ORIGINS OF LOUISVILLE CULTURE

By William C. Mallalieu
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky

A Talk given before The Filson Club, October 1, 1962

In order to keep my talk within reasonable time limits, I am confining it largely to the development of culture in the limited sense of increase of knowledge and refinement of taste. Lacking direct information on individual cultural growth, I will show evidences of community development in formation of educational institutions and cultural organizations. Increasing interest in knowledge is shown, not only by establishment of schools, colleges, and universities, but also by the springing up of organizations for study and discussion of literature, science, and history and the growth of bookstores and libraries. Refinement of taste is shown in the development of architecture, both public and domestic, and formation of organizations concerned with literature, art, and music.

It is evident that cities have taken the lead in cultural development, not only in this country, but also in many others, perhaps all. Businessmen throughout the centuries have supported cultural progress, as demonstrated in Miriam Beard's *History of the Businessman,* showing merchants, financiers, and industrialists promoting art in various centers of civilization from ancient Babylon to modern London and New York.

Aristotle recognized the close connection between commercial and urban development and cultural growth. He said: "Men come to cities in order to live; they stay in cities in order to live better."

I have therefore outlined my talk according to three stages in Louisville's growth in wealth and population: First, the frontier village with limited commercial activity; second, the booming commercial town, with established churches, theater, and museum and ambitious plans for schools, libraries, etc.; third, the thriving metropolis, the center of trade, finance, and culture of a large region.

Until recently, American historians have largely ignored the importance of towns and cities in our national development. In western history, attention was concentrated upon pioneer hunters, fur traders, cattlemen, and farmers. Yet the land speculators, lawyers, merchants, doctors, and craftsmen of Western towns had essential roles in Western development.[1]

Louisville was unique among early Kentucky settlements in being located near a military post (Fort Nelson) and in being planned as a

town practically from the beginning. Most Kentucky settlements consisted of farm lands grouped around a "station" (private blockhouse). Towns sprang up later when merchants were needed to provide export of farm produce and distribution of imported articles. As commerce increased, towns with particularly favorable locations became leading commercial centers, with facilities for storage, transportation, and finance. Lexington early took the lead, but by 1830 Louisville was well ahead.

Some of the first settlers of Louisville were probably simple pioneers, seeking new farm lands beyond the earlier settlements in the Bluegrass. In 1779 John Floyd had no doubt of getting settlers for his lands on the upper Beargrass Creek, because, he wrote, "they are very sickly at the Falls."[2] In the spring of 1780 and 1781, thousands of pioneers passed through Louisville on their way to new lands east and south of the town. By 1785 there were many stations in Jefferson County, and the area south of Salt River was made into a separate county (Nelson).

Those who decided to stay in Louisville in spite of its autumnal fevers and mosquitoes, were attracted by the potential value of commercial sites just above the Falls of the Ohio. Within a year of the landing on Corn Island, the streets of a new town were laid out and steps taken to secure legal recognition from the Virginia Assembly. The act establishing the town of Louisville authorized the town trustees to grant lots to those who built log cabins within a short time, but growth was slow for many years. The early cabins, or houses, were all built upon the height of land between the river and the ponds, along Water, Main, Market, and Jefferson streets. The ponds began at what is now Liberty Street. The ten- and twenty-acre lots in the southern part of the town were not built upon until the 1820's.

In 1786 the town was "flourishing fast" offering an "amazing market" for anything the farmers of Jefferson County could produce.[3] James Wilkinson, in ordering produce taken to the Falls for shipment down-river, told his agent to weigh all commodities carefully. "Remember," he wrote, "you are amongst a set of sharpers."[4] By this time small cabins had been built along Water and Main streets. Shelter was in such demand that even a poor cabin could be rented for £36 a year.[5] Settlers willing to work for others were few and they demanded good wages. Several good loghouses had been erected, but a visitor felt that "the extravagance of wages and the laziness of tradesmen" was retarding the growth of the town. "In truth," he wrote, "I see very little doing but card-playing, drinking, and other vices among the common people . . . and too many of the better sort." A few storekeepers were "busy in land and other speculation, in which the veracity

or generosity of some are not very conspicuous, being ever on the watch to take advantage of the ignorance or innocence of the stranger."[6] The growth of the town was slow until after 1800, when it had only six hundred inhabitants among its ponds.[7]

The Louisiana Purchase (1803) assured freedom of navigation on the Mississippi, but river transportation was slow for many years. The trip to New Orleans and back took four or more months.

The Napoleonic Wars stimulated American exports to Europe and by 1810 Louisville was known as the principal port of Kentucky, shipping down-river an "immense quantity of produce," including pork, flour, tobacco, and lumber, as well as manufactures such as mixed cloth, rope, bagging, leather, salt, and whiskey.[8] As these exports flowed out they provided funds for purchase of many articles of clothing and household equipment from the East. Working capital for Louisville commerce was furnished by leading merchants, especially by Prather and Jacob, a firm which had become a branch of the Bank of Kentucky. The permanent population was one thousand three hundred, and the houses numbered two hundred and fifty, many being of "handsome brick."[9]

Louisville was now out of the village stage, but its future was still uncertain. Bardstown had a larger population and Shepherdsville was a serious competitor. A newcomer in 1810, who later became a leading merchant, gives this description of the town:

> No street was paved and sidewalks were unknown. The first paved street was Main between Fourth and Fifth. There were two taverns, one a log house of one storey with exterior clapboards. The city extended from Third to Sixth Street and from the River to Market Street, a part of this being ponds and swamps.[10]

A traveler called the town one of the most beautiful in America; he especially admired the tasteful "hanging gardens" of Dr. Gault and Messrs. Bullet [*sic*] at the lower end of town.[11] Another visitor remembered nothing but merchants, boatmen, and land speculators devouring meals in taverns and talking of nothing but money.[12]

But there was another side to early Louisville, unknown to travelers who saw only the wharves, business houses, and taverns. There was no actual church building in 1800, but services were held in Steele's Meeting House. Father Badin came occasionally to celebrate Mass for Roman Catholics of Louisville and Shippingport. A Methodist Society, formed in 1806, met in private homes. A Catholic church was erected in 1811 and Methodist, Presbyterian, and Baptist churches shortly thereafter.

Items from early newspapers show the interests and activities of the boom town residents. Dr. Ferguson, who had imported genuine and

fresh medicines from Philadelphia, offered to instruct one or two young gentlemen in the art of the physician.[13]

There were no public schools; wealthier families educated their children at home or in private schools. There were two young ladies' academies in 1806. Children were also being taught to dance properly. Mr. Nugent held dancing classes in Louisville and Middletown and offered to teach in gentlemen's homes. A Pittsburgh manufacturer was trying to interest Louisville merchants in ladies' hats of the newest fashion, i.e. chip bonnets.[14] In 1813, "play actors" entertained the townsmen who could also buy books in every department of literature or borrow them from Dickinson and Miller's Library in Prather's Row on Main Street.[15]

With the signing of peace treaties in Europe in 1814 and 1815, American commerce revived. Steamboats multiplied on the Ohio and Mississippi. Louisville exports expanded and imports increased even more as steamboats brought European and East Coast products to the city for distribution by Louisville merchants. The city's permanent population quadrupled. The floating population of boatmen was now augmented by equally rowdy "steamboat characters," as well as by numerous migrants seeking new lands in Indiana, Tennessee, Missouri, Arkansas, Illinois, and Iowa.

Growing wealth and population brought new institutions into existence. Jefferson Seminary, authorized in 1798, was provided with a building with funds raised by a lottery. Thus secondary education was provided for young men of the city and neighboring region. By 1820 the city also had a Sunday school association, a library company, a theater, and a museum. The latter contained pictures and statuary, including a wax Venus. In 1818 there was an exhibit of "living animals," consisting of a marmoset, an African leopard nearly eight feet long, and a Brazilian tiger beautifully spotted and striped, which "preferred" human flesh.[16] At a later date the museum offered a demonstration of laughing gas. For fifty cents one could inhale this chemical and have all the pleasant effects of inbibing alcoholic beverages without any of the bad results. For twenty-five cents one could observe the quaint antics of those who had sniffed the gas.

Other pleasures enjoyed by Louisville inhabitants included watching horse races at the Beargrass track or at the course on the grounds of the Hope Distillery, and boating and skating on Gwathmey's pond. Then there was the bathing house, with a separate compartment for ladies. "Families desirous of enjoying the luxury of bathing through the season can be accommodated with a ticket of admission," read the advertisement in the newspaper.[17]

Dr. McMurtrie described the general character of the inhabitants of

Louisville in his *Sketches of Louisville and Its Environs.* Most, he said, were "absorbed in the great business of adding dollar to dollar;" few had time for literature or polished society. But within a small circle "there was every pleasure that wealth regulated by taste can produce or urbanity bestow." The principal diversions of the townsmen, according to the doctor, were the theater, balls, whist, billiards, and the "festive board." He saw hardly a vestige of gambling but heard rumors of "secret dens of midnight swindlers."[18] From other sources, one gathers that there was nothing secret about the gambling dens. The good doctor apparently never heard of the "houses of general resort" where games of chance and other diversions were provided for tired businessmen and weary travelers.

The early twenties were a period of recession. Louisville's growth was also checked by an outbreak of "bilious fever" which afflicted nearly every one of its families in 1822. But by filling in the remaining ponds in the town limits, the authorities hoped to prevent a recurrence of the dread disease. Prosperity returned in the late twenties and early thirties. The village of 1800 had now become the largest town in the state and it demanded elevation to the rank of city. A city charter passed in 1828 provided broad powers for a mayor and council, including authority to provide better law enforcement and health facilities and to establish public schools. After a slight pause in 1832, the boom resumed with even greater force and reached a high point in 1837.

Cultural growth was also great. The city's leading businessmen had begun building fine residences outside the business district, especially along Walnut and Chestnut streets. Prather Square (between Liberty, Walnut, Third, and Fourth streets) contained the residences of Thomas Prather and of his son. Prather's partner, John J. Jacob, purchased the next square to the south (between Walnut and Chestnut) and erected a fine residence and later residences for his married daughters. James Guthrie, George Keats, William Preston, and Dr. Samuel Gross were other leading citizens with homes on Walnut Street. This street was graced with many fine trees and was also the location of some of the city's leading churches.

Cultural institutions established between 1820 and 1840 included the Saint Cecilia Society, three literary societies, the Mechanics Institute, the Kentucky Historical Society, and the Mozart Society. The last built was Mozart Hall with the assistance of J. J. Jacob. Here many famous musicians were heard, including Ole Bull, the Norwegian violinist; Louis Gottscholk, pianist; and Jenny Lind, the "Swedish Nightingale."

James Guthrie, as a member of the City Council, took the leadership in development of public education. In addition to helping start the

public elementary schools, Guthrie brought about city support for the Louisville Medical Institute and the establishment of a Collegiate Institute. These were envisioned as first units of a university with four "grand departments." It was to be nearly a century before this dream was fulfilled. The University of Louisville was chartered in 1846, and its Medical and Law Departments flourished. But the Academic Department never received adequate support and was inoperative for over sixty years. Expansion of public education was authorized by the new city charter of 1851, but progress was hampered by a controversy between the school trustees and those of the University of Louisville. The University refused to put its Academic Department under the popularly elected School Trustees. The City Council rejected the proposal of the University for endowment of the Department with city stock in the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. The School Trustees established the Male and the Female high schools in 1856, the former operating in the building intended for the Academic Department of the University. When the University Trustees refused to grant degrees to graduates of a school they did not control, the school authorities obtained the legal right to grant their own degrees. The degree of Bachelor of Arts was conferred upon Male High graduates from 1860 to 1915. While the school was attempting the impossible task of being both a high school and a college, it did provide Louisville youths with a liberal education on a high level (perhaps too high a level). Its juniors and seniors took courses equivalent to those given in colleges of the time. In fact, few of today's college students could take some of the courses which Male High offered, such as calculus and Cicero's Ethics (in Latin).[19]

Louisville commerce, manufactures, and finance grew enormously during the 1850's. The city dominated the trade of Kentucky and Tennessee and extended its commercial connections into parts of Indiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama. Cotton was "King" in those days and Louisville's trade with the flourishing Cotton Belt on the lower Mississippi brought it safely through financial crises in 1854 and 1857.

Louisville businessmen built larger and more ornate mansions on Chestnut Street and Broadway; "palaces of the merchant princes," Colonel Durrett called them. Houses were also being built south of Broadway as far as Breckenridge. Beyond that in 1860 were still the large estates of the Dumesnils, Duponts, and others. A French writer describes Louisville houses of this period as follows: "The houses," he says, "were constructed of brick, and painted red to preserve them. They were covered with wood and some had facades of stone. Front stairs were stone, with grillwork ornamented with silver or gold apples.

Shutters were green and doors white ('de ceruse') with fixtures of yellow brass. Luxurious carpets covered the floors, rich tapestries garnished the walls and furniture was mahogany. The silver and glassware sparkled and made of these homes 'asylums of wealth and sanctuaries of happiness'."[20] The streets were described as well paved and well kept up, having wide sidewalks (up to twelve feet). Seven hundred houses were said to have been built in the past year—more in the current year (1853). There may be some exaggeration in this picture, but it is obvious that the writer had been enchanted by his visits to some of the grandest houses in the city.

In spite of election day riots and fire company fights, Louisville continued to grow. Better police and fire protection were provided by the end of the decade.

During the Civil War, Louisvillians were apparently too much concerned with the War and its effects upon their city, to give much attention to culture. Yet George Prentice, the editor of the Louisville *Journal,* said he had never heard of so many picnics as were being held during this period. At any rate, the four-year period was a blank as far as cultural progress was concerned, although the city's merchants and manufacturers were very prosperous after the first year of uncertainty.[21]

In the years following the end of the War, several literary societies sprang up and an attempt was made once again to establish a public library. Depression in the early seventies checked progress again. Beginning in 1875 the Kentucky Derby attracted visitors from all over the country, and Macauley's Theater provided entertainment for visitors and residents both.

Louisville culture reached a new peak between 1878 and 1890 with the founding of the Polytechnic Society and The Filson Club and holding of art exhibits and concerts in connection with the Southern Exposition (1883-1886). This was also the period when the Satellites of Mercury, in fantastic costumes, had their annual parades through the city streets.

The Polytechnic Society constructed a large building on Fourth Street, which contained an extensive scholarly library as well as rooms for lectures and society meetings. It was planned that special groups would form "academies" for discussion of subjects in which they were interested, such as history, literature, or science.

The only such group of which there is any record is the Academy of History formed by a group headed by Colonel Reuben T. Durrett in 1883. The records of this organization are found in a strange place, the record book of the Federal District Court. The secretary was also the clerk of the court and kept the Academy minutes in the back

pages of the court record. In the following year (1884) much the same group formed The Filson Club.[22]

In connection with the Southern Exposition and also under the sponsorship of William F. Norton, many famous actors, actresses, and musicians came to Louisville between 1883 and 1890. Among the latter was Walter Damrosch, the director of the New York Symphony Orchestra. In his memoirs Damrosch gave his impression of Louisville in the 1880's:

> In 1885 and 1886, I was invited by the Southern Exposition of Louisville to come there with my orchestra to play the entire summer giving two concerts a day. I shall always look back on these two summers with delight and gratitude. I was very young and it was my first experience of a prolonged stay in a Southern city. Louisville at that time was a small community but with an old civilization which manifested itself in a circle of charming people of established culture and social relations.[23]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Richard C. Wade, "Urban Life in Western America" (*American Historical Review*), October, 1958 (lxiv, p. 14ff.), says towns were the "Spearhead of the American frontier." Actually, he shows that towns were generally located near the earlier forts or trading posts.

[2] John Floyd, Harrodsburgh, October 30, 1779. (Copies of Floyd Correspondence in Draper Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society.)

[3] Nicholas Meriwether to William Meriwether, Louisville, August 7, 1784, in Meriwether Papers (Kentucky State Historical Society, Frankfort.)

[4] Quoted in *The Admirable Trumpeter A Biography of General James Wilkinson,* by T. R. Hay and M. R. Werner, Garden City, N.Y., 1941.

[5] Nicholas Meriwether, *loc. cit.*

[6] "General Butler's Journal," in *The Olden Time,* 2 vols., 1846, 1848, reprinted 1876, vol. ii, p. 495ff.

[7] *The Ohio Falls Cities and their Counties,* 2 vols., 1881, vol. 1, p. 212.

[8] John Melish, *Travels in the United States of America,* 2 vols., 1812, vol. 1, pp. 150-154.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 141.

[10] "Reminiscences of Louisville: Memories of J. D. Colmesnil," *Taglicher Louisville Anzeiger,* May 24, 1866 (translated by John J. Weisert).

[11] F. Cumings, *Sketches of a Tour of the Western Country, 1807-1809, 1810* (R. G. Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846,* IV, pp. 258-259).

[12] Alexander Wilson, quoted in *Audubon's America,* ed. D. C. Peattie.

[13] *Farmer's Library,* October 14, 1802, *et seq.*

[14] *Farmer's Library,* Louisville, *pass.*

[15] *Louisville Correspondent,* 1814-1815.

[16] *Focus* and *Louisville Public Advertizer,* 1827.

[17] *Louisville Public Advertizer,* October 10, 1821.

[18] McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville and Its Environs,* Louisville, 1819.

[19] *Records of the Board of Trustees of the University of Louisville,* 1851-1860; *Records of the Trustees of the Public Schools of Louisville,* 1851-1860.

[20] *Guide des emigrans Francais dans Kentucky et Indiana,* 1853.

[21] Edward R. Johnson, *A Social and Economic History of Louisville, 1860-1865* (M.A. Thesis, University of Louisville, 1938).

[22] Flora Heitz, *A Comprehensive Survey of Cultural Movements in Louisville during the Nineteenth Century* (M.A. Thesis, University of Louisville, 1937).

[23] Quoted in *Louisville Post,* April 11, 1923.