

## **Geneva In 1882, As I First Knew It**

**By Mrs. W.K. Kenan In 1943**

The earliest records of the Town of Geneva date back to the year 1836 when at that time a small group of men with their families formed a settlement at the junction of the Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers in southeast Alabama. These early settlers were not like the Arabs, nomadic in their habits, as is learned from the fact that through the succeeding years some of their names are familiar to present day citizens; among them are Alexander, Keith, Simmons, Albritton, McDougald, Newell and Morris.

These pioneers were wise men, for they brought with them a young physician; this fact I learned several years ago when collecting facts and data for a history of Geneva. In the cemetery there is a tombstone erected to the memory of the wife of Dr. John G. Moore, the name of their physician; she was a young girl, only 16 years old.

In 1858 a clipping from an old Macon County newspaper says, "The thriving Town of Geneva now claims a population of 500,"

The Civil War of the 1860's took all of Geneva's young men; only elderly men, young boys, women and children were left. In the year 1865 there was a tremendous flood, which completely inundated the thriving town, and with difficulty the people were rescued from drowning, while there was no loss of life, very little personal property was saved. A camp was formed about where the jail now stand, North of Van Husen, and was the beginning of a new town which built toward the north, away from the rivers. President Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, and this flood was always spoken of as "the Lincoln freshet."

After the flood waters subsided, as many of the houses as could be moved were brought to the new location, and were in use in the year 1882 when Mr. And Mrs. W.K. Kenan came to Geneva. A brief sketch of the town as it was at that time is given below:

Mr. Kenan and I were both born and reared in Selma, Ala. We were married there on April 25, 1882. Three years prior to our marriage Mr. Kenan had invested in a hardware business in Union Springs with Major Wright, a substantial businessman of that place as a partner. Major Wright later sold his interest to Mr. Oliver Smith of Selma. Major Wright had two stepsons, William and Robert Jelks who were good friends of Mr. Kenan. William Jelks later became one of Alabama's Governors. Robert Jelks had invested his money in a general merchandise store in Geneva, and he urged Mr. Kenan and several others to visit him. All returned from this visit enthused over the future of Southeast Alabama. Mr. Kenan with the pioneer spirit of his grandfather decided to buy a half interest in Robert Jelks

General Merchandise. Mr. Samuel Baldwin of Columbus, GA bought the other half interest.

In August 1882, just three months after our marriage, we packed our nice new household goods, and at noon on the 6th, we left Union Springs on the train for Troy, where we spent the night. Early next morning we hired a two-seated hack, and began our drive of 65 miles to our future home of Geneva. That evening we reached Elba, a village in Coffee County; 35 miles was considered far enough for a horse to travel in one day. The following morning we got a fresh team, and started the drive of 35 miles to Geneva. The drive from Troy to Elba was diversified, with a few cabins with gardens along the road; scrub oak and small pine trees grew in scattered clusters but from Elba to Geneva, it was almost an unbroken forest of pine trees, magnificent in their lofty height. There were no human habitations visible, but a curl of smoke in the distance told us someone had a home over there.

Deep in the forest an occasional deer would run away frightened by the noise of our vehicle. Once a handsome buck and doe with a dear little fawn, crossed our path. What graceful creatures they are! Wild duck would fly up from an occasional marshy place where they found their daily food. As we came nearer to human habitation razor-backed hogs appeared, "piney-woods rooters" they were called because of their long noses which, rooted for the nuts and roots under the wiregrass.

After crossing Double Bridges Creek, not a house was to be seen until we reached Mr. Cumbaa's blacksmith shop, with his home across the road; he was Mace Cumbaa's grandfather. Mr. Kenan said, "Well, here we are at Geneva." I said, "I don't see anything but trees," which was true, for from there to the lot Judge Pony Black's handsome home now occupies, there was not a single house. This area was a big corn field where the courthouse is now, was in the center of which was a small house where Judge John Angus Campbell and family lived.

Later he sold that place and built a home across the Creek at what is now Eunola. His son Mr. Will Campbell lives there now. From that cabin in the cornfield to the house now owned by Mr. & Mrs. E.A. Broxson (now Parker) there were no houses; but about where Lorenza Milligan lives (the H.A. Holland res. later) there was a house in the middle of a thickly wooded place where Jake Alexander's parents lived. Down the road which, is now Commerce St., was a house owned by Mrs. McKinnon and her sons, Gus & Angus, it was known as the Runyan house. (This is the lot where Geneva Public Library now stands.) The house occupied by Mrs. Harris now was built for Mr. Baldwin, Mr. Kenan's partner. (This location is just north of Louie Hendrix's Insurance office.) A small house owned by Mrs.

Green & her daughter, Miss Ida, who was postmistress at that time, and later a small building adjoining their home was added and used as the first Post Office. (This location was where Hayes Standard Service now stands.) Nothing from there to the lot now occupied by Chapman's Department Store, then a big weather beaten building used as a wholesale store, was owned by Mr. Jonah Keith; he had the nicest home in Geneva, opposite his store, where Gilstrap Drug now stands. Mr. Keith was the richest man in Geneva at that time. I don't know who was Mayor, but Mr. Keith ruled the town! A few scattered buildings were from there down to the water tank, including several very nice store buildings, one occupied by Kenan & Baldwin & another by Mr. John Holloway.

There was not a church or school building in Geneva in 1882. Where the Methodist church now stands the foundation for a church was laid; but across the street was another weather beaten two-story building brought from the old town, which was known as "The Academy." (I have often been asked how the street on which I live, got its name.) This was used on weekdays for a school, on Friday nights for any kind of social gathering such as a box-party, & sometimes charades & tableaux. On Sunday it was used for services, when the Methodist Circuit Rider came once each month weather permitting. An occasional minister of other denominations was warmly welcomed. The Presbyterians worshipped with the Methodists, as by another year their church was in condition to be used though not completed. In 1884, the Presbyterian Church was organized in the old Academy; the ministers who organized the church held morning & evening services in the Methodist Church, and we were given the privilege of using it until our own church was far enough advanced to be used. The foundation of the handsome new church is the old building, which was in such perfect preservation that additions were made back & front, and it was finished with brick veneer. I do not know just what year the Baptist church was organized, but not long after the Presbyterian church was built, a very nice frame building was erected on the street east of Commerce, known as Borland St. This church was burned, and the present commodious church was built.

Academy Street, west of Commerce, had several very comfortable homes. The one now owned by Mr. & Mrs. Joel Johnson, was built and occupied by Mr. & Mrs. Henry Yarbrough and was the foundation for this handsome home. A small house on this street was occupied by Mr. & Mrs. Zack Morris. On the opposite side of the street was the home of Dr. S. F. Latimer, father of Miss Tessa Latimer. (Where the John Olive res, is now.) Adjoining the Methodist Church lot was a house, which now forms the center of the Watson home. It was new, and we rented it for a year, until our first home, (the center of the present Draughon house) was completed. We lived there five years and then built our present

home, which we have occupied for 52 years. [Note: From the above information I have learned that my home in which I was born, was built in 1891. Rebekah L. Kenan, March 20, 1973]

*Submitted by: The book committee. Written by Mrs. W.K Kenan in 1943*