

The History of Somerset Hall, Ludlow, KY



Presented by the

LUDLOW HISTORIC SOCIETY

Somerset Hall: The Kenner Family Summer Villa in Ludlow, KY

Introduction

Somerset Hall is an important American Greek Revival villa, built in the 1840's as a "northern" residence by the plantation-owning Kenner family of Louisiana. The Kenners intermarried with the Ludlows of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky and engaged in villa building, town planning, and horse racing on their Ohio River site. They apparently intended Somerset Hall and their new town of Ludlow to be a seasonal retreat from their plantations and the heat and diseases of Deep South summers, with steamboats providing the critical transportation link.

Somerset Hall is a multipart villa, constructed in stages. Bold and impressive outside, its planning included natural cooling strategies, large spaces for entertaining, private living and sleeping areas for the Kenners and their guests, and internal lodging and workspaces for their servants. The villa synthesized northern and southern planning strategies.

The current owners of Somerset Hall have generously given members of the Ludlow Historic Society access to the house for recent investigations. These enabled hypothetical reconstructions of the villa's original plans and room functions, shown on page 2. This essay is somewhat abridged, however. The Ludlow Historic Society is continuously researching and advocating for Ludlow's historic buildings and hopes to produce a more complete historic structure report on Somerset Hall in the future.

Somerset Hall is well-preserved and is unique in the American architecture of its period. Its most impressive feature, a 120' long gallery-veranda, overlooks a rear yard that now serves as a beautiful urban green space and an amenity for its neighborhood and city. The building and its surrounding space have high historical, architectural, and preservation value.

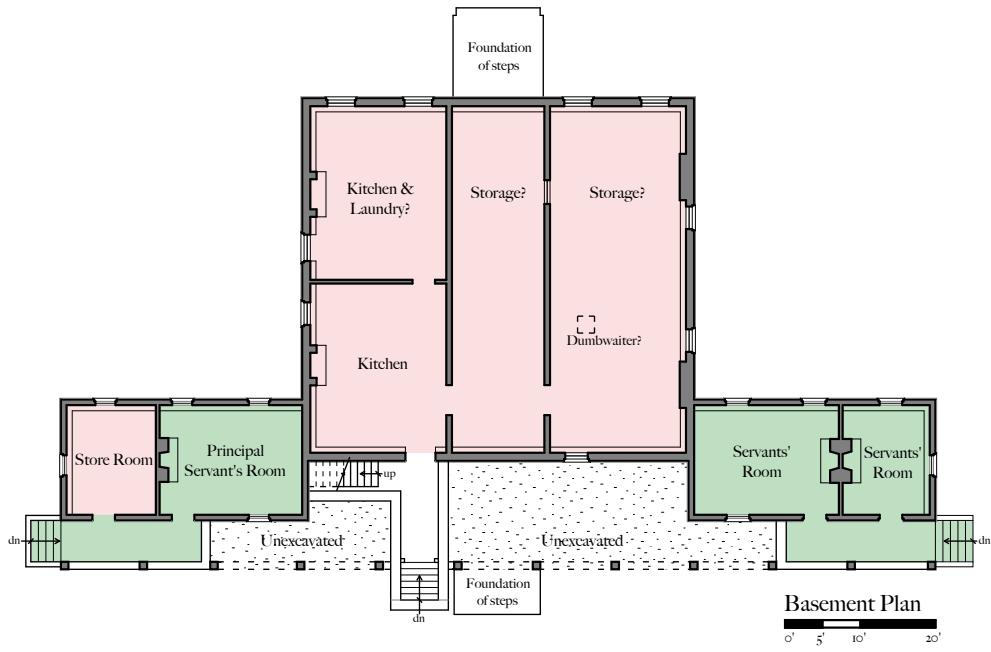
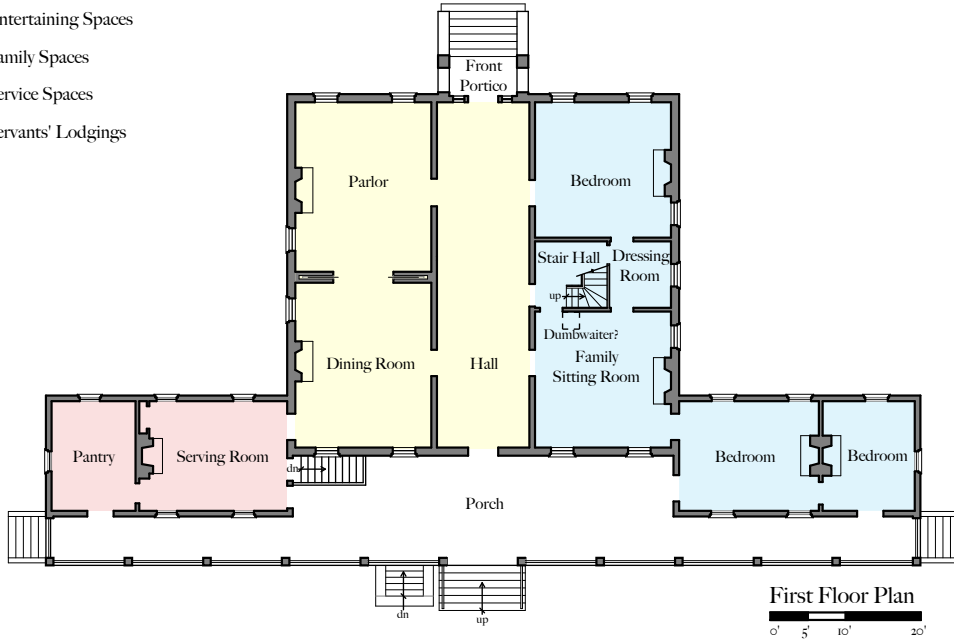
The Kenners and the Ludlows

The Kenners played a major role in the antebellum South. They intermarried with elite southern families such as the Bringiers and Minors, owned plantations on the Mississippi River in Louisiana, and built numerous grand houses and other structures.

The Kenners' involvement with Northern Kentucky and the eventual town of Ludlow began through their intermarriage with the Ludlow family. Israel L. Ludlow (1804-46) and his wife Helen Adela (1807-1872), with two purchases in 1831 and 1837, acquired the site of the future town of Ludlow, a 1,200+ acre farm-estate on the south bank of the Ohio River, across from the rapidly developing town of Cincinnati. The Ludlows moved into an existing villa on the site called Elmwood Hall. Two Kenner brothers married half-sisters of Israel L. Ludlow. In 1832, William Butler Kenner (1810-53) married Ruhamah Riske (1811-85) and in 1840, George Rappele Kenner (1811-52) married Charlotte (Riske) Jones (1812-60).

Hypothetical Original Room Functions - Late 1840s

- Entertaining Spaces
- Family Spaces
- Service Spaces
- Servants' Lodgings

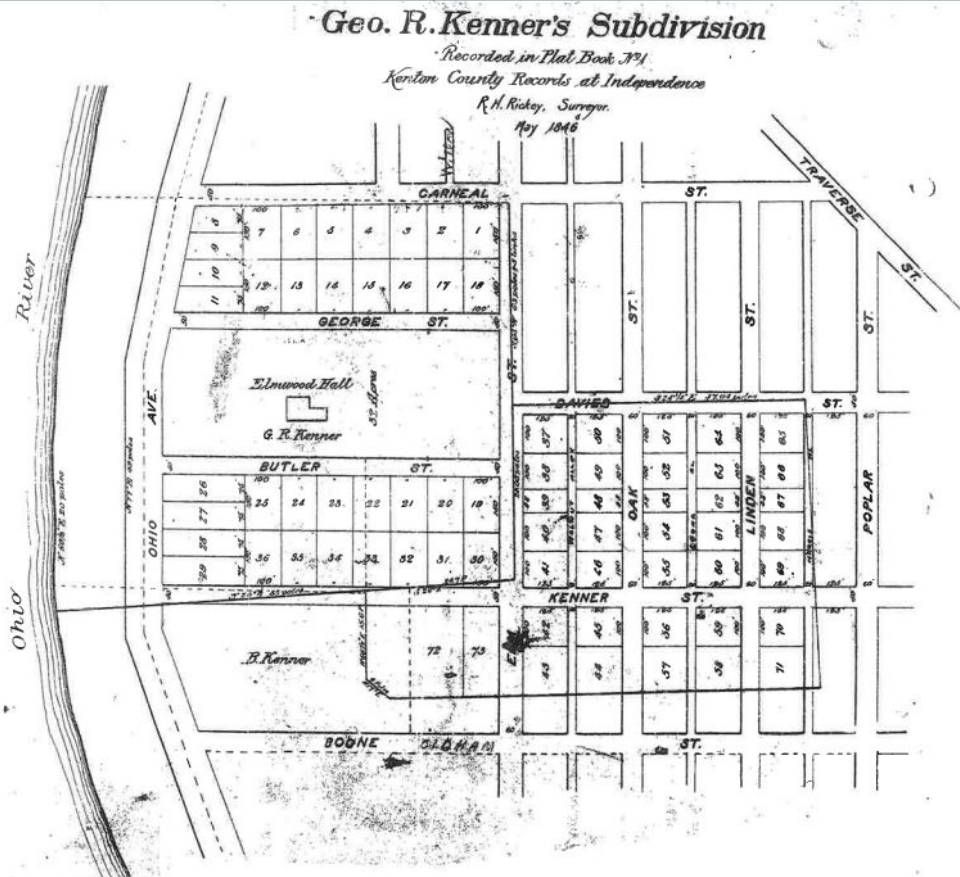


SOMERSET HALL
FLOOR PLANS
HYPOTHETICALLY RESTORED TO LATE 1840s

The Kenners Plan "Ludlow"

The Ludlows and Kenners decided to develop a "new town" together on the Ludlows' Ohio River estate. In the mid-1840's, the Kenner brothers purchased acreage along the riverfront from Israel and Adela Ludlow. This included the Ludlows' own villa, Elmwood Hall, into which George and Charlotte Kenner moved (while the Ludlows relocated to a "cottage" to the east). Butler and Ruhama Kenner purchased land to the west, where they began, around 1846, to build Somerset Hall.

Despite the death of Israel L. Ludlow in April 1846, the Kenner brothers proceeded with their town planning. George Kenner had the first town plat made in May 1846, illustrated below. This plat focused on the two villa sites, creating long strips of land around them, running from the newly laid out Elm Street to the south to the Ohio River to the north. These alternated with long, north-south blocks of new house lots. South of Elm Street were blocks of smaller house lots.

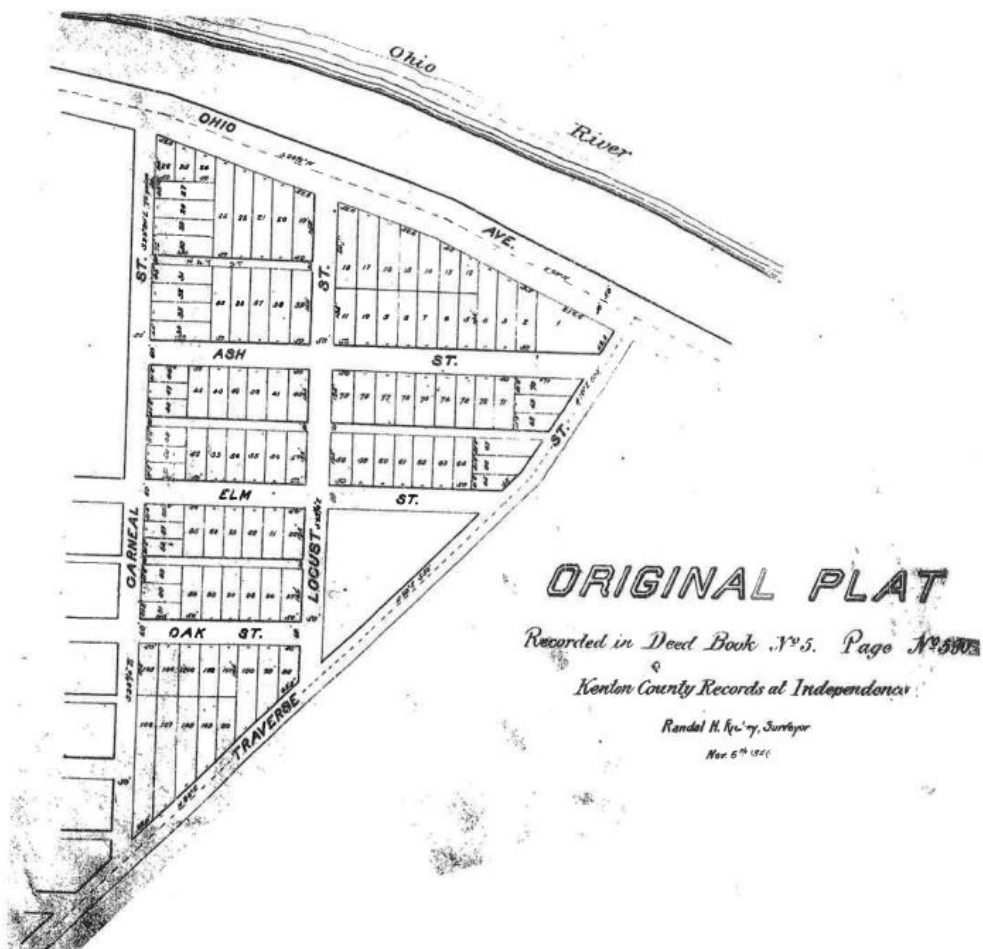


George R. Kenner's subdivision plat for Ludlow, dated May 1846 (North is to the left)

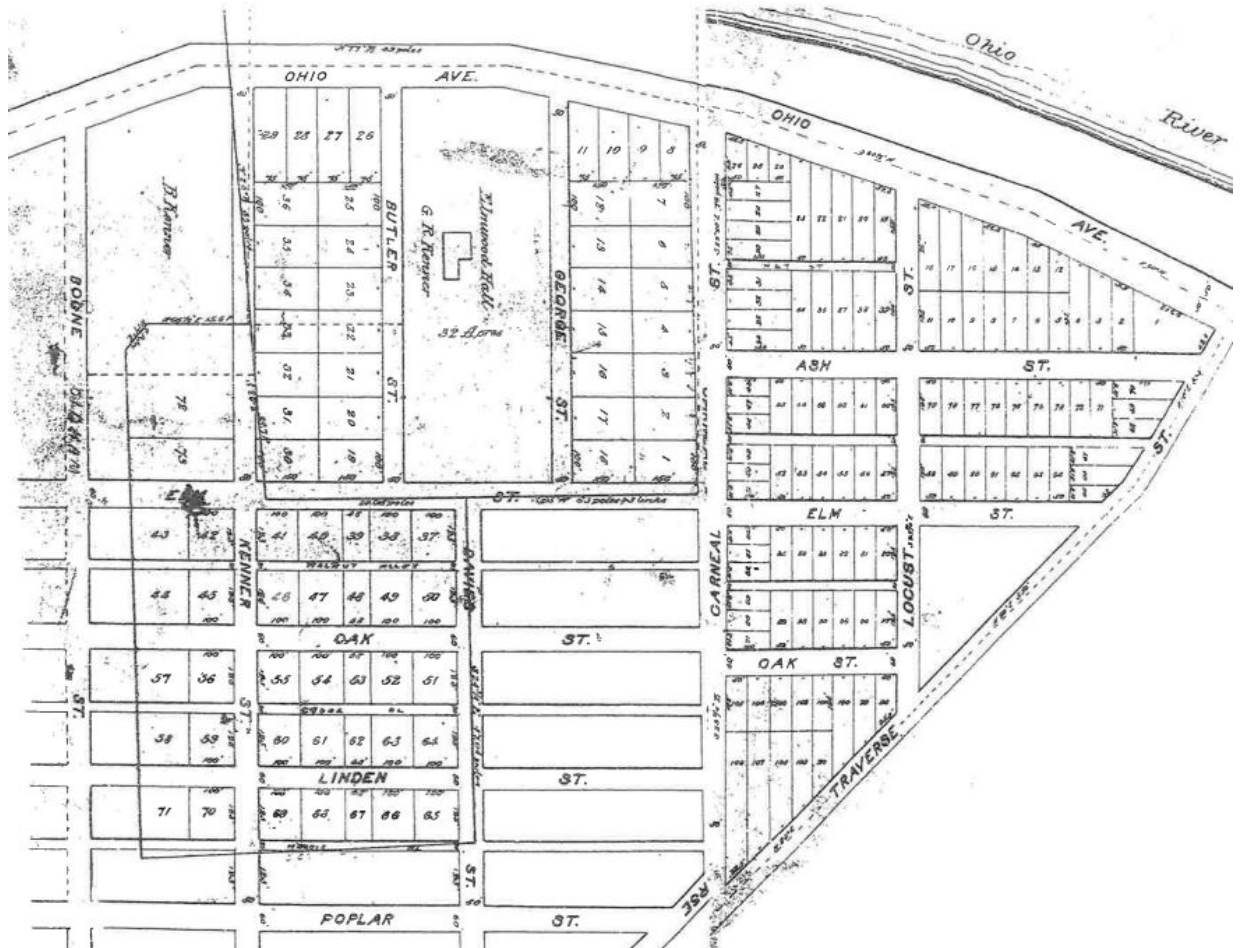
(Kenton County Records, Independence, KY)

The two long villa sites were similar to the Kenners' Louisiana plantations on the Mississippi river, with their short river frontages and deep strips of land perpendicular to the river. In the 1846 plans for "Ludlow," the two villa sites formed park-like spaces, creating an open, green "villa-town." The Kenner brothers named the new town "Ludlow" in honor of their recently-deceased brother-in-law (and his still-living widow), but the north-south streets that bounded their villas they named for themselves: George (now Euclid), Butler, and Kenner Streets (from east to west).

In November, 1846, a second plat created six blocks of smaller house lots in a triangular parcel to the east, illustrated below and on page 5. This constituted the early plan of Ludlow. The Kenners thus deserve credit for the genesis and physical layout of the town, having in the 1840's created its central portions along the riverfront (roughly corresponding to the new Ludlow Historic District).



Second plat ("Original Plat") for Ludlow, dated Nov. 6, 1846. North is at the top.
(Kenton County Records, Independence, KY)



Combined plats for Ludlow, May and November 1846. showing the Kenners' full town plan. (North is at the top)
 (Kenton County Records, Independence, KY)

The Ludlows and Kenners had other joint concerns. In the 1840's, Israel L. Ludlow acquired vast tracts of land in and around Matagorda Bay on the Texas Gulf Coast, with plans to develop plantations. Ludlow and the Kenners seemed to envision a Deep South plantation empire stretching from the Kenners' lands on the Mississippi River above New Orleans, west along the Gulf of Mexico. By the 1840's, steamboats connected Ludlow's land on the Ohio River, the Kenner plantations on the Mississippi River, and the Texas Gulf Coast. The Ludlows and Kenners intended to reside on and manage their plantations in the winter, spending summers in their new town on the Ohio.

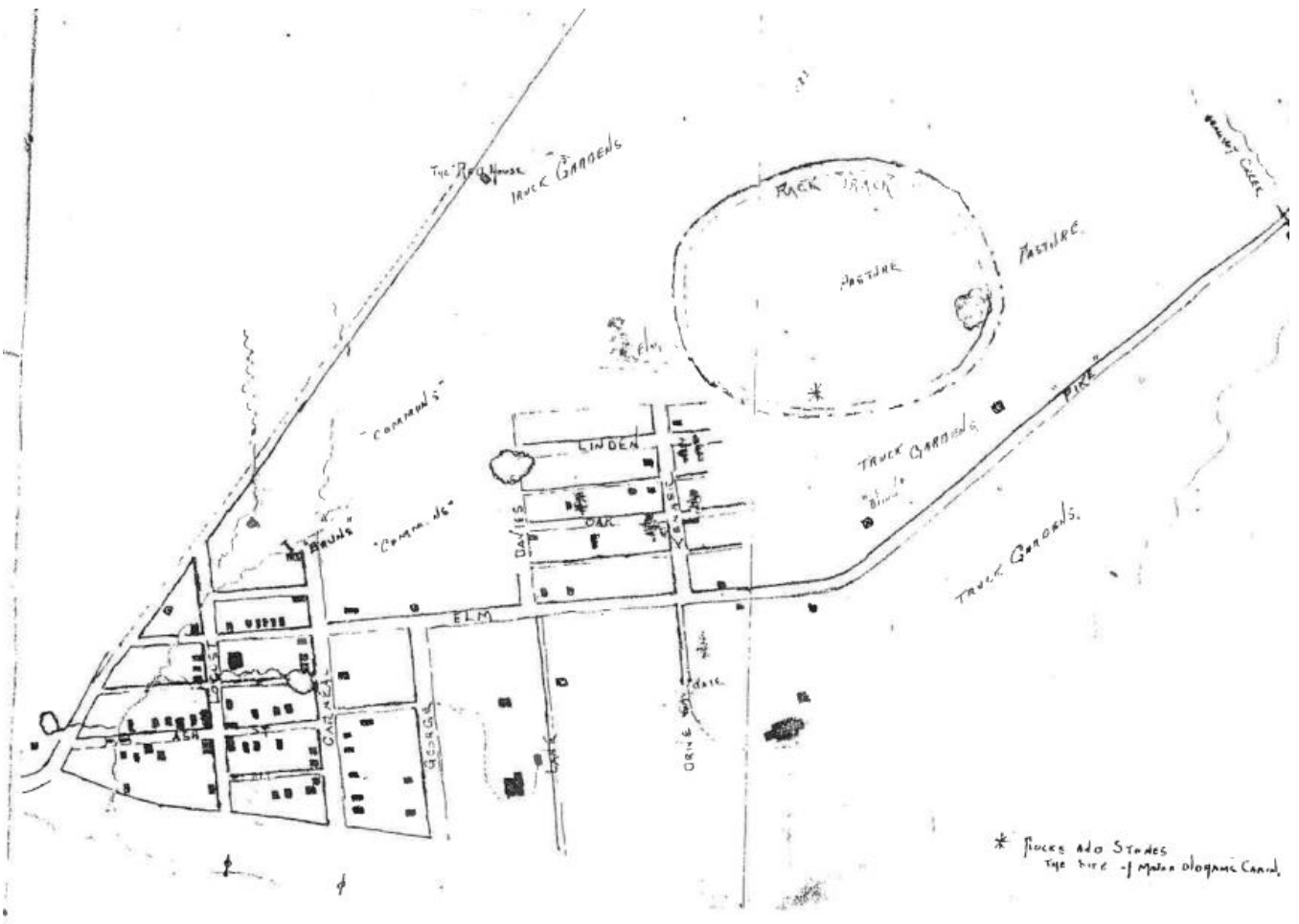
The Kenners' Functional Needs for Somerset Hall

Butler and Ruhamah Kenner began construction of Somerset Hall around 1846, ostensibly as their northern villa-retreat. But their motivations were more complex. The Kenners probably intended to develop the new town of Ludlow as an appealing suburban community for both well-to-do Cincinnatians desiring villas and cottages outside the increasingly industrialized Cincinnati basin and possibly for their Louisiana acquaintances who might easily commute north by steamboat. For New Orleans residents especially, regular epidemics meant that escaping their city could be a matter of life or death. Shortly after planning Ludlow, the Kenners also established the new town of Kenner, Louisiana on one of their Mississippi River plantations, as a suburban retreat closer to New Orleans.

Although George Kenner's name is on the first of the two "Ludlow" plats of 1846, he may have moved to Texas by the time of the second plat (November 1846) and it seems likely that Butler and Ruhamah Kenner continued the town's development on their own. Having town lots to sell perhaps meant that Somerset Hall, in addition to its function as a northern retreat for the Kenners themselves, served as a "model villa" to advertise the new town, with capabilities for entertaining prospective investors.

Like other southern gentry, the Kenner men had great interest in horse breeding and racing. In the late 1840's, they may have been the ones to establish the Queen City Race Track near the site of the new "Ludlow." The Kenners may have envisioned a genteel, semi-private race track where turfmen from Kentucky, Cincinnati, and Louisiana could meet to run horses and transact thoroughbred-related business. The track lay just south of Somerset Hall and the newly-platted town, illustrated on page 7. The Kenners likely envisioned Somerset Hall as an elite entertainment venue for the track. The track itself would have been a primarily male environment and it is possible that Somerset Hall provided a place for women who accompanied the men to socialize in a more refined, gender-segregated environment.

The Kenners' plans for their Ludlow site thus seem complex and multifaceted: creating a villa as a northern retreat; developing and promoting the new town of Ludlow; and establishing a race track for entertainment and profit. All these ambitions help to explain how the Kenners designed and used Somerset Hall.



Map of Ludlow, c. 1860, drawn by Walter Ritchie. Somerset Hall and its stable appear at the lower right; Queen City Race Track is in the upper right; north is at the bottom

(Ritchie Papers, Cincinnati Historic Society)

The Greek Revival

Somerset Hall is a significant Greek Revival building. Greek Revival architecture helped the United States to construct its first national image—one identified with Ancient Greek democracy. The style began in the early 19th century for public buildings and from the 1830's-50's became popular for homes. It corresponded with the mechanization of the American building industry and the introduction of equipment, such as power-driven circular saws, enabled the creation of bold and simple architectural forms.

In the slaveholding South, the democratic messages of the Greek Revival were muted, but the style appealed to the planter elite because it could be effectively adapted to the hot, southern climate and communicated a strong visual organization through its repetitive elements. Ashland Plantation (pictured below), built in the early 1840's in Louisiana by Duncan Kenner, younger brother of Butler and George Kenner, is surrounded by massive, square columns that shaded the house and gave an image of classical order to the complex activities of a 19th century plantation.



Ashland Plantation

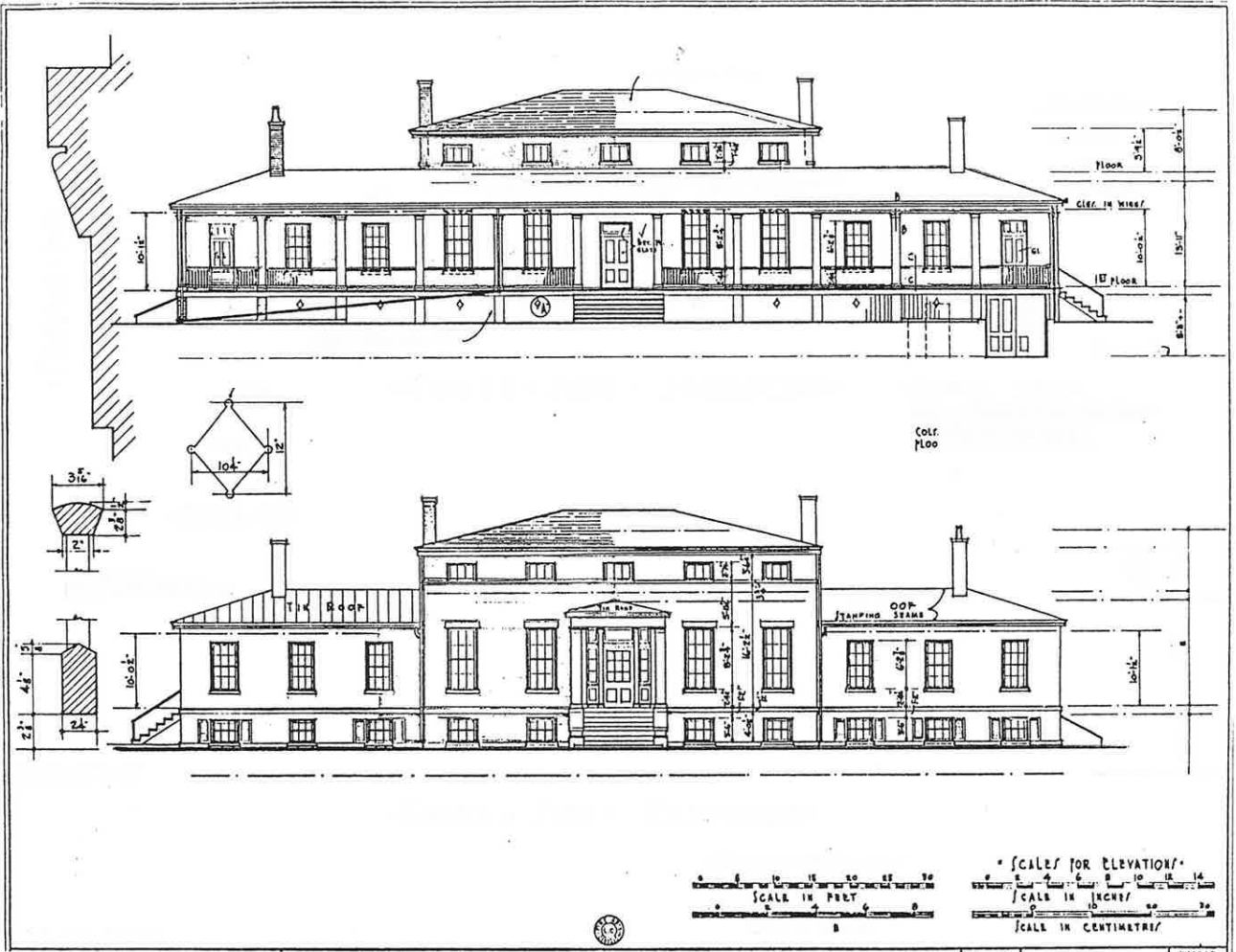
The Design of Somerset Hall

The architect for Somerset Hall is unknown. It seems likely that a Cincinnati-area architect of the 1840's designed the house and supervised its construction, but it is also possible that the Kenners obtained designs from a Louisiana architect. Whoever designed the house, it fit the Kenners' functional needs so perfectly that Butler and Ruhamah Kenner clearly must have participated in the design process. In domestic architecture especially, the wife often played a critical role, since she was responsible for the functioning of the house. Ruhamah Kenner is pictured below.



Ruhamah (Riske) Kenner (1815-85), half sister of Israel L. Ludlow, wife of Butler Kenner, mistress of Somerset Hall
(from Smith & Smith, Cane, Cotton & Crevasses)

Somerset Hall was sensitively customized to its Ohio River site. It is raised on an artificially banked earth terrace that partly conceals the basement story and visually elevates the house on its north, river-facing front. The house forms a grand, three-part composition, with a nearly square central block of five bays, approximately 52' wide by 48' deep. Low, symmetrical three-bay wings, 32' long by 16' deep, join the central block near its rear, southern corners. Together with the main block, these wings increase the length of the house to nearly 120', making it twice as long as deep. Finally, across the rear (south) elevation is a long, colonnaded, wooden gallery-porch-veranda that spans the central block and wings. See page 10 for an illustration.



Top: Somerset Hall south elevation
 Bottom: north elevation

(Historic American Buildings Survey, 1934, Library of Congress)

The central block of the house, raised upon its earth terrace and its partially-concealed basement, has a main living story of 14' in height, with a low attic story above. The relative importance of the three stories is shown by their differing heights and window sizes. Above the attic is a low, hipped roof (that originally sat on a wooden cornice with boxed-in gutters).

Two grand flights of stone steps approach the house from the river, the main route of arrival in the 1840's. The second set of stone steps leads to a wooden, temple-like entry porch of one story covering the front door; its columns are square versions of the Greek Doric order. The body of the house is brick (though remains of a creamy-yellow color under the rear gallery suggest that it was originally painted to resemble stone or stucco). The horizontal belt courses dividing the stories are of cut limestone, as are the lintels and the sills of the main story windows.

The floor plan of the main block is bisected by a grand central hall 12' wide by 45' long. This hall was originally open but now contains a massive Victorian staircase added by the Closson family, probably in the late 1870's. To the right (west) of the hall is a single large space that was originally two rooms. To the left (east) of the hall are two further rooms divided by a small attic staircase. The wings each contain two unequal rooms on the principal story. Please refer to the restored floor plans on page 2.

Somerset Hall's design of a central block with wings, as well as its pavilion-like arrangement of a main story between raised basement and low attic, recalls earlier, Federal-style houses in the United States. Greek Revival houses more often tended to be single, autonomous blocks. Somerset Hall's multipart composition is "Palladian", named after the villas of 16th century Italian architect Andrea Palladio. For farm-villas, Palladio created a grand central block for the family, elevated on a basement, with lower wings into which service and storage functions could be collected (rather than being located in separate outbuildings). The annexed service spaces gave Palladio's villas long, impressive fronts articulated in a clear hierarchy: the main block was high, elevated, and more elaborate, while the wings expressed their "secondary", or service character, by being smaller, lower, and simpler.

A practical advantage of Palladian multipart compositions is that they can be built and occupied in stages. This appears to have been the case with Somerset Hall: the brick joints between the wings and main block do not "interlock," nor do the brick courses correspond exactly. This means that the Kenners probably built the house in sections over the span of a few years. It would appear that the central block came first, the wings slightly later, and the rear porch-gallery last. There seems little doubt, however, that the house was designed at once, even if constructed in stages. Its visual and functional unity, as well as its materials and construction details, argue for its being conceived as a whole.

The north front of Somerset Hall was designed to be seen from the river and presents a grand and lengthy composition. The south, or rear, facade is open and horizontal, organized by its long colonnaded gallery that links the central block and wings. The gallery served multiple functions: to shade the house from the southern sun; to provide a cool outdoor living space; and to organize service circulation into a covered, outdoor corridor.

The Kenners came as far north as possible for their thermal comfort and they brought with them a retinue of enslaved, African-American house servants that they also viewed as essential to their comfort. Somerset Hall presented an impressive but rather closed front to the Ohio River and the house itself discretely screened views of the Kenners' slave laborers, who were confined to the rear wings and gallery on the south.

Texas Overreach

The year 1846 proved significant for the Ludlow-Kenner joint endeavors. It marked the zenith of the family's plans and the beginning of their collapse. By 1846, Israel L. Ludlow had acquired thousands of acres in Texas; George Kenner was developing plans for the family's "summer town" of Ludlow; and Butler and Ruhamah Kenner were simultaneously managing Oakwood, their Louisiana plantation, and building Somerset Hall as their summer villa in Ludlow. Family members planned to reside on and manage their plantations in Louisiana and Texas during winters, then meet for summertime socializing, entertaining, town development, and thoroughbred racing in their respective villas and cottages in Ludlow—all accessible by steamboats.

But 1846 also saw the beginning of the end. Israel L. Ludlow returned to Northern Kentucky ill from the strain of attempting to manage his holdings in Texas and died in April 1846. Later that year, George and Charlotte Kenner sold their Ludlow villa (Elmwood Hall, which they had purchased in 1840 from Israel and Adela Ludlow) so that they could move to Texas to rescue the family investments there. This proved futile and George Kenner died in Texas in 1852. Butler and Ruhamah Kenner, thus having lost two of their "brother-partners," realized that their plans for Ludlow were over. They sold Somerset Hall in 1852 and returned to Louisiana to save investments there. Butler Kenner died of yellow fever in New Orleans in 1853, far from the healthful villa-retreat that he had planned in Northern Kentucky.

The three Ludlow-Kenner men died in their early 40's. The Texas lands were lost. Sisters-in-law Adela Ludlow and Charlotte and Ruhamah Kenner were left widows with children. Charlotte Kenner died in 1860, shortly before the Civil War. After the war, Ruhamah Kenner lived in reduced circumstances in Philadelphia with a married daughter and son-in-law, where she died in 1885.

Later Owners and Changes to Somerset Hall

Buildings do not remain static over time. Later owners alter them to suit changing lifestyles, technologies, and aesthetics. The Kenners built Somerset Hall in the later 1840's and sold it in 1852 to Thomas Keevan. In 1854, Keevan sold the house to Cincinnati clockmaker and silversmith Richard Clayton, a noted balloonist and aeronautical expert. It is unknown whether Keevan or Clayton made changes to Somerset Hall.

By 1856, Clayton had sold the house to Cincinnati jeweler Henry Jenkins. In 1869, the Jenkins Subdivision was platted around the villa. This subdivision was unusual in occurring before the arrival of the railroad in Ludlow. The Jenkins Subdivision introduced three, new east-west streets to the house site: Hooper and Somerset Streets to the north, between the house and the river, and Ringgold Street to the south. The subdivision left Somerset Hall on a generous lot of nearly 150 feet wide by 225 feet deep. If Jenkins made changes to the house itself, they are unknown. Later Victorian houses gradually occupied the surrounding lots. In 1873, the Closson family, of Cincinnati art and furniture store fame, acquired Somerset Hall as a summer residence and owned it for over a half-century. The Clossons made some changes to Somerset Hall, including the addition of the grand central staircase. In 1925, Unity Lodge purchased Somerset Hall for its masonic meeting functions and owned it for over 70 years. To create a large meeting room, the Lodge removed the dividing wall and pocket doors between the original parlor and dining room, creating one large room and closing the two original fireplaces. The Chapman and Dorger families have owned and preserved the house since 1997.

Although later owners made alterations, Somerset Hall has survived in unusually original condition for a building of its age. Despite later changes, it is possible to reconstruct the early appearance of Somerset Hall as the Kenners planned it.

“Reconstructing” Somerset Hall

Recent physical inspections of Somerset Hall by the Ludlow Historic Society have resulted in several discoveries that enable an understanding of how the house was built in the 1840’s and how its spaces originally functioned. Four new observations about the villa are discussed below:

1. *The location of its original kitchen*
2. *The route from the kitchen to, and location of, the original dining room*
3. *The rooms occupied by the Kenners’ servants*
4. *The hierarchy (or relative elaboration) of ornamental molding profiles in the house that give clues to original room functions*

The floor plans of Somerset Hall on page 2 show hypothesized room functions to suggest how the Kenners originally used their spaces. In the floor plans on page 14, the rooms of the house are numbered to assist readers in understanding the spaces being discussed.

1. The original kitchens

On its south facade, Somerset Hall’s long, gallery-like rear porch is approached up a central wooden staircase, on-axis with the central hall. To the left of this stair is a wide, stone staircase leading down, under the porch, into the partially submerged basement beneath the house. [Page 14, Room 14] From this stair, a short, brick-paved corridor leads into the rear (or southern sides) of two rooms that occupied the western portion of the basement under the central block. These two rooms correspond to the current “great room” upstairs (which was itself originally two large rooms). Each of these two basement rooms had its own large, cooking fireplace (both fireboxes are now bricked in). [Page 14, Rooms 15, 16]

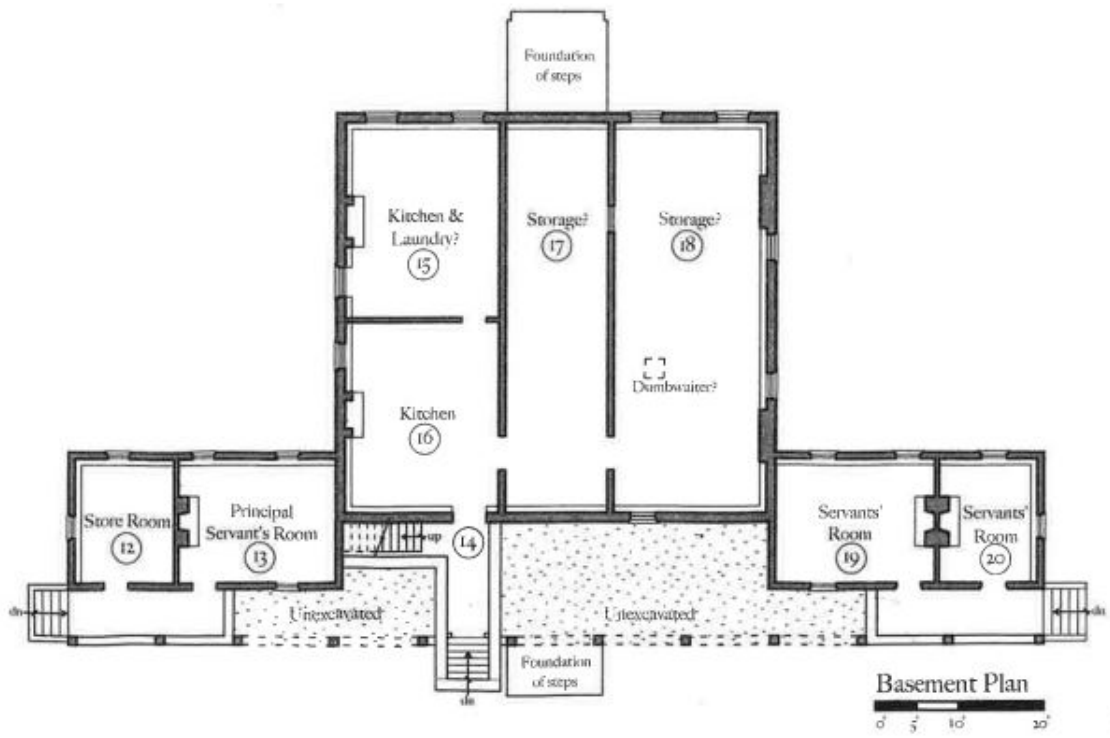
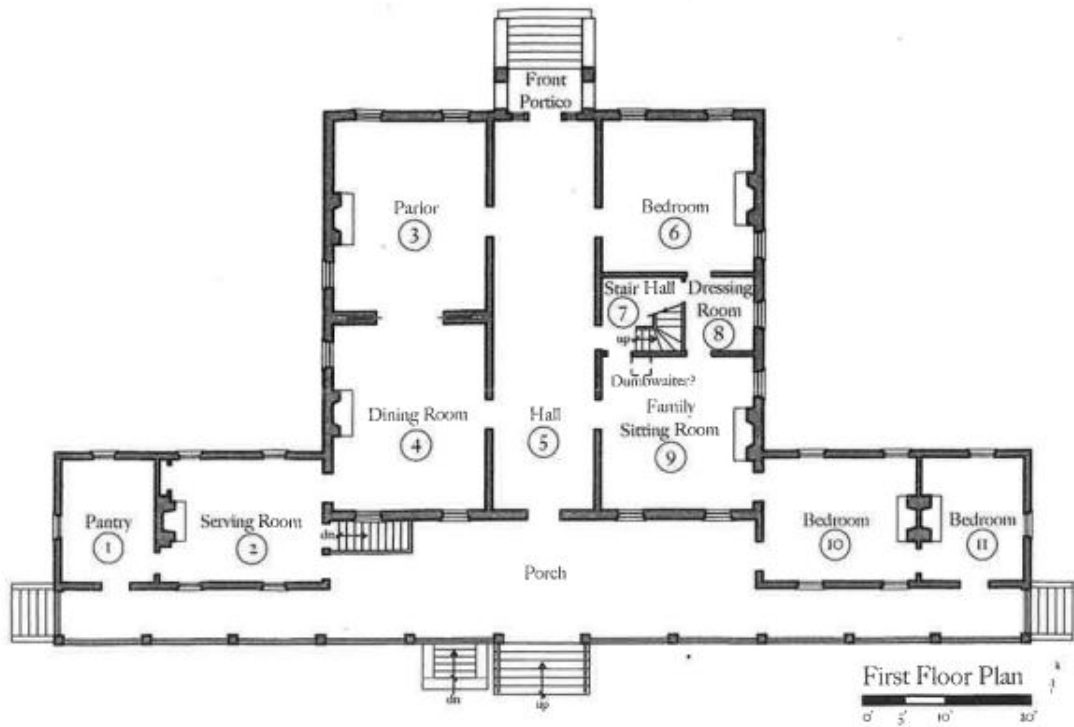
Somerset Hall’s two basement fireplaces may have been used for specialized functions: one could have had an open fire with kettles and cranes, while one may have contained inserts for baking, boiling, stewing, washing, etc. However, these two large cooking fireplaces are surprising and exceptional, providing the house with an unusually large cooking and entertaining capacity.

When one recalls the Kenners’ functional needs for the site, these two huge cooking fireplaces make sense. In addition to using Somerset Hall seasonally as their northern, summer retreat, the Kenners used the house as a “model villa” for promoting the new town of Ludlow, while also possibly hosting entertainments related to the nearby Queen City Race Track.

2. A route from kitchens to dining room: the missing stairs

If the Kenners’ servants cooked food in the two large basement kitchens, how was it carried upstairs to the dining room—and where *was* the original dining room?

No internal staircase originally existed to connect the main floor of Somerset Hall with its basements. A staircase from the main floor to the basement currently exists under the staircase in the central hall of the house, but it is not original. The large staircase in the hall was added in the late 1870’s by the Closson Family, who wanted greater access from the main floor to both the attic and basement. The original, 1840’s staircase in the main block of the house survives, enclosed in a small, square room immediately east of the central hall. [Page 14, Room 7] This earlier, more “private” stair led from the main floor up to the attic but not to the basement. In the Kenners’ period then, no internal stair linked the main-floor rooms of the central block to the basement below and all service circulation between the basement and the principal floor took place outside.



Somerset Hall basement (bottom) and first floor (top) plans with rooms numbered

In the 1840's, a now-missing "service stair" led from the basement up to the rear gallery-veranda. Evidence of this stair exists in the space to the left (west) of the main basement entry. [Page 14, Room 14] This service stair rose from east to west between a low, stone retaining wall on the left (south) and the outer brick wall of the rear kitchen room. Although gone, outlines, or "ghosts," of the two top steps of this stair survive in the paint of the interior brick basement wall, as seen in the photo below.



"Ghost" outlines of steps from the now-missing original service stair, surviving in the paint of the basement wall under the rear gallery (center of photo)

The open well through which this service stair rose onto the rear gallery has now been floored over, but the later flooring and “infill joists” are evident under the gallery. This stair began just outside the rear kitchen room in the basement, rose through the gallery floor and directly into the western wing, the larger room of which must have been a serving-preparation room where food cooked in the basement arrived to be dressed for serving in the dining room. [Page 14, Room 2] A bricked-up doorway at the top of this now-missing service stair originally gave direct access to this serving-preparation room (the current owners’ dining room). In typical southern fashion, the kitchen was thus “detached” from the rooms of the main house and food carried outside, under the covered rear gallery, preventing the heat and cooking odors of the kitchens from invading the main rooms of the house.

The Kenners’ dining room must have occupied the space at the southern end of the current “great room”—which itself was originally divided into two rooms by double walls containing a pair of large, pocket doors (the evidence for the dividing walls and pocket doors can be seen in the plaster cornice and ceiling of the “great room”). The front (north) of the two rooms that originally occupied today’s “great room” would have been the “parlor,” while the back (south) room was the original dining room. [Page 14, Rooms 3, 4] A door opens directly from the serving room in the wing into this original “dining room” space of the main house.

The open well of the now-missing service stair on the rear gallery would originally have been enclosed by a railing. This stair thus rose directly from the basement kitchens into the upstairs serving room without access to the rear porch, meaning that, for servants carrying food upstairs, the route from the basement kitchens to the upstairs serving room was one-way circulation with no deviations possible.

3. The lodging rooms of the house servants

The Kenners brought house servants with them from their Louisiana plantations in order to staff Somerset Hall. These servants occupied three lodging rooms in the basements of Somerset Hall’s rear wings. These rooms survive in an amazing state of preservation, including original plaster on the walls and ceilings (some with the original paint colors) and heating fireplaces with wooden mantelpieces. [Page 14, Rooms 13, 19, 20]

The basement of the eastern wing contains two servants’ lodging rooms, one larger and one smaller, both with heating fireplaces. [Page 14, Rooms 19, 20]. The basement of the western wing contains only one lodging space, in the larger room nearer the main block of the house. [Page 14, Room 13] The smaller room behind it to the west, having no fireplace, probably served another function, perhaps storage. [Page 14, Room 12] Three basement rooms in the wings therefore seemed to accommodate the Kenners’ house servants. If each room housed two servants, this would constitute a household staff of about six for the villa.

These servants’ lodging rooms exhibit a clear hierarchy of importance. The two rooms in the eastern wing have identical mantelpieces with no ornamental moldings and their plastered walls appear to have been whitewashed. The servants’ room in the west wing, by contrast, has a more elaborate mantelpiece with Greek-style cyma-recta moldings under its shelf, while its plaster walls exhibit the remains of robin’s-egg-blue paint. [Page 14, Room 13] The elaboration of the lodging room in the western wing suggests that this space belonged to a more important servant or servants: a butler, chief cook, or housekeeper, perhaps.

The basement service rooms, though partially submerged, are well lit and ventilated by opposing windows in their north and south walls. The south-facing basement windows are under the rear gallery-veranda, but this gallery would originally have been more open at its base than it now is (the spaces between the brick piers below the floor level are now bricked-in). The Somerset Hall basements resemble earlier Louisiana plantation houses that have ground-level kitchens and services, with the principal living rooms above. Somerset Hall’s basement, however, is partly submerged, like a “raised” or “English” basement.

At Somerset Hall, the servants’ basement lodging rooms had neither internal connection to each other nor to the main house. They were originally entered laterally, from small, exterior stairs (now missing) at either end of the long gallery. These stairs led down into short, submerged, dead-end “corridors” onto which the doors of the servants’ lodging rooms opened. [Page 14, Rooms 13, 19,

20] (At a later period doors were cut through the walls that originally separated the servants' rooms from each other and from the basement rooms of the main block-- possibly by the Closson family after 1873.) Originally, these lodging rooms resembled detached quarters, the servants going outside in order to access the main house.

4. Molding profiles, spatial hierarchies, and room functions at Somerset Hall

Elite American houses of the 19th-century often exhibited a careful, graded hierarchy in the ornamentation of their rooms that indicated the relative importance of these spaces and gives clues as to their original functions. The moldings in the main-floor rooms of Somerset Hall suggest four, hierarchical-functional "zones": entertaining spaces, family living spaces, service spaces (the spaces in which servants did household work), and servants' lodging spaces. [See page 2]

Moldings in Entertaining spaces

The most elaborate ornamental moldings in the house are found in the three, principal-story rooms in the western portion of the central block. These rooms originally comprised a suite of hall, parlor, and dining room. [Page 14, Rooms 3, 4, 5] Greek honeysuckle vines adorn plaster centerpieces in the ceilings of these rooms. Their plaster cornices are elaborated with Greek egg-and-dart moldings and their door frames have deep, projecting cornices. The Kenners destined these three rooms for elaborate entertainments.

In the first half of the 19th-century, elite entertaining generally included food and refreshments in the dining room, cards and conversation in the parlor, and music and dancing--which, at Somerset Hall, could have occurred in the grand central hall space. The hall was roomy, well ventilated and, except for light chairs along the walls, could be mostly free of furniture. Guests could move freely through Somerset Hall's grand entertaining rooms in an efficient flow of circulation.

Moldings in Family Spaces

The principal story rooms east of the central hall in the main block of the house contain ornamental molding profiles of an intermediate level of elaboration. [Page 14, Rooms 6, 9] Wooden door and window frames have simple, shallow moldings and the ceiling cornice, rather than containing elaborate, cast-plaster ornamentation as in the public entertaining rooms, is composed purely of run-plaster moldings. The simpler ornaments of these two rooms suggest that they functioned for private and informal family activities. Locating the "family rooms" on the east side of the villa created effective passive cooling as they are shielded by the house itself from the southern and western sun.

The front (northeast) room seems to have been the villa's only large bedchamber---as it is today. [Page 14, Room 6] The adult Kenners may have occupied it when in residence and it could also have accommodated important guests. During entertainments, this room may have functioned as an "arrival" space for adjusting clothing and freshening one's appearance before joining the company.

The rear (southeast) of the two large eastern rooms displays the same molding profiles as the front room-bedchamber and might have functioned as a second large bedchamber on the main story. [Page 14, Room 9] However, it has four doors and is thus so cut up by circulation that it lacks privacy. It may have functioned as the Kenners' multipurpose family living space: a place for Ruhamah Kenner to receive her female company and meet with her servants in running the house, a room for breakfast and other informal family meals, and a family sitting room. The space may originally have contained a dumbwaiter for bringing up food and drink from the basement kitchens, reinforcing the family-dining-function hypothesis for this rear room.

Between the front bedchamber and this rear “family room” are two small spaces. [Page 14, Rooms 7, 8] That one nearest the main hall contains the original staircase to the attic. The space on the outer wall could have been a dressing room-closet-bathing room that connected the large front and rear rooms. The area where the staircase compartment opens into the family living room suggests that the four attic bedrooms probably functioned variously for the Kenners: their guests, their children, and possibly their servants. The upstairs hall and some of the bedrooms may sometimes have been set up dormitory-style, with temporary beds.

This original attic staircase also opens into the main hall through a large door. [Page 14, Rooms 5, 7] While this seems to contradict its exclusive association with the private-family spaces on the eastern side of the floor plan, the hall door to the staircase may have been mostly for air circulation. If opened during an entertainment, this door would efficiently exhaust hot air from the hall, up the staircase, and out the attic vent windows, simultaneously cooling the entertaining rooms and the attic. The central hall, with its north and south doors and door opening into the little stair, would have facilitated natural air movement both horizontally and vertically.

Moldings in Sleeping Spaces, Service Spaces, and Servants’ Lodgings

A third level of spaces in Somerset Hall have the simplest treatment: no ornamental plaster moldings and door and window frames with plain, unmolded wooden surrounds. These spaces were used as family sleeping spaces (the attic rooms and the bedrooms in the east wing), work spaces where the servants did the household labor (the basement kitchens and store rooms and the main floor pantry and serving room in the west wing), and the servants’ basement lodging rooms. All these spaces were so private and off-limits to guests that they had no ornamental moldings whatsoever.

From the exterior, Somerset Hall is hierarchically ordered and classically symmetrical. Its internal functions, however, were distributed quite asymmetrically. Entertaining and food-serving spaces occupied the western two-thirds of the main story. More informal and private family living, dining, and sleeping spaces occupied the eastern third of the main story and the attic. Servants’ lodging spaces and work spaces occupied the basements and the upper rooms of the west wing (and possibly the upper rooms of the east wing as well). [Page 2]

The Rear Gallery

The last portion of Somerset Hall to be constructed and its most unique and beautiful feature is its nearly 120’ long rear gallery-veranda. This shaded the house on its south façade, created a cool, outdoor family living space, and provided covered, open-air rear circulation for the servants. The gallery’s modular brick piers and wooden columns give classical order to a functionally complicated space that in fact accommodated upper and lower level circulation, five separate staircases, and eleven doorways opening onto or under it. This gallery would have been continually busy with combined activities of servants and family throughout the day.

Conclusions

Somerset Hall is an important Greek Revival villa that has received limited attention. It may be typologically unique in American architecture: a seasonal riverside villa for summer occupancy, created by a prominent, Deep South plantation-owning family that brought its antebellum slaveholding culture as far north as was legally and culturally possible.

The new villa and town of Ludlow were planned as the northern summer retreat for the intermarried Ludlows and Kenners who, in the 1840’s, were on a trajectory to establish a southern plantation empire stretching from the Kenners’ Mississippi River plantations in Louisiana on the east to the Texas Gulf Coast on the west—an empire enabled by steam boats. This dynastic scheme began to evaporate with the death of Israel L. Ludlow in 1846.

George and Butler Kenner attempted to carry the family plans forward, but their deaths in quick succession in 1852-53, ended this ambitious dream. What survives is Somerset Hall itself and the Kenners' 1846 layout of Ludlow's historic neighborhoods along the Ohio River.

While Somerset Hall is a building of national significance, its greatest importance is to its city and neighborhood. The villa is surrounded by park-like green space left by the 1869 Jenkins Subdivision. The villa's northern, river front remains an impressive sight, while its colonnaded south gallery defines a lovely, urban green space. Somerset Hall and its neighborhood still reflect the spirit of the Kenners' plans for Ludlow: a green, park-like town of villas and cottages on the riverfront.

Somerset Hall has had few and sympathetic occupants (only six changes of ownership in over 170 years) and is well preserved. The villa is a document of the Kenner family that commissioned and briefly used it, but it is also a tribute to the unknown architect who designed it, the forgotten artisans who constructed it, the enslaved servants who staffed it, and the subsequent owners who have carefully maintained it. The building is a landmark structure in the development of Ludlow, is of great architectural and educational importance, and deserves to be better known in the history of American architecture.

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Published Sources/Further Reading

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Mitchell, Mark. The Ludlow Legacy: The Descendants of Israel Ludlow (1765-1804), Surveyor and Pioneer of the Northwest Territory. Ludlow, KY: Privately Published, 2015. [Contains accounts of Israel L. Ludlow and his wife Adela (pp. 149-152) and Butler and George Kenner and their wives Ruhamah and Charlotte (pp. 175-177) and the best source on the Ludlow-Kenner family in Texas and on the Ludlow-Kenner slaves.]

Schroeder, David E. Life Along the Ohio: A Sesquicentennial History of Ludlow, Kentucky. Milford, OH: Little Miami Publishing Co., 2014. [Chapters 1 and 2 contain the best history of antebellum Ludlow, with useful discussions of the Ludlows and Kenners.]

Smith, Philip Chadwick Foster and G. Gouverneur Meredith S. Smith. Cane, Cotton, & Crevasses: Some Antebellum Louisiana and Mississippi Plantations of the Minor, Kenner, Hooke, and Shepherd Families. [Accounts, photographs and maps of the Mississippi River plantations of the Kenners, including Butler and Ruhamah Kenner's Oakwood Plantation and George and Duncan Kenner's Linwood-Ashland Plantation.]

Tenkotte, Paul Allen. "Rival Cities to Suburbs: Covington and Newport, Kentucky, 1790- 1890." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1989. [Best account of the development of new towns in Northern Kentucky, including Ludlow. Recognizes that Ludlow's site had a "suburban" identity and relationship to Cincinnati that preceded those of neighboring cities like Covington and Newport (especially pp. 238-242); good analyses of slavery in Northern Kentucky (pp. 3-4, 22-24).]

Tenkotte, Paul Allen and James C. Claypool, eds. The Encyclopedia of Northern Kentucky. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009. [see particularly "Kenner Family" p. 502; "Ludlow" p. 567 (by David E. Schroeder); "Slavery" pp. 834-36 (by Diane Perrine Coon).]