

Proceedings Of The  
Livingston Historical Society

*Lest We Forget . . .*



November, 1966



# Livingston and The Keans

ROBERT WINTHROP KEAN

*An Address presented to  
The Livingston Historical Society  
Monday, September 27, 1965*

Proceedings of the Livingston  
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The Honorable Robert Winthrop Kean

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PROCEEDINGS OF THE LIVINGSTON  
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LIVINGSTON AND THE KEANS

ROBERT WINTHROP KEAN

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THE KEAN FAMILY'S first connection with New Jersey came about in 1785 when John Kean was elected as a member from South Carolina to the Continental Congress which was then meeting in New York. Only 29 years old at the time, John was the son of James Kean who, in his will probated in Charleston, had listed himself as a mariner. Although the older Kean died in 1758 when John was only two years old, the boy had been well educated through the benefaction of a maternal uncle in England who had left the income from a coal mine in Durham for his nephew's education. John had become a partner with Peter Lavien, the half-brother of Alexander Hamilton, in the firm of Box and Lavien in Savannah, Georgia. During the Revolution because of his patriotic activities he had been imprisoned by the British on the prison ship *Packhorse* in Charleston harbor.

At the age of 30 John Kean married Susan Livingston, the niece of Governor William Livingston of New Jersey who some years before had built his home, *Liberty Hall*, just outside of Elizabeth, where my sister-in-law and nephew still live. It is Governor Livingston after whom this Town is named.

Livingston had grown up in New York and had been an active lawyer there. In the late 1760's he had purchased 120 acres of land in New Jersey and in 1772 he built *Liberty Hall*. His intention of retiring there he expressed in a poem:

"Mine be the pleasures of a rural life,  
From noise remote, and ignorant of strife."

However, as you will see he was not allowed to retire.

In 1774 John Adams — later our second president — described Livingston as "a plain man, tall, black, wears his hair i.e. no wig. Nothing elegant or genteel about him. They say he is no public speaker, very sensible and learned and a ready writer."

The impact of his character and ability on his fellow citizens of New Jersey is shown by the unusual fact that after only two years of residence he was chosen as one of the five delegates to represent the Colony of New Jersey at the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia in July 1774. He was re-elected in 1775 and 1776.

War had now come and although completely ignorant of military affairs, Livingston was appointed Brigadier General in command of the New Jersey Militia, a job which he hated. His troops were chiefly around Elizabeth protecting the Colony from attacks by the British from Staten Island.

In the summer of 1776 New Jersey promulgated a new Constitution and on the last day of August Livingston was chosen Governor. He was re-elected 13 times, only once having more than token opposition and he was to die while in office in 1790.

In 1787 Livingston was chosen as one of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention where he had an important part in formulating that charter and in securing New Jersey's prompt ratification.

With reference to this Constitution, it might be of interest to quote a letter written by George Washington to my great-great grandfather General Jacob Morris on the day the Constitutional Convention, of which Washington became Chairman, convened. This letter, as yet unpublished, is in the possession of my sister-in-law at Liberty Hall.

“Sir

Philadelphia — 29 May 1787

Your favor of the 18th found me in this City. — Two or three days after the receipt of it I put the enclosures for General Gates into the hands of Colonel Presley Neville who was then setting off for Winchester, and promised either to deliver them with his hands or send them from there by a person in whom he could confide to their address.

“I think with you Sir, that the happiness of this Country depends much upon the deliberations of the federal Convention which is now sitting — It however can only lay the foundation — the community at large must raise the Edifice — My best respects attend Mrs. Morris — with esteem & regards I am — Dear Sir

Your most obedient  
G. Washington.”

There is no record of Governor Livingston ever having visited what is now Livingston, though during his early days as Governor he was often forced to flee from place to place to escape capture by the British, so he may well have been here. There is a record of his having spent considerable time nearby in Parsippany.

To return to John Kean, after completion of his service in the Congress, he had been appointed by Washington to be cashier of the Bank of the United States in Philadelphia and he, his wife and his infant son — Peter Kean — moved to Pennsylvania where, unfortunately, John Kean in 1795 died when only 39. His widow, Susan then moved to Elizabeth where she rented a house. Meanwhile she had inherited considerable property from her father, who had died in 1792. The latter had been President of The New York Provincial Congress and had earlier accumulated a considerable fortune as a contractor supplying the British Army in the French and Indian wars. (They seem to have had war profiteers even 200 years ago—)

In January 1800 the widow Kean married Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz — a Polish patriot and statesman who had come to this country with Kosciuszko. I quote from Niemcewicz' writings which have been published in a 398 page

book by the N. J. Historical Society with the title "Under Their Vine & Fig Tree:"

"I spent two years rooming and boarding with my tailor, Mr. Rivers (in Elizabeth). During this span of time my relationship with my future wife, Mrs. Kean nee Livingston, grew closer. An abandoned exile, I did not dare to ask her for her hand lest she might consider, might feel, that it was not her own personal worth, but her considerable fortune that tempted a poor man. When once in conversation she put out her hand, saying, 'If you want it, this hand is yours,' I took it with gratitude and kissed it. I must sketch her portrait here. Mrs. Livingston Kean was of good height, blond with blue eyes, light complexion, more vigorous and well-formed than beautiful; she was well read and remembered a great deal, was pleasing in her speech and witty in response. Nervous attacks made her at times irritable, but she was a woman of uncommon intellect and of an excellent heart. She had a ten-year-old son, Peter Kean, with whose education I concerned myself after our marriage.

"This marriage, however, took place only in 1800. I did not press it at all; she also hesitated at times, intimidated by the advice of her brother and of her sister, Mrs. Ricketts, not to unite with an unknown foreigner. Time passed; I contemplated going to the new city of Washington and opening a bookstore there, when my alarmed bride wrote me that she was ready to fulfill her promise and to set a day for the marriage. I answered that I did not wish to force her and released her from her promise, but that if she felt that she would be happy with me, I would not marry her unless it be stipulated in the marriage contract that I would renounce all rights to her estate. My disinterestedness surprised her brother and her other relatives. They did not now impede our marriage but urged it along. Our marriage took place in June 1800.

"On the day of the wedding and of the marriage contract in which I renounced all rights to my wife's estate I went before the ceremony to a nearby stream to bathe. I brought a bundle of my linen and clothes from my lodgings at the tailor's and went to dress in the stable. Only a few close friends were invited to this ceremony. An Anglican clergyman, Hobart, later a bishop, officiated at the marriage. Tea and arrack punch concluded our modest wedding; at weddings here they have punch made only from arrack. It was in truth modest and quiet; the next day I went to bid farewell to my fat landlady. I took my small belongings and moved into my wife's house."

My sister-in-law still has at Liberty Hall Niemcewicz' marriage contract renouncing all rights to his wife's property.

With the exception of the return to Poland to settle his father's estate in 1802, Niemcewicz remained in Elizabeth until 1807. With Napoleon's victory against Prussia and Russia in that year and his Proclamation of the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, Niemcewicz felt that he should return home. He needed a passport. Instead of applying to the nearest Passport Office, he wrote directly to his old friend, Thomas Jefferson, the President of the United States. I quote the letter:

"Sir

"The important events passing now in Poland, have certainly, Sir, attracted your attention, and as friend of freedom and national independence, have excited your interest. Never was there a more promising prospect of that unhappy

country regaining its existence. Altho now an American citizen and enjoying under your administration the blessing of the only free Government in the world, I cannot forget my native country: consistent in my principles, I consider it as a sacred duty to hasten to post and join my feeble service to those my countrymen undertake . . . I . . . take the liberty to apply to you, that you may be so good, as to direct the secretary of state, Teler Madison, to whom I have not the honor to be acquainted, to give me a passport."

We have at Liberty Hall the original of Jefferson's answer, as follows:

"Dear Sir

"I received on the 20th your favor of the 10th inst. and yesterday I wrote to desire the Secretary of State to forward your passport to Elizabeth-town. In the visit you proposed to make to your native country, I sincerely wish you may find its situation, and your own interests in it satisfactory. On what it has been, is, or shall be, however, I shall say nothing. I consider Europe at present as a world apart from us, about which it is improper for us even to form opinions, or to indulge to any wishes but the general one that whatever is to take place in it, may be for its happiness. For yourself however personally, I may express with safety as well as truth, my great esteem and the interest I feel in your welfare. From the same principles of caution I do not write to my friend Kosciuszko. I know he is always doing what he thinks is right, and he knows my prayers for his success in whatever he does. Assure him, if you please, of my constant affection, and accept yourself my wishes for a safe and pleasant voyage with my friendly salutations and assurances of great esteem and respect.

Thomas Jefferson"

You will note that as President, during a period when the United States was weak and trying to remain outside the great power struggles of the day, he rightly ducked any statement as to his views on European affairs.

Niemcewicz left America, never to return. In the Grand Duchy of Warshaw he rose to great fame, eventually to head its Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Five years after his departure, his wife bought Liberty Hall, just outside Elizabeth, the former home of her uncle — Governor Livingston. She maintained a farm on the substantial acreage which came with the home. She shortly found out that in order to run a successful farm and to make it pay that it was necessary to have two things: one — some land in the meadows from which she could get salt hay to bed the cattle in the winter time; the other, a wood lot. She bought some land in the meadows where Port Elizabeth now is. Her descendants held on to this property until only a few years ago when it was condemned by the Port Authority.

The wood lot was in Livingston where Saint Barnabas Hospital now is. My father remembered as a small boy in the early 1870s getting up about 4 o'clock in the morning, helping to hitch the farm horses onto the sleigh and driving the long distance from Elizabeth to Livingston; piling logs on to the sleigh, and driving back in the dark to Elizabeth. Of course, wood was the only method of heating at that time. It interested me to note that in Liberty Hall there were no windows on the north side of the house where the cold winter wind comes from.



This wood lot was the first land owned by my family in Livingston. However, I have been informed that Mrs. Niemcewicz also held a mortgage on property in Livingston Center, that the interest was not paid, and she was forced to foreclose the mortgage; but she did not keep the land. Perhaps this was the result of a letter she had received from Alexander Hamilton, an old friend of hers to whom she had written for financial advice after she became a widow. As can be seen by the letter Hamilton was not enthusiastic with reference to long term holdings of land. In answer to her request, he wrote as follows:

“New York — January 23, 1799

“Honored Madam:

“How do you like, My dear friend, this mode of beginning my letter? Just as well, I presume, as I did the counterpart of it in your letter of the 18th instant, which reached me only yesterday. Are you now to be told that the more familiarly you treat me, the more you will gratify my friendship and regard for you?

“You consult me on a subject about which I have less skill than you suppose and much less than many others. But whatever my advice may be worth, it is at your command, whenever you imagine it can be of use to you. You appear desirous of promptly knowing my opinion. According to my present lights, you will do well to invest the money you have, partly in the purchase of the Stock of the New York Insurance Company and partly in the proposed loan — I like different investments because it divides whatever of risk may be. Either of these objects will give you good interest for your money — The Chance is that both will rise rather than fall in price. Both are in my apprehension safe.

“Loans on real security give too little income with great trouble in the collection. And in times of great national calamity, which alone can endanger other securities, that of real property, we have seen, is not without its hazards. By watching the course of things, it is possible to anticipate dangers and to slip out of them. You ladies know better than anybody else how to make a good retreat from slippery and perilous ground.

Eliza and Angelica reciprocate the tender of affection. My friend Peter (her son — Peter Kean) must take care of becoming a very clever fellow to deserve success and 'tis many to one that he will then command it.

Adieu My Dear Madam

Signed — A. Hamilton.”

Our family's association with Alexander Hamilton is interesting. It began in 1773 when Governor Livingston, a leading Presbyterian layman, received a letter of introduction from Hugh Knox, a prominent Presbyterian Minister in St. Croix, brought to him by a young lad named Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton for a short time lived in Liberty Hall with Livingston while attending the School of Francis Barber in Elizabeth-town in preparation for entering Kings College, now Columbia.

As I said before, John Kean was a partner of Hamilton's half-brother, Peter Lavien. Nicholas Fish, a close Revolutionary companion of Hamilton, was executor of the latter's will and named his son Alexander Hamilton Fish.

This son, after whom my father was named, married my great-aunt Julia Kean, and was to become Governor of New York, United States Senator and Secretary of State in the Cabinet of President Grant.

Outside of the annual trip to cut wood for Liberty Hall and paying the small taxes on the Livingston property, the next interest of the Kean family in Livingston did not come until three-quarters of a century later.

My uncle, Alexander Livingston Kean, who by the way, received his middle name because of his descent from the Livingston family, was my father's youngest brother. He lived with his parents in Elizabeth. In 1892 my grandfather died and Alexander Kean came into some money. It could not have been too much for my grandfather left a widow and nine children, all of whom shared in the inheritance.

Anyway, Alexander decided to acquire his own home, although he was still only in his twenties. He had lately graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Why he chose Livingston, I do not know, except that the hill top was beautiful. Perhaps, the fact that his middle name was Livingston had something to do with it. He also was an intimate friend of Mr. and Mrs. Douglas Robinson, the latter a sister of President Theodore Roosevelt, who lived in a sumptuous home nearby in West Orange where the Essex County Country Club now has its golf course.

In 1894, Alexander Kean purchased 160 acres from James and Cornelia Montgomery and started to build his home here. This is the house where I now live. My uncle did not hire an architect but owing to his training at M.I.T. was able to approve plans drawn up by the builder.

While supervising the building of his house, he used to drive his horse and buggy over from Elizabeth and spend the night in the little wooden building which was later my children's playhouse. The stone for the house, except for the brown stone trimming which came from nearby, was all cut out from the rock in a quarry on the property itself. The hill where the house is located was covered with cedars and it was wood from these trees which was used in my library which now has walls and ceilings of cedar.

A tremendous amount of work had to be done to landscape the place properly. Earth was taken from one side of the slope of the hill to the other side to make a level driveway. I still suffer from too shallow earth for trees to grow properly on one side of my front drive. Retaining walls were built and earth filled in behind it, and a vista was cut through the woods to provide a view. An unusual wall — somewhat like a small Roman aqueduct was built along part of the front of the place and along the drive from the house to the barn. I have been told that this took a long time to build, that my uncle let it be known to any resident of Livingston that anytime he wanted to earn a dollar a day, he could come up and work on the wall. It was eventually finished although some of it has fallen down since.

The house was finally completed in 1898 and my uncle moved in. One of the first things he did was to import some horses from the west and to try to break them for saddle use. He had spent a few months on a ranch after graduating from college; however, this experience did not prove sufficient and he took a good many falls in attempting to train the horses.

Alexander Kean, before the days of World War I, used to spend the coldest months abroad, usually in Egypt. The rest of the time he spent in Livingston. With the coming of the automobile he traveled a good deal on weekends to see his brothers and sisters and other close friends. Among his closest friends were the two Hewitt sisters, the Misses Sally and Nellie, daughters of former Mayor Abraham Hewitt of New York, who lived in Ringwood, near the New York line. Ringwood Manor is now a New Jersey State Park.

Alexander Kean became greatly interested in religious matters and I think it was in 1916 that he bought the land and built the temporary Saint Peter's Chapel where the Episcopal congregation worshipped up until a short time ago. It was hard going at first. Livingston at that time had few Episcopalians and very small collections. My uncle used to pay for the minister, the organist and almost highjacked the small congregation to come to services.

My uncle was very opposed to Prohibition, and when this became law in 1920, he used his scientific knowledge in making all sorts of alcoholic drinks on the place. He made wine from grapes, wild cherries, elderberries. He made mead from honey and even built a miniature still and manufactured terrible tasting whiskey. Most of this was legal as he made no attempt to sell it.

My uncle had always told me that, as I was the youngest member of my family as he was of his, he would leave his place to me. I was not particularly interested. I had only visited him here two or three times. He was still in his fifties and I figured that I would be well settled elsewhere before he died. However, in November 1922 he suffered a stroke and died at the Orange Memorial Hospital. He was only 53 years old.

Under my uncle's will, I was left the house with the surrounding land, and with my brother, was made executor of the estate. My wife and I came out to Livingston to look the house over. We found strange sanitary arrangements. All drainage from the house just emptied into an open ditch going down the hill. Hardly healthy sanitation for small children. We had two at the time, the other four arrived later. Also the electric wiring was limited and much of it not properly installed. The house needed much painting. I had little money available to do this work, but my uncle's brothers and sisters, who were his heirs, were anxious that I take the house and suggested that I take a \$10,000 executor's fee to do the necessary work. With this sum I was able to make the place fit to live in. This took considerable time and we did not move to Livingston until May 1924.

Though my uncle had left a legacy to the Episcopal Diocese, in his will he had not mentioned the land on which Saint Peter's Church stood. So, as part of the residue of the estate, it belonged to my uncle's five brothers and sisters. All of them were elderly and fearful that if one of them should die the Church property might descend to minors, making action impossible. We hastily got the family to sign a paper deeding the church property to the Episcopal Diocese of Newark.

Livingston was then a truly rural community. The last census had given the population as about 1800. There had been little growth for many years. I have a book published in 1880 giving the population at 1170.

We did business with Mrs. Panek's grocery store at Livingston Center. We bought our milk from Thompson's as we have ever since.

The Post Office, if I remember right, was in Charlie Zahn's real estate office. After Roosevelt was elected in 1932, as the terms of Republican postmasters expired, Mr. Farley replaced them with Democrats. For a while the Post Office was moved to the old Junior Order Hall on West Mt. Pleasant Avenue. Shortly afterwards a new Post Office was installed in the Hockenjos Building at Livingston Center.

Here there was a procession of "acting" postmasters — all of course Democrats. This was because at that time there was little talent among Livingston Democrats — none of them could pass the Civil Service examination. There had been numerous examinations given but the three leading candidates, from whom under the law the Postmaster must be chosen, were never Democrats satisfactory to the County Democratic organization. I was, in the meantime, elected to Congress in 1938 and after six years of no permanent postmaster, I told the Post Office Department that they must make a choice or I would publicize the entire matter. In the end, Whitehurst Carner was confirmed and for the balance of the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, Livingston was the only community in the area which had a Republican postmaster.

In the early 1920's a group of Livingston businessmen had formed the Livingston Water Company which supplied the center of the town with water from a well. But as the town grew, more water was needed. In 1925 negotiations were entered into with the Commonwealth Water Company which supplied West Orange. That Company suggested what I considered a rather slick scheme by which they could get water into Livingston at no cost to themselves. They proposed putting a pipeline over the Second Mountain and assessing those of us who lived there for the cost of putting in the pipe. I made my first appearance before the Township Committee and protested violently against paying a large assessment so the Water Company could get to Livingston. The Committee sat silent and did not comment. I thought they were unimpressed by my argument but I did not have to pay the assessment.

Livingston citizens who needed banking facilities had to drive either to West Orange or Caldwell. In 1926 several local businessmen began talking about the possibility of starting a bank here. Arthur Vanderbilt of Millburn — afterwards N. J.'s Chief Justice — and Raymond Connolly, a Maplewood real estate man and partner of George Becker, were interested in it as a long-term investment. It was evident that the Town was not big enough yet for a money-making bank, but it was felt that a Bank was needed and the town would have a growth in the future.

A lot of the spadework for the bank was done by Charles Zahn. We applied for a charter in Washington. It was granted. Soon we received applications for the position of cashier. I interviewed those whose backgrounds were of interest. The most promising seemed to be William Conover, who then was working in the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. It was a happy choice, and he has run the Bank conservatively and well ever since.

When the Bank opened on January 30, 1928, I was president, Mr. Conover, Cashier, Lloyd Baker, Teller and Janice Halsey, stenographer.

We sold all the stock we could to local residents; the balance was taken up by Vanderbilt, Connolly and myself. We disguised the old wooden building on the corner of Mount Pleasant and Livingston Avenues which had been Mrs.

Panek's grocery store, with a stone front and the Bank did its business there for over 26 years. Mr. Conover ran the Bank. My work as President consisted of a couple of hours on Saturday mornings. Banks were then open on Saturdays.

One day, Jay Spurr, then a Township Committeeman, stopped in to see me, said he thought the Township should have a coat-of-arms and asked whether I had a Livingston coat-of-arms. I had a book on the Livingston family and we looked through the various Livingston coats-of-arms and picked a picturesque one. I then wrote to the senior member of the Livingston family who lived in upper New York State and asked him whether he would have any objection to the Town adopting for its own, the Livingston coat-of-arms. His reply was favorable and the arms of Lord Livingston of Callendar have since been used by the Township.

In the late 1920s, Livingston's voting population was small. In 1928, in the Hoover-Al Smith campaign, only 1365 votes were cast in the Township. Of these Hoover received 1113 — Smith only 243. Livingston had but two voting districts. George Ochs was the committeeman in my district. In 1930 the growth of the Town justified four districts. As this put George Ochs in the second district and I was anxious to make a start in politics, I asked whether I could run for the position.

The then dominant organization said "Yes," but I ran head on into a local fight. An organization which was called the Pleasure Club dominated by the merchant Gottlieb Hockenjos, was attempting to take control of the Town and was running not only candidates for Township Committee, but County Committee as well. They swept the Town and I was defeated by Raymond Parenteav. I had learned a lesson — that you do not get elected by merely offering your name. I had done nothing to interest voters in my candidacy.

I thought I was stymied in my political ambitions. However, the next year there was a deadlock in the election of a Town Chairman. There were two votes for Lewis Vinson and two votes for Louis Diecks. They took ballot after ballot with no result. Finally, I was asked if I would take the job. I agreed and remained as local Republican Chairman for more than 20 years.

During the years I was in Washington, I asked often to be relieved of this post, but George Becker, then County Chairman, insisted that I remain. In those days, Congress adjourned in mid-Summer and I was here all the time from August to Election Day. I was not here for the Primary — always a hot fight locally — to take a part. George used to say that when I came back from Washington, I was in a fine position to pull all the sides together and get a good Republican vote in the fall.

With the Roosevelt sweep in 1936, our long-term Congressman — Fred Lehlbach — was defeated. I was restless, as Wall Street had been dull during the long depression of the 30's and I talked to Arthur Vanderbilt, then our County Leader, as to the possibility of my running for Congress. He encouraged me, and I announced my candidacy in the spring of 1938.

Though I had the endorsement of the Clean Government organization, all was not clear sailing. An able Commissioner from Montclair, Dallas Townsend, also hankered for the job — and the powerful Montclair organization naturally backed him. After a hot fight I won by only 712 votes. If it had not been for

the fine support I received here in Livingston, I would not have won. Livingston gave me a 780 majority.

The election that fall was easy. Although I was running against the incumbent Democratic Congressman, it was a Republican year, with the Republicans picking up 69 seats nation-wide in the House. During all my campaigns — ten of them — I always was gratified by the fine support I received in Livingston.

During my last term in Congress, Saint Barnabas Hospital decided to move from Newark to the suburbs. They approached my family, and we agreed to sell them part of the wood lot bought so many years ago by my great-great grandmother. I remember as the local Congressman being one of those who shoveled the first spadeful of dirt for the Hospital in the pouring rain on May 3, 1958.

Upon my defeat for the United States Senate, I was asked to serve on the Board of the Hospital which, as a resident of Livingston, I felt I should do. I became intensely interested in the work they were doing and later on became Chairman of the Board. I believe Livingston is proud of our Medical Center and will be prouder as the days go on. We are making history there.

There have been tremendous changes since I first moved to Livingston nearly fifty years ago. Naturally, there is nostalgia in seeing a rural community grow into an almost urban one. But, on the whole the growth has been well guided by patriotic and able citizens. Let us fervently hope that its future will be guided as well.

SP. COLL.  
LIV. N.J.  
974.934

KEA

Kean

Livingston and the Keans





## Historical Society Prints Proceedings



**Robert W. Kean is shown presenting the first copy of the first issue of the Proceedings of the Livingston Historical Society to Joseph J. Spurr, president of the Society, and Mrs. Ruth Rockwood, chairman of the books and publications committee.**

The first issue of the "Proceedings of The Livingston Historical Society" has just been published, and will be available for sale at the next meeting of the Society at

the Recreation Building, Monday evening, November 28, at 8 p.m.

"Livingston and the Keans" by Robert Winthrop Kean, is the text of an address which the former Congressman and local resident made at the Society's fall meeting in 1965. Threading the narrative about the Township from earliest times until the construction of St. Barnabas Hospital are original sources, heretofore never published, including letters from George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, to members of Kean's family.

All proceeds of the sale will go towards the restoration of the Historic Society's Force House in Memorial Park.