

Kenton County Historical Society

P.O. Box 641
Covington, Kentucky 41011

R E V I E W

June 1990

GENERAL MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM FOR MEMBERS, FRIENDS, GUESTS, AND THE PUBLIC

Elizabeth Chavez, Programs Chairperson, announces that on Tuesday, July 10th, 7:00 PM, Kenton County Public Library, Covington, Mr. Charles King, Kentucky and local history librarian, will discuss and explain the uses of genealogical resources at the library.

The library has many birth, marriage, death, census, tax, land records, and indices. And there is other reference material and equipment useful to the family historian and other researchers.

Mr. King will discuss problems encountered when records are missing, unavailable, or unaccounted for.

Sponsored by the library and the Kenton County Historical Society, this group program will be free and open to citizens interested in learning more about the library's resources, and how to use them.

Tuesday Evening
July 10th
7:00 PM
Kenton County Public Library
Fifth and Scott streets
Covington

KENTON COUNTY BIRTHDAY PARTY PARADE

There is much enthusiasm for the July 4th parade, which will commence at six different points, converge in Latonia, then proceed to the new RiverCenter. Descendants of Simon Kenton are scheduled to honor the parade with their presence.

ELECTRIC STREETCAR ANNIVERSARY

After the opening of the Suspension Bridge in 1866, horse (and mule) powered street rail transportation was established to Ludlow, to Newport, to Pike and Main, and past Fifteenth and Sixteenth on Madison and Scott respectively in Covington. Streetcar historian Earl Clark recently sent us a postcard reminding that 1990 marks 100 years since Covington saw its first electric streetcar. In the 1890s Cincinnati-Newport-Covington lines were consolidated into a modern network. In addition to transportation, recreation sites such as the Ludlow Lagoon, the Queen City Beach in Dayton, Ky, sporting activities in Ft Thomas, the 5 cent fare package to Coney Island by way of the Island Queen, and other romantic amenities all helped lure riders at one time or another.

SOMERSET HALL, A CLANDESTINE UNDERGROUND STATION

How many structures said to have been used by the Underground Railroad are true survivors of that clandestine institution? From time to time claims are made that this house or that house was once a station on the Underground, yet those making such claims usually lapse into total silence when asked to document their claims. Certainly, the Underground days of the Renkin House at nearby Ripley can be documented, but what about those closer to home? Ludlow's Somerset Hall appears to be one of those rare structures whose use as a "station" has been thoroughly authenticated.

It seems that during the 1960s or early 1970s someone made a proposal to demolish the graceful old Ludlow structure. This promptly galvanized a group of the building's admirers to action, and one of them, George T. Marksberry, began to seriously research the building's background. His findings were later published in the Ludlow News-Enterprise and are generally credited with squelching all proposals for the building's demolition.

Marksberry found that the structure was built in 1832 as a summer home by George Kenner, a wealthy Louisiana plantation operator and slaveowner. Kenner erected his summer residence in the center of the 42-acre plot of ground, which he had, in turn, acquired from his brother-in-law, Israel Ludlow, Jr. The Southerner's newly-acquired estate, Marksberry said, extended from present-day Elm Street to the Ohio River, and from what is now Kenner Street on the east to Bromley on the west.

The home Kenner erected faced the Ohio River with which it was connected by a broad, flower-bordered walkway. The building's light and airy interior was just what one might expect to find in a summer home. It was not designed for winter use, and indeed, was closed and boarded-up at the end of each summer when Kenner and his human chattel would return to his Louisiana plantation.

At that time the northern part of Kentucky represented a place of retreat from the sweltering, humid summers of the deep South. No matter how humid the Ohio Valley summers might become they were infinitely more bearable than those of the lower Mississippi. In fact, it has been said that steamboat travel helped make the northern reaches of Kentucky the Michigan and Wisconsin of the pre-Civil War South. Every year witnessed scores of Southerners coming here to take advantage of the cooler summers and to visit Cincinnati business houses where they would attend to a large portion of their annual business needs.

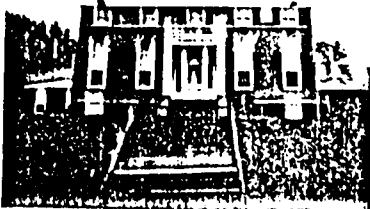
The local area held an added attraction for the Southern visitors in that slavery was legal on the Kentucky side of the river, a fact which Covington hotels invariably pointed out in any advertisements that they might place in Southern newspapers. The Southerners were advised that if they stayed at a Covington hotel they could legally keep their slaves at the hotel's slave quarters, and then feel free to cross the Ohio to transact their business.

Other Southerners, like George Kenner, preferred building their own summer homes, a number of which can still be found throughout the Ohio Valley. According to Marksberry, every summer saw a number of Kenner's slaves take advantage of their nearness to a free state and flee his ownership by swimming across the Ohio-- and probably with the help of local abolitionists.

A number of abolitionists were active in the local area, and, according to students of that era, a high percentage of them were closely associated with the Underground Railroad. Like the legitimate railroads, the Underground consisted of a number of divisions. Two of these divisions, the Illinois Line from St. Louis, and the Quaker Line from the Ohio River, converged in Cass County, Michigan from where they followed a common course into Canada.

The origin of the Illinois Line's name is readily apparent, while the Quaker Line received its name because of the large number of Ohio, Indiana and Michigan Quakers who aided the fugitives. It was the Quaker Line (although by no means completely manned by Quakers) which operated in the local area.

Marksberry's research further revealed that whenever Kenner closed Somerset Hall for the winter and returned to his Louisiana plantation, the vacant home would be commandeered by escaping slaves and their allies. It was then used as a place for the runaways to rest and to hide before beginning the next leg of a journey that would take any number of them as far as Canada. "It was really an authentic slave underground escape route," wrote the researcher, who then went on to note that during the 1930s the U. S. Department of the Interior recognized the building's unique background when it presented its owner with a certificate testifying to the structure's historic value. The certificate was signed by Harold Ickes.
(John Burns, Director)



The Kenton County Historical Society

Organized in 1977. Dues \$5.00 per person per annum. Lifetime membership \$100.00. Please send your check to the Treasurer, P. O. Box 641, Covington, Ky 41012. Monthly membership meetings. Monthly communications to all members. Affiliated with the Kenton County Public Library, the Historical Confederation of Kentucky and/or associated with other organizations with similar interests. Committees include: Historic Sites, Library, membership, publications, and programs. People with appropriate interests are invited to participate. Genealogical advice from Dorothy Wieck, RSCVP, or other members.

You are invited to become a member, or to renew membership at just \$5.00 per person.



**THE KENTON COUNTY SESQUICENTENNIAL YEAR
1990**

6-90

Kenton County Historical Society
P. O. Box 641
Covington, Ky 41012

Kenton County Birthday, April 30, 1990 (150th)
Covington Birthday, February 8, 1990 (175th)
Bromley Birthday, May 23, 1990 (100th)

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