

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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HODGEPODGE ABOUT KENTUCKY

The name for the Bluegrass State or Kentucky possibly means “meadowland” or “prairie” from the Wyandot or Huron Indian word *Kentake*.¹ Another possible understanding of the appellation is “dark and bloody ground” from the many battles between the native inhabitants and the early European settlers.² The name actually looks funny when written in all capital letters—KENTUCKY—possibly because the “U” and the “C” appear to be side by side horseshoes. This is fitting for a land once known for bison, bear, and wild turkey but now renown for breeding thoroughbred horses.³ Originally part of ancestral hunting grounds for Shawnee, Wyandot, Delaware, and Cherokee, “Kentucky was the first area west of the Alleghenies settled by American pioneers.”⁴ Harrodsburg became the first settlement in 1744. The famous Daniel Boone “blazed the Wilderness Trail through the Cumberland Gap and founded Ft. Boonesborough in 1775.”⁵ With permission from the state of Virginia in 1792, although most Kentuckians will deny asking “permission” from anybody, Kentucky became the fifteenth state of the new American nation.

¹“Kentucky,” *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia* (Cambridge, MA: SoftKey Multimedia Inc., 1996), n.p.

²*The World Almanac and Book of Facts: 1999* (Mahwah, NJ: World Almanac Books, 1998), 560.

³See Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely, *The Border States: Kentucky, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia* (New York, NY: Time-Life Books, 1968), 163ff.

⁴*World Almanac and Book of Facts: 1999*, 643.

⁵*Ibid.*

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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Kentucky is over 400 miles long east to west and over 150 miles wide north to south. The state is located in the southeastern United States. The shape of the state appears to be an elf shoe with a wrinkled, irregular top and the toe crunched downward. This elf shoe is defined by the Mississippi River from Reelfoot Lake to Cairo on the west, the Ohio River from Cairo to Ashland on the north, and the Big Sandy River and the Tug Fork from Ashland to the heel point on the northeast. The Cumberland Mountains form the southeast boundary from the heel point to Cumberland Gap, and along the south a fairly flat bottom of the shoe extends from Cumberland Gap back to Reelfoot Lake. This southern boundary is an east to west line with a crinkle straight down at the Tennessee River and the Land Between the Lakes.⁶

This “Kaintuckee”⁷ area approximates 40,000 square miles and sustains a human population of almost four million (give or take a few thousand uncountable bushwhackers, coal miners, and moonshiners [bourbonshiners? whiskeyshiners?] in the eastern mountains of the state). This is pretty simple math, that you really need if you’re from Kentucky, and it yields about one hundred people per square mile in population density.⁸ Of each group of one hundred Kentuckians, ninety-one are white, seven are black, and less than two are Hispanic (adjusted

⁶Sylvia McNair, *America the Beautiful: Kentucky* (Chicago, IL: Childrens Press, 1988), 112.

⁷See Steven A. Channing, *Kentucky: A Bicentennial History* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1977), 16.

⁸“Kentucky,” *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia*, n.p.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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average ethnic distribution).⁹ The majority of Kentuckians are Protestant, perhaps ninety percent of the population. Less than ten percent profess Catholicism, and very few, less than one percent, follow non-Christian religions.¹⁰

Big towns in Kentucky include Louisville, Lexington, Owensboro, Covington, Bowling Green, Hopkinsville, Paducah, Frankfort (the capital town), Henderson, and Ashland—all in descending order of size.¹¹ Some not so big towns include Black Gnat, Black Snake, Co Operative, Future City, Gap in Knob, Habit, Head of Grassy, Herd, the famous Iuka, Jarvis, Jeff, Jeremiah, Job, Joy, Krypton, Load, Lucky Stop (play the lottery here), Molus, Paw Paw, Peedee, Pewee Valley, Preachersville (no churches in this town), Rabbit Hash, Sample, Soft Shell, Stab, Subtle, Upper Tygart (but no Lower Tygart), and Wax.¹²

Here in both larger and smaller Kentucky communities—“united we stand, divided we fall”—as the state motto says. Many of the smaller places are not listed in any atlas index, so you’ll have to look hard on the map to find them. But these are those “out of the way” places that give the land of Kentucky its distinctive flavor and its rousing vitality. These are those magical places that stir the “romantic imagination” and make you want to sing the state song—“My Old Kentucky Home.” These are those places that make you think, “Heaven is a

⁹*World Book and Almanac of Facts: 1999*, 643.

¹⁰McNair, *America the Beautiful: Kentucky*, 24-25.

¹¹“Kentucky,” *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia*, n.p.

¹²See *Rand McNally Road Atlas: 1995* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1995), 38-39.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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Kentucky kind of place.”¹³ So “for stirring the romantic imagination, Kentucky has few rivals. The state’s name conjures images of Daniel Boone, Abraham Lincoln, and Jefferson Davis; coalminers, moonshiners, and mountaineers; and white-suited colonels, bourbon whiskey, and the Kentucky Derby.”¹⁴ But to the contrary, most non-Kentuckians conjure up images of red-necked Dukes of Hazard, sour Kentucky Bourbon, and Colonel Sanders (that is, Harlan Sanders from Corbin) Kentucky Fried Chicken—hardly anything romantic.

Kentuckians, though, deserve credit. Their natural or geographic divisions are much more sophisticated than Tennessee’s East, Middle, and West. Kentuckians have five regions, and these are Eastern, Northern, Central, South Central, and Western.¹⁵ These clever epithets also define regional institutions, for example, Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond and Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. Is this the fallacy of geographic simplicity? More seriously, the geologic triad for the state consists of the Appalachian Plateau, the Interior Low Plateaus, and the Coastal Plain.¹⁶ Eastern Mountains and Coal Fields are separated from Western Coal Fields by magnificent plateaus—the Bluegrass (Northern) and the Pennyryle or

¹³A preacher saying, quoted in McNair, *America the Beautiful: Kentucky*, 10.

¹⁴*Rand McNally Atlas of the United States* (Chicago, IL: Rand McNally, 1983), 61.

¹⁵See Zoe Strecker, *Kentucky: Off the Beaten Path* (Chester, CT: Globe Pequot Press, 1992).

¹⁶Christopher L. Salter, et al., *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 525.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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Pennyroyal (South Central). And an area of fertile river plains, historically called the Jackson Purchase,¹⁷ forms the westernmost section of the state.

Kentucky enjoys a humid continental climate with long, warm summers and short, cool winters.¹⁸ Natural resources are abundant. Many rivers provide abundant water and excellent transportation. Fertile soil, a good climate, and ample rainfall yield lots of tobacco (the principal cash crop), soybeans (second principal cash crop), corn, wheat, hay, and other crops. Cattle as well as hogs, chickens, and sheep are important to the economy. “About half of the land is forested, with the heaviest stands of timber in the eastern, and more mountainous, part of the state. Deposits of coal, petroleum, and natural gas provide fuels for manufacturing. Iron-free water for making distilled and malt liquors [is plentiful]. Horse farms and horse racing are [major] tourist attractions.”¹⁹ Flora and fauna are diverse and brilliant.²⁰

People have given Kentucky its most enduring and definitely most endearing resource. The roster of notables born in Kentucky is lengthy. Here are a few that caught my attention. Louis Dembitz Brandeis (1856-1941), author, jurist, and lawyer born in Louisville; Christopher (Kit) Carson (1809-1868), frontiersman, Indian agent, Civil War brigadier general born in Madison County; Cassius Marcellus Clay (1810-1903), politician and emancipationist born in

¹⁷See McNair, *America the Beautiful: Kentucky*, 14.

¹⁸Salter, et al., *Essentials of World Regional Geography*, 526.

¹⁹“Kentucky,” *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia*, n.p.

²⁰See McNair, *America the Beautiful: Kentucky*, 18-19.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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Madison County; Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. alias Muhammad Ali (1942-), heavyweight boxer born in Louisville; Jefferson Davis (1808-1889), soldier and politician born in Christian County; Hatfields and McCoys, notorious feuding Appalachian families; Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), lawyer and politician born in Hodgenville; Loretta Lynn (1935-), country music singer born in Butcher Hollow; Carry Amelia Moore Nation (1846-1911), prohibitionist born in Garrard County; and John Bell Thomas (1881-1982), writer and Appalachian folk song collector born in Ashland.²¹

More hodgepodge about Kentucky includes things I found interesting, things I did not know, things I already knew through personal experience, some significant ecological, literary, and artistic contributions, and two questions unresolved.

Interesting things about Kentucky and things I didn't know. Since 1937, Kentucky has guarded lots of federal gold at Fort Knox, but the state has no air base. Kentucky is the oldest state west of the Appalachian Highlands. The Pennyroyal Plateau is named for a native variety of the mint plant that is used in making the famous Kentucky mint juleps. The two opposing leaders of the Civil War—Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis—were both born in Kentucky. Dr. Thomas Walker named the Cumberland Gap when he led a party of Virginians through the pass in 1750. The last battle of the American Revolution was fought at Blue Licks, near Mount

²¹Ibid., 127-131.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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Olivet, in 1782. In 1966, Kentucky was the first southern state to pass a comprehensive civil rights law. The state tree is the Kentucky Coffee Tree.²²

Things I knew from personal experience. If you want to walk for miles underground and see much of nothing, try Mammoth Cave. Take a trip to Hazard, especially on a rainy day, and enjoy driving 30-40 mph up and down the hills behind big coal trucks, and watch the sooty runoff from the trucks change the color of your automobile to a grimy, greyish black. Enjoy the splendor of a drive from Monticello to Somerset to Renfro Valley. Enjoy the splendor of a drive from Renfro Valley to Somerset to Monticello during a tornado warning. Visit the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill or visit the Old Mulkey Meeting House in Tompkinsville and reenact the jerking exercises of the Second Great Awakening to knock out your daily aerobic routine or just for fun. Go to Fort Knox, pretend you are James Bond, and tell them you have come to protect the gold. Be sure to go to Bowling Green, just to say that you've been to Bowling Green. Try swimming across the Ohio River during the Spring floods just south of Evansville, Indiana. Join in a modern day racing experience with speeds in excess of 100 mph on I-75 from Lexington to Cincinnati. Seek out the exact replica of the Jerusalem Protestant Garden Tomb (of Jesus) on the hills overlooking the Ohio River valley in Covington. Go fishing, or boating, or camping, or exploring at the Land Between the Lakes, and relish the sunset and the moonlit evenings.

Some place you ought to see. Take a trip to Irish Acres Antiques in Nonesuch. See Penn's Store, the oldest one-family owned store west of the Alleghenies, near Forkland.

²²"Kentucky," *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*, n.p.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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Experience Bybee Pottery, the oldest pottery west of the Alleghenies, out from Richmond. Stop at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the oldest Cistercian monastery in the New World, when passing Culvertown. Don't forget to spend some time at Cumberland Gap! The Red River Gorge, along with the Natural Stone Bridge, is worth your time. If caves are your thing, then do visit Carter Caves State Park near Grayson. If you like old things, then Big Bone Lick, the only prehistoric graveyard you'll ever lay eyes on, is for you. Be sure not to forget Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, a remarkable work of French-Gothic architecture, in Covington. If you like covered bridges, then you shouldn't pass up Fleming County south of Maysville, that has three such bridges. If you must, visit Lincoln's boyhood home near Hodgenville. Nature lovers shouldn't miss Cumberland Falls, the largest American waterfalls east of the Rocky Mountains (except for Niagara), which is close to Corbin. If you like Indian things, you'll love the enormous sculpture called Wacinton at Noble Park in Paducah.²³

Some significant ecological areas in Kentucky. Three ecologically delicate but fabulous wetlands exist in the state. First, Blanton Forest near Baxter in Harlan County is "a 2,350-acre tract of old-growth forest composed of mixed mesophytic vegetation, upland oaks, and oak-pine forests that have never been logged."²⁴ This is "the 13th largest stand of old-growth forest in the eastern United States. A canopy of hardwoods—hemlocks, oaks, beeches, maples, and

²³See Strecker, *Kentucky: Off the Beaten Path*.

²⁴Parke Puterbaugh, John Netherton, and Tom Blagden, Jr., *Southeastern Wetlands: A Guide to Selected Sites in Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Kentucky* (Alexandria, VA: Terrene Institute, 1997), 182.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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poplars—towers majestically above creeks, bogs, rhododendron thickets, and moist hollows where the air of decomposing organic matter is palpable.”²⁵ Second, “numerous wetlands lie in the floodplains of the small creeks that flow through the Daniel Boone National Forest near Cave Run Lake in eastern Kentucky.”²⁶ A natural habitat for over 200 bird species, various amphibians and reptiles, and other animals, Cave Run Lake is an excellent example of restored and created palustrine wetlands. Third, a small section of Reelfoot Lake, with lacustrine, emergent palustrine, and cyprus swamp wetlands, protrudes into southwest Kentucky. Reelfoot Lake “is the most productive natural fish hatchery in the nation” with excellent variations of amphibians and reptiles, birds, and mammals.²⁷

A fascinating literary contribution by a Kentuckian. While the state’s literary output is significant,²⁸ by far the most interesting and undoubtedly the most hair-raising is William Lynwood Montell’s *Ghosts Along the Cumberland: Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1975). I found this book in the regular stacks of the Coffee County Public Library (Manchester, Tennessee) and tried to check it out. Somehow this eerie volume had disappeared from a reserve section of the library. I had to ask the library staff to find it. And it was not to be checked out! When I got to peruse the *Ghosts . . . Deathlore*

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., 192.

²⁷Ibid., 166.

²⁸See William S. Ward, *A Literary History of Kentucky* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1988).

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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book, I found the pages well worn and starting to break away from the binding. It had been peered over frequently, perhaps by those morbid mystics who try to defy modern day science with ancient occult practice and lore. Or maybe it was a favorite resource of adult scout leaders who needed to keep fresh their repertoire of spooky campfire stories. Whatever the reason for the book's well-worn appearance, one thing spoofed me. The library staff did not take their eyes off me while I had this book in my possession. One staffer even requested the book posthaste after I copied a page from it. I gladly returned it to her. The book had a surreal feel to it, almost magical, maybe subhuman. The stories looked inviting, even tantalizing, and definitely ghastly. I did, though, manage to copy a page detailing the area, the eastern Pennyroyal section of the state, from where these stories emerged. The rest I must leave to your imagination, unless you find a copy of the book.

An important Appalachian craft native to Kentucky. One fascinating Appalachian craft native to Kentucky and other Appalachian states is dulcimer making. "The Appalachian mountain dulcimer is, in the strictest sense, a folk culture instrument."²⁹ Brought to this country by settlers from northern Europe, the dulcimer "has never been a factory-made instrument, rather always the handmade product of the individual craftsman who fashioned it, usually in his own home or workshop."³⁰ The dulcimer exists "only through the artistry and traditions of the individual craftsman, who is a complex individual, motivated by a multiplicity of forces, and

²⁹R. Gerald Alvey, *Dulcimer Maker: The Craft of Homer Ledford* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 1.

³⁰Ibid.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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whose vitality as a tradition bearer cannot be separated from the strength of the dulcimer tradition itself.”³¹ One of the finest skilled craftsmen of these exquisite instruments is Homer Ledford, a native of Winchester. Although Kentuckians excel in the making of other beautiful artifacts—furniture, linens, and quilts—the dulcimer that is handmade by gifted Kentucky artisans remains one of the finest examples of Appalachian craft-making preserved by people in the state.

A couple of nagging questions. Answers to these questions must wait for another round of hodgepodge about Kentucky. But why did Frankfort and not some other city become the state capital? And why does Kentucky have toll roads when other southern states do not?

³¹Ibid.

David W Fletcher, Spring 1999

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