

# LOCAL HISTORIC LANDMARK PROGRAM

Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission

## Körner's Folly

Local Historic Landmark #66

413 South Main St., Kernersville

Construction Date: c. 1880

Local Landmark Designation: 09/03/1985

Joseph Körner, born in 1769, was a clockmaker from Germany. Körner was sent to the United States as sales representative of a clock-making company. Instead of returning to his native country, he settled in the Moravian community of Wachovia. He bought 200 acres of land from the Moravian leader, William Frederick Marshall, set up shop as a clockmaker, and married Christinia Kastner. Interestingly, despite being a Catholic among Moravians, Körner became a prominent member of the Wachovia community. In 1817, Körner purchased 400 acres of land and moved his wife and three children to a house known as "Dobson's Tavern."

Soon the area in which Körner settled became known as "Kerner's Cross Roads." (The spelling difference between family and place names seems to stem from the pronunciation of the unlauded German "ö.") Körner and his sons ran the tavern and several other enterprises. Incorporated in 1871 as Kernersville, the village thrived as a tobacco and commercial center after the arrival of the Northwestern North Carolina Railroad in 1873, and the Körner (Kerner) family prospered.

Körner's Folly, the centerpiece of Kernersville, was the home of Jule Gilmer Körner, Joseph Körner's grandson. Jule was born in 1851; during the Civil War, he was sent to school in Indiana, where he developed a talent and interest in art. He then went on to Philadelphia to study art as well as "designing and the decorative arts." At the death of his father in 1875, he returned to Kernersville, where he established himself as a photographer and sign and portrait painter. In the early 1880s, Körner took the pseudonym "Reuben Rink" and formed a company of the same name. As such, Körner developed the advertising campaign to promote Bull Durham Tobacco for W. T. Blackwell and Julian Carr, painting realistic bulls on buildings across the nation; he also became one of the most successful interior designers in the southeast.

In 1878, Körner purchased from his brother, Joseph, a lot located adjacent to the town's main street. He then began



constructing a building originally intended to be "a combination of studio, office, reception halls, ballroom, carriage house, and stables." Jule planned to erect an adjacent residence, but according to his son,

"Pygmalion-like he became so attached to his first creation that he transformed it eventually into his home. He constructed a brick-yard where he made specially designed brick of very large size; bought a huge chestnut tree [and the land around it] and had shingles made for the roof; and generally made

the building as unique as possible. As it grew, the oddness of its appearance excited curious comment and his cousin Nathaniel M. Kerner (Local Historic Landmark #43) dubbed it the “Folly” and it has borne that name ever since.”

The sizeable brick structure, with tall, cross-gabled roofs and Italianate corbelling, contains multiple stories of rooms of varied heights, levels, and surprises, fantastically adorned with millwork, tile, carved human and animal figures, and ceiling murals by German artist Caesar Milch. There are twenty-two rooms, including a third floor theater (the first Little Theatre in America), and twenty fireplaces,



*Kerner's Folly, c. 1940s*  
Courtesy of Forsyth County Public Library Photograph Collection



*Walkway at Kerner's Folly, c. 1940s*  
Courtesy of Forsyth County Public Library Photograph Collection

all different. Besides the unusual appearance of the Folly, it was notable for a variety of innovations, mostly Jule's ideas for extra comfort and convenience, including a complicated series of vents and tunnels to supply warm and cool air.

Jule Körner died in 1924; his wife, ten years later. For years, the house was owned, but not lived in, by their two children. Over the years, the Folly housed various uses. In 1970, the descendants of Jule Körner formed a corporation and purchased the house.

Today, Körner's Folly is a tourist destination, billed as “The Strangest House in the World.”

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

**Körner's Folly National Register Nomination**  
<http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/FY0008.pdf>

**Kernersville South Main Street Historic District National Register Nomination**  
<http://www.hpo.ncdcr.gov/nr/FY0716.pdf>

<http://www.kornersfolly.org/>

<http://images.lib.ncsu.edu:8180/luna/servlet/view/search?embedded=true&q=IsPartOf%3D%22Built+Heritage+of+North+Carolina%3A+Historic+Architecture+in+the+Old+North+State%22+AND++Subject%3D%22Korner%27s+Folly+%28Kernersville%2C+N.C.%29%22>

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This information is also available at the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission's web site:  
<http://www.ForsythCountyHRC.org>