

The Early History of Covington
and Kenton County,
Kentucky

The land comprising what is now Kentucky was formerly included in Fincastle County, Virginia. After being made a separate county and then a district under the name of Kentucky, it was admitted to the Union as the fifteenth state in 1792. Prior to that, it had itself been divided into counties. Kenton County, which was first a part of Fayette, then of Woodford, Scott and Campbell 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 Englishman 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 his assistant crossed the Licking River at its mouth, going westwardly with their pack horses, on March 18, 1751. Two years later Mrs. Mary Inglis, after whom the Inglis Highway is named, with another woman, escaping from the Indians, crossed the Licking at the same point, going eastwardly.

The junction of the Licking and Ohio soon became a well-known place of crossing for the early settlers. It was also the rendezvous for military expeditions by and against their Indian and English foes during the campaigns of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. Simon Kenton, after whom the county was named, first visited it in 1771, and often returned in later years. Other famous pioneers, who camped there 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 between four and six miles south of Covington as early as 1785 (Dry Creek). It is also recorded that there was a log cabin on the Ohio River twenty rods west of the Licking, erected by a Mr. Williams, which was still standing in 1791. Another log cabin was put up about the same year on the Ohio River near the mouth of Willow Run; and a third was on the Licking River, a short distance south of Thirteenth Street.

In 1789 or 1790 a Scotchman named Thomas Kennedy, who had first settled in Losantiville (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 & 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, and he 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 re-assigned it to one James Welch. Finally on May 2, 1785, a survey of the land was made 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 in 1801 for one hundred and fifty pounds, and about the same time erected on it for his large family a handsome stone house, which faced the Ohio River between Riverside Drive and Second Street some three hundred feet east of Garrard Street. When destroyed in 1909, it was the oldest house in the city. On this farm he lived until 1814, at which time three Cincinnati capitalists, named General John S. Gano, Richard M. Gano and Thomas David Carneal, bought one hundred and fifty acres from Kennedy in order to lay out the infant village.

As platted and chartered 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 to \$12 per front foot.

The town was named after General Leonard Covington, of Maryland, a gallant and distinguished cavalry officer, who had served under "Mad Anthony" Wayne, and who was probably known to the Ganos and Carneal when he was located in Cincinnati. General Covington was mortally wounded at the battle of "Chrysler Field" and died on November 14, 1813, just fifteen months before the town was incorporated.

In naming the streets five governors of Kentucky were honored, so we find that the thoroughfares running north and south, beginning near the Licking River, were called Shelby, Garrard, Greenup, Scott and Madison respectively. One was named after old Thomas Kennedy and 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 twenty years the town prospered, and slowly expanded. In 1804-05 there had been seventy-six 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 four hundred and four. Four years later the census showed seven hundred and fifteen. But the small community was an interesting one and still retained a certain backwoods' charm. Several old-fashioned inns, or taverns, served the traveler; the citizens worshipped in a log church; the 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 erected. This cabin was used for many years for various kinds of meetings, such as those of the Town Trustees, the Light Infantry, the Social Polemic Society, and lectures of different sorts.

In addition to such improvements, the little place soon acquired a bank and 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 for the new municipality being chosen only five days previously. Mortimer M. Benton, a capable lawyer, was elected Mayor, and for councilmen some of the leading citizens were pressed into service. They were 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 2026, while the country around had developed even more rapidly, the total outside of Covington being 5790 for what is now Kenton County, It was this large growth which made it necessary to create a county government and to establish its seat at Independence, which was then described as "the most eligible point".

If the improvement had been great in the previous ten years, it was destined to be even more so in the succeeding years for both city and county. Merchants of means had begun to settle there; doctors and lawyers of ability were finding it a good field; churches were growing; excellent private schools and even a college, the Western Baptist Theological Institute, were located in the town; two newspapers were published there. By 1846 a census of Covington alone showed over six thousand people.

At that time a movement started for the erection of a roadway instead of a ferry across the Ohio River, which was ultimately to result in the Suspension Bridge. The foundation for its towers were not begun until 1856, and it was not completed until January 1, 1867, but the undertaking was typical of the spirit of the community. The atmosphere was one of hope and prosperity, and during this period 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 would drive with their coaches and servants to spend the summers there.

The decade beginning with 1850 was one of tremendous railway development. The City of Covington was not free from such schemes. The railroad to Lexington, afterwards known as the Kentucky Central and absorbed by the Louisville & Nashville, was built by 1851 as far as Cynthiana, and a little later was 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 which the approaching Civil War had engendered and the animosity between slave holders and abolitionists, which was intensified in all the border states. The result was one of disappointed expectations and of 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, and the indirect effects of conflict and of martial law, made the years

1860 to 1865 unhappy for all citizens.

The dark days of Reconstruction which followed would have been unbearable, excepting for a business boom, which came when the Suspension Bridge was opened for traffic in 1867. During the ensuing six years there seemed to be promise of a glorious future for Covington. Many 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 per cent greater than it had been in 1840. Town lots alone increased in the same period twenty-four times in money value.

If it had not been for the great panic of 1873, which covered 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.

After that date the growth of Covington was regular but not spectacular. It advanced hand in hand with its neighbors and became a solid and substantial city. Another bridge over the Ohio was erected in the late eighties. With it came a new railroad, the Chesapeake & Ohio. Many splendid highways were built in the following years. From an industrial and residential standpoint, there has likewise been steady progress. The advantages of its location, combined with the richness and beauty of its surrounding country, seem to make it certain that Covington and Kenton County will continue to develop as important links in the gateway to and from the South.

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