
Murder in Kenansville: Black Liberation Struggles in Antebellum North Carolina and the Kenan Legacy of Violence

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Liberty Hall, a home in Duplin County, North Carolina that was once the enslaved labor farm of the Kenan family, is the beating heart of Kenansville.¹ It was restored throughout the 1960s and 1970s by a Kenan patriarch who reinserted his family name and the white supremacy it represents.² Public places meant to intimidate Black people in North Carolina—by glorifying the Confederacy and supporting antebellum aesthetics—was reinforced in the renovating of Liberty Hall.³ A tour guide at the home shared that local students recently visited the site to learn a curated version of the Kenan legacy, one that casts them as benevolent enslavers and heroes of a lost cause.⁴

¹ Driving into Kenansville, one passes James Kenan High School and Kenan Elementary School. Local children frolic on the playground at Kenan Park. The Kenan name is everywhere.

² Frank Hawkins Kenan (1912–96) was an ardent segregationist who opposed the implementation of federally mandated school desegregation following *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). He also restored Liberty Hall to its antebellum appearance after acquiring the property when it was in a state of extensive disrepair; renovations began in the 1960s.

³ The concept of “public places meant to intimidate Black people in North Carolina” was presented by Kieran Haile, a descendant of Alexander Manly, during the 2023 panel “1898 Real Talk: Descendants in Dialogue.” See “1898 Real Talk: Descendants in Dialogue,” University of North Carolina Wilmington, <https://uncw.edu/events/2023/11/descendants>. Manly was the editor of the *Daily Record*, a prominent African American newspaper published in Wilmington, North Carolina, during the late nineteenth century.

⁴ According to available enrollment data from the 2022–23 academic year, James Kenan High School reported an 85 percent minority enrollment, with all students classified as economically disadvantaged. African American students comprised 30 percent of enrollment, Hispanic students 52 percent, and students identified as “other” 3 percent; white students comprised 15 percent. See “How Does James Kenan High School Rank Among America’s Best High Schools?” *U.S. News & World Report*, accessed April 1, 2025, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/north-carolina/districts/duplin-county-schools/james-kenan-high-school-14387>. During a tour of Liberty Hall, the guide expressed frustration that many participants did not speak English and objected to the use of an interpreter.

This essay discusses the oppression of Black people by the Kenan family in Kenansville, North Carolina during the antebellum era.⁵ Special attention will be paid to a suspected uprising of enslaved people in 1831 and the subsequent murder of its presumed leaders. The goal of this research is to shed light on the collective memory of Kenansville and its relationship to the built environment. Additionally, this work strives to pull enslaved individuals from the margins and into the center of historical discourse. It may help explain white supremacy that persists in the region through the modern era. The intended audience is anyone with an interest in American slavery, white supremacy, or the history of North Carolina. This work rejects the self-curated narrative the Kenan family has presented for centuries, one of paternalism and beneficence as enslavers.⁶ Through extravagant philanthropy, the Kenan family has laundered their name.

KEY WORDS: African American history, Abolition, Freedom and liberation struggles, White Supremacy, Antislavery

Liberty Hall, the Kenan family ancestral home, is located within proximity of the Graham residence. The two families were close neighbors and confidantes to the point that they intermarried and became family.⁷ Mary Rand Kenan (1823-1903) married Dr. Chauncey Graham (1819-1866) in 1846. Chauncey's sister, Sarah Rebecca Graham (1817-1871), married Mary Rand Kenan Graham's brother, Owen Rand Kenan (1804-1887), on May 12, 1836.⁸

⁵ To reflect terminology used in the primary sources examined in this study, this paper retains historical terms such as "negroes" when discussing those sources or quoting historical language. Because several members of the Kenan family appear throughout this work, individuals are sometimes identified by their first names to improve clarity. In other contexts, surnames are used. The "Lost Cause" refers to an ideology that promotes the idealization of the Confederate cause and the preservation of antebellum social values and aesthetics. The "Myth of the Lost Cause" reflects an ideology that promotes the adulation of the Confederate cause, and of antebellum values and aesthetics.

⁶ See Emery P. Dalesio, "Modest Mansions Reflect Early N.C.: Va., S.C. Plantations Cast Shadows," *Washington Post*, August 23, 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/modest-mansions-reflect-early-n-c/docview/2267525366/se-2>. Dalesio characterizes the Kenans as benevolent enslavers, suggesting that "they often worked alongside [their enslaved laborers]."

⁷ The two families were connected through marriage, and their estates were often managed as a single enterprise, particularly by the mid-nineteenth century. This relationship is important for understanding the significance of the Graham family in discussions of the Kenans.

⁸ "Marriage Record of Owen Rand Kenan and Sarah Rebecca Graham," MS 027, Duplin County Marriage Bonds, Center for Southeast North Carolina Archives and History, University of North Carolina Wilmington.



Figure 1. *Liberty Hall, the ancestral home of the Kenan family and enslaved labor farm, before its renovations in the 1960s. Photo courtesy of NCpedia, Liberty Hall, and Alvaretta Kenan Register.*

They maintained both the Kenan and Graham properties in the years leading to the Civil War. This included overseeing the forced labor of individuals they enslaved, through which the Kenans built their wealth.⁹ Some of these people may have resisted their bondage and the exploitation of their labor.

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND METHODOLOGY

A detailed account of the violence inflicted upon enslaved people in 1831 in Kenansville due to a suspected uprising was unearthed when Liberty Hall was renovated in the 1960s and 1970s. Poet Lynn Veach Sadler wrote an analysis of the record, “Dr. Stephen Graham’s Narration of the “Duplin Insurrection:” Additional Evidence of the Impact of Nat Turner” (1978). This research builds on Sadler’s work and expands her analysis to more fully consider the enslaved perspective. The research presented in this paper ties into the historiography of the Kenan family, notably *Across Fortune’s Tracks: A Biography of William Rand Kenan, Jr.* (1996).¹⁰ What this paper adds to the historical conversation is an expanded analysis of the antebellum Kenans and their role as enslavers.

This paper also connects to the scholarship of David S. Cecelski, especially *The Waterman’s Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (2001), in which

⁹ Graham and Kenan families during this period should be viewed as extensions of each other in many ways.

¹⁰ Campbell’s work focuses primarily on twentieth century Kenans.

he writes about intersections of slavery and freedom in coastal North Carolina during the colonial and antebellum eras. While Cecelski briefly addresses the events of 1831 and ties them to broader efforts for Black emancipation, he does not make the direct connection of anti-Black violence to the Kenan and Graham families, which is a historical gap this paper addresses. Cecelski's work is in conversation with *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (2018), by Julius S. Scott, who illuminates how information about liberation struggles traveled throughout the Atlantic world. This paper fits into the historiography by building on the scholarship of Cecelski and Scott to identify and analyze an alleged antebellum revolt of enslaved people in southeastern North Carolina and connect it with broader ideas of freedom that were swirling throughout the Atlantic World.

THE KENAN FAMILY AND GRAHAM FAMILIES IN EARLY NORTH CAROLINA (1775-1860)

Kenans and Grahams were among the most eminent leaders in early North Carolina. Sarah Rebecca Graham was a descendant of Lord Patrick Graham, a member of British Parliament.¹¹ Owen Rand Kenan, Sarah's husband, served in the North Carolina legislature and then in the first Congress of the Confederate States.¹² Kenan men held positions of power in colonial, antebellum, and Confederate governments.

In the early 1800s, the Kenan family built Liberty Hall. Thomas Kenan (1771-1843), Owen's father, served in the state legislature in the early 1800s. He also served in the United States Congress from 1805-1811.¹³ Owen's grandfather, James Kenan (1740-1810), set a precedent for political violence in Wilmington, when he led a group of patriots into the city who were virulently opposed to the Stamp Act.¹⁴

¹¹ "The Wilmington Messenger (Wilmington, N.C.)," April 15, 1903, image 8, *Wilmington Messenger*, <https://newspapers.digitalnc.org/lccn/sn91068368/1903-04-15/ed-1/seq-8/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

to day, he was not very well, but was
better than he had been.
We have been much excited for some
days, at the discovery of an extensive
plot, amongst the negroes, to engage
in an insurrection, last Tuesday week
these they had fixed on to
commence the horrid work of
murder, they were to have a meeting
at the Lodge in sight of Calhoun's
you know the place, but the timely
disclosure defeated their project, the
two ring leaders were about sixteen
said, and we have about sixteen
to be tried, this week, sundry
things will be changed, no damage
was done by the negroes, and we are
now pretty quiet, how grateful
should we feel to God for his inter-
position, in the design of
the inhuman wretches intended against
us. There is a great number in the church
now, and Wilmington Daily and many
others will no doubt be converted.
Please remember us to Charles
Bolister, Miss Humphrey, Mr.
Mary A. and all our friends,
your Mother Aunt Lall and
their love to you & Mary A.
Your Affectionate
Father J. Graham.

Figure 2. "Letter to Sarah Rebecca Graham from her father, Dr. Stephen Graham," September 26, 1831. Photo courtesy of the Kenan Family Papers #4225, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

James Kenan was a brigadier general in the Colonial Army and a Revolutionary War hero.¹⁵ He also represented North Carolina in the Colonial Conventions of 1774, 1775, and 1776.¹⁶ James was a founding trustee of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH).¹⁷ He owned thirty-seven slaves, making him the second largest slave holder in Duplin County at the time of his death in 1810.¹⁸ Kenansville is named in his honor, as is James Kenan High School. Kenan men shaped policies and institutions and were invested in maintaining their control as wealthy purveyors of culture within the region, made possible by the labor of the individuals they enslaved.

¹⁵ *Wilmington Messenger*, April 15, 1903.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* James Kenan served as a North Carolina state senator from 1777 to 1791.

¹⁷ Walter E. Campbell, *Across Fortune's Tracks: A Biography of William Rand Kenan Jr.* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5. Members of the Kenan family served on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Board of Trustees for three centuries. The Graham family likewise maintained significant institutional influence in North Carolina. Dr. Stephen Graham (1786–1834) played an important role in the incorporation of Wake Forest College, later Wake Forest University. See Lynn Veach Sadler, "Dr. Stephen Graham's Narration of the 'Duplin Insurrection': Additional Evidence of the Impact of Nat Turner," *Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 359–67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27553430>.

¹⁸ Campbell, *Across Fortune's Tracks*, 5.

ENSLAVED GRAHAM AND KENAN LABORERS ALLEGEDLY FIGHT BACK

Psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon asserted that oppressed people must employ violence as a tool for liberation because their oppressors will not willingly give them their freedom.¹⁹ Perhaps this was true of individuals enslaved by the Kenan and Graham families in 1831. On the other hand, perhaps those individuals were the victims not only of bondage and its abuses, but of an extreme case of mass white hysteria related to Black liberation struggles that occurred in the region during that same period. On September 26, 1831, Dr. Stephen Graham wrote a letter to his daughter, Sarah Rebecca Graham, about a purported revolt of enslaved individuals at the family home.²⁰ They may have been willing to use violence to gain their freedom because their oppressors, the Kenans and Grahams, would not emancipate them.

Dr. Graham wrote passionately about the violence. Clearly horrified by the potential desire for freedom by his enslaved laborers, Dr. Graham felt validated in participating in the murder of at least two individuals and jailing many more, condemning “the horrid work of massacre.”²¹ He demanded complete submission from the people he enslaved. Dr. Graham reported to his daughter of “the discovery of an extensive plot amongst our negroes to engage in an insurrection.”²² Details of their plans were somehow revealed to Dr. Graham, who shared that the enslaved group were scheduled to assemble on the neighboring Kenan property to revolt against their enslavers. When Dr. Graham was informed of the possible violence, he had the “two ringleaders... shot at our jail.”²³ Dr. Graham stated that sixteen of the “inhuman wretches” were scheduled to be tried that week, and that he thought they would all

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Homi K. Bhabha, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004), 6. Although Fanon’s argument that violence can function as a tool of liberation addresses colonized and oppressed peoples broadly, his analysis focuses primarily on anticolonial struggles in Africa. This study extends his theoretical framework to enslaved people in the antebellum United States.

²⁰ Sarah was living at the home of Reverend Hollister, where she was immersed in private music lessons. This musical education served as a finishing school for Sarah; a place to prepare her to become mistress of Liberty Hall.

²¹ “Letter to Sarah Graham from her father, Dr. Stephen Graham,” 1831–1835, box 1, folder 3, series 1, Kenan Family Papers #4225, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

²² “Letter to Sarah Graham.”

²³ Ibid.

be hanged.²⁴ Additionally, he said “there [were] a great number [of enslaved individuals] in Sampson and Wilmington Jails and many will no doubt be convicted.”²⁵ Dr. Graham did not abide any protest by enslaved people.

Individuals enslaved by the Kenan and Graham families may have been what historian Manisha Sinha calls “architects of their own liberation.” Their potential struggle for freedom in 1831, though fatal and failed, represents one of many chips in the foundation of American slavery that eventually led to emancipation thirty-five years later. Organizing to liberate themselves illustrates the “long roots stretching onto the antebellum period” that Sinha emphasizes.²⁶ This desire to be free was not new or sudden. Individuals enslaved by the Graham and Kenan families may not have been passive participants in their own bondage. They may have fought for their freedom.

Conversely, these enslaved individuals may have been killed due to white supremacist violence. In other words, though there may have been a desire to rise against their enslavers and emancipate themselves, there may have been no plot. This “uprising” may be better described as existential white dread related to concurrent Black liberation struggles in the region which resulted in lethal violence towards Black people, both enslaved and free.

Sadler makes significant and relevant connections linking the people enslaved by the Kenan and Graham families to wider Black liberation struggles throughout the antebellum Atlantic world.²⁷ She notes Denmark Vesey’s failed revolt of enslaved people in Charleston, South Carolina (1822), as well as three important publications as possible inspiration for those enslaved in Kenansville.²⁸ The first two, David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the*

²⁴ “Letter to Sarah Graham.”

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Manisha Sinha, “Architects of Their Own Liberation: African Americans, Emancipation, and the Civil War,” *OAH Magazine of History* 27, no. 2 (April 2013): 5–10, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oahmag/oat012>.

²⁷ Lynn Veach Sadler is among the few scholars to discuss this presumed nineteenth-century uprising in Kenansville. The account, “Dr. Stephen Graham’s Narration of the ‘Duplin Insurrection,’” was reportedly discovered in the library of Liberty Hall during renovations in the 1960s and 1970s. Sadler explains that the source is an account ledger begun by Dr. Chauncey Graham Jr., Stephen Graham’s father. Because both men practiced medicine, the ledger records medical cases alongside personal observations and other miscellaneous entries. See Lynn Veach Sadler, “Dr. Stephen Graham’s Narration of the ‘Duplin Insurrection’: Additional Evidence of the Impact of Nat Turner,” *Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 3 (1978): 359–67.

²⁸ Sadler, “Dr. Stephen Graham’s Narration of the ‘Duplin Insurrection,’” 361.

World (1829) and George Moses Horton's *The Hope of Liberty* (1829), were both written by North Carolina Black men.²⁹ These authors were likely known to the enslaved people in Kenansville.³⁰

Cecelski addresses the impact of Walker's antislavery rhetoric at length. He writes that "Walker's thoughtful, articulate, and militant call for armed resistance to slavery" implored "abolition and armed struggle."³¹ Cecelski pins Walker to Wilmington, not just by birth, but because Walker's *Appeal* "was fundamentally an expression of a collective vision of African American struggle that arose out of southern ports."³² Walker's message of freedom likely traveled straight up the Northeast Cape Fear River and into the kitchens and yards of Liberty Hall.³³

Additionally, Sadler links the potential fight for freedom in Kenansville to the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804). Both Cecelski and Scott consider the way that ideologies of emancipation traveled in the Atlantic world. Cecelski writes of the "revolutionary ideology spread by black sailors."³⁴ With Liberty Hall close to the bustling port city of Wilmington and the Northeast Cape Fear River, there were many opportunities for enslaved and free Black people in Duplin County to receive revolutionary news from maritime travelers.³⁵

Cecelski writes at length about the mobility of enslaved and free Black people in coastal North Carolina facilitated by their ties to maritime activities. He states that "no pattern emerged more forcefully than that of black watermen serving as key agents of antislavery thought and militant resistance to slavery."³⁶ The spread of Black emancipatory thought is also Scott's thesis. In

²⁹ Walker was living in Boston at the time of publication.

³⁰ Horton, a poet, was the first Black man to publish in the American South and Walker bluntly encouraged enslaved resistance.

³¹ David S. Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song: Slavery and Freedom in Maritime North Carolina* (University of North Carolina Press, 2001), xvii, 53.

³² Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*, xvii, 183.

³³ Liberty Hall is fifty-six miles from Wilmington, NC.

³⁴ Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*, xviii.

³⁵ From the mid-eighteenth century, Wilmington served as North Carolina's principal port. Its prominence increased during the 1830s with the expansion of railroad networks that connected the city to other parts of the state. For a discussion of Wilmington's development, see Duncan P. Randall, "Wilmington, North Carolina: The Historical Development of a Port City," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 58, no. 3 (1968): 441-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2561800>, 443-44.

³⁶ Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*, xvi.

The Common Wind, Scott that “the tempest created by the black revolutionaries of Saint Domingue and communicated by mobile people in other slave societies [proved] a major turning point in the history of the Americas.”³⁷ Due to their geographical position, it is entirely plausible that Black people enslaved by the Kenan and Graham families were caught up in the common wind of freedom that Scott articulates.

Perhaps inspired by Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, people enslaved by the Kenans and Grahams may have planned to employ violence to demand their freedom.³⁸ In Southampton, almost sixty white people were killed in an uprising of Black enslaved individuals demanding their freedom, which was led by Nat Turner, a locally enslaved man.³⁹ The attack was ended violently by the local white community, and retribution was swift: nineteen Black participants were murdered extralegally by a white mob.⁴⁰ Additionally, three hundred enslaved Black people were exiled to Liberia in response and white hysteria spread through the region, including into North Carolina.⁴¹

Fears of a reclamation of Black autonomy tore through white communities across eastern North Carolina. Harriet Jacobs, a formerly enslaved woman from Edenton, North Carolina, wrote about white violence that erupted as alarm over the potential insurrections of enslaved populations increased following Nat Turner’s Rebellion. In her memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave*

³⁷ Julius S. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution* (Verso, 2018), xvii. Saint-Domingue was the French colonial name for Haiti.

³⁸ Lynn Veach Sadler draws important connections between the killings in Kenansville and Nat Turner’s Rebellion, which began on August 21, 1831. Southampton County, Virginia, lies approximately 160 miles north of Kenansville. For an overview of the rebellion, see “Nat Turner’s Rebellion, 1831,” Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/nat-turners-rebellion-1831>.

³⁹ Nat Turner was eventually captured, tried, executed by hanging, and his body was subsequently mutilated. See John W. Cromwell, “The Aftermath of Nat Turner’s Insurrection,” *Journal of Negro History* 5, no. 2 (1920): 208–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713592>, 218.

⁴⁰ Virginia authorities convicted and executed fifty-four additional Black defendants for their alleged involvement in the uprising. During the ensuing panic, white vigilantes killed as many as 300 Black people in southeastern Virginia. See David Walbert and L. Maren Wood, “Nat Turner’s Rebellion,” *NCpedia*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/nat-turners-rebellion>.

⁴¹ “Nat Turner’s Rebellion, 1831,” Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/nat-turners-rebellion-1831>

Girl (1861), Jacobs detailed that many members of her enslaved community were tortured.⁴² Jacobs recounted that “men, women, and children were whipped till the blood stood in puddles at their feet. Some received five hundred lashes; others were tied hands and feet, and tortured with a bucking paddle.”⁴³ Enslaved women hid to avoid sexual assault, and Black enslaved men were whipped if they protested these transgressions against Black women.⁴⁴

Jacobs expressed the fear and violation that Black individuals felt as they were robbed of their possessions, while their homes were searched for imagined plots of murderous Black riots.⁴⁵ These men participated in what Black feminist scholar bell hooks articulated as a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.” Even though they did not profit from the free labor of enslaved Black people, poor white men benefitted from the position of power lent them due to their proximity to white supremacy, via their race and gender.⁴⁶ Thus, pandemonium in the white community spread through North Carolina, and eventually into Kenansville.

“NEGRO-HEAD ROAD”

There is much evidence that points to mass white hysteria of Black liberation in North Carolina following Nat Turner’s Rebellion. Cecelski writes that “Wilmington authorities searched all black homes” routinely and placed a curfew on nighttime movement of Black individuals.⁴⁷ In nearby Southport, “the entire white population feared a slave insurrection so much that they took shelter in the local garrison.”⁴⁸ This white panic translated from the streets of white society to the halls of lawmakers. Laws were tightened in

⁴² Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Lydia Maria Child (Published for the Author, 1861), 97–104.

⁴³ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 103.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press, 1984), 3, 118–19.

⁴⁷ Cecelski, *The Waterman’s Song*, 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, xvii, 54. Cecelski notes that authorities in Raleigh jailed all free Black residents amid fears of additional violence following Nat Turner’s Rebellion.

Virginia and surrounding states to further control enslaved populations, such as legislation that limited preaching by Black people and restricted literacy.⁴⁹

Just one month after Nat Turner's Rebellion, Rachel Mordecai Lazarus of Wilmington wrote to a relative that there was chaos in the city. She stated that "several [Black people] have been executed in Duplin, Samson & here, & the jail is now crowded with the accused."⁵⁰ Lazarus's commentary reinforces the idea that people in Kenansville were reacting to news of Nat Turner's Rebellion.⁵¹ Though Cecelski does not connect the revolt in Virginia to the Kenan or Graham families, he does write about the failed revolt in Kenansville, stating that torture was used to secure details of the planned uprising.⁵² Through this coercion, admission of guilt was placed on enslaved individuals. In other words, there may never have been a plan for emancipation at Liberty Hall.

The terror that ensued in Kenansville may have been the paranoid delusions of white supremacists. Of the enslaved men executed in Kenansville, Cecelski notes that "some were beheaded and their heads placed on posts as a warning to other blacks" and "at least one...was burned at the stake."⁵³ This echoes the inhumane treatment of Black people in Virginia following Nat Turner's Rebellion. A letter written by a man about a month after the lethal event in Virginia stated that "a greate many of the blacks have been shot. There

⁴⁹ North Carolina first enacted legislation prohibiting the education of enslaved people in 1818 and strengthened those restrictions in 1830. See "A Bill to Prevent All Persons from Teaching Slaves to Read or Write, the Use of Figures Excepted (1830)," *NCpedia*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-bill-prevent>. The 1830 law further prohibited both free Black people and enslaved people from preaching or leading religious meetings attended by enslaved persons from different households. It also imposed penalties on anyone who taught enslaved people to read or write; white offenders could be fined between \$100 and \$200 or imprisoned, free Black offenders could receive between twenty and thirty-nine lashes, and enslaved people convicted of teaching other enslaved people could receive thirty-nine lashes."

⁵⁰ "'Letter Concerning Nat Turner's Rebellion,'" *NCpedia*, accessed April 5, 2025, <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/primary-source-letter-0>.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the fear and retaliatory violence that swept North Carolina after Nat Turner's Rebellion, see Charles Edward Morris, "Panic and Reprisal: Reaction in North Carolina to the Nat Turner Insurrection, 1831," *North Carolina Historical Review* 62, no. 1 (1985): 29-52, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23518997>.

⁵² Cecelski, *The Waterman's Song*, 54.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

heads taken of stuck on poles at the forks of roads some been hung.”⁵⁴ In this way, the Kenan family participated in the creation of a public memory of racialized trauma in North Carolina that has been soaked into the built environment and communicated across generations.

This memory of violence was perpetuated through a widely traveled road known for the next one-hundred-and-fifty-years as “Negro-Head Road.” An account from 1946 stated of the thoroughfare that it was the site where white supremacists “killed the colored leaders and hung their heads on poles along the road as a lesson to other rebellious Negroes.”⁵⁵ Another periodical from reiterates this memory of racialized violence.⁵⁶ Yet another publication stated of the road that “it was the main artery of travel between Wilmington and Fayetteville, and Wilmington prospered from the trade with farmers along its length.”⁵⁷ Sentiments rooted in enslavement and the torture of Black people did not disappear at the end of the Civil War. Rather, they continued to influence American society and produce adverse effects. Scholar Saidiya V. Hartman identifies this phenomenon as “the afterlives of slavery.”⁵⁸ The Kenans participated in violence to intimidate Black people in antebellum North Carolina.

THE KENAN LEGACY OF VIOLENCE

In *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (2019), historian Kellie Carter Jackson considers “political and social tensions” and the role of violence as a primary tool for liberation by enslaved individuals in antebellum

⁵⁴ “Nelson Allyn to Joseph Allyn,” September 25, 1831, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/t-05655.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Cora Bass, *The Year Book, Sampson County* (1946), F262.S3 S25 V. 1 1945/46, East Carolina University Digital Collections, accessed May 1, 2025, <https://digital.lib.ecu.edu/17086>.

⁵⁶ Doris Goerch, “Sampson County,” *Our State*, March 1, 1941, accessed May 2, 2025, <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/state/974326?item=974342>.

⁵⁷ “Rich in Historic Interest,” *Wilmington Morning Star* (Wilmington, NC), December 2, 1940, accessed May 1, 2025, https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ndnp/ncu/batch_ncu_fen-nel_ver02/data/sn78002169/00279559071/1940120201/0412.pdf.

⁵⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 6. Hartman argues that the “afterlives of slavery” describe the enduring social, political, and economic legacies of slavery that continued to shape the lives of Black Americans long after emancipation.

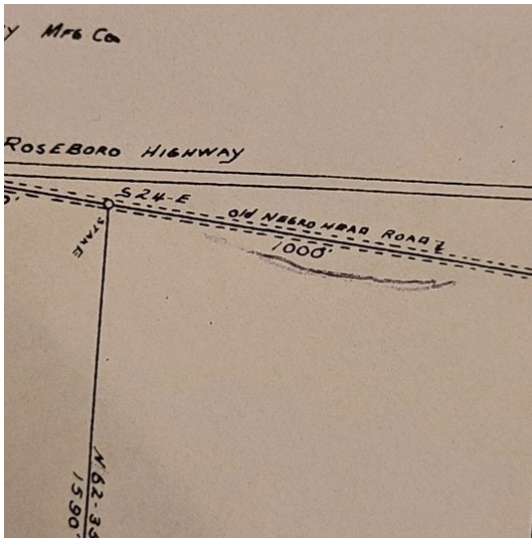


Figure 3. *Property Lines Map Belonging to the Koonce Family. Photo Courtesy of Danielle Koonce.*

America.⁵⁹ The potential willingness of Graham and Kenan enslaved individuals, who may have been prepared to risk their lives, illustrates that violence was viewed as a pathway to freedom. Carter Jackson maintains that “Black resistance and violence was central to understanding their antidote to slavery.”⁶⁰ Fanon points to this in his scholarship about colonialism and imperialism, as well.

As with Africans in Fanon’s research, enslaved individuals at Liberty Hall may have been willing to die for their freedom because their oppressors would not give it to them voluntarily. The possibility that there was no plot by enslaved individuals to revolt at Liberty Hall is better comprehended when hook’s framework of a “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” is applied. White violence in Kenansville was necessary to intimidate them into continued submission, especially as emancipatory news moved through the Atlantic world. In short, the Kenan and Graham families, via their participation in extrajudicial killings, reinforced the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” and continued to benefit from it.

⁵⁹ Kellie Carter Jackson, *Force and Freedom: Black Abolitionists and the Politics of Violence* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

It is important to reflect on the white violence in Kenansville in 1831 and connect it to the broader Kenan legacy. In the antebellum period, Owen Rand Kenan engaged in brutality against expressions of Black freedom in Kenansville. In the Civil War, he served in the Confederate Congress and his three sons fought in the Confederate army to defend the right to own other human beings.⁶¹ In 1898, his youngest son, William “Buck” Rand Kenan, Sr., perpetuated violence as leader of the Wilmington Light Infantry’s machine gun squad during the 1898 Wilmington Massacre and coup d’état.⁶²

In 1929, Buck’s daughter, Sarah Graham Kenan, enabled a premier archive of Southern history to initially reflect a white narrative through her philanthropic support.⁶³ Her nephew, Frank Hawkins Kenan, a firm segregationist, used his inherited wealth to fund segregation academies and private schools during forced integration. He poured money into Kenan and Lost Cause memorials that reinserted white supremacy back into the built environment as Black liberation struggles continued into the 1960s.⁶⁴ Therefore, there has been an unbroken cycle of Kenan violence and anti-Blackness since the eighteenth century.

CONCLUSION: “THE GUN THAT SHOOTS TWICE”

Individuals enslaved by the Kenan family may have resisted their bondage and the exploitation of their labor, through which the Kenans built their wealth. The murder of enslaved individuals in 1831 embodies a theory that

⁶¹ Campbell, *Across Fortune’s Tracks*, 6.

⁶² LeRae Sikes Umfleet, *A Day of Blood: The 1898 Wilmington Race Riot* (North Carolina Office of Archives and History, 2020), 96–100. Kenan’s squad murdered at least twenty-five Black people and likely many more. See Jan Davidson, “Story Map and Timeline of Events of the Wilmington Massacre and Coup d’état of 1898,” Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, accessed April 30, 2025, <https://nhcgov.maps.arcgis.com/apps/MapJournal/index.html?appid=5a4f5757e4904fb8bef6db842c1ff7c3>. Buck also visited polling places to intimidate Wilmington’s African American citizens and ensure their disenfranchisement through threats of violence. See Walter E. Campbell, *Across Fortune’s Tracks: A Biography of William Rand Kenan Jr.* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 17, 22.

⁶³ Initial funding for the Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was secured through Kenan’s support. See “Letter from Harry Woodburn Chase to Hamilton,” December 30, 1929, series 1, folder 89, January 1930–February 1930, Correspondence, Chronological 1926–1930 (folders 62–94), box 3, Joseph Grégoire de Roulhac Hamilton Papers #01743, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁶⁴ Thomas Kenan III, *Sarah Graham Kenan Foundation: A History* (Chapel Hill, 1984), 57–90.

historian Dan Hicks refers to as “the gun that shoots twice.”⁶⁵ In the mid-twentieth century, with the restoration of Liberty Hall, the murder weapon was shot twice. The murders did not just take place two centuries ago with the brutal killings of enslaved people, they are echoed today, albeit metaphorically. By glorifying the site of a tragic event, the Kenan family “weaponize[ed] time itself.”⁶⁶ The celebration of the Myth of the Lost Cause and honorifics of the Kenan and Graham family names reverberate on the landscape of southeastern North Carolina.

This work matters because it helps residents of southeastern North Carolina better understand anxieties about changing demographics. It reveals the roots of those sentiments.⁶⁷ An awareness of the fatal violence employed by Kenansville’s most prominent citizens helps elucidate how white supremacy was reinforced in southeastern North Carolina.

Liberty Hall celebrates Kenan opulence, with portraits of Kenan men in Confederate regalia, and boasts a scholarship.⁶⁸ This exaltation of the beneficence of the Kenan family is harmful if the whole story is not told. Without comprehension of how the Kenan family built their wealth, of the cruelty inflicted upon enslaved individuals, it is a false narrative. And while a scholarship to one Kenansville youth is a noble gesture, what of the descendants of those murdered in 1831? What of the economic status of *any* descendants of people enslaved by the Kenans? They deserve a portion of the wealth that their ancestors helped to create. Some gave their life for it.

⁶⁵ Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (Pluto Press, 2021), 12.

⁶⁶ Hicks, *The Brutish Museums*, 7.

⁶⁷ Conversation with a Liberty Hall tour guide, March 29, 2025. During the tour, the guide commented on the racial demographics of UNCW, asking whether “there were a lot of Hispanics at UNCW?” After learning that the institution’s population was approximately 76 percent white, the guide responded, “Oh good, y’all are holding your own then. Fighting the good fight.” UNCW is approximately sixty miles southeast of Kenansville.

⁶⁸ The James Kenan scholarship is given annually to a local high school student. The award totals six thousand dollars. For more information on the details of the James Kenan Scholarship, see “James Kenan High School DCEF Scholarships - Duplin County School District,” accessed April 5, 2025, n.d., <https://www.duplinschools.net/our-district/duplin-county-education-foundation/scholarship-descriptions-and-applications/james-kenan-high-school-dcef-scholarships>.

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