

# Art class is in session as Kenansville school revives

**‘W**e’re 50 miles from anywhere,” artist Eldon Lux says about Kenansville, where his studio occupies the ground floor of a historic school that neighbors aim to renovate.

“It’s 27 miles to the nearest grocery store,” adds Myra McWhorter, one of those neighbors in the Kenansville Community Association.

So, why do people live there, I ask—a visitor from the core of Orlando, where we’re all about “urban.”

“Because it’s 27 miles to the nearest grocery store,” laughs McWhorter. “It’s a wonderful way of life.”

And you can believe it, especially if you’ve recently crawled in a car past endless fast-food joints in the concrete jungles of Florida “progress.”

In Kenansville, deep in Osceola County, Lux can gaze out big schoolhouse windows at a view that has changed little in decades: Cattle dot the palmetto prairie under a canopy of tall clouds, much like the scenes Lux depicts in his paintings.

Lux is a bona fide “cowboy” artist—both cattleman and painter—who grew up in the Sand Hills of Nebraska, and says that his slice of Osceola is “the only place I know of east of the Mississippi where I would be happy living.”

He leases space in the community-owned schoolhouse. There, a cheery group of adult art students gathers weekly for lessons from him in a light-drenched room where children once learned to read and write.

Yep, art blooms in tiny Kenansville, and so does history.

## Preservation is goal

The community association’s goals include preserving the two-story brick school that rises surprisingly out of the flat ranch land. It’s a building that would be at home in many cities, a smaller cousin of Orlando’s historic Princeton or Delaney.

Railroad magnate Henry Flagler promised the community a new school to go with the railroad line he began building in 1911, part of a route between New Smyrna and Okeechobee; the rails and the station are long gone, but the school remains.

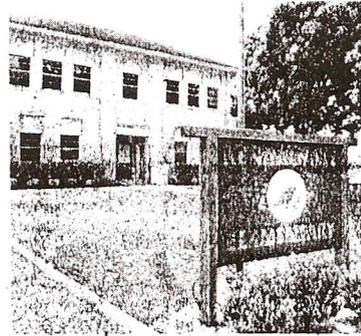
Kenansville takes its name, in fact, from Flagler’s third wife, Mary Lily Kenan, whom he married in August 1901 in Kenansville, N.C. After Flagler’s death in 1913, her estate donated five acres of land and \$6,000 for the school, built in 1917. During boom years until the early 1920s, the school housed 12 grades, with 100 students and five teachers.

Even after the railroad left, the school chugged on for decades. Pupils brought their own lunches, sometimes bacon-on-biscuit sandwiches. Graduates included the children of at least one Seminole Indian family. On the school auditorium’s cozy stage, bluegrass king Bill Monroe gave a concert in the 1930s.

Finally, in 1962, Kenansville School closed and sat empty for 30 years. It came to life again in 1992 to serve young students who otherwise would have had to ride a bus 35 miles. Then, in 2003, it was closed for good.



FROM ‘THE RIVER OF THE LONG WATER’



ORLANDO SENTINEL ARCHIVE

Members of the student body of the Kenansville School (above) for 1935-1936 posed with the schools only teacher, Alma G. Phillips (later Hetherington). In 1980, she recorded much of the area’s history in her book ‘The River of the Long Water,’ available from the Osceola County Historical Society. Now members of the Kenansville Community Association seek to restore the historic school (at left), built in 1917.

## More information

To learn more about Kenansville and Eldon Lux, visit [Kenansvilleschool.com](http://Kenansvilleschool.com) and [Eldonluxart.com](http://Eldonluxart.com). Also, see the new book *Historic Osceola County* by Jim Robison (who said I had to see the Kenansville School; he was right). The book is available from the Osceola County Historical Society; see [Osceolahistory.org](http://Osceolahistory.org) or call 407-396-8644.



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## Renewal is under way

But now the milestones of its history are proclaimed on a state marker installed in March, through the efforts of the community association.

And just last month the group accomplished the restoration of one of the big schoolhouse windows, as well as the renewal of a section of original red brick, which had been painted white.

The group’s plans include bringing back the building’s original parapet-style roofline, destroyed long ago by a hurricane, and repairing the auditorium so that it might be used again.

There’s plenty more to do, but the folks in Kenansville, where the population is only 200-300 without snowbirds, have the can-do spirit of the old frontier.

The restoration of the school is “a monumental undertaking for such a small community, but we are excited about the future and the possibilities that lie ahead,” McWhorter says.