

Kenilworth is a large, two story French Creole plantation house surrounded by galleries. The upper story, the main living space, is set on a high brick basement. It is of pegged, heavy timber brick-between-post construction. A circa 1820 construction date is being used in this nomination on the basis of a conveyance record from 1824 which references “a dwelling house entirely new.” Framed by mature trees, the house is set on about four acres of flat land, facing Bayou Terre aux Boeufs, in semi-rural lower St. Bernard Parish (about eighteen miles below New Orleans). Despite a long history of alterations, Kenilworth retains its general identity as a French Creole residence as well as those specific features that establish its architectural significance. Most fortunately, the house survived Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005). The basement story was flooded, but the upper story (the principal story) was undamaged.

A large house for its time, Kenilworth survives today with a long and complex construction history, which, with the accessible evidence, is not possible to determine at every stage. Indeed, there are a number of architectural anomalies. The elaborate roof truss structure, supporting a broken pitch roof, suggests the late eighteenth century, at least typologically. The earliest extant decorative woodwork in the house is Federal (which fits with the c.1820 date). The board and batten shutters, attached using wrought iron strap hinges with clinched nails, are also early.

There are some unanswerable questions. For instance, was the high brick basement originally meant for habitation, or was it merely service space? The clues are contradictory. Thus this document will not attempt to develop a detailed biography of the house, but rather it will describe the structure in general terms, noting significant features.

The house has a roughly square, more or less symmetrical plan on both stories with a large central room flanked by pairs of smaller rooms. The upper central room, which would have been the salon, currently runs from front to rear of the house (like a wide American central hall). Evidently, originally it was a more or less square parlor with another room behind. The parlor retains its Federal wrap-around mantel as well as its exposed beaded beam ceiling and most of its Federal molded chair rails and baseboards. There is a second matching Federal mantel in the room immediately east of the parlor. The mantels feature delicate fluting on the pilasters. In various parts of the upper story the brickwork is exposed to reveal the French joinery of the heavy timber frame. (Originally it would have been covered with plaster.)

Most of the rooms on both stories open onto the surrounding galleries through evenly spaced sets of French doors, with shutters and transoms. The French door surrounds feature moldings that appear to date from the Federal period. Another signature Creole feature is the delicate classical turned colonnettes that mark the upper gallery. The lower gallery pillars are strongly splayed and appear to have been reworked during the bungalow era. The present wide central entrance to the lower story, with its cut glass French doors, appears to date from this period as well.

Kenilworth has a complex roof system that employs king posts and truss-like multiple angle braces. The resulting hip roof shape culminates in a distinctive and marked break near the peak. This denotes the roof as (typologically) of the late eighteenth century. (Earlier Creole broken pitch rooflines had a break lower down.) Three chimneys pierce the peak. The broad roofline provides for generous 12 foot galleries which (on the upper story) have exposed beaded beam ceilings. Crowning the upper galleries is a continuous course of exposed rafter tails that are shaped in the Creole manner.

There have been many changes at Kenilworth over the years. Aside from those previously noted, they are as follows: In the mid to late nineteenth century fireplaces in some of the secondary rooms were fitted with Italianate mantels. In the early twentieth century two Colonial Revival dormers were added to the front roofline and one on each side elevation. More recently, secondary rooms have been converted (in one case subdivided) for bathrooms and a kitchen. The only early staircase that survives is on the rear gallery, ascending from the second story to the attic. There is a relatively new winding stair on the west gallery. The wide interior staircase that ascends from the previously mentioned lower central room to the upper central room was installed by the present owners. The present owners also installed a narrow winding stair in the upper central room to access the now-finished attic (truss work is still exposed). Finally, a structural wall has been removed on the first story (the space framed now by fluted piers), the lower rear gallery has been glazed in, and Colonial-style woodwork was added in the 1960s to two upstairs rear rooms.

These changes admittedly have been numerous and significant. But despite them, Kenilworth retains the distinctive form of a French Creole galleried house under a generous umbrella-like roof. It also retains many signature details and features including: colonnettes, shaped rafter tails, French doors, brick-between-post construction with French joinery, the elaborate roof structure, two wrap-around mantels, and, importantly, its rare Creole broken pitch roofline. Within the context of St. Bernard Parish, Kenilworth remains a very early and important example of the area’s native French Creole tradition.

Significant Dates	c. 1820
Architect/Builder	Unknown
Criterion	C

Kenilworth Plantation House is of local significance in the area of architecture as arguably the most important surviving remnant of St. Bernard Parish's French Creole heritage.

The French Creole architectural tradition, which was once dominant, is almost gone from St. Bernard Parish. This was well demonstrated in a parish-wide survey conducted in 1982. (Although it has not been possible to determine how many of these surveyed buildings survive post Katrina, nonetheless the survey does provide a good basis for assessing the significance of Kenilworth.) The survey identified some 618 buildings which were then 50 years old or more. The vast majority of these are modest shotgun houses and bungalows from the period 1890 to the early 1930s. The French Creole tradition is represented by less than 50 or so cabins of various sizes, most of which are late (some early twentieth century). These resources display the requisite shape and form but little else. There are also a few small Creole houses claiming an early nineteenth century date. But without exception these have severe integrity problems (replaced columns, substitute siding, replaced windows, lowered gallery floors).

The parish's French Creole architectural heritage is most aptly represented by six substantial early nineteenth century plantation houses. Although none of these is in a pristine state of integrity, all are worthy examples. Kenilworth is conspicuous among this group as the only fully raised Creole house and the only one with galleries on all four sides. Together, these attributes distinguish Kenilworth as what is generally considered the ultimate expression of the Creole architectural tradition. Also, of the six, it is the only one in which the gallery of the principal story is intact. (In every other case the columns have been replaced.) Finally, it is the only one to feature the distinctive and characteristic late eighteenth century (style) Creole broken pitch roof, which lends a strong sense of antiquity.

#### Historical Note:

Kenilworth is located in a portion of St. Bernard settled in the Spanish colonial period by immigrants from the Canary Islands known as *Los Islenos*. Some of the acreage on which the house was built can be traced back to land grants to *Los Islenos*. On March 8, 1824, creditors of Jean Chauveau and Vincent Rillieux sold the property to Durham Tudor Hall. Part of that transaction referred to Vincent Rillieux owning one-half of the plantation, upon which existed "a dwelling house entirely new, a store, a stable, a sugar house . . ." The conveyance also included a drawing prepared by Joseph Pillie, City Surveyor, dated February 21, 1824. (Regrettably, this drawing is missing from extant records.)

The first known reference to the plantation being called Kenilworth is in 1880. It was owned at that time by Leonidas McClung.

Perhaps Kenilworth's most notable owner was Albert Estopinal, Jr., a political figure descended from *Los Islenos*. Estopinal owned the property from 1898 to 1914. He served in the Louisiana legislature, as Lt. Governor, and from 1908 until his death in 1919, as a United States Congressman. His grandson, Fernando J. Estopinal, III, has researched Kenilworth exhaustively. (A complete copy of his work is located in the National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.) Kenilworth has been owned since 1964 by the Valentine Acosta family.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chain-of-title research by Fernando J. Estopinal, III. Copy in National Register file, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.

St. Bernard Historic Structures Survey, Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation.