

HISTORY OF COVINGTON AND KENTON COUNTY

by

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Kenton County, which was first a part of Fayette, then of Woodford, Scott and Campbell Counties in turn, was created April 30, 1840. It is one of the smallest counties of the State from a territorial standpoint, but the second largest in population.

Although earlier explorers had penetrated into Kentucky, the first white person who, according to the records, actually set foot on the soil of Kenton County was Christopher Gist, a surveyor for the Ohio Land Company of Virginia. He and an assistant crossed the Licking River at its mouth, going westwardly with their pack horses, on March 18, 1751. Two years later Mrs. Mary Ingles, after whom the Ingles Highway is named, escaped from Indians with another woman, and crossed the Licking at the same point as Gist.

The ^wjunction of the Licking and Ohio soon became a well-known crossing point of the early settlers. It was also a rendezvous for military expeditions for and against Indian and English foes during campaigns of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Simon Kenton, after whom the county was named, first visited this region in 1771, and often returned in later years. Other famous pioneers who camped here were General George Rogers Clark, Daniel Boone, General Charles Scott, Colonel John Floyd and Colonel Benjamin Logan.

It is not certainly known when the first home was built in what is now Kenton County, but there were settlers four miles south of Covington as early as 1785. It is recorded that a Mr. Williams erected a log cabin which was still standing in 1791 on the Ohio River, twenty rods west of the Licking. Another log cabin was built about the same year on the

Ohio River near the mouth of Willow Run; a third stood on the banks of the Licking River a short distance south of Thirteenth Street.

In 1789 a Scotchman named Thomas Kennedy, who had first settled in Losantville (now Cincinnati), moved to the Kentucky side and established a ferry. Up to that time the locality had been known as the "Mouth of the Licking", "The Point", or sometimes even as "Newport". When the ferry began to operate, it was called "Kennedy's Ferry" or "Kennedy's Farm".

A few years previous to this (February 14, 1780) one George Muse, a Virginia soldier of the French and Indian wars, had been granted a warrant for two hundred acres of land at the mouth of the Licking. It is said that he traded this warrant to a comrade, for a keg of whiskey, who in turn sold it for a quarter of buffalo to General James Taylor, afterwards a resident of Campbell County. The general transferred it to Colonel Stephen Trigg, killed at the battle of the Blue Licks, who assigned it to John Todd, Jr., and he reassigned it to one James Welch. Finally on May 2, 1785, a survey of the land was made out and entered on the records.

The two hundred acres, which had been thus bandied about, included what became the original town of Covington. Thomas Kennedy acquired the tract from Welch for 150 pounds in 1801, and erected on it, for his large family, a handsome stone house which faced the Ohio River between Riverside Drive and Second Street some 200 feet east of Garrard Street. When destroyed in 1909, it was the oldest house in the city. He lived on this farm until 1814, at which time three Cincinnati capitalists, General John S. Gano, Richard M. Gano and Thomas Davis Carneal, bought 150 acres from Kennedy in order to lay out the infant village.

As platted and charted by them on February 2, 1815, the town included the present city blocks south to Sixth Street and west to Washington Street. By the act of incorporation, the title was vested in Uriel Sebree, Alfred Sandford, Joseph Kennedy (son of Thomas), William Hubble and John C. Buckner, with full power to dispose of the lots by public auction. The plat was not recorded until August 31, 1815, in what was then Campbell County, at Alexandria, but the first sale of lots took place March 20, 1815, bringing from \$8.00 to \$12.00 per foot.

The town was named after General Leonard Covington, of Maryland, a gallant and distinguished cavalry officer, who had served under "Mad Anthony" Wayne. General Covington was mortally wounded in the battle of "Chrysler's Field", and died November 14, 1813, fifteen months before the town was incorporated.

Five governors of Kentucky were honored when the streets were named, so we find that the thoroughfares running north and south, beginning near the Licking River, are called Shelby, Garrard, Greenup, Scott and Madison, respectively. One was named after old Thomas Kennedy, another after General Thomas Sandford, representative in Congress from this district; the last one to the west was named after President Washington. The streets, extending from east to west, were numbered from the Ohio River southwardly.

During the next fifteen years the town prospered and slowly expanded. In 1804-05 there had been 76 people residing in a space which included five times the area of Covington along the immediate Licking bottom. In 1826 the population of the town itself numbered 404. Four years later the census showed 715. Old-fashioned inns,

or taverns, served the traveler; the citizens worshipped in a log church; children were taught in a log cabin school in the center of the public square where the old Court House and afterwards the City Hall were later erected. This school cabin was used for many years for various kinds of meetings, such as those of the Town Trustees, the Light Infantry and the Social Polemic Society.

In addition to such improvements, the little place soon acquired a bank and a fire brigade. Then followed a cotton factory and a rolling mill. The ferry, which had formerly employed skiffs, flat boats and barges in the order named, now advanced first to horse power and in 1830 to steam. The ferry rates were reduced to 12½ cents for pedestrians, while for wagons, horses, and live stock, there was a charge varying from 25 cents to a dollar.

In the following decade, partly owing to Cincinnati's progress, the town took on new life, so that on February 24, 1834, the Legislature passed an act incorporating it into a city. The last meeting of the Board of Trustees of the old town was held April 10 of that year, officers of the new municipality having been chosen five days previously. Mortimer M. Benton, a capable lawyer, was elected Mayor, and some of the leading citizens were pressed into service for councilmen: William Hopkins, John T. Levis, John B. Casey, William W. Southgate, James G. Arnold, John A. Goodson and John Mackoy.

By 1840 the population of the city had increased to 2,026, while the surrounding countryside had developed even more rapidly, the number of citizens in what is now Kenton County being 5,790. This great growth made it necessary to create a county government, and its seat was established at Independence, then "the most eligible point."

The improvement of the previous ten years was destined to be surpassed in the succeeding years in both city and county. Merchants were attracted to this thriving region; doctors and lawyers of ability found it to be a good field, more churches were built; excellent private schools and even a college -- the Western Baptist Theological Institute -- were established in the town; two newspapers were published there. By 1846 a census of Covington showed over six thousand people.

At that time a movement was started for the erection of a roadway instead of a ferry, across the Ohio River; and ultimately a suspension bridge was built. The foundations for its towers were begun in 1856, and completed January 1, 1867. During this time the atmosphere was one of hope and prosperity; substantial homes were built; the macadamizing of the Covington and Lexington Turnpike was finished; other roads were projected; gardens and pleasure resorts were started; and the popular Lettonian Springs (from which Latonia gets its name) were founded. Families from the deep South drove with their coaches and servants to spend the summers there.

The decade, beginning with 1850, was one of tremendous railway development and the City of Covington was ambitious. A railroad to Lexington, afterwards known as the Kentucky Central and absorbed by the Louisville and Nashville, was built by 1851 as far as Cynthiana and later extended the balance of the way. But in 1857 there was a panic, the inevitable result of over-expansion, and hard times set in. These conditions were accentuated by the bitterness engendered by the approaching Civil War, and the animosity between slave holders and abolitionists was intensified in all the border states. The result was

one of disappointed expectations and unrealized plans. With the exception of those individuals and families who profited by war contracts, the people of Covington and Kenton County suffered severely during the strife. While there was not much actual fighting, the attacks and threatened raids of the Confederate forces, together with the indirect effects of conflict and martial law, made the years 1860 to 1865 unhappy for all citizens.

The dark days of Reconstruction which followed would have been unbearable, except for a business boom, which came when the Suspension Bridge was opened for traffic in 1867. During the ensuing years there seemed to be promise of a glorious future for Covington. Many new people came to reside in the city; more factories were built; there was an increased demand for real estate. Prices soared as high as three hundred dollars a front foot for strictly residential lots; and houses sold for twice as much as they afterwards brought, even in the speculative days of 1929. The taxable value of property in Kenton County in 1873 was 700 percent greater than it had been in 1840. Town lots alone increased in the same period twenty-four times in money value.

Had it not been for the great panic of 1873 which encompassed the whole country, this tide of prosperity might have continued longer, but other events were transpiring to change the trend of population. Improved means of transportation, such as horse cars and later electric ones, took the people to the hill-tops and by 1880 the expected boom had subsided.

Since that date, the growth of Covington has been regular, but not spectacular. It has advanced hand in hand with its neighbors to become a solid and substantial city, as the facts and figures given in the following pages will show. Another bridge to Cincinnati has been

erected, a new railroad serves the city, and many splendid highways lead to all sections of the country. From an industrial and residential standpoint, there has been steady progress. The advantages of its location, the richness and beauty of its surrounding country, and above all, the character of its men and women, with the sturdy traditions of those who preceded them, make it certain that Covington and Kenton County will continue to maintain their position as a sound, prospering American community.

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