CHAPTER 1: KENTUCKY AT THE TIME OF BETHEL ACADEMY

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When one is studying the history of a particular site, one should look at the context in terms of several factors: inhabitants, governments, migration patterns, as well as social events related to the site. This article will deal briefly with each of these factors.

Archaeological knowledge of the original settlers of the region known as Kentucky is largely confined to traces of structures in which they lived and were buried, along with a number of objects they made and used. These sites and artifacts indicate people lived in Kentucky for several thousand years, some assume as many as 15,000 years. They are popularly called Indians, though a better term may be Native Americans.

For some reason, Kentucky was largely abandoned as a home for these people for at least a century before white people began to move into the area. Instead, it became a “no man’s land” used for hunting and fighting between northern Shawnees with their allies and the southern Cherokees with their allies. Their government was basically tribal, led by chieftains who were determined to keep all intruders out of their territory.

EUROPEAN CLAIMS TO KENTUCKY

Twenty years after Columbus discovered the Caribbean islands, Ponce de Leon found the shores of southeastern North America, and De Soto explored inland as far as the Mississippi River. The result was that the Spanish government regarded all lands south of the Ohio River and east of the Mississippi River as Florida.

At about the same time John Cabot of England located the northeastern shores of the same continent and claimed all of it for his homeland. When Englishmen settled in Jamestown in 1607, they called the area Virginia and claimed it reached from “sea to sea.”

In 1524, Verrazano, the captain of a French ship, examined the eastern coastline
and claimed everything that lay to the west of it for France. The first white men to see Kentucky were French led by La Salle in 1670-71, when the group explored the Ohio River by canoe. Two years later Marquette and Joliet made a trip down the Mississippi River and passed the point where Kentucky touches that river. In 1682 La Salle travelled to the mouth of the Mississippi River and likewise saw the western tip of Kentucky. He called the entire Mississippi Valley, including all tributaries, Louisiana.

These three claims meant that Kentucky was part of Spain’s Florida, England’s Virginia and France’s Louisiana at the same time. Of course, these claims resulted in wars, especially between England and France. In American history these wars are called King William’s War, Queen Anne’s War and King George’s War. None of these wars decided who really owned Kentucky.

After King George’s War, the French showed their desire to possess all lands to the west of the Appalachian Mountains by building forts. One of these forts was on a site now known as Pittsburgh, from which they sought to stop English migrants from using the Ohio River to settle in Ohio and Kentucky. These forts played an important role in the French and Indian War, which England and English colonists won. This victory left England as the only European nation with a viable claim on Kentucky. The native Americans did not submit to this claim and fought invasion of their lands with vigor, e.g., the Mohawks. Some native Americans fought with the English, and many fought with the French in this conflict.

**TAKING POSSESSION OF KENTUCKY**

Technically, a few English people had visited Kentucky before the French and Indian War, but they were brought in as captives of Indians. They managed to escape and return home. Also, before this war, English hunters, traders and surveyors began to explore and exploit the animals and land of Kentucky.

Several land companies were formed to begin the task of surveying Kentucky, namely, The Ohio Company, the Loyal Land Company, and the Vandalia Company. The Loyal Land Company sent surveyors led by Dr. Thomas Walker in 1750 through a gap in the Appalachian Mountains which Walker called Cumberland Gap. He also called the stream just to the west of it the Cumberland River. At a site now called Barbourville, he built the first log cabin in Kentucky. The area he traversed contained steep hills and narrow valleys, which did not impress him, so he returned home.

The next year the Ohio Company sent Christopher Gist down the Ohio River. He found the mouth of the Kentucky River and moved up its valley to the head of the river, then went overland toward the northeast to the Kanawha River and on home. In 1754 James McBride, as a surveyor, travelled up the Kentucky River and across the Bluegrass region, known then as the “Big Meadows.” John Findley, a hunter, was in the area at the same time and became acquainted with Daniel Boone during the French and Indian War.

It was several years later that Findley located Daniel Boone at his home in Yadkin, North Carolina, and persuaded Daniel and Squire Boone to go to Kentucky. The three men spent the winter of 1767-68 at the Breaks of the Sandy River in southeastern Kentucky but returned home disappointed with what they found. That fall, however, Findley talked Daniel Boone and four others into entering Kentucky by way of Cumberland Gap. They felt a sense of security because that year the northern tribes sold Kentucky to the English by the
Treaty of Fort Stanwix, and the Cherokees had done the same in the Treaty of Hard Labor.

Unknown to Findley and his party, many tribes did not accept these sales as valid and soon attacked and captured Boone and a friend in December of 1769. After the two escaped, the hunters tried to continue their hunt but one was killed, leaving Daniel and Squire Boone to continue on their own. After a short time, Squire returned home but Daniel travelled widely in central Kentucky. Over twenty other hunters also found much game in Kentucky, but often lost their furs to hostile Indians. During this decade, surveying parties were doing their work here and there in Kentucky.

James Harrod is credited with founding the first permanent settlement in Kentucky in May 1774. Travelling via the Ohio and Kentucky Rivers and moving inland, his party of thirty-one men began to erect cabins. Daniel Boone appeared on the scene and began a cabin for himself, but war with the native tribes broke out. After several months, the fighting stopped and a fort was completed at Harrodstown (now Harrodsburg). Meanwhile Boone was busy marking a trail with a hatchet, the famous Wilderness Road.

James Harrod was the founder of the second oldest settlement known then as Boiling Springs, but now called Danville. Another military leader, Colonel John Floyd, led thirty men to another spring, calling it St. Asaph but later known as Stanford. It was southeast of Boiling Springs on the Dick's (Dix) River.

Some of these settlers tried to get land titles from Virginia, whereas others moved on to the north and to the west, due to the threat of more Indian raids on their cabins.

The Transylvania Company was formed by Judge Richard Henderson of North Carolina with the goal of purchasing large tracts of land from the Cherokees and founding a colony in Kentucky. A treaty was made with the Cherokees in which $50,000 of merchandise was traded for the land lying between the Ohio, Kentucky and Cumberland Rivers, i.e., the south-central part and the western part up to the tip of Kentucky called “The Purchase.” Daniel Boone was hired to oversee the blazing and clearing of a trail for settlers to follow into central Kentucky. It ended on the banks of the Kentucky River. After Judge Henderson arrived late in April, a fort was built and named Fort Boonesborough.

On May 24, 1775, a convention called by Judge Henderson met with delegates from the other settlements. The first laws of Kentucky were made at this convention and a document somewhat like a constitution was adopted for the Colony of Transylvania.

That fall Boone's wife and children, including two daughters, were the first women to settle in Kentucky. Shortly afterward other women arrived at Harrodstown.

In June 1775, men camped on the banks of Elkhorn Creek heard of the outbreak of the Revolutionary War and promptly called their camp Lexington. At the time there were about 200 white people in Kentucky, but in 1783 when the war was over, they numbered in the thousands.

During the war, many Indian bands led by English officers fiercely attacked the several settlements. Boonesborough barely escaped destruction. Many living in isolated cabins were killed or quickly moved out of the region.

The Transylvania Company sought legal recognition from the Continental Congress, but Virginia strongly resisted the move and formally declared Kentucky was a part of its Fincastle County. The Congress took the side of Virginia and the Transylvania Company went out of existence. George Rogers Clark put pressure on Virginia and in December
1776, Kentucky became a separate county of Virginia. Four years later, Kentucky was divided into Jefferson, Lincoln and Fayette counties. After much agitation and ten conventions, the Congress of the United States admitted Kentucky as the fifteenth state on February 4, 1792, and set June 1, 1792, as the effective date of statehood.

MIGRATION ROUTES AND DEMOGRAPHICS

In pioneer days, it was far easier to travel by water than by land, especially if the land was mountainous and covered by forests. The primary waterway touching Kentucky was the Ohio River into which flowed many tributaries draining Kentucky land. Migrants leaving homes in New York, Pennsylvania, northern Virginia, and other northeastern locations, floated down the Ohio River on boats and rafts.

The first significant stream flowing into the Ohio from the south is the Big Sandy River which forms the northeastern border of Kentucky. A few people moved up this river to establish homes, but the land was heavily wooded and except in the valleys, or "hollows," the land was infertile. Going down the Ohio River they came to a favorite port called Limestone (now Maysville) because people could go overland and soon enter the Licking River valley where land was less rugged and more fertile.

Farther downstream, across from Cincinnati, the Licking river entered the Ohio. This stream provided easy access to the northern part of the Bluegrass region and small settlements and farms soon dotted the valley.

Downstream the Kentucky River flowed into the Ohio from the south, and because of its size, could handle large boats and rafts easily. By way of this river, settlers could reach all sections of central Kentucky with their household goods and use it for trading activities.

The Falls on the Ohio River at Louisville, blocked further travel by boats and rafts, but people learned they could portage their goods around the Falls or go south to the Salt River. They could follow it west to the Ohio or to the east, to the Salt River valley's rich farm lands.

The other major migration route was overland through the Cumberland Gap at the southeastern corner of Kentucky. People could come down from the north through the Shenandoah Valley, from Virginia, from North and South Carolina, to this Gap and make one of two choices: They could follow the Cumberland River to the southwest through the Appalachians to the northern edge of Tennessee, or follow the newly created Wilderness Road through rough country to central Kentucky.

When the Cumberland River emerged from the mountains, migrants could turn up streams flowing in from the north and settle along the south-central part of Kentucky, called the Pennyroyal (Pennyroyal) region. This area was settled more slowly than central Kentucky, which attracted most of the migrants. The Ohio River and the Wilderness Road were the most heavily used migrant routes.

In spite of the migration of many white people through Kentucky to the north and to the west, the first national census of 1790 lists the population of this area as 73,677, which included 12,400 slaves. Fayette County, with 8,400, and the most populous of the counties, stands in contrast to the 2,729 people living in the larger area between the Licking and Big Sandy Rivers, known as Mason County. In 1800, the population of the state was 220,955, with Fayette County still the most populous having 14,028 people. Lexington was the
largest city in the state until the mid-1820s.

Only three men: John, Jacob and Samuel Hunter, are known to be living in 1780 in that part of Fayette County that is now Jessamine County. In that same year, Jacob became the father of the first white child born in the present Jessamine County. Some historians estimate that 2,000 people were in this county in 1790.

RELIGION AMONG THE EARLY SETTLERS

Most of the people who came into Kentucky were Protestants. The first religious service occurred on Sunday, May 28, 1775, near the close of the convention sponsored by the Transylvania Company at Fort Boonesborough. The service was led by Rev. John Lytle of the Anglican Church. The next service was held at Harrodstown conducted by two Baptist ministers who were invited by a Presbyterian layman. The first known Presbyterian minister in Kentucky was Rev. Terah Templin who came in 1780 followed by Rev. David Rice who organized churches in Danville and surrounding communities in 1783. Rev. Adam Rankin founded a church in Lexington. In 1796 a Transylvania Presbytery was organized and then divided three years later.

In 1781 three Baptist churches were started. One was near present day Elizabethtown, one in Nelson County and one in Garrard County. By 1785 eighteen Baptist churches were active in Kentucky.

The first Catholic mission was founded in Nelson County in the 1780s.

Two young preachers were appointed to Kentucky by the Methodist General Conference in 1786. They were James Haw and Benjamin Ogden. Both travelled and preached at a number of places in central Kentucky. The 1787 General Conference Minutes had the first tally of Methodists in Kentucky; there were ninety members.

In 1788 a Methodist pastor was appointed to care for 480 Methodists in Lexington and Danville. The next year 846 were accounted for; in 1790 there were 1,088.

Bishop Francis Asbury came by horseback to hold the first Kentucky Conference at Masterson Station near Lexington in May 1790. Two more circuits were added and pastors appointed to them. During that decade the membership grew as follows:

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By 1794 there were five circuits: Lexington, Danville, Limestone, Madison, and Cumberland and eleven ministers. In 1800 there were thirteen preaching places and eleven ministers.
In 1800 a powerful revival broke out in Kentucky and brought into faith a large number of people. This revival was marked by the appearance of a uniquely American phenomenon, the campmeeting. The revival began in Logan County at the Gaspar River Church under the ministry of a Presbyterian, Rev. James McGready. He was helped by two brothers, John, a Methodist and William McGee, a Presbyterian. The crowds became too large for the small log churches, so ministers constructed a platform from which they could preach in the nearby woods. Many people were converted to a vital relationship with Jesus Christ.

The Presbyterian pastor, Rev. Barton W. Stone, of the Cane Ridge Church near Paris, Ky., went to Logan County in 1801 to see for himself what was happening. He was so impressed that he returned to his church to hold a campmeeting-style, evangelistic meeting August 6-13, 1801. His success was remarkable and the practice of holding campmeetings spread throughout the frontier and continues with modifications to the present day.

Methodist ministers in Kentucky quickly adopted the campmeeting style of evangelism, and revival swept many into the Methodist churches throughout the frontier. It became a potent factor in the rapid growth of Methodism in the decades that followed.

SLAVERY AND ANTI-SLAVERY

Many newcomers to Kentucky came from Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Those who were affluent were slaveowners and naturally brought their slaves with them. Many of the people moving in from the northeastern states had strong religious convictions against slavery and were not timid in voicing their opposition to what they believed was a great moral evil.

The issue came to a head at the Constitutional Convention held at Danville after Kentucky was admitted to the Union in 1792. The constitution had to be drafted before June 1; it was completed by April 19, 1792.

Among the delegates of the convention were nine ministers led by the Presbyterian Rev. David Rice. They argued vigorously that Kentucky should not recognize slavery as valid, but they did not have the votes to sustain their views. They did have enough influence to modify the position of the new state on slavery. The constitutional statement is in Article IX. It reads thus:

The Legislature shall have no power to pass laws for the emancipation of slaves without the consent of their owners, or without paying their owners, previous to such emancipation, a full equivalent in money, for the slaves emancipated; they shall have no power to prevent immigrants to this state, from bringing with them such persons as are deemed slaves by the laws of any one of the United States, so long as any person of the same age and description shall pass laws to permit the owners of slaves to emancipate them, saving the rights of customers, and preventing them from becoming a charge to the county in which they reside; they shall have full power to prevent slaves from being brought into this state as merchandise; they shall have full power to prevent any slave being brought into this state from a foreign country, and to prevent those being brought into this state, who have been since the first of January 1789, or may hereafter be imported into any of the United States from a foreign country. And they shall have full power to pass such laws as may be necessary to
oblige the owners of slaves, to treat them with humanity, to provide them with necessary clothes and provisions, to abstain from all injuries to them extending to life and limb, and in case of their neglect and refusal to comply with the directions of such laws to have such slave or slaves sold for the benefit of their owner or owners.

George Nicholas, a lawyer who lived in that part of Fayette County later to become Jessamine County, was a leader at this convention and vigorous supporter of establishing Kentucky as a slave state. When a second constitutional convention met in the summer of 1799, he tried strenuously to have his way but Article IX remained the same.

During this time, the strongest opposition to slavery centered in the Baptist, Presbyterian, and Methodist ministry and congregations.

Kentucky was a wild frontier when Bethel Academy was constructed. People were flooding in from Virginia and the Carolinas through the Cumberland Gap, and from the Northeast via the Ohio River, so that cultures from the North and the South mingled. Most of the migrants had little to no formal education; their interest was in land. A number of the migrants moved on to new frontiers, making it difficult to establish stable congregations, and to persuade parents to place their sons in schools for any length of time.

The migrants had practical skills in building, but little money. These skills were used to good effect in erecting the building in which Bethel Academy was housed, but provided little capital with which to operate and maintain a school. These factors, combined with the controversy about slavery, doomed the school by the Kentucky River, but it did not prevent it from reviving again and functioning for most of the nineteenth century in Nicholasville, Kentucky.

BIBLIOGRAPHY