

# Historical home fades into past



Courtesy of State Historical Society

By Adeana Leftin  
Staff Reporter

Only three days remain until a small piece of Lincoln's history will fade into the past.

Cuts forced on the Nebraska Legislature by the state's tight economic condition has put a strain on the Nebraska Historical Society. Something had to go.

Brent Carmack, tourism facility operator, said the Ferguson House, located at 10th and H streets, was chosen as the thing to go.

Carmack said the Ferguson House was interesting architecturally but compared to its neighbor, the Kennard House, and other historical sites, it didn't have "a lot of crucial Nebraska history."

The Ferguson House was built by William Ferguson, a wealthy Lincoln businessman, in 1909 and is a good representation of a wealthy Lincoln family in the 1920s, Carmack said.

Cynthia Keenportz, a tourism aide at the Ferguson House, said that when constructed, the house cost about \$38,000. To add perspective to how much money that was in 1909, she said, wages at that time were \$1 a day.

Mrs. Ferguson lived in the house until she died in 1962 at the age of 103. Because her grandchildren inherited the furniture, the current furnishings have been donated by the Historical Society. Keenportz said the furnishings are typical of the 1920s.

The living room has a Swiss music box from 1884 that plays 36 tunes. Along with the music box, the living room has one of the house's four fireplaces, three of which are marble.

In the master bedroom is a 1760 rope-frame bed. Rope is wound through

the frame of the bed supporting a four-inch mattress.

"Not very comfortable," Keenportz said.

The mattress would sag if the ropes became too loose, so at the foot of the bed there is a crank to tighten them up.

Keenportz said that although the Fergusons had two teen-age sons and no daughters, the Historical Society thought it would only be fair to have a girl's room too.

The girl's room is furnished with a Queen Anne high-boy, a sleigh bed and among other accessories, a five-pound iron hair dryer.

Just outside the girl's room is the sitting room — the perfect spot for reading or sewing, Keenportz said.

The room contains a small rendition of a grandfather's clock that she said is called a granddaughter's clock.

In the basement is a walk-in vault. "They thought of everything," Keenportz said.

The four-level, 18-room house has been called "high tech" by some of its visitors, she said.

Electricity was a new concept as well as a status symbol, Keenportz said.

Each level of the house has a framed fuse box to show off the fuses. However, because electricity was still unreliable, electric light fixtures also were equipped with a gas back-up system.

Plumbing was modern enough to install permanent bathtubs instead of claw-footed tubs.

The showers could spray from the side as well as the top, but the Fergusons had to be careful not to shock themselves by touching the light switch that was in the shower.

"That shows how new electricity really was," Keenportz said.

When it stormed, rainwater washed

through drainage pipes into a cistern to be pumped through the house.

Because the house was so big, the Fergusons installed an in-house telephone to call from room to room.

Another modern convenience that Keenportz said is a luxury even today is a central vacuuming system. The Fergusons' maids would only have to carry around a vacuum tube to connect to one of the many outlets throughout the house.

The vacuum collector in the basement of the house supposedly only had to be emptied once every two years, she said.

"Now that's something I'd like to have," Keenportz said.

Keenportz said she would be disappointed when the house closed on Sunday.

"We've really come to love it," Keenportz said. "It's a dream home for a lot of us."

Carmack said the title to the house is held by the state, and the Historical Society had been the caretakers. Now he said the house will return to the state department of administrative services.

He said he thought the house would be put on a surplus list, but past that, "we have no idea."

Some staffing cuts will be made with the closing of the house, Carmack said. But no decisions have been made yet, he said.

What won't suffer from cuts is the Kennard House.

The Kennard House, built by Nebraska's first Secretary of State Thomas P. Kennard in 1869 to instill confidence in the struggling prairie town, is the Nebraska Statehood Memorial.

Melanie O'Brien, a tourism aide at the Kennard House, said the house was built by Kennard to convince people that it was OK to settle in Lincoln.

Kennard, along with Nebraska's first governor David Butler, and the state's first state auditor, John Gillespie, had been commissioned to choose a site for the state capitol.

They chose Lincoln and built the first permanent homes, of which the Kennard house is believed to be the oldest, to encourage others to move to the new capitol.

The interior of the house is painted a Pepto-Bismol pink with rainbow-colored carpeting.

In the living room is a sofa from 1850 upholstered with woven and dyed horsehair.

Also in the living room is a Steinway and Sons piano with only 85 keys.

One room of the house, the governor's room, holds pieces of furniture collected from the possessions of past governors.

In one corner is a horn and hide chair that O'Brien said was a popular item because some Nebraskans felt they had lost out on the "wild old west."

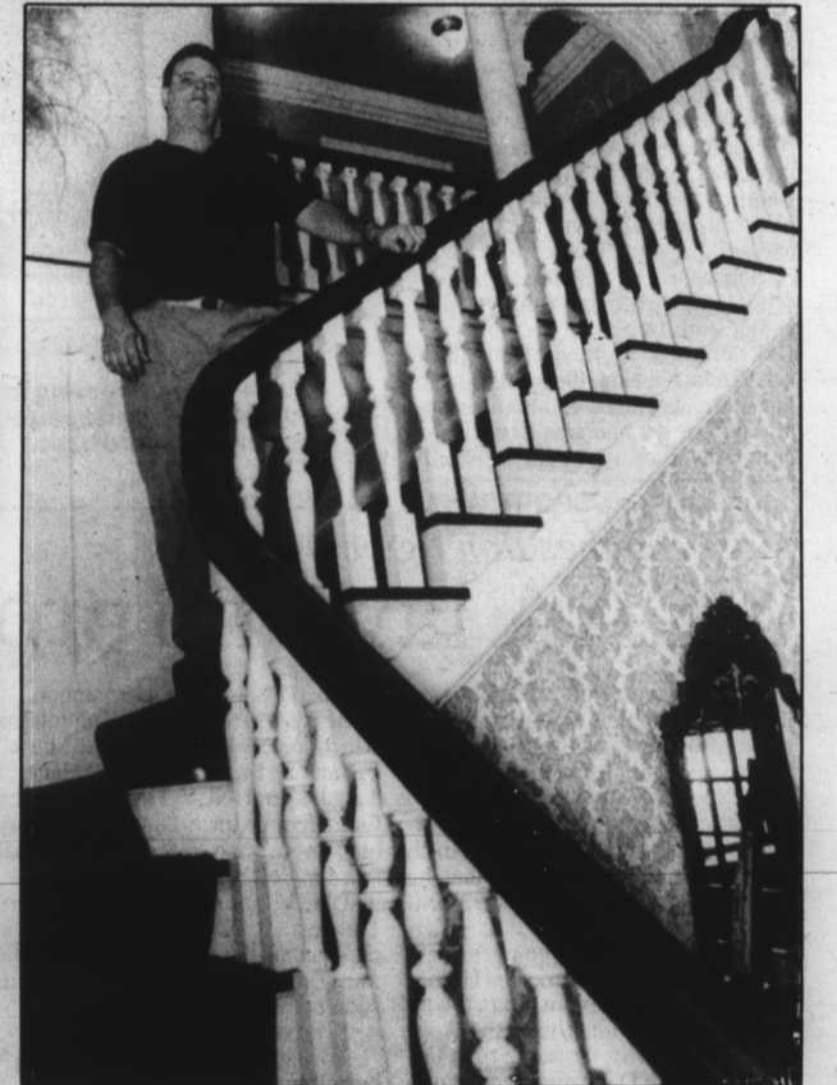
An 1854 sewing machine as well as educational toys fill the upstairs girl's room, and across the hall is a room dedicated to displaying the early history of Lincoln and the Kennard House.

O'Brien said the two houses offer quite a contrast in the history of Nebraska and that by closing the Ferguson House, tourists would not be able to see the contrast.

She said the Ferguson House depicted the luxury of a thriving Lincoln, but the Kennard House was from the time when Lincoln was just struggling to get on the map.

Now, though, it is the Ferguson House that has struggled and lost.

"We're all going to try to give that last tour before it closes," O'Brien said. The final tour will be Sunday afternoon.



Clockwise from top left: The Kennard and Gillespie homes, on the southeast corner of the Nebraska State Capitol Grounds, 1872.

Not exactly modern, the kitchen is original to the house built in 1869.

Brent Carmack, tourism facility operator, stands on the staircase of the Ferguson House, which will have its last tour on Sunday.

The houses as they appear today.

The master bedroom of the Ferguson House.

Photos by Shaun Sartin

