

## DATE OF THE FIRST SETTLEMENT OF LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY

BY SAMUEL M. WILSON

In kingdomes, the first foundation or plantation is of more noble dignity and merit than all that followeth.—*Sir Francis Bacon*

In this paper, it will be assumed that readers have before them the article by Dr. Willard Rouse Jillson on "The Founding of Lexington, Kentucky," published in *THE FILSON CLUB HISTORY QUARTERLY* for October, 1929. In that article a part of the interview which Rev. John D. Shane had, in May, 1841, with Josiah Collins, then of Bath County, Kentucky, is reproduced with the view of establishing the precise date of the "founding" of Lexington and showing who participated in that memorable deed.

Josiah Collins was born in Halifax County, Virginia, May 2, 1757, and, therefore, had just passed his eighty-fourth birthday when interviewed by Dr. Shane. In spite of his advanced age, his statements in regard to pioneer people and events, as reported by his interviewer, are extremely interesting, and, generally speaking, reliable, but it would be altogether exceptional if all of his statements were found free from error. Perhaps we would be warranted in accepting as final what he says about the *date* of the first permanent settlement of Lexington as well as his roster of those who took part in forming that settlement, were he the only witness to the transaction or were we without other evidence. There are, however, statements by others, equally credible, to be reckoned with. As to the *date* of the occurrence in question, there exists at least one statement by Josiah Collins himself at variance with what he told Dr. Shane in 1841. Thus in a deposition given by Collins, under oath, on March 7, 1820, in a suit, which went to the Supreme Court of the United States (*McConnell vs. Trustees of the Town of Lexington*, 12 Wheaton 582), he swore:

"This Deponent being duly sworn Saith &c., that on the 16th day of April, 1779, Robert Patterson with twenty-four men, he making 25 in number, came to where Lexington now is

and commenced building a block-house, this deponent being one of the number of the above mentioned men," etc.

David Mitchell was undoubtedly one of Patterson's party. He swears he was, and Josiah Collins mentions him eighth in his list of the first comers. Mitchell was a reputable man in every way, and his statements are worthy of entire credence. In the Harrison County suit (discovered by Richard H. Collins and utilized in his admirable *History of Kentucky*, Volume II, pages 179-180—a composite product of many contributions—and, also, in his excellent article on "The First Settlement of Lexington, Kentucky," published in *The Age*, at Louisville, Kentucky, on April 19, 1879), David Mitchell testified, some forty years before the Shane-Collins interview, that he "was not in Bowman's expedition in May, 1779, but was a resident in Lexington at the time; I recollect of fourteen citizens coming over [from Harrodsburg] to settle in Lexington about the 14th of April in that year; Robert Patterson and John Morrison were two of them," etc. Josiah Collins testified at the same time and gave no precise date, simply saying that "he marched from Lexington in Holder's company, in May, 1779; my residence at that time was at Lexington, having moved there in April from Harrodsburg." John Morrison also testified and, without giving any precise date, deposed that "he became a resident of Lexington in April, 1779." Elijah Collins, a brother of Josiah Collins, who is named in the list furnished Dr. Shane by Josiah Collins in 1841, was another witness in the Harrison County suit, and testified that in May, 1779, he "and James Parberry, being then inhabitants of Lexington, joined Bowman's expedition." Robert Patterson, with every incentive to give the precise date of the first settlement of Lexington, failed to do so in the deposition he gave in Harrison County on October 28, 1796, contenting himself with saying: "That, in the month of May, 1779, [I] then an Inhabitant of Lexington & an Insign in Capt. Levi Todd's Company of Militia, was ordered on an Expedition against the Shawnee Towns to be Commanded by Colo. John Bowman; did march from Lexington about the 15th of sd. month," etc. Samuel Johnson, one of the Patterson party, according to Josiah Collins, and a witness in the Harrison County suit, with the same vagueness as to date, which characterized all of the evidence, testified that "in April, 1779, Colonel Robert Patterson, myself

and others made a settlement at the town of Lexington." Alexander McConnell, another witness in said suit, deposed that "in the month of April, 1779, he settled at Lexington." Nowhere, in any of this group of depositions, is any approximation of the date of the first settlement of Lexington to be found, save in the single deposition of David Mitchell, above quoted, who puts it "about the 14th of April."

The writer of this paper has examined many depositions given by Robert Patterson, several of them pertaining to the "birth and beginnings" of Lexington, but in none of them as yet has he ever found any explicit statement of the precise date on which the original settlement of the town was begun. Robert Patterson died in or near Dayton, Ohio, August 5, 1827, and, in 1843, some sixteen years after his death, John W. Van Cleve undertook to compile from Colonel Patterson's papers a sketch of his life. In the course of this sketch, published in the *American Pioneer* (Vol. II, p. 346), Van Cleve states:

"In April, 1779, being then an ensign, he was ordered to proceed from Harrodsburg, with twenty-five men, and establish a garrison at some convenient site, north of the Kentucky river. On the 17th, he accordingly commenced the erection of a fort at the place where Lexington now stands, and about that time he laid off the town."

If these statements were based solely and exclusively on memoranda left by Robert Patterson, a strong presumption might arise that "the 17th" was absolutely the correct date. But Van Cleve's sketch of Patterson is introduced with these words:

"Mr. Jefferson Patterson, son of Colonel Robert Patterson the founder of Lexington, Ky., and one of the three original proprietors of Cincinnati, has kindly placed in my hands the few remaining memoranda of his deceased father, to enable me to give a sketch of his life and adventures. They are only loose papers, and go very little into details; in many cases being only mere references, to the incidents of which they give the dates. From some other authentic sources, I have been able to give more particular accounts of some of the events merely mentioned in the memoranda, and have accordingly made use of them, although they have, in some cases, already been in print."

Since the Shane interview with Josiah Collins was in May, 1841, and the Van Cleve sketch of Patterson did not appear until August, 1843, it is entirely possible that Van Cleve might have gotten the date "April 17th" from Collins through Shane, as one of the "other authentic sources" upon which he drew for "more particular accounts" of the events narrated. At all events, we are confronted with this situation:

(1) A half dozen witnesses, including Josiah Collins, testified, under oath, in or prior to the year 1804, that they made a settlement at Lexington "in April, 1779."

(2) In or prior to the year 1804 David Mitchell testified, under oath, that the party from Harrodsburg "came over to settle in Lexington about the 14th of April in that year," i. e. 1779.

(3) In March, 1820, Josiah Collins signed and swore to the deposition that "on the 16th day of April, 1779, Robert Patterson, with twenty-four men, he making 25 in number, came to where Lexington now is and commenced building a block-house, this deponent being one of the number of the above mentioned men."

(4) In May, 1841, some sixty-two years after the settlement of Lexington, Dr. John D. Shane interviewed Josiah Collins and reports Collins as saying: "I continued at Harrodsburg till the 15th of April, 1779, when I joined with 24 others . . . all from Harrodsburg, and went on to Lexington, that now is and built a block house; commencing the same the 17th of April, 1779."

(5) In August, 1843, sixty-four years after the settlement of Lexington, John W. Van Cleve, of Dayton, Ohio, published a sketch of Colonel Robert Patterson, drawn from Patterson's papers and other sources, in which he (Van Cleve) makes the statement: "In April, 1779, being then an ensign, he [Patterson] was ordered to proceed from Harrodsburg, with twenty-five men, and establish a garrison at some convenient site, north of the Kentucky river. On the 17th, he accordingly commenced the erection of a fort at the place where Lexington now stands."

Upon the strength of these divergent statements, can it be said that uncertainty no longer exists as to the precise date of the "founding" or first settlement of Lexington? Or can it be

said with final and infallible certainty that "the Lexington founding date is now definitely established as April 17, 1779"? Would it not be better to allow some margin for the possibility of error, or, at least, concede that there is still room for choice between conflicting dates? Richard H. Collins, a master in such matters, spoke thus guardedly in 1879: "Lexington was not settled on the 1st nor on the 2nd of April; but was settled on the 14th day of April, 1779, or a few days later."

And the present writer prefers to leave the question for the present in the uncertain state in which he found it in April, 1929, when he wrote: "The obvious conclusion from all this is that Lexington could hardly have been settled before April 14, 1779, and its actual settlement may not have begun until April 17, 1779."

Whatever may be the preference of others as to the precise date of the interesting and noteworthy event, all are safe in saying that it occurred "about the middle of April," 1779.