

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

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**Thomas Kennedy:  
Founder of Covington, Kentucky**

by

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Paper read by Mr. Robert C. Dorsey, Covington, at the monthly meeting of The Christopher Gist Historical Society, held Tuesday night, August 24, 1954, at the Covington YMCA, Covington, Kentucky.

Entitled: Thomas Kennedy -- Founder of Covington, Kentucky.

The George Rogers Clark Memorial Park, situated at the confluence of the Ohio and Licking Rivers in Covington, is the birthplace of Kentucky's second largest city. However, long before the settlement of Covington, (also known as the city of Churches) this site played an important role and had much to do with writing the history of Covington, of Kentucky, Ohio, the Northwest and the Mississippi Valley, for it was on this very ground that trod those men who helped write these pages and whose names became familiar to the later generations.

The first white settlers who came to this section were Christopher Gist, his negro servant and a small company of men. Gist, a Yadkin man and explorer, and a friend of General George Washington, was chosen by the then newly formed Ohio Company, to explore the company's huge grant of land. He and his small party visited Big Bone Lick in Boone County, and later, in 1751, crossed the Licking River near its mouth. It is presumed that he camped at this site before making further explorations into central Kentucky.

Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton and their pioneer associates often came here and camped before crossing the Ohio River to make raids upon the Indian villages of Ohio.

It was not long after the exploration period of Kentucky that the settlers came. Their lot was not an easy one for the savage Indians of Ohio and around the Great Lakes were continually making raids into Kentucky; killing the whites and burning their newly made homes and destroying their farms. So in the year of 1779, the military authorities of Virginia, decided to carry the war to their enemies. Their objective was old Chillicothe, a strong Indian village on the Little Miami River. Colonel John Borman, the military authority for the District of Kentucky, send word to the various forts and stations throughout the District of his intended plans. He selected as his rendezvous the mouth of the Licking River and it was here at this site that the "Kentucky Long Rifles," gathered for the expedition northward.

This point was again used as a military base of operations and jumping-off point for an expedition against the Indians, November 1782. A band of Kentuckians under the command of General George Rogers Clark met here. From this historic point (which Covington has named the park as a memorial in his honor), the General led his frontiersmen, across the Ohio River and into hostile territory. Their resounding victories against the Indians made this place and all the surrounding lands safe for the settlers and Thomas Kennedy, who is the father of Covington, to settle. It was at this site that those brave men, who fought under General Clark chose and resolved to meet fifty years hence.

Thomas Kennedy's farm included this site. Thinking not of the history of this plot of ground but only of its convenience, Kennedy with his family settled here. A large boulder and an inscribed bronze plaque now indicate the exact location of Kennedy's huge stone house which he erected in 1801. The founder operated a ferry across the Ohio River at this point and he was a congenial host in the stone tavern called Kennedy's Ferry.

Kennedy and his family were the original settlers of this area having arrived here in about the year of 1789. It is thought that the land was secured through a warrant signed by Patrick Henry, who was then the Governor of Virginia, of which the present Commonwealth of Kentucky was then a part thereof.

Another interesting account of how the land was acquired is, for according to a paper read several months ago by our treasurer, Mr. Robert S. Tate, on the subject: "Grass Roots of Kentucky County," "On Saint Valentine's Day (1780), George Muse, a soldier of Virginia, who fought in the French and Indian War, swapped for a keg of whiskey his scrip for 200 acres of land allotted him for military service. The new owner of the land then traded it for a quarter of buffalo that Colonel James Taylor offered him. General Taylor dickered it off to Colonel Stephen Trigg, who in turn got rid of it to John Todd, Jr., who in turn unloaded it onto James Welch. Welch kept the land long enough to get it surveyed, and in 1801 sold it to Thomas Kennedy for \$750.00." Thomas Kennedy erected a huge stone house overlooking the Licking River and lived there as a tavern keeper and a ferry-man until 1814. Kennedy then sold 150 acres of his land to John S. Gano, Richard M. Gano and Thomas Carneal. During the following year the three men chartered the town and named it for General Leonard Covington of Maryland, a hero of the War of 1812, who died of wounds received in the Battle of Chrystler's Field.

Even in the days when Kennedy was an inn-keeper, Government deemed it necessary to regulate, fix and control prices of such business houses. The county officials at the November term of 1787 fixed the prices of whiskey "full proof per gallon", at twelve shillings; the price for a warm dinner was one shilling, six pence; for breakfast or supper, one shilling. For a night's lodging "in a good feather bed with clean sheets," a charge of one shilling was allowed.

The founder of the Kennedy family in America was Thomas Kennedy Sr., who was born in the north of Ireland in the year of 1703. He had no brothers or sisters. Kennedy Sr. emigrated to America and settled on the Brandywine River, in Chester County, Pennsylvania, where he purchased some land and turned his attention to agricultural pursuits. Thomas Sr. was married twice and two of his children by the first marriage were Thomas Jr. and Margaret Kennedy. Thomas Sr. died in 1788 at the ripe old age of eighty-five years.

His son Thomas, who was the founder of the Kennedy family in Kentucky, had been desired by the father to become a Minister of the Presbyterian Church, but the younger Kennedy's inclinations did not lie in that direction and thus he did not follow his father's wishes. Thomas Jr. further antagonized the wishes of his father, perhaps involuntarily; for he fell in love with a widow six years older than himself and who had three daughters by a previous marriage. She was Mrs. Dinah (Davis) Piersel. When the father learned of his son's regard for the comely widow, he arranged to send his undutiful son to Ireland, however, before this could be accomplished, Thomas Jr. surreptitiously married the widow in the City of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The children of his wife's first marriage were: Mrs. Mary Scott, Zacheus Piersel and Mrs. Sallie Kyle, all of whom accompanied Thomas Kennedy and his wife upon their removal to Kentucky. Thomas and Dinah Kennedy became the parents of three children, Joseph, Samuel and Hannah.

Hannah, who was married to William Porter, moved to Tennessee soon after her marriage. She lived to see her grandson become Governor of that State. The

family of Kennedy and several of his relatives made their journey to their new home by flatboat down the Ohio River. They settled on the land previously purchased and laboriously began the clearing of the land and the erection of a home. This consisted of a tract of land of 150 acres, covering the present area of Madison Avenue south of Sixth Street, thence east to the Licking River, and all of that part fronting on the Ohio River from Licking to Madison Avenue.

No records are available of the Kennedy's trip down the Ohio to be the place he adopted as his future home. Now will it be thoroughly understood why he and countless thousands left their settled homes in the East to come to this, "the land of promise or the land of tomorrow." Kennedy's reasons may have been many, perhaps, just for the love of adventure, maybe his love for individual freedom, or his repugnance against the established social and economic life of the settled East. However, regardless of the nature of the causes, it was men like he who kept pushing and pressing on and on into the wilderness, clearing and planting these lands without knowing they were making possible an empire of extent and splendor undreamed of by them.

Thomas Kennedy settled here when he was 49 years of age, just in the evening of his life. However, in spite of his years the few accounts of his life show that he was a very active man. During the 32 years that he lived here, being the remainder of his life, having died in 1821, Kennedy helped to bring law and order to this section of the Commonwealth. The first Campbell County Court was established in 1792. Thomas Kennedy was appointed as one of the first Justices' in this section of Kenton County which was then a part of Campbell County. The first charter of Newport was adopted on December 14, 1795 naming Thomas Kennedy as one of the first trustees.

Kennedy did more than act as a Magistrate in the first political beginnings of this area. He built his first tavern and inn; operated a ferry and the ferry was heavily used and taxed during the War of 1812. He was also a congenial host to the many emigrants to this new land, whether they came by rafts or flatboats down the Ohio River, or by oxen and carts over the buffalo trails.

These newcomers all used and knew of the Kennedy Inn as a good stopping place to replenish their supplies and also learn of the best lands on which to settle.

Friends and neighbors were few and far between when the first census was taken in the years of 1804-05. In that section which is now Kenton County the census shows that there were 76 persons white and black making up the total population.

During the past few years, at Christmas time, a beautiful nativity scene with lifesize figures, nestled amid brilliantly lighted and decorated trees is within this park (The George Rogers Memorial Park in Covington) and the site where Thomas Kennedy built his first house. It is, therefore, fitting and proper that the people of Covington, should worship each Christmas season before the crib, and the site is appropriate for it is the birthplace of Covington.

Thomas Kennedy and his wife Hannah are still today a part of Covington and this community. They have left traces of their lives in and about this city. Persons seeking their graves will find that they are buried in the historic Linden Grove Cemetery, and they will also note that their markers are the oldest in this burial place.

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