



Edward Austin Kent

• 1854–1912 •

Virtual Exhibit
Companion
Booklet

By Rich Lunghino

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EDWARD AUSTIN KENT was born in Bangor, Maine on February 19, 1854 to Henry Mellen and Harriet Farnham Kent. He was the second of six children, his siblings being an older sister, Ellen May, two younger brothers, Charles Farnham and William Winthrop, and two younger sisters, Charlotte Mellen and Nora Bartley.¹

Edward's father, Henry, was a successful merchant in Bangor before moving the family to Buffalo in 1865 where he engaged in the mercantile and dry goods business. With William B. Flint, he formed the firm that became known as the Flint & Kent department store.²



The Flint & Kent Department Store
(Photo courtesy of the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society)

Four years after the Kents moved to the Queen City, Edward attended Horace Briggs' Classical School. Formed in 1863, this institution was an exclusive all-boys academy for college preparation. Edward graduated on June 27, 1871 and gave an oration titled, "Gains and Losses." It was tradition for members of the graduating class to give such a presentation at their commencement.³ The following year, Edward entered the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale University. He graduated in 1875 with a degree in Civil Engineering. He then went to Paris and studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts and later took courses at South Kensington in England.

In 1877, Edward returned to the United States, practicing as a draftsman under Joseph Lyman Silsbee, an architect based in Syracuse, New York.⁴ Soon after, he went to Washington, D.C., and was employed by the Government Architect. Two years later, in May of 1882, he moved to Chicago to reunite with Silsbee in an architectural firm named Silsbee & Kent. In October of 1884, Edward moved back to Buffalo to his father's house on 274 Delaware Avenue, setting up his own practice downtown in Chapin Block.⁵

Edward began work on many public and private projects throughout the city. In 1888, he designed a small hotel located at Niagara Square for the Women's Christian Association.⁶ That year, Kent designed the New Kent House in Lakewood, New York to replace the previous Kent House that burned down in October of 1887. The five-story hotel contained 250 rooms, a grand dining room, an observatory tower, and was supplied with hot and cold water, gas, and electricity. Each room also contained an



The Kent family home at 512 Delaware Ave.

(Photo courtesy of the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society)

electric bell, return call, and a fire alarm to help avoid the previous Kent House's fate.⁷ He also constructed a summer home for E. Carlton Sprague in Hamburg, New York.⁸ In 1890, he worked in conjunction with his brother William to construct a synagogue for Temple Beth Zion on Delaware Avenue.⁹ Two years later, Edward designed a home for his family located at 512 Delaware.

In 1894, Kent designed another Delaware mansion, this time for S. Douglas Cornell. The mansion at No. 484 accommodated a theatre on its fourth floor, which produced four performances every year.¹⁰ Not far away, Kent also designed the firehouse for Engine No. 37. The firehouse became known as Chemical No. 5, because of the mixture of baking soda and other chemicals used to increase water pressure during a fight.¹¹

While 1894 was a good year for Edward professionally, his personal life took a hit when, on April 1, his father Henry passed away. Though the death was not unexpected due to a long-term illness, his passing was a blow nevertheless. Henry was not only the co-founder of the Flint & Kent firm, but also a trustee of the Erie County Savings Bank and the Fine Arts Academy.¹²

At a meeting of the board of trustees of the Erie County Savings Bank, Henry was memorialized:

*Mr. Kent was a gentleman in the highest and most ideal sense of the word. Kindly, affable, modest, considerate of others, perfect in his integrity, firm in his opinion when he believed he was right, but ever ready to listen to the advice of others: he had that grace of winning manners that springs from a warm and affectionate heart and a pure and upright life.*¹³

In 1897, Edward designed a new building for the Flint & Kent dry goods store on Main Street in Buffalo as the continued growth of the firm and the city called for larger quarters. The store was built with four stories, despite Edward's original plan calling for three additional floors.¹⁴

In 1906, Edward once again collaborated with his brother, William, to work on one of his best-known works in Buffalo, the First Unitarian Church on the corner of Elmwood Avenue and West Ferry Street. Modeled after early English Gothic churches, the Buffalo Express called it the most beautiful, artistic, and original church in the entire city.¹⁵



In addition to his architectural practice, Edward was very involved in societies and clubs. In 1885, he was elected a fellow of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and was president of the Buffalo Chapter. His presidency led him to travel abroad in Europe to attend conferences.

In 1902, he was one of the founding directors of The Society for Beautifying Buffalo. In 1908, he was a delegate to the International Congress of Architects in Vienna, and two years later was a member of the Town



Helen Churchill Candee
(*The Era Magazine*/1902)

Planning Conference in London.¹⁶

He was also a member of the Liberal Club in Buffalo whose president was none other than E. Carlton Sprague, the gentleman for whom Edward had designed a summer home.

On January 24, 1912, Edward sailed for Europe on the *Olympic*, the largest ship afloat. Upon his return to the United States, Kent planned to retire. His journey abroad took him from England to the Riviera and to Egypt, before going to France where he would board the *Olympic*'s new sister ship, *Titanic* for his journey home.¹⁷

Edward boarded the *Titanic* from the French port of Cherbourg on April 10, 1912. Onboard, he befriended several first class passengers: Helen Churchill Candee, a prolific author and advocate for women's suffrage; Colonel Archibald Gracie, an amateur historian; Hugh Woolner,

a businessman from London; Hakan Björnström-Steffanson, a young Swedish lieutenant; James Clinch Smith, an upper-class gentleman from Long Island; and Edward Pomeroy Colley, an Irishman.¹⁸

Edward and the other five men competed over being Candee's protector on the voyage and the group as a whole, called "our coterie" by Gracie, was inseparable.¹⁹

After dinner on the night of April 14, the coterie adjourned to a cafe to hear the ship's orchestra. There, Edward and his companions were served coffee, and as Colonel Gracie later wrote, "full dress was always en

regle” amongst the passengers in attendance.²⁰ After the concert ended, Edward and the coterie went to the A la Carte Restaurant and ordered grog, steaming Scotch and lemon, and a hot lemonade for Björnström-Steffanson.

Candee detailed the scene in her recollection of the voyage:

*How gay they were, these six. The talkative man [Gracie] told stories, the sensitive man [Kent] glowed and laughed, the two modest Irishmen [Colley and Clinch Smith] forgot to be suppressed, the facile Norseman [Björnström-Steffanson] cracked American jokes, the cosmopolitan Englishman [Woolner] expanded, and the lady felt divinely flattered to be in such company.*²¹

Around 11:20 p.m., Candee reluctantly returned to her stateroom, as did Colley, and Edward, Woolner, Björnström-Steffanson, Gracie, and Clinch Smith went to the first class smoking room.²² Right around 11:40 p.m., Edward and the others felt a strange sensation underneath them.

Woolner described what they experienced:

*We felt a sort of stopping, a sort of, not exactly shock, but a sort of slowing down; and then we sort of felt a rip that gave a sort of a slight twist to the whole room. Everybody, so far as I could see, stood up and a number of men walked out rapidly through the swinging doors on the port side, and ran along to the rail that was behind the mast.*²³

Along the starboard side of the *Titanic* off in the distance, a few of the men could see something. Edward, Woolner, and Steffanson could not see it themselves, but they heard someone call out, “We hit an iceberg—there it is!”²⁴ Almost immediately, Woolner went in search of Mrs. Candee. Edward stayed behind for a time, but soon after, met Candee and Woolner on the Grand Staircase.

Candee was wearing a lifejacket and had two small items with her: a flask and an ivory miniature of her mother. Fearing she would lose the items in the commotion of lowering the boats, Candee pleaded to Edward to take care of them for her. Edward initially hesitated in accepting her valuables, but ultimately consented and took them from her.



From that moment, the actions of Edward Kent disappear from history.²⁵

Edward was among the estimated 1,500 people to perish in the *Titanic* disaster. Very soon after news of the disaster was known, his sister, Charlotte, and Elbert B. Mann of Flint & Kent went to New York to find information about the architect, but came up empty-handed.²⁶ On April 21, Charlotte posted a plea in the *New York Sun*:

TO SURVIVORS OF THE *TITANIC*—Information of any kind concerning Edward A. Kent during voyage of the *Titanic* will be gratefully received by the family. CHARLOTTE M. KENT. The Lenox. Buffalo, N. Y.²⁷

Charlotte's appeal was soon answered in the afternoon of April 23 through a letter received from Helen Churchill Candee's daughter, Edith Mathews. The letter detailed the episode where Candee gave her valuables to Edward. However, Candee placed the exchange on the Boat Deck instead of the Grand Staircase, making for a more dramatic scene.²⁸

On April 27, the Flint & Kent dry goods store was closed and a service for Edward was held at the First Unitarian Church, which was filled to capacity. The pulpit and the area surrounding it was adorned with clusters of plants as well as a large wreath and an anchor.²⁹

Before the close of the service, the cable steamer *Mackay-Bennett* which was sent out by the White Star Line to recover the bodies of the victims, sent out a list of bodies via a telegram. The message revealed that the ship had found Edward's body in the North Atlantic.

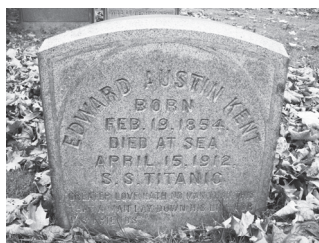
Let go
the breath
there is no
death...

Edward's body was delivered into the care of his cousin, John G. Eppendorff, and H.K. White, the husband of his sister, Nora. Still on Edward's person were Candee's flask and ivory miniature. On May 1, Edward's body was taken by White and Eppendorff and laid to rest in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Buffalo. Soon afterward, Charlotte returned the flask and miniature to Mrs. Candee.³⁰

Although Edward never married and had no children, his legacy is left behind through his buildings, some of which are still standing. The First Unitarian Church continues to offer services on the corner of Elmwood and West Ferry, the Chemical No. 5 Firehouse now functions as a private residence on Cleveland Avenue, and the homes he built for S. Douglas Cornell and E. Carleton Sprague are also still in existence.

While the full story of Edward's last hours on the *Titanic* may never be known, the inscription on his gravestone provides insight into the type of gentleman that he was to the very end:

GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS, THAT A
MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS.



Edward Austin Kent's final resting place at Forest Lawn Cemetery
(Photo courtesy of the author)

Endnotes

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- 2 – “Obituary: Henry M. Kent,” *The Buffalo Express*, April 2, 1894, 7.
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- 4 – Henry Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)* (Los Angeles: New Age Publishing Company, 1956), 340.
- 5 – *The American Institute of Architects, Quarterly Bulletin*, April, 1912, 46-47; *Buffalo City Directory 1884*; *The Buffalo Express*, December 1885.
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- 9 – “Temple Beth Zion,” *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, September 6, 1890, 11.
- 10 – Edward T. Dunn, *Buffalo’s Delaware Avenue: Mansions and Families* (Buffalo: Canisius College Press, 2003), 255.
- 11 – Paula Voell, “Old Chemical No. 5,” *The Buffalo News*, September 29, 1991.
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- 13 – “A Memorial to Mr. Kent,” *The Buffalo Express*, April 5, 1894, 7.
- 14 – *A History of the City of Buffalo* (Buffalo: The Buffalo Evening News, 1908), 171.
- 15 – “New Church of Great Beauty,” *The Buffalo Express*, September 4, 1906.

- 16** – Obituary Record of Graduates of Yale University Deceased during the year ending June 1, 1912; “Society for Beautifying Buffalo,” Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, January 28, 1902, 2.
- 17** – The American Institute of Architects Quarterly Bulletin Jan. 1, 1912-Apr. 1, 1912, 46-47; Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, 3rd. Ser. V. 19, Apr. 27, 1912, 452-463.
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- 19** – Walter Lord, *The Night Lives On* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 51.
- 20** – Colonel Archibald Gracie, *The Truth About the Titanic* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1913), 11.
- 21** – Helen Churchill Candee, “Sealed Orders,” *Collier’s Weekly*, May 4, 1912; Hugh Brewster, *Gilded Lives, Fatal Voyage* (New York: Crown, 2012), 153.
- 22** – Lord, *The Night Lives On*, 55.
- 23** – U.S. Senate Inquiry, 883.
- 24** – Lord, *The Night Lives On*, 56.
- 25** – Lord, *The Night Lives On*, 119; Gracie, *The Truth About the Titanic*, 124; “At Last Word of Mr. Kent,” *The Buffalo Express*, April 24, 1912.
- 26** – “Service for the Victims,” *The Buffalo Express*, April 21, 1912.
- 27** – “Information Wanted,” *New York Sun*, April 21, 1912, 11.
- 28** – “At Last Word of Mr. Kent,” *The Buffalo Express*, April 24, 1912.
- 29** – “Kent’s Body Recovered,” *The Buffalo Express*, April 28, 1912; “Honor Memory of Buffalo Man Who Died With Titanic,” *Buffalo Courier*, April 28, 1912, 1.
- 30** – Obituary Record of Graduates of Yale University Deceased during the year ending June 1, 1912; Randy Bryan Bigham, “Life’s Decor: A Biography of Helen Churchill Candee,” *Encyclopedia-Titanica*, December 23, 2005.

Inside the Edward Austin Kent Exhibit

The Edward Austin Kent Exhibit at the Buffalo and Erie County Historical Society was developed by **Rich Lunghino** and **Erik Taheri**, who are currently enrolled at Canisius College.

Lunghino's research into Kent's story began in the Fall of 2010 and continues to this day. The idea for an exhibit on the architect was conceived in Summer of 2011 between him and Associate Professor **Jamie O'Neil** of the Canisius Digital Media Arts program. It was over that summer in which the first prototype of the exhibit application was designed.



(from left to right)

Erik Taheri and Rich Lunghino

Taheri came aboard over the Winter of 2011 to shoot and edit the final versions of the videos that are seen in the exhibit today. He brought a Hollywood production-type feel to the videos. Taheri used a plethora of equipment, most notably his Canon 7D camera and a Pocket Dolly.

Lunghino and Taheri, with the assistance of O'Neil and the Canisius College Video Institute, hired well-known actors from Buffalo theatre companies to breathe life into Kent's story:

Christian Brandjes — Edward Austin Kent

Diane Curley — Charlotte Mellen Kent

Beth Donohue Templeton — Helen Churchill Candee

Gerry Trentham — Rev. Richard W. Boynton

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