

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

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# The Early History of Union, Kentucky

By

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The following paper was read before about two hundred persons who had gathered in the lot adjacent to where the fire house is now located in Union, Boone County, Ky.

The occasion was a Bicentennial Burgoo in celebration of the founding of the United States. It was rather a warm evening and the crowd had a most enjoyable afternoon eating burgoo, playing games, and talking. There was country music and singing. The date — August 22nd, 1976. The master of ceremonies stepped forward and introduced the chairman of the program committee and others. Then he remarked that it was time to hear some history and that he, Dr. Wilbur Houston, had asked the writer to speak at the burgoo and tell the people about some of the history of Union. The speaker stepped forward. With a microphone in hand he began:

" NOTES ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF UNION, KY.

Our account begins some twenty thousand years ago when the end of the Ice Age was near and the last glacier came as far as this section of Kentucky. The retreat of the polar ice sheet was like its advance, very slow and deliberate, and as it melted and the cold water ran off it left behind what had been pushed, rolled, or carried here on the advance.

In 1882 a boulder, some three feet in diameter, was found near this this very spot. It was placed on exhibition at the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893. Investigation by the geologists of that date indicated it had been carried some five hundred miles by the ice pack from the far northern Canadian shore of Lake Huron.

This ice pack was also instrumental in the presence of the woolly mammoth at the Big Bone Lick. They were driven from their homes in the north by the slow movement of the glacier and here found the salt lick where some of them, as well as other prehistoric animals, became entrapped in the soft mud and clay around the lick. They perished but their bones were preserved to be found thousands of years later by French soldiers who were the first recorded civilized

people to visit this area about 1739.<sup>2</sup>

But before the Frenchmen there were other people whose ancestors wandered through these parts about the time the great pyramids of Egypt were being built. These people, often called "mound builders" because they left earthen mounds as proof of their existence, hunted, fished, made pottery and other crude handiwork while they lived here. Two mounds were located seven miles southwest of Union. In late 1938, these mounds were excavated, plotted, and the contents catalogued by the University of Kentucky. They were about sixty feet in diameter and six to seven feet in height. One was in a cornfield and the other covered with trees. Each contained the remains and artifacts of the people who lived here within the last two thousand years.<sup>3</sup>

After this culture came the American Indian who also hunted and fished and boiled the water at Big Bone Lick to obtain salt. This land was not lived on by them but they fought desperately to hold it as their home and to drive out the early settlers.

If we could have been near this very spot about one hundred and ninety years ago, we would no doubt have seen a blue-eyed and red-haired young man leading a column of unshaven soldiers through the wilderness. This would have been Colonel George Rogers Clark and his men on a march along a buffalo trace to the mouth of the Licking River where they would be met by other companies of militia. As a group they would then cross the Ohio and attack Indian villages farther north where the British had been supplying the savage inhabitants with guns and ammunition and encouraging attacks on the Kentucky settlements.<sup>4</sup>

In the early days of recorded Kentucky history, this part of the state was heavily wooded and it has been said that a man could walk for days and never be out of the shade of the towering trees. These deep forests were penetrated with a network of buffalo roads which connected

the salt licks, water holes, canebrakes, and meadow lands. Many of these roads or traces as they were called, crossed the Ohio River from what is now Indiana and Ohio and followed the easiest way through the land, which is present day Boone County, to the Big Bone Lick. An early farm, west of here and on the old Big Bone - Riddle Run road, was called Buffalo Hill because of the Buffalo trail crossing it. In earlier days a trapper, his name now forgotten, built a cabin near the trail so meat might come to his door. One day as a herd of buffalo was lumbering by, he shot and wounded a buffalo cow. An enraged bull charged and killed the trapper. 5

Shortly after Boone County was erected out of Campbell County, a man named Jacob Fowler purchased five thousands acres of land. Half of the land was in Campbell County (now Kenton County) where a feeder streamer called Fowler's Creek runs into Bank Lick Creek. The other half was in Boone County where a fork of Gunpowder Creek is called Fowler's Branch. Union is located on this branch. 6

Jacob Fowler's son, Benjamin Piatt Fowler, came to live on the land in Boone County and he built a stone house near Union. In later years, this house was known as the Smith house. Accounts say that the building was erected in 1817 of limestone rock, with walls twenty-two inches or more thick. An endless chain was laid in the mortar at each story. It is believed that these chains acted as bands to brace the building. Benjamin also built the Boone House in Burlington which is now the Renaker house and behind the Boone County court house. 7

Other families coming to this pleasant countryside in the early days were, to name a few, the Lassings, Stansifers, Scotts, Rices, Clarksons, and Steers. As the land was cleared by these early pioneers to create farms and pastureland, it was customary to pile the brush and refuse and burn it in the springtime. The blue smoke from the fires and the smouldering ashes would linger in the air for days and we

have been told that because of this the community was called Smoky Row.

Big Bone Lick played an important part in the history of Boone County. An early historian wrote in 1821 that Big Bone was rather a dull place with an old tavern and springs of bluish water patronized by nondescript sportsmen who had come to kill the game which was plentiful in the hills. 8

Another man wrote that it later became one of the most celebrated health and watering places in this part of the Ohio valley. Its historic background of salt making, the mild medicinal properties of the sulphur-saline spring water, and the continual finding of prehistoric bones of the mammoth served to attract the best families in the Bluegrass. The Todds, Crittendens, Clays and many others came in their carriages.

These vehicles, carrying all the charm and chivalry of their day, would be piled high with luggage and driven by the traditional coachman in linen or livery as they rolled along the dusty ridge road which today we know as the Dixie Highway or Route 25. Between the villages of Walton and Florence, these vacation bound parties would bear to the west and would soon be making their way through the narrow streets of the quaint old town of Union. 9

The hotel at Big Bone was named for Henry Clay and was a political rendezvous where many well known politicians and statesmen of yesteryears would meet and many passed through Union on their way to and from the meetings and burgoos.

Collins History of 1847 described Union as having two churches, one store, one doctor and fifty inhabitants. He did not mention the post office. Research indicates that the churches were of the Old School Baptist denomination. Bethel Baptist church was on the Union-Frogtown road and the trustees, one of whom was the Revolutionary War veteran Hugh Steers, purchased one acre of land for the church in 1818 for one dollar. 10 The building was once described as having the two traditional doors in front with a third door in the rear which opened on to a rock walk. Along each side of the

walk was a row of inscribed tombstones. A part of this building remains as the side of an old tobacco barn but there is no trace of the tombstones.

The other church was called Old Sardis and was on the outskirts of the village on the road to Florence. This building was reached by crossing the creek. Morris Lassing, a post master in Union in the 1830's, was ordained as an Old School Baptist preacher at Old Sardis in April of 1854 and assumed charge of the church. <sup>11</sup> Another preacher at Old Sardis was Elder William Hume who also preached at Dry Creek church in Kenton County and Mount Pleasant Church at Bullittsville. Converts to Old Sardis were baptized in the creek under an old stately elm tree. This pool of water was called Elm Hole.

The store mentioned by Collins was in all probability the store of Morris Lassing who was a merchant in Union as early as 1827. The doctor would be his son Henry Clay Lassing who later resided at Elm Tree Place. This charming country estate reminds one of the ante-bellum days and it was here that John Lassing was born in 1864. He became an attorney at Burlington, later the county attorney and then became the circuit judge in this district. <sup>12</sup>

Another landmark was the popular and aristocratic White Haven Academy which was almost opposite Elm Tree Place on the road to Beaver Lick. This school was founded by Reverend W. G. White a pastor at the Richwood Presbyterian Church during the Civil War era. White Haven was attended by the young men and women who had finished the three R's in the common schools of those days. Here at the academy, which was one of several academies in the county, the pupils were taught how to be ladies and gentlemen as well as algebra, latin, and other subjects which prepared them for colleges and higher schools of learning. <sup>13</sup>

We must not overlook the Civil War period as Boone County had sons serving under each flag. The hamlet of Union was represented by the Boone Guards ably trained by Captain Stansifer and in 1861 they left with the Buckner Guards of Florence to an encampment farther south. <sup>14</sup>

There were no recorded skirmishes in or about Union but the village was frequently visited by soldiers and officers either in the Union blue or Confederate grey. But these soldiers didn't worry Dan Piatt. He prepared to set up and advertised a peach depot at Horton's grocery on the northwest corner of Madison street and Lexington Pike in Covington. There he would take orders for peaches of the best quality. We do not know how he made out in that late summer of 1862 as about that same time Covington, Newport, and Cincinnati were threatened by the troops of General Kirby Smith. On the seventeenth of September, there was a skirmish at Florence and later the battleground moved southward. 15-16

In late November of the following year, two men rode into Union on horseback. They came in on the road from Florence and it being late in the afternoon, they made friends and ate supper. It was learned that they were General John Hunt Morgan and his aide Captain Thomas Hines. They had escaped from prison very early that morning in Columbus, Ohio and road by train to Cincinnati. They jumped off the train in the outskirts of the city and slipped across the Ohio River at early dawn to Ludlow. Here they went to the home of a friend and later they went into the country where they were given horses. They had been traveling faster than the news of their escape and now the news was wide spread but they were among friends. A doctor came over from Florence and they planned the best route to pursue out of Kentucky. They did not stay in Union that night but rode out of town on the road to Big Bone where they remained that night and the next day. On the evening of the next day, they left with a volunteer guide and after traveling all night were with friends in Owen County. 17

After the war, progress came to Boone County. A railroad was built between Covington and Louisville and before long the shriek of the locomotive whistle could be heard as the trains followed the iron rails through Walton, Verona and the countryside. The school system started by the county in the 1850's, was disrupted by the war. Up until that era the schools in Boone County were of the subscription type.

They were operated by learned persons who came into or were brought into the county to educate the children. These persons operated out of their homes or churches and other places for a fee. With a common school system, everyone would be able to receive an education.

The first school near Union was begun in 1858 at the intersection of Union-Frogtown and Richwood Church roads and the first school in Union, number 35 in 1869, was on the Union-Visalia road. 18

Churches became more numerous in the county and also in Union. The Big Bone Baptist church bought land in Union in 1876 and erected a building. This served as an arm of Big Bone Baptist church until 1886. In that year, the Union Baptist church was organized and the property donated to them by the mother church. The first pastor was Lafayette Johnson followed by Dr. Sam Adams. 19

The Union Presbyterian church is a daughter of the Richwood church and was the results of the efforts of Dr. W. T. Spears. He came to Richwood church in 1879 and conducted preaching two afternoons a month in Union. After five years, it was decided to organize a church in Union. An old store-room was purchased and converted into a church. A newer church was erected at the present location of the Union Presbyterian Church in recent years. 20

The taverns in all counties seem to have come into being from the beginning of the state of Kentucky and were the center of entertainment during the early years. There was a tavern or hotel in Union and in the early 1860's it was known as the "Eagle House". Sometime during the Civil War it was called the "Lone Star House" and in later years, as late as 1903 it was again called "The Eagle House". 21

We will close on the status of Union in 1883. There were the four churches mentioned and the school-house. A Mr. Henry Bannister was a magistrate and blacksmith while Conner and Utz were dealers in general merchandise. There were several doctors and quite a few school teachers. There was a post office and a population of 113. I thank you." 22



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Florence, Ky. August 1976  
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