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## Early History of Covington

By

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## Early History of Covington

The first authentic report of a deliberate journey made into what is now Kentucky was made in 1750 by Dr. Thomas Walker. He crossed the Alleghenies and returned home with stories of the great Appalachian coal fields of Eastern Kentucky. Only one year later we have record of an explorer crossing the Licking River at its mouth and, so far as we know, being the first white man to set foot upon what is now our own city of Covington. This man was Christopher Gist, an agent of the Ohio Company. He found most of Kentucky at this time abandoned by the Indians, who had perhaps only one settlement opposite where Portsmouth now stands, with a few towns along the Mississippi River.

A few years before the Revolution broke out Simon Kenton, with some other men, went down the Ohio River, and on their return explored the Licking. Although they did not land, they traveled on two sides of what is now our own city.

During the Revolution, in 1779, Colonel Bowman, of Kentucky County, Virginia (which then embraced the entire present State of Kentucky), led an expedition against the Shawnee Indians. He notified the people accordingly to "plant their corn, and be in readiness to rendezvous at the mouth of the Licking"—where Covington now is. Men from the falls of the Ohio, coming up the river in boats, made it possible for the men from the interior to cross with ease. Each man was allowed a "peck of parched corn apiece" and some "public beef." The results of the expedition were not so successful as anticipated. This spot was again made the place of rendezvous when George Rogers Clark led an expedition against the Indians.

Nearly one thousand volunteers from Kentucky flocked to this place to meet him. Clark gathered his men a second time at the mouth of the Licking to avenge the battle of Blue Licks. They destroyed five towns in Ohio, after which no formidable body of Indians ever after invaded the country now known as Kentucky.

The first survey of lands on the plat of Covington was one of two hundred acres in the name of Stephen Trigg, who came to Kentucky in 1779 as a member of the court of land commissioners and was killed at the battle of Blue Licks, mentioned above.

This land embraced the Ohio River front from the Licking to the foot of Philadelphia street. King George III. of England had allowed the Governor of Virginia to give this land to a soldier in return for military services; not appreciating his land warrant very highly, the soldier sold it for a keg of whiskey to another, who in turn sold it for a few pounds of buffalo meat; from this last owner it passed to Stephen Trigg, who surveyed it. The tract of land was very heavily wooded timber land with magnificent beech, sugar maple, chestnut, oak and others. It had the Licking on the east, the Ohio on the north, and the great wooded hills formed a half-circle in the rear. There was an abundance of buffalo, deer and bear, and the Licking made easy transportation of corn and other food from Central Kentucky. After Stephen Trigg, the land passed from one to another down to Mr. Kennedy.

The first house in Covington was a log house built in 1791 by Mr. Williams twenty rods below the point. One year later Thomas Kennedy, his wife and three children made a settlement. Mr. Kennedy and family came in a flatboat from Pittsburgh and bought one hundred fifty acres of land between the Ohio and the Licking. He built here a log house near a spring, which furnished the family water for years. Other farms sprang up in the neighborhood and this community was known as Kennedy's Ferry, because Mr. Kennedy and his sons purchased and operated the ferry. This ferry consisted of skiffs for the foot passengers at twelve and one half cents each, and flats (propelled by oars worked by men) for wagons, horses and stock— one dollar for a farm horse team and others in proportion. Later a horse ferry and then a steam ferry boat was used until the building of the Suspension Bridge. The Kennedys always claimed and used the ferry, ferry right, and the wharf, except for seven years, when legal ownership was held by the proprietors of Covington. Mr. Kennedy built another home—the most prominent at Kennedy's Ferry—a stone residence. The rooms were paneled with quaint and beautiful designs of woodwork. The walls of the house were three feet thick, and a great porch ran across the front, having a full view of the river. There was also a stone barn, stone spring house, stone hen house, stone ice house, and stone smoke house. It was located where is now Garrard street on the alley north of Second street. Mr. Kennedy lived here until 1814, when he sold one hundred fifty acres of his

farm for \$50,000. He then built what was later known as the Cooper home on Sixth and Greenup, where he and his wife died in 1820. The company who purchased the one hundred fifty acres from Thos. Kennedy never entirely paid all the money and in time the stone house and land adjacent reverted to the Kennedys. Mr. Kennedy sent for his son Samuel and his family to occupy the stone house and run the ferry.

The one hundred fifty acres bought by the company was named Covington in honor of General Covington, the town being established by an Act of Legislature, approved February 8, 1815. Lots were made out and sold at public auction at prices far exceeding what the same lots sold for ten years later. The plat of the town was recorded a few months later (August 31, 1815) and the streets were named in honor of Governors Shelby, Garrard, Greenup, Scott, of Thos. Kennedy, the late owner of the farm, and of General Sandford, the first Representative in Congress from this part of the state. The street west of Scott was left without a name, awaiting the ensuing election for Governor, and was then named after Governor George Madison. The plat embraced the ground west to the east line of what is now Washington street and south to the north line of what is now Sixth street.

The city charter was granted in 1834 and Mortimer Benton chosen first Mayor. Covington hardly began to grow until 1828, when the Covington Cotton Factory was built on the west half of the square bounded by Front, Second, Scott and Greenup. It was successfully managed until the manufacture of cotton became unprofitable. A rolling mill on the opposite street was the next factory, followed by many others and by a rapid increase in the population. The first bank in Covington was private and temporary, established in 1821 by Benjamin Leathers in connection with his store. He gave out notes, promising, to pay at a certain time in order to bridge over hard times. When the day of redemption came, he paid the money and threw the notes into the flames of the fireplace. The draft of the chimney carried the notes out on the ground and roof. Before the banker discovered that he had established such a bank of reissue—a sort of fire in the rear to consume his capital—he had redeemed many handfuls brought in by the growing stream of panic-stricken citizens. He then closed the doors of his bank, but always vividly remembered his balloon currency.

George Rogers Clark and his soldiers who had met at the mouth of the Licking to make an attack upon the Indians in 1782 resolved to meet again at that point fifty years later. The survivors met in 1832, Simon Kenton sending out the notices. Kenton himself became ill and was unable to attend. Only a few responded to the call, many being kept away on account of the cholera, which was ravaging this part of the country.

The old St. Elizabeth Hospital on Eleventh street was built and used for a Baptist Theological Institute for over twenty years, when the seminary was moved to Georgetown, Ky. It was used as a Federal hospital during the Civil War and afterward purchased by the Roman Catholics for a hospital.

#### IMPORTANT DATES

Land where Covington now stands was bought from Thomas Kennedy in 1814.

Covington was established by Act of the Legislature approved on February 8, 1815.

First sale of lots at public auction took place on March 20, 1815.

The plat of the town was recorded at Alexandria on August 31, 1815.

The city charter was granted on February 24, 1834. The first election was held in April, 1834. Mr. Mortimer Murray Benton was elected Mayor.

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This short sketch of the history of Covington, Kentucky, was found in the Covington Public Library. It appears to be the only separate item on Covington history except what is found as a portion of some other book. This leaflet has been printed by the pupils in the Printing Department of Holmes High School. It is hoped that someone may be inspired to prepare a more complete history of Covington.