

A History of 65 Kenyon Street, Hartford, Connecticut



The Charles Atkins House - Land Purchased in May of 1897
Photo: April 30, 2007

The West End neighborhood of Hartford was originally all farmland when developer Eugene Kenyon laid out the streets north of Farmington Avenue in 1870. He built his home on the road to Farmington, Connecticut, known as Farmington Avenue and his farmhouse up a dirt path that was to become Kenyon Street. (His greatly embellished farmhouse is still at 96 Kenyon.) But in the 1870's, the national economy tanked, and the neighborhood didn't begin to be developed until the mid-1880's.

Lydia and Edward Howes Smiley

In the mid-1890's Ella Lydia and Edward Howes Smiley decided to divide the property they owned on Kenyon Street into six lots. Born August 17, 1852 in Winslow Maine, Smiley went to Colby College and became a teacher at the age of 24, and in 1890 he came to Hartford. In 1895, he was 43 years old and the principal of Hartford Public High School, the oldest public high school in the nation, then on the corner of Asylum Avenue and Broad Street. Ella was born on June 2, 1853 and may have lived in the house they built for themselves, next door at 67 Kenyon until at least 1931. According to city records, their lots were sold between December 3, 1896 and September of 1899.

The Smiley's lots were sold to, or the mortgages held by:

- 65 Kenyon -Charles A. Atkins, (45 year old owner of a lumber dealership) 5/1897, 254/146
- 88 Kenyon -Homer W. Brainard (science teacher and noted genealogist) 12/3/1896, 246/508
- Julia P. Drake, 5/1899, 265/135
- William J. Hickmott, 9/1899, 264/419
- Scottish Union and National Insurance Co., 4/15/1897, 251/277, mtg
- Lion Fire Insurance Co., 5/1897, 251/424, mtg

With one exception, each of the owners of 65 Kenyon Street lived in the house for a long time.

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| ▪ Charles A. Atkins | purchased the lot, May 1897 | 12 years |
| ▪ James Cooke | October 5, 1909 | 23 years |
| ▪ Thomas Preston | April, 1932 | 8 years |
| ▪ Sarah and Mae N. Bennett | November, 1940 | 32 years |
| ▪ Janet and _Ley | August, 1972 | ¾ of a year |
| ▪ David J Getomer and Carolyn S. West | April, 1973 | 36 years + |

Charles A. Atkins 1897 to 1909

At the age of 45, Charles A. Atkins bought the land for his new home from the Smileys in May of 1897. Atkins was born in 1852 in Mansfield, Connecticut. His father, Charles Sr., was in real estate and had died 10 years earlier. According to a write-up in *Connecticut's Leading Citizens of 1901*, Charles was a lumber dealer with "pronounced success". He is mentioned as a potential gubernatorial candidate for the Republican Party. The text goes on to say, "He has just completed a beautiful and expensive home on Kenyon Heights, one of the most fashionable locations in the city." Charles had two children.

Heat and Hot Water:

The original heat was from a coal-fired boiler with a separate hot water chamber above the firebox to supply hot water for cooking and washing. The distribution is a one-pipe steam system delivering steam to the radiators in each room, which each have a handle and a valve to regulate how much steam

1903 is the date of the first city water bill hanging on a hook in the basement - found in 1973.

enters the radiator. The system has an expansion box at the top of the house. The steam rises in the pipe and the cold, condensed water drips back down the same pipe. The steam was also delivered to one iron floor radiator in the main stairwell. Adjustable flaps just below the floor grid regulate the flow of heat up the staircase. The coal was delivered from the outside driveway and sent through the basement window into the basement coal bunker.

In 1940, Joe, the 'house man' was the one who shoveled the coal. According to Dick, he slept in a little room in the basement which also had a wooden-seated toilet with pull-chain and tank on the wall and a work bench in the bay just outside his sleeping room. Joe was not recorded as a resident in the 1940 census. There were no toilets originally on the first or third floors, so the servants who lived on the third floor probably used the basement toilet. The original coal furnace was converted to oil fuel in 1942 (with an in-basement, above-ground, 275 gallon tank located where the coal piles stood). A free-standing electric water heater was added somewhat later, and from 1973 to 2007, three increasingly energy-efficient water heaters succeeded each other. The original coal furnace was still in use in 1973. It was used to heat the house for 72 years. A new boiler and oil burner replaced the original coal boiler in 1973, just before the first oil embargo. The boiler and burner were replaced again with a smaller, more efficient model again in ___ when the system was converted to natural gas and remains the same in 2007. The same one-pipe radiator system still delivers the heat.

Most days, the thick framing and high ceilings keep the house cool if the doors and windows are closed. The addition of fans keep many West End homes comfortable without air conditioning even today. The large circular front porch is a living space in the cool of the evenings. Before air conditioning, the front sleeping porch on the second floor is surrounded by screens on two sides. This was the retreat to survive any very hot days that refused to cool in the evenings. Even today, because of its unique construction, all it takes is one window air conditioner downstairs and two in bedrooms upstairs to cool the entire house.

Lighting:

The house was built with both natural gas and electricity for lighting (knob and tube, of course.) The original electric panel with screw-in fuses still exists in the second floor middle bathroom (which we believe to be the location of the original second staircase to the third floor). It probably was rated to provide about ____. There was 30 amp service in the house when we bought it in 1973, which was upgraded to 100 amps shortly thereafter. The original light fixtures were dual gas-electric fixtures because electric service was so new it was unreliable. They have an adjustable gas jet curving up, and an electric bulb curving down, both with fluted glass covers. There are still five of these original fixtures in the house. The basement had just plain gas jets for lighting. These remain as well. The last of the fuses were replaced with circuit breakers in 2006 when the system was upgraded to 200 amps and ____. The original underground electric service was replaced with above-ground service at that time.

Cooking:

Up until 1942, cooking was still done on a wood stove in the kitchen. There is a ceiling vent on

the top of the Italianate kitchen roof to vent the wood smoke. (The vent was replicated when the flat kitchen roof was re-roofed with a vinyl barrier in 2006). The old wood stove was replaced with an electric model in 1942. In 1940, a wringer-washer was located in the basement wash room alongside a huge soapstone sink with three deep sinks and faucets (the soapstone sink remains). In the kitchen, there was a mangle with a large black enameled hood for pressing clothing and tablecloths. The kitchen sink was heavy porcelain on free-standing legs. It had two nickel faucets, a small sink bowl of about 16", and a four foot slanted, ridged porcelain drain board emptying into the sink. There was a table in the middle of the room. Both Sarah and Mae Bennett have reputations as being outstanding cooks. Mrs. Bennett would get up at 4:30 in the morning to fire up the stove in time to make the family breakfast.

Other Appointments:

In 1900, the original owner was an aspiring gubernatorial candidate and social up-and-comer. He owned a lumberyard and intended his new home to be embellished with the finest. The entire first floor foyer, closet and dining room is elaborately paneled in exotic wood - imported from across the world - very rare at the time. Each room of the ground floor is appointed with a different combination of wood for the wall paneling and flooring. The front hall and hall cloak room is of gum which is harder than rock maple, and the flooring is of quarter-sawn oak. The paneling in the dining room is of oak, and the flooring as well which continues into the near floor to ceiling cabinetry in the butler's pantry. The floor to ceiling moldings and cornices, tall fireplace mantle, window surrounds and bay windows that are in the front and back parlors are all of exotic woods as well. Charles Atkins intended to appoint the entire house as he did the first floor, according to Dick Kyle who lived here from 1940. But, apparently, he ran out of money. Only the original back bath on the second floor was fully paneled. The second floor is unusual in that it doesn't have original hardwood floors - it was carpeted in wall-to-wall oriental carpet over plain pine sub flooring.

However, the house did have a central vacuum system, piped from the basement, which still worked in 1940. Was the system original to the house? The third floor interior might not have been finished until 1904. Dick Kyle remembers having the job of steaming the third floor wallpaper off as a kid - and seeing the date and signature of the plasterer. According to the census, both the brother and a sister lived with Charles here - the brother would leave to marry. The looming economic downturn of 1907 must have put an end to Charles' grand plans for his homestead. The property records show that the house was foreclosed on by the U.S. Bank in April of 1909.

James Cooke 1909 to 1932

The next owner was said by the older residents still here in 1973 to be a real 'looker'. I was told that James Cooke was a handsome man who had "an invalid wife and a Pierce Arrow with a rumble seat in the back". One woman, born in her house on Kenyon, and about 80 years old in 1976 or so, spoke about him with a sigh and a twinkle in her eyes. She said all the women on the block noticed James Cooke. We assume he was the one to accommodate his spiffy automobile by replacing the original one-car garage with a larger two-car, heated garage. He built it

complete with grease pit and two attic spaces above. Could someone have slept in that small garage attic with its tiny window? It has the old spring bed and electricity up there still. No piped heat in the attic as far as we can tell, but then the heat would have risen from the garage area below. The garage still exists as ever (with upgraded electric doors, knob and tube replaced, and the huge heating pipes removed to make way for storage shelves). But the original driveway consisting of two thick concrete troughs with a grass strip up the middle had to be replaced in 2005. One hundred or so years later, the wheelbase on the 2001 Volvo wagon finally exceeded the width of the troughs. It was replaced with a 9' wide asphalt drive - smooth enough to dance on. When all the plantings were removed for the driveway construction, sunlight provided the perfect excuse to put in a perennial garden, mimicking many of what could have been the original plants - lilacs, crab apple, and maple tree with a hosta border running the entire length of the drive. Many more perennials and shrubs were planted - daffs, iris, black-eyed susans, lilies, climbing roses, daylilies and dozens more provide continuous bloom. The r. 'Scintillation' and 'Emerald Green' arborvitae provide year-round screening from the house next door – just a few feet to the south.

Thomas Preston 1932 to 1940

The next owner was Thomas Preston senior. T.R. Preston.

Sarah and Mae Bennett 1940 to 1973

In 1940, Sarah Bennett bought the house from the Prestons. She lived with her daughter, Mae who was a single, successful businesswoman and one of her grandsons, Dick. For several months, Dick's cousins Mary, Patty and XX lived here, too, until they moved to XX and later to their house on Cone Street. It was World War II, and families were in flux. For many years Sarah rented two of the second floor bedrooms - one to XXX, a teacher at the old Hartford High School (?) and to trainee executives at Aetna for several months at a time. They never boarded here - just slept and studied in their rooms. Mae was hired by Beatrice Auerbach to establish a millinery department at the famed G. Fox Department Store, downtown. Mae then worked for The Louise Shop downtown on Pratt Street, and came to open her own hat shop on La Salle Road in West Hartford Center. Her clientele shopped at her store because it was the best. When Mae retired and sold the shop, she sold hats from her home on Kenyon, converting the closet in the front bedroom to display them and creating a mirrored wall and vanity for her clients. Mae was famous for her elegant and elaborate entertaining. The kids remember 14 around the dining room table - this is where the whole family gathered. When the table was set for Easter, each place was set with special china, and each place had a sugar egg with an Easter scene inside. The house was similarly decorated. Mary remembers a special trip to New York to buy solid, heavy brass fixtures in the shape of winged angels for the bathroom. They still decorate the back bathroom. Mae had a statue on an onyx base in the front hall. As a child, Mary felt it needed to be embellished, and polished the statue's fingernails.

to be continued...