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# The Old Maysville Road

By

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# The Old Maysville Road

Pioneer Trade and Settlements Along a Celebrated  
Kentucky Highway.

By R. S. COTTERILL



HERE is no part of Kentucky history that is more interesting than the story of the early towns. How these towns came into existence, what determined their location, why some of them lived and prospered mightily, while others went speedily the way of the flesh and perished from the earth—all this is a subject abounding in interest and often in romance. Some of these old towns of Kentucky that flourished greatly in the old days have entirely disappeared, and many more have sunk into insignificant villages or hamlets. Many a town that we now boast of was in the olden times but a tavern or a roadside inn without prospects or hopes. Maysville was once the metropolis of the West, Lexington far surpassed Cincinnati in population and importance, while Washington, the name of which has now almost vanished, for a long time outranked all three in size and expectations.

In olden Kentucky the towns commonly arose along the courses of the main roads and owed their existence to commerce and travel. Some of these towns were situated at the crossing of the roads, some of them were built apparently for no other reason than that a good spring was near at hand, some grew up around the various salt licks, and some in the beginning were merely resting

places for weary travellers over the broad highways.

There were four main highways, as every Kentuckian knows, in the olden days. First in importance, though not the first to be used, was that which ran from Maysville to Lexington. This road was the commercial highway of Kentucky and was, in fact, little better than an annex of the Ohio River. For in those days, say 1792, all of the merchandise that came to Kentucky made its way on boats down the Ohio River to Maysville, which was called Limestone, landed there, and was hauled on wagons up into Central Kentucky, where the "settlements" were.

Time was when the trade had come in over the old Wilderness road, but the Maysville road had supplanted it after 1778. A second of these roads was that which ran from Central Kentucky—Danville and Lexington—to Louisville. It was of far less importance commercially than the Maysville road, and consequently there were fewer towns to be found along it. For the "settlements" were closer to Limestone than to Louisville and sought the Ohio by the first named route. The old Wilderness road that Boone and Logan had cut, had for a long time served as the only entrance into Kentucky, but its glory had departed when the Ohio River had come



to be used as a common carrier, and thereupon the only trade over it was the herds of cattle being moved to their Virginia pastures or droves of horses driven to the Carolina market.

The fourth road, and not the least famous, was the old Natchez trail from Central Kentucky to Natchez. But this road ran through the "Barrens" and there were hardly even towns to be found along its course. Michaux, travelling over it in 1793, found but one house in a journey of 117 miles.

In addition to these roads the Ohio River itself must not be left out of consideration. There was a respectable volume of trade going down it in 1792, and this led to the building of towns, just as on the highways. Whenever a tributary came into the Ohio there was likely to be a town. Moreover, most of the trade of the Ohio at that time was carried in flatboats, and these boats were accustomed to tie up on the bank when night overtook them; on the site of these tying-up places grew up little villages for the convenience of the trade.

The most important of these pioneer commercial towns developed on the site of the present Maysville. Here "Old Ned Waller" settled in 1785. The excellent location of the spot soon attracted other settlers, and in a few years' time the settlement, then known as Limestone, had become prominent as a landing place. As the Ohio replaced the Wilderness road as a trade route, Limestone increased in importance. The bargemen who came from Philadelphia to Limestone and Cincinnati could make the return trip by land, while those who went farther West to the Mississippi had to return by a long sea and land journey to Philadelphia and Pittsburg. The square-cornered barges then used for river navigation could only travel with the current, so that the trip down the river ended their useful-

ness as shipping craft and they were broken up and sold as firewood. With such advantages in transportation facilities, imports at Limestone sold for a profit of two hundred per cent over Philadelphia. Here, too, tradesmen received fifty per cent advance on Philadelphia prices.

Limestone was, then, evidently a flourishing port, but its industry was almost entirely confined to shipping and shipbuilding. In 1807 several ships of 400 tons had been built, and four years later seven ships of respectable size had been launched from this port. It is to be remembered in this connection that shipbuilding was one of the principal occupations in the Ohio Valley throughout the early period of history. These were not flat boats or barges, but great three and five mast ships that sailed down the Ohio and the Mississippi when the "flood" was on and as often as not went on past New Orleans and into foreign ports. Ships of this kind, then, were building at Limestone. The town, meanwhile, had changed its name from Limestone to Maysville, and was known as the greatest shipping port on the Ohio below Pittsburg.

As to what sort of a town constituted a "great shipping port" in the early history of Kentucky may be gathered from the reports of travelers who visited Maysville at different stages of her development and prosperity. We are told that in 1792 Limestone was well laid out and flourishing, the people were more orderly than is customary in newly settled localities, and justice was meted out with propriety and dispatch. In 1802 Limestone contained thirty or forty houses. In 1805 these had increased to sixty, and in two years more to eighty. A town of eighty houses scarcely answers the description of a "bustling place," according to our modern notions, but the wealth of Limestone consisted not in her population but in the ships



in her harbor and the wealth which they brought. Maysville was not a metropolis to be despised in 1807.

As the wagons loaded with merchandise moved out of Maysville on their way toward Central Kentucky, they had first to encounter the long haul up Maysville hill. So long and difficult was this hill that often an entire day was spent in getting to the top of it. So it was quite natural that there should grow up at the top of the hill a little town wherein travelers and teamsters and merchants might find rest and entertainment over night. It was in this way that Washington began its existence. Simon Kenton had settled here in 1775 and had built a little fort, but population had come only with the coming of the Ohio trade. Washington, then, was four miles distant from Maysville at the top of the hill on the road to Lexington. In early times it was one of the most promising towns of the West, far surpassing Maysville, with which it was most often compared. It was a flourishing town in 1794, according to Michaux, and had five hundred inhabitants. In 1802 it was described as having two hundred houses built along both sides of the road and was four times as large as Maysville. In 1808 it had 280 houses and was laid out in three parallel streets. This was about the period of its greatest prosperity, for when Melish saw it in 1811 it had only 815 inhabitants and was not growing. What caused the decline of Washington? Its prosperity vanished with the downfall of Maysville's commerce. For, as time went on, Cincinnati and Louisville broke the hold of Maysville on the Western trade and so merchandise found its way to Central Kentucky by new routes. This meant damage to the towns on the old Maysville road, and Washington was one of many that declined.

The next two towns on the Maysville road owed their existence and their names to the presence of salt

"licks." Mayslick was, indeed, too small to deserve much notice of passing travelers. In 1807 Cumings described it as merely a post town and having but eight or ten houses. For it is to be remembered that this was a postroad, and mail went from Maysville to Lexington twice a week.

The little village of Lower Blue Licks served as a subject of many a description in olden days. Its fame was all out of proportion to its importance; every one knew of the massacre that had occurred here in 1782. The story was prevalent that in this battle fifteen hundred Americans had been ambushed by two thousand Indians and over six hundred of the white men killed! The descriptions of the salt making there are probably more accurate than the legends of the battle. The wells, says Michaux, were twenty feet deep and were placed fifty or sixty fathoms from the river. Brass pots with the capacity of two hundred pints were used for evaporation. These were placed ten or twelve in a row on a four foot pit, so that they rested on the sides of it. The fire beneath was fed with wood cut into sticks of about three feet in length. There were, in 1807, seven furnaces here, each producing twenty-five bushels of salt per week. The salt makers only rented the wells, paying some three hundred dollars a year rent. It was a matter of record that the salt produced here was much whiter than that of any other place, but the lick water was not so strong. According to Dr. Saugrain, it required 1,000 gallons of water to make one bushel of salt, and this sold, when made, for two dollars a bushel. The mildness of the water, perhaps, accounted for the popularity of the Lower Blue Licks as a health resort. Buffaloes, which had once been its principal visitors, had disappeared long before 1792, and the salt works themselves were abandoned in 1818, because of the lack of wood. There was a bridge over the Licking river



at this place for the convenience of travel.

After crossing the Licking at Lower Blue Licks, the next town on the way to Lexington was Millersburg. In pioneer times this was a mere village, and not very many travellers gave it any notice at all in their descriptions of Kentucky. In 1807 it had but thirty houses and was not growing. Paris, the next town on the road, was more conspicuous. In 1793 it had eighteen houses, in 1807 eighty-seven houses, and by 1811 it had grown to 120 houses and 838 inhabitants.

The Maysville - Lexington road came to an end at the latter city. It required two and a half days for the slow wagons to travel the sixty-five miles that separated the two places. Today Lexington is world-famed as the metropolis of the Blue Grass region, and its history need not be retold here. In 1794 it had 900 inhabitants. In 1802 Michaux said it had 3,000 inhabitants and was spread over 100 acres. It was the great trading and distributing point for Central Kentucky and, for that matter, for all the West. It was the converging point of nine roads, and over these it sent out the eastern goods that had made the long journey of forty days overland from Philadelphia or Baltimore. Here, too, were gathered the western products that were to be carried back over the mountains to the East. In 1807 Lexington had 366 dwellings and a population of 2,820, of whom 1,165 were slaves. The streets were laid out at right angles and were from fifty to eighty feet wide. In 1811, according to Melish, there were 4,236 people in Lexington, and it was by far the largest town in the West, easily surpassing Cincinnati and Louisville.

It has already been stated that the prosperity of the towns described depended on the commerce that passed over the Maysville-Lexington road. It is only fitting, then, that some ac-

count should be given of this trade. In the first place, it must be premised that the trade of the Maysville-Lexington road was an import trade. The exports of Kentucky, for the most part, went by boat down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans, but the imports came in from Philadelphia or Baltimore via Pittsburg and the Ohio River. Kentucky, then, had the novel arrangement of an export trade to the West and import trade to the East. This was occasioned by the fact that the Kentucky trade was a river trade, and only flatboats could descend the river.

The articles, then, that came over the Maysville road were manufactured articles made in the Atlantic cities or imported from England and France. Seven-tenths of them were from England; silk, brandies, and—strangest of all—mill stones, came from France. Glassware came from Pittsburg; flour, groceries and even whiskey bulked large in the trade over the Maysville road. So extensive was the trade that great trouble was experienced at Maysville in getting horses and wagons for the journey to Central Kentucky. It is noticeable that a prominent article in the imports to Kentucky were the stills, which were brought in great numbers.

Of course, many of these articles were disposed of on the way to Lexington, but most of them were brought to that city for sale. From Lexington the goods were retailed to the little towns round about and to the individual settlers. Quite often there was a residue remaining, and it was the custom to dispose of this by sending it over the Natchez trail to Nashville. The merchants of Lexington enjoyed, or at least obtained, a twelve months' credit from the eastern merchants whose factors they in most cases were. They in turn were accustomed to sell on credit, and no one in those days made a virtue of being a "one price"

merchant. The credit price was always frankly much in excess of the cash price. In fact, there was precious little cash to be had in the West in the year of grace 1792. The balance of trade was constantly against Kentucky, inasmuch as imports had free entrance down the Ohio River and exports were limited on the Mississippi until 1795. What specie did come into the country speedily found its way into the hands of the merchants and was by them sent to the East in payment of their debts. Specie, by the way, was always shipped East by way of the Wilderness Road; river pirates were much too numerous to allow the use of the Ohio for such precious articles. The Kentuckians, when they were out of money—and they generally were—paid their "store bills" in hemp or in any other product they could induce the long suffering merchant to accept. There was always a sale for hemp, however, and the merchants were not averse to taking it. Hemp was, indeed, the only ar-

ticle of any bulk that found its way East by means of the Ohio and consequently was one of the principal articles of commerce over the Maysville road. Of course, everything, practically, that was shipped down the river from Maysville found its way to that city by the Maysville road.

When Cincinnati and Louisville supplanted Maysville as the ports and landing places of Kentucky, most of the towns along the old highway died or declined in population. Maysville itself was shortly compelled to give up its precedence; Washington all but disappeared; Mayslick and the Lower Blue Licks sank into villages. Millersburg and Paris suffered with the others, but were revived with the coming of the railroad at a later period. Lexington remained unhurt. For, after all, whatever change might take place in the ports of Kentucky, there was always the need for a distributing city in the center of the State.

