured in the New South, in the world of modern corporate America. His was a world of national integration, multinational corporations, industrialization and urbanization. Slavery, the South, the Confederacy and the Lost Cause—Kenan says almost nothing about them in the five different editions of his autobiography, Incidents By The Way. Indeed, he reveals very little about the people and places that shaped the first twenty-five years of his life.

Liberty Hall was as close as Kenan got to the Old South, and he remembered it fondly as a place of freedom and frolicking. To him it meant Christmas-time, special occasions and summer vacations. It meant cousins, hog killings and barbecues. And it always involved him and his family in a tedious but interesting trip into the countryside: an hour-long train ride from Wilmington—exactly "forty-eight" miles on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad—was followed by a tight-squeeze wagon ride from Magnolia station to Kenansville, the latter a horse-drawn journey that was "eight miles via a sandy road and usually took one hour."30

The wagon ride prepared the family for the slower, more self-sufficient lifestyle of rural Duplin County. Even in Kenansville, the county seat, one was "immediately struck with the quiet and antiquated appearance of things in general." The war and Reconstruction had taken their toll; no longer was Kenansville "one of the most flourishing and dashing little towns in North Carolina."31

Liberty Hall lay just south of the slumbering village, and was still impressive if decidedly less prosperous and majestic in appearance. Its bedrooms "were large," Kenan recalled. "many having four-posters and deep feather mattresses. The heating was done by means of wood in fire places, one in each room of the house. There was no refrigeration of any kind. If a chicken was required for dinner, it was killed and cooked immediately. If we had beef or lamb, it was planned ahead when to kill it and the excess over our consumption was sold to the neighbors."32

Owen, the old Confederate patriarch, still reigned at Liberty Hall but increasingly it was his maiden daughter Annie, her cousin Annie Kinney, and Martha Cooper, their black cook, who ruled there. Though Kenan had little to say about the two Annies, who later tried to turn Liberty Hall into a retirement home for women, he remembered his grandfather Owen as both a generous teacher and a strict Presbyterian Sabbatarian. "My Paternal Grandfather looked upon Sunday as a day of rest, so the noon-day dinner was all prepared on Saturday and, of course, a cold spread was eaten."33

On other days Owen tried to teach his grandson about farm ways, profits and patience. A lifelong leader of the Cape Fear Agricultural Association, he occasionally provided young Will with a plot of land to tend at Liberty Hall. "Sometimes when we came up to spend the summer I would plant a garden and work it but as I had to return home in time for school some of the vegetables were not matured; however, I was sure to harvest them and take them home." In addition to paying his grandson to cut and haul wood from the forest, Owen stimulated the young man's interest in the care and feeding of cattle—a pursuit better suited to teaching the lessons of patience and profit. The ex-Confederate congressman often gave Kenan "a calf which I would raise on his feed and, when grown, I would sell it, keeping the proceeds."

What Will Kenan enjoyed most about Liberty Hall, though, were the freedom and fun he shared there with his sisters, cousins and the servants' children. "Usually all the grandchildren would be there and did we have fun. Negro servants, many of all ages—Martha, the cook, had a large family, all of them living on the place, and, in addition there were several other families living there." Eventually the Kenan grandchildren numbered eight: Will and his three sisters, Mary Lily, Jessie, and Sarah; and the four children of James and Annie Hill Kenan, Owen, Emily, Thomas, and Graham. While only Mary Lily, the oldest of the eight, could remember their grandmother Sarah, even Graham, the young-

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est Kenan cousin, who was born in 1883, got to know their grandfather Owen.

Liberty Hall was a marvelous playground for the Kenan cousins and their black playmates. They rode horses, fed the chickens, gathered eggs, and watched the prize gamecocks strut. They played in and around the big house, the smokehouse, and the shacks of the servants who lived "in the yard." They ran through the fields, walked in the woods, and climbed in the trees that surrounded the huge garden. "Each tree belonged to one of the children and they took particular pride in their tree. They could do what they wanted to in their respective trees." 

They also carved their initials on the kitchen wall and lapped up the desserts prepared by Martha, the black cook. Her apple pie was Kenan's favorite: "The bottom or crust was made and apple sauce put in just before being served, this was covered with a deep layer of whipped cream and it was good." 

Visits to Liberty Hall were also quite unlike the strict and closely supervised routine imposed on Will and his sisters in Wilmington. "At Liberty Hall everyone was welcome and we children could do anything." They could even sample the wine cellar, "a large high ceiling cellar under part of the house. Most unusual for the south in those days." The old cellar had "many large wooden casks containing both hard liquor and many kinds of wine, all made on the place." Its huge key "hung on the wall of the Butler's Pantry. It was about eight inches long and weighed approximately one pound. We children would take it any time and sample every cask in the cellar. There was no way to get the contents out, except through the bung hole in the top side so it was necessary to take a rubber tube and siphon it out, which we did."

Christmas always brought the Kenan clan together at Liberty Hall for "a barbecue of both pig and lamb." Will remembered the cooking as a very precise operation:

This was done out of doors by digging a trench 2′ wide and 15″ deep and 6′ long, the fire in the bottom and hickory limbs were laid across the pit above the fire to carry the carcass. . . . the cooking is done rapidly at first in order to brown the meat and hold the juices inside; after that the heat is reduced and the roasting is done slowly. The carcass is turned frequently and basted all the time with a sauce very highly seasoned.

But Kenan’s Liberty Hall memories included more than succulent sensations of taste and smell. They also contained the pain of the worst physical injury of his life. This happened late one fall when "they were killing the hogs for the winter supply. It was not unusual for my grandfather to kill 35 or 40 at a time as he had his own smoke house." Young Will became intrigued with the meat grinder during sausage-making, and as he "did not understand how it worked, put my finger into the same and the end of one finger on my right hand came off. I had it sewed on again and it did not give me any trouble thereafter except when playing baseball on two occasions I got it partly split off."

Kenan’s meat grinder story is important for several reasons. For one thing it helps explain his exquisite penmanship. Kenan wrote an elegant, precise, and proportional hand, one that suggests hours of practice to overcome the stitched digit's distortions of his pen. The story also illustrates the extent to which Liberty Hall and the Wilmington house at 110 Nun Street were in different worlds. There were no hogs or hog killings at the family’s Nun Street home, no cows, no smokehouse, no fruit trees, and no wine cellar. In Wilmington, the family visited the market; in Kenansville, Liberty Hall was its own market. While most Wilmington households worked to make a sufficiency, the goal at Liberty Hall remained self-sufficiency.

The most significant thing about Kenan’s meat grinder story, however, is that it reflected his assumptions about his own personality. Kenan believed that some benign force—be it Providence, Nature, or Fate, he never says—that this force blessed him with the soul of a scientist and then showed him the way to develop and use this gift for the good of mankind. If one ignores the setting of his sausage-making story—hog-killing time at the old plantation—then one is left with the image of Kenan’s eagerness to learn, his aggressive if naive curiosity about how things worked. He may have been born and raised in the South, Kenan intimates, in a region not noted for scientific achievement, but it was not the region that ruled him; it was his scientific spirit. Indeed, Kenan regarded his injury as an act of both self-realization and self-immolation: It taught him the burdens of being a scientist.

This same general assumption pervades Kenan’s memories of the house in which he grew up. And yet his description of his “father’s house” reflects the cold cornice of an engineer and not, as with Liberty Hall, the happy, wide-eyed child who drank, frolicked and eventually slept in a featherbed. The house at 110 Nun Street

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was frame construction, about ten feet from the street line, with a yard on one side and a driveway on the other; a fairly large grounds in the rear. The house was two story and attic with a veranda in front, one across the west side and a two story veranda at the rear. The storeroom and kitchen was a separate building (the storeroom was just as large as the kitchen) separated from the main house about twelve feet and had a veranda connecting about ten feet wide across the front. There was no cellar under the house, it being constructed on brick piers about four feet high,—enclosure being lattice work.

The heating was by means of a fire-place in each room, and, in addition, a pot stove in the rear hall, first floor was used. In later years a cellar was dug under the rear veranda about 10 x 16' and a hot-air furnace was installed for heating, coal being the fuel.

The house faced north, had high ceilings, large windows and was painted white with green blinds. There was only one bath room and it contained a copper tub built in with wood. This opened into my parents room and also had a door opening on the upstairs rear veranda. A hall went through from the entrance to the veranda on the rear. On the left or east side was a large room which was designated ‘the parlor’ and a smaller room to the rear used as a play room, with entrance from the rear veranda. On the right or west side was the living room and back of that the dining room and then the butler’s pantry, which opened on the rear porch.

It was not that his memories of Nun Street were particularly unpleasant, or that he was completely unhappy there. It was simply that Kenan remembered the house as a laboratory, as a place where he discovered and nurtured his natural scientific inclinations. "When I reached about eight years old my job was to keep the wood boxes on the rear verandas (both first and second floors) filled. After a few years of carrying wood upstairs, I rigged up a hoist and purchased a goat and had him haul up all the wood, which was great fun."

Others recognized this inner light, of course; Harry Walters gave Kenan science books and his own family gave him tools as presents. But here again the actions of others only buttressed what Kenan believed was his innate cathedral of character. "I was always interested in construction and from time to time received many carpenter tools. I built several shacks in the yard, improving and enlarging them from time to time."

If both Liberty Hall and the Nun Street house confirmed Kenan’s character, so too did the city of Wilmington itself. The Cape Fear River was only a block and a half from his house—a convenient laboratory, it seems, for discovering the sailor and boat-builder that lay within him. Kenan not only made "a model of a boat and fully rigged it." He made a canoe which he and his friends carried "back and forth to the river, where we got much pleasure in going all about." Kenan also appreciated the port city’s role in fostering his passion for collecting stamps from faraway places. "I was interested in a foreign stamp collection and it was our custom to board foreign ships both at the docks and out in the stream to obtain stamps from the members of the crew. I had a very fine collection of about 1,000 varieties and, when I came north to live, left them at home and they simply disappeared."

Kenan may have been a born collector but he failed to inherit the one bit of gene-knowledge shared and manifested by most of his family members—the ability to make music. Unfortunately for Kenan, this natural deficiency made it impossible for him to participate fully in what became one of the most important aspects of family life at 110 Nun Street. All the white women of the house, Mollie, Mary Lily, Jessie and Sarah, they all received some kind of professional instruction in either voice, piano or both. Indeed, singing voices and piano-playing dominate Kenan’s recollections of family life at 110 Nun Street.

His warmest memory is of his mother Mollie at the piano. "She was fond of music and any night a crowd of young people would call and she would play the piano all the evening for us to dance." And there were other musicmakers in the family as well, men and women alike; uncle Tom played the guitar; aunt Annie the organ; cousin Tom the cornet and the guitar; and so on—with the exception, of course, of young Will himself, who "could not sing nor play any instrument."

This natural deficiency worried Kenan, for it became obvious early on that it might do more than render him mute during family musicmaking. It might also ruin his chances to meet and attract women. Kenan first made this connection in a series of incidents that combined his own pubescent stirrings with the coming-out parties of his oldest sister, Mary Lily. Mary Lily was almost five years older than Will, and "when she came out, or made her debut, it was the usual custom for the young men to serenade the young ladies at night with vocal and instrumental music, especially if some other out of

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town young ladies were visiting at our house." Young Will could not ignore the ritual's impact on the serenaded debs. "My room was at the end of the hall, second floor, directly over the entrance, had two large windows and was a corner room. It was very favorable to see and hear the serenade, so the girls would all pile into my room, and, of course, wake me up, much to my disgust."

A few years later, Kenan's musical deficiencies barred him from the Glee Club at the University of North Carolina, the one college club that guaranteed its members field trips and female audiences throughout the state. Kenan became so intent on making the club, however, that he literally turned flips to join it, conceiving the idea of performing a tumbling act with several other club members during concert intermissions. The club director considered such antics "foolish," of course, but Kenan continued to work on him and eventually persuaded him... to come over to the gymnasium and view the performance. We put it on for him and, after that, I became a member of the Glee Club."

The University of North Carolina, Liberty Hall, the house at 110 Nun Street—Kenan says more about them in his autobiography than he does about his parents and other family members. He acknowledges Buck and Mollie as sources of food, clothing, shelter, and presents, and they appear warm and friendly to almost everyone, including their only son. Yet they remain rather vague figures, nourishing but neither significant nor instrumented in shaping his life. In Kenan's mind they were much like Liberty Hall and 110 Nun Street: "The houses that you remembered as big and beautiful have dwindled and become commonplace."

Kenan remembered his mother as "small of stature but the most energetic person I ever knew." She "was born and raised at Chapel Hill, N.C., attended the public schools and finished at the Oxford Female Seminary at Oxford, N.C." She played the piano. She was "a good housekeeper and a fine seamstress." And when the children were young "she would get in a colored seamstress and, together, they would make most of our clothes, including my clothes, until I was about eight years old." Thrifty, energetic and skilled in the womanly arts, Mollie would also "make friends of anybody."

To the extent that her eyes mirrored her soul, though, and her surviving photographs her general temperament, Mollie was not a happy person. One can see traces in her face of the beauty some remembered her being, but none of the joy lines of a toe-tapping piano player. Friendly though she may have been, Mollie's facial circuitry registers unhappiness and pain.

The ice-blue eyes of her husband Buck are much harder to gauge. They appear luminous, even sinister, in some of his photographs, and yet jovial and generous in others. Never, though, is their purpose clarified by his large mouth and lips, for shortly after the war Buck veiled these sensuous Kenan signifiers with a stringy wide moustache. If he was not the gorgeous young man who had led the university commencement almost a decade earlier, Buck was still an attractive, handsome fellow. He "was a strong active man and each morning and evening would go through a setting up exercise using Dumb-bells or Indian clubs. He took great pride in his physical condition..."

Buck appeared to his son to be both a generous provider and a skilled protector. He was a "wholesale merchant" who gave his young son some spectacular (if potentially dangerous) gifts:

When I was about twelve years old my father purchased a pony for me, a real wild Mustang, never had a bridle nor a saddle on him. They were driven from the range, loaded in cattle cars and brought to Wilmington to be sold. The cowboys would lasso the horse, one around the neck and then the other around the hind leg and throw the horse to the ground, when saddle and bridle was attached and we boys learned to ride by mounting the horse on the ground.

But Buck was clearly a better protector in Wilmington than a provider, for the skills he brought to the city were those of a country boy from rural Duplin County. He was "a great hunter of all kinds of game and with any kind of gun. It seemed to be natural with him." His marksmanship impressed his son: "He was the best shot I ever saw." But it could also be intimidating:

When I was eight years old he gave me a gun (a 16 gauge double-barrelled shot gun) and afterwards I always accompanied him when hunting. He would take a 22 rifle and kill more squirrels than I could with a shot gun. We would hunt ducks in a canoe with a colored boy to paddle us. I sat in the bow and he amidship and I always shot first and if I missed he always knocked them down.

Buck became an unusually aggressive protector, in fact, in military and political matters. And yet here again his son avoids the topics of politics, the Civil War and the family's role in both. Kenan says nothing about his father's epic protector days, those

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which Buck had spent as a Confederate sharpshooter, and nothing about what was undoubtedly the most important part of Buck’s public and private life, his political activities. Kenan chose instead to emphasize his father’s New South sabre-rattling. Buck was much interested in the National Guard. Organized a company in Wilmington; was its Captain for many years, and then Adjutant of the State Guards. He always went into camp with them each summer and on the rifle range he would take any one’s gun and outshoot the whole Regiment.’’

But Buck’s most aggressive act as a protector, one that greatly “impressed” his son, would occur at the end of the century, at a time when Will would be working for the Union Carbide Company in Michigan. ‘’There was a riot of colored men in Wilmington and my father organized a volunteer company of men with all kinds of rifles together with a riot gun on a wagon and they cleaned up the riot very quickly, although they were compelled to kill several persons. He rode the wagon and directed the operation.’’

Riot? Colored men? Guns? And killings? What does this say about Buck; about Wilmington; about the people and places that shaped the first twenty-five years of Will Kenan’s life? There was more to Kenan’s life story, of course, than what appeared in his memoirs, Incidents By The Way. For Kenan casts himself in Incidents as a man fulfilling a destiny. He portrays himself as an actor and shaper, not someone shaped and acted upon, and thus he has little to say about the people and places that defined him and his social identity.

And this is the major weakness of Kenan’s autobiography. He says nothing about the complex connections of individual choice and historical accident, those epic contingencies that ruled his life. Nor does he reveal the interplay of public events with his own private life and with the private lives of other members of this very public family. Kenan’s life was not the happy stroll he described in his autobiography and implied in its title, Incidents By the Way. Nor was it the perfect passage he suggested it had been when he wrote in his Prologue: “should I have my life to go over again, I would not wish it to be changed one iota.’’

Rather Kenan’s story is that of an ordinary man who made an extraordinary journey. He accomplished much he could be proud of along the way, and many of the paths he blazed were his own. But more often than not he was forced to follow the tracks of others.

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2 Harvey Green, Fit For America: Health, Fitness, and American Society (Baltimore, 1986), 183.


5 R.G. Dun & Company Collection, Special Collections Department, Baker Library, Harvard University Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University (hereinafter R.G. Dun & Company Collection, Harvard), North Carolina, Volume 18, 108. The collapse of the European naval stores market is mentioned in Watson, Wilmington, 106.


7 Kenan, Incidents, 25.

8 Wilmington Star, April 23, 26, and May 1, 1872.

9 Ibid., July 28, 1872.

10 Evans, Ballots and Fence Rails, 166-167.

11 John Lyon Holmes to S. A. Ashe, April 26, 1872, Samuel A. Ashe Papers, North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Raleigh, N. C. (hereinafter NCD&A/H).

12 A.M. Waddell to S.A. Ashe, March 13, 1872, Samuel A. Ashe Papers, NCD&A/H

13 Evans, Ballots and Fence Rails, 188-192; John Lyon Holmes to S. A. Ashe, April 26, 1872, Samuel A. Ashe Papers, NCD&A/H (quotation). Holmes was Kenan’s third cousin. See Alvaretta Kenan Register, The Kenan Family (Statesboro, 1967), 130.

14 Wilmington Star, October 15, 1872.

15 Meares Notebook, 37, Meares Papers, DUMC.

16 Evans, Ballots and Fence Rails, 188-192.


18 Except where otherwise noted the following discussion is based on Chapters One, Two and Three of Glenn J. Hoffman, "History of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad," an unpublished manuscript in the Legal Department of the CSX corporation in Jacksonville, Florida. Copy in possession of author.

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19 Wilmington's third railroad company was the Wilmington, Charlotte and Rutherford.

20 Quoted in Hoffman, "History of the Atlantic Coast Line," Chapter One, 15.


25 Incidents, 1st. ed., 41-42.


28 See Chapters ** below.

29 Edward N. Akin, Flagler: Rockefeller Partner and Florida Baron (Ohio, 1988), 42.

30 Incidents, 1st. ed., 19

31 Quoted in Faison Wells McGowen and Pearl Canady McGowen, eds., Flashes of Duplin's History and Government (Kenansville, 1971), 258.

32 Except where otherwise noted all quotations are from the first edition of Incidents (1947).


34 Incidents, 1st. ed., 18.