

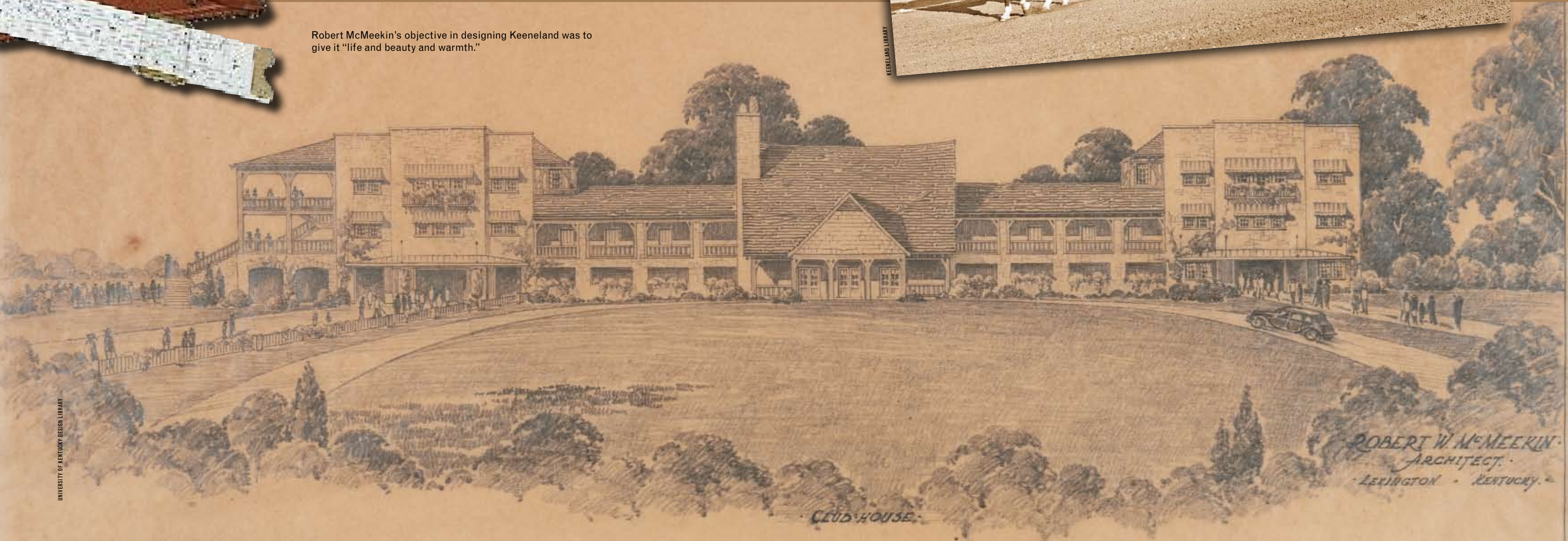
SET IN STONE

Keeneland Architect Leaves Timeless Portfolio

By Vickie Mitchell

Jack Keene gave Keeneland's clubhouse its start, but a 36-year-old architect named Robert McMeekin gave Keene's rough draft its flourish. McMeekin took Keene's stone barn — a structure that could have passed for a prison — and finessed it into a gracious and genteel gathering place for racegoers. In doing so, the Lexington native, born in 1898 on his family's Hartland farm and a graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's esteemed architecture school, did what architects are often required to do — he gave another's work a fresh face.

Robert McMeekin's objective in designing Keeneland was to give it "life and beauty and warmth."



“You don’t always start with a clean slate,” said Clyde Carpenter, a professor of architecture at the University of Kentucky College of Design, who is working on a book about McMeekin. “I think McMeekin was very much the architect of Keeneland as we know it. He transformed it into what it is.”

Best Man for the Job

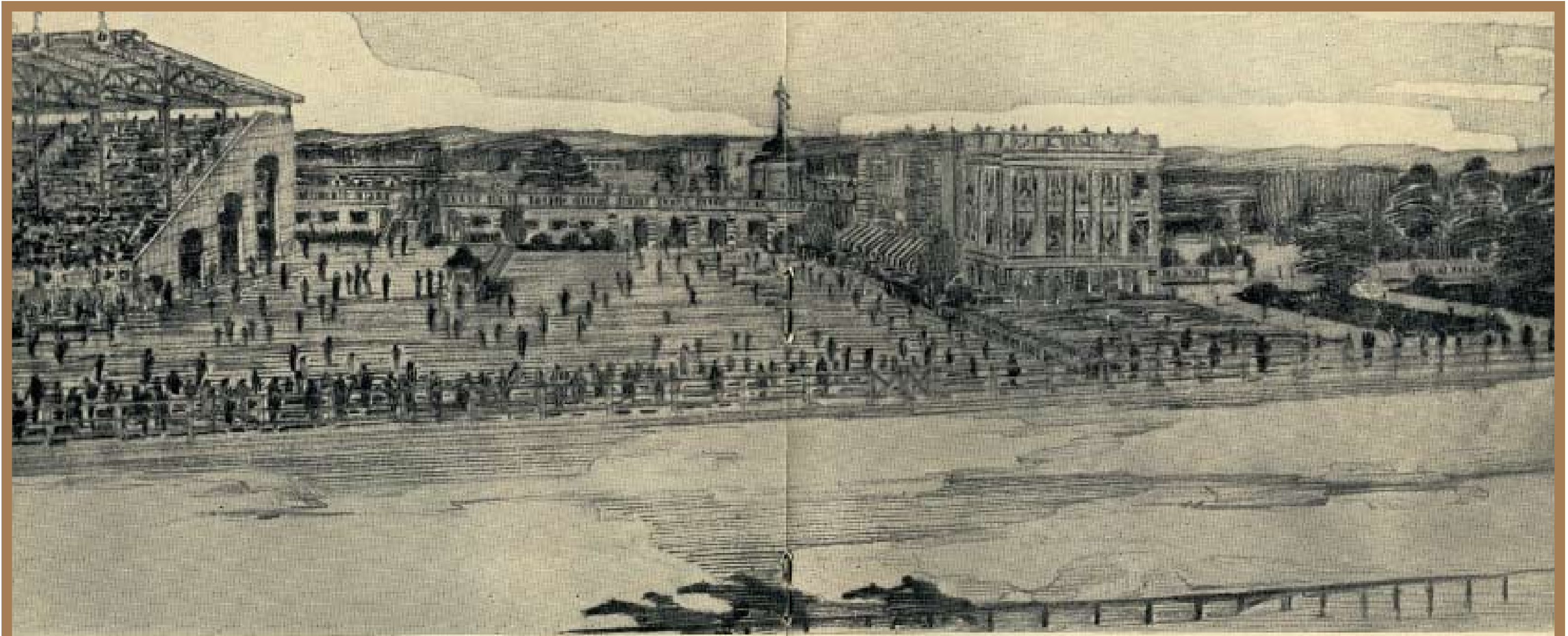
McMeekin had already spent a decade designing handsome homes, barns, and businesses in the Bluegrass when, in 1935, Keeneland’s founders held a competition for the clubhouse and grandstand design.

“I decided to enter the competition,” McMeekin wrote in his unpublished memoirs. “Because of the Depression, the building profession was at an absolute standstill, with no new work anywhere. This was an opportunity.”

McMeekin had never designed a racetrack building; he would

never design another. Horses weren’t his passion; he preferred his collection of exotic parrots and other birds to the ponies he’d owned in his youth.

Yet, in hindsight, it is hard to imagine an architect better qualified for the job.



THE PROPOSED KEENELAND: A SETTING WORTHY OF THE SPORT OF KINGS

Saddling Paddock and Inclosed Training Track

Members' Arrival Court

Grandstand

Club House

Like Keene, he'd grown up surrounded by Kentucky limestone, and, like Keene, he used it frequently in his building designs.

Like Keeneland's founders, McMeekin demanded quality and carefully oversaw the work he was hired to do. A stone supplier remembered McMeekin as "very particular, knew just the way he wanted it."

And, perhaps most important, McMeekin, in his short career, had become known as an architect who could design residences as livable and welcoming as they were handsome.

Their entrances were grand, their stairs were sweeping, their sunlight was abundant, their woodwork was thick and rich, their doors were heavy and paneled. Many of those characteristics would carry over into his design at Keeneland's clubhouse, destined to become the home of Thoroughbred racing in Lexington.

"He felt that the entrance to a house was so important," said Carpenter. "Go into the clubhouse at Keeneland, and there is a great sense of arrival."

Softening a Hard Exterior

McMeekin found little to like when he looked at the massive structure Keene had concocted.

"I studied the cold, flat-topped, empty shell," McMeekin said

in his private memoirs, written to his sons before he died in 1983. "The stones were not cut according to the specifications I favored, and the building was bare, lifeless, and forbidding."

Even the limestone Keene had used was sub par. McMeekin preferred "Kentucky marble," a gray stone that handsomely fades to white. Keene had used another type of limestone, which had, as McMeekin put it, "a pattern as plain as linoleum."

McMeekin softened Keene's harsh start. He folded a slate gable roof over the building's center section, a roof much like the one he used on the stone house he built for his mother in the late 1920s on Richmond Road. He added a portico to the front and built two big porches on the west side, facing the track. To tie the new racetrack to the old Kentucky Association track that had closed, he used the old track's 19th century gate and gate posts. He planned the private dining room and the clubroom.

He spent little time studying other racetracks, a fortuitous decision because it allowed McMeekin to create a racetrack that rose above the rest.

"I visited a track or two before I started on my plans, but they didn't affect my ideas very much," he wrote. "Most tracks are rather stark. There was an opportunity at Keeneland to build a plant in unusually pleasant surroundings.

"I wanted to work with all the imagination I could muster to try to give it life and beauty and warmth."

A Year to Remember

McMeekin won the commission for Keeneland on Oct. 1, 1935. As the founders pushed to open the track a scant six months later, there was little time for anything else, including a honeymoon for McMeekin and his bride, Martha Terry Smith. They married Nov. 3, 1935.

In an interview with *Keeneland* magazine in the late 1970s, McMeekin described Keeneland co-founder Louie Beard's reaction to McMeekin's request to get "a little time off to get



Robert McMeekin

KEENELAND LIBRARY

married."

McMeekin recalled, "Major Beard said, 'The hell you do! You have to finish this clubhouse.' That was that."

Beard and McMeekin seemed to get along well otherwise, despite the pressures of opening a racetrack on a tight deadline.

Before he got the Keeneland commission, McMeekin had designed a home and office for Beard. He didn't always agree with his employer, but he heeded his direction.

For example, at Keeneland, McMeekin had hoped to use steel for the new grandstand's structure; Beard insisted on wood because he was tired of backing "up against a steel column on a cold day."

McMeekin's professional affiliation with Keeneland would last into the mid-1950s. In 1939 he designed the original Keeneland Library.

"I designed that for free," he said in an interview years later. "I wanted to show I appreciated our good relationship."

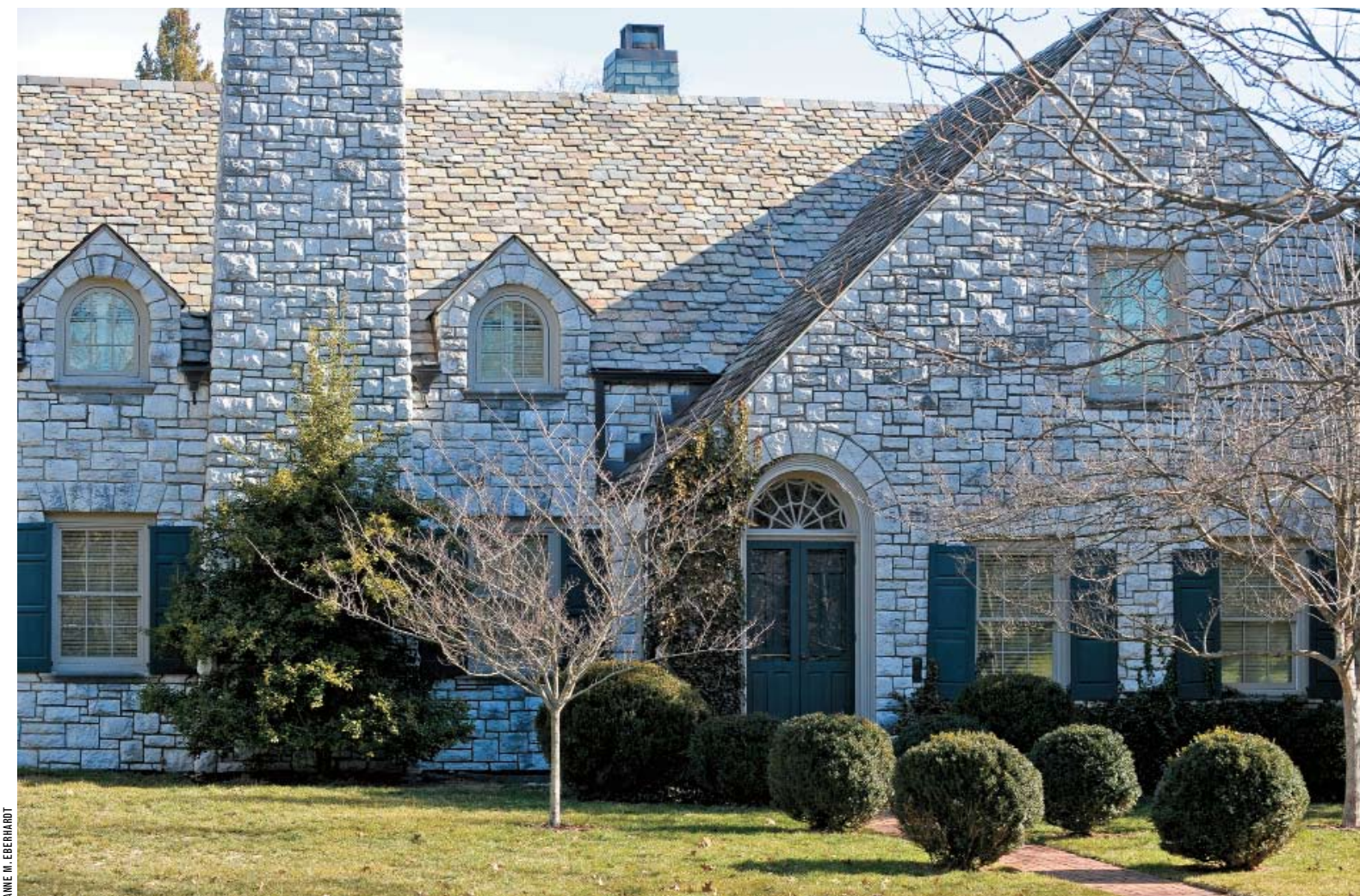
As the track grew, he would design new buildings, some as mundane as a refreshment stand commissioned in 1946 and a

combination dormitory, garage, fire department, and carpentry shop in 1948; others as important to the track's future as alterations and additions to the existing grandstand in 1953.

No doubt Keeneland would have been a different, although not necessarily a better, place had Keene's stone barn not existed or had the founders had more funds. For one, points out Keeneland president Nick Nicholson, the spectator area would be laid out in the tradition of other racetracks. "The clubhouse would be down by the finish line, where the grandstand is."

But money, or a lack of it, made everyone involved with building Keeneland make do. "That was a key," said Nicholson. "They did not have the money, so they worked with what they had to work with."

The original architectural drawings and plans for the Keeneland projects, as well as drawings for other McMeekin projects — 320 drawings in total — are part of the collection of the Design Library at the University of Kentucky, donated by McMeekin's family. In 1988 they, along with McMeekin's memoirs, were



ANNE M. EBENHARDT

McMeekin built this stunning stone house for himself and his mother on Richmond Road.

McMEEKIN'S ZOO

If you met your first lion, zebra, or elephant at the Bird and Animal Forest Zoo in Jessamine County in the 1960s, you have Robert McMeekin and his family to thank.

In 1958 the McMeekins began operating what was then Kentucky's only zoo. The venture married two of Robert McMeekin's passions — exotic animals and architecture.

A member of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums, the zoo sat on cliffs above the Kentucky River. Ever the designer, McMeekin built enclosures of wire that often blended into the woods around them, and they held quite a menagerie including lions, camels, two elephants, zebras, bison, big tortoises, and several rare breeds of horses.

Because McMeekin was still a busy architect, his wife, Martha, and sons Robert Jr. and Douglas handled much of the zoo's day-to-day management. In her memoirs Martha McMeekin recalls the adventures involved in running the park, from bottle-feeding baby lions to herding visitors into the zoo's gift shop when bears escaped by climbing out of their pit-like enclosure on a ladder used by zoo workers.

The park closed in the late 1960s, after attempts to have the city of Lexington take it over and move it to a new site near the city failed. Some of the animals were sold; some went to the new Louisville Zoo, for which McMeekin had served as a consultant and for which he had drawn a master plan.

In 1968 he also designed the Salisbury Zoo, in Salisbury, Md. In McMeekin's later years he and his wife traveled around the world, with visits to zoos at the top of their itinerary.



the basis for “Discovering Robert Ward McMeekin 1898-1983,” an exhibit organized by seminar students at the UK College of Architecture, with Leslie Hennessy as their instructor.

McMeekin’s Houses

As those many drawings and plans illustrate, McMeekin’s work goes far beyond Keeneland. In more than 50 years of practice — he retired in 1978, five years before his death at age 84 — he designed buildings of many stripe, including gas stations, barns, department stores, academic buildings, and aviation terminals. In addition to Keeneland, his residential work has made a lasting impression as well.

Within a mile’s drive on inbound Richmond Road are three of his most beautiful city homes: 1617 Richmond Road, his first from-the-ground-up commission, a traditional frame home with a handsome arched entrance; 1717 Richmond Road, the stunning stone house he built for himself and his mother in 1928 with its stone-walled garden out back (landscape design was another of McMeekin’s loves), and 1725 Richmond Road, a stucco-and-timber house with some similarities to the McMeekin home. Closer to town is one of his public projects — the old Henry Clay High School, now the offices of the Fayette County Public Schools. Outbound on Tates Creek Road sits the home he built for his family on 7.5 acres at 1700 Tates Creek Road, a stately brick from 1939, where he would spend the rest of his life.

In his career, timing was everything, it seemed. McMeekin returned to Lexington in 1925 after his father suffered a stroke. Three years out of MIT with work at a New York firm on his resume, he landed commissions almost immediately.

He credited his thriving business to a period of economic vitality between the end of World War I and the start of the Great Depression.

“Money was plentiful; fine craftsmen skilled as stone masons, brick masons, and carpenters were available. Labor in every field was abundant and inexpensive,” he wrote. “At this time large country houses were in their heyday, and on this land in Central Kentucky I am glad to have had the opportunity to build some of these houses.”

A number of the houses he built seemed to step straight from the English countryside. Architect Clay Lancaster, in his *Vestiges of the Venerable City*, said McMeekin showed “impeccable taste in creating large stone houses in character with the region.”

“Old stone houses and stone mills, some of them built in Kentucky in the 18th century,” McMeekin wrote, “have always appealed to me and it was natural that some of my first houses should be of stone.”

A number of those early houses would be built on area horse farms.

THE ART OF ARCHITECTURE

In his explanations about the principles and philosophies that guided his work, McMeekin seems as much the artist as the architect, as much the poet as the planner.

“I like to adopt materials and methods of early builders when they have proven beautiful and practical.”

“I think good woodwork has a subtle power, which gives a room elegance in the same way that good character shines in a face.”

“I like the rich color of wood-paneled walls for a library. I particularly like the warm, honey color of ash wood floors.”

“I love to see sunlight flooding into a room. It is always a joy to me to greet the morning sunlight or to look out at a sunset. They lift the spirit.”

Beginning early in his career, even before his Keeneland commission, McMeekin built for many of Lexington’s elite and its horse farm owners: Mr. and Mrs. Harkness Edwards of Walnut Hall Farm, Joseph Madden of Hamburg Place, Warren Wright of Calumet. He considered his best to be the Harkness Edwards home and a house on Russell Cave Pike, built in 1928 for Mr. and Mrs. Henry Oliver.

In those early years, he also was the local architect for the University of Kentucky’s Memorial Hall, working in collaboration with a Cleveland firm. In 1935 he helped plan the Northside’s Deepwood subdivision, designing the entrance and four houses, including one that is a replica of Gunston Hall in Washington, D.C., home of statesman George Mason.

Fortunately, many of McMeekin’s works remain, much as he had hoped. In his memoirs he wrote, “I hope some of the buildings of this period can be used and preserved. We no longer build this way, and they provide continuity within an era that is past.”

Carpenter, who believes McMeekin one of the most important area architects of his era, agrees.

“McMeekin’s houses have such resonance with the past,” said Carpenter, “and so many of them remain. It is nice that they have been passed down.”

He would also be pleased to know his work at Keeneland is protected, not only by the community, but by its status as a National Historic Landmark, a designation that came in 1986, three years after his death.

About his work at Keeneland, McMeekin wrote, “I consider it one of my most important jobs, not only for my own small contribution, but also for what it has meant to this area. With its beautiful setting and its air of graciousness, it seems to give an invitation to come in and enjoy.” 