

## SLAVERY IN EARLY LOUISVILLE AND JEFFERSON COUNTY, KENTUCKY, 1780-1812

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African-Americans entered Kentucky with, if not before, the earliest explorers. When Louisville was founded in 1778, African-Americans were among its earliest residents and, as the frontier and early settlement periods passed, both slavery and the subordination of free persons of color became institutionalized in the city and surrounding county.

The quality and quantity of research in this area have improved markedly in recent years, but significant gaps in the extant research literature remain. The research dealing exclusively with African-Americans in Louisville focuses on the post-emancipation era.<sup>1</sup> Other general works focus on African-Americans at the statewide or regional levels of analysis but actually make very few references to conditions and relationships that existed before 1820.<sup>2</sup> The standard works on Louisville and Kentucky address the role of

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1 Scott Cummings and Mark Price, *Race Relations in Louisville: Southern Racial Traditions and Northern Class Dynamics* (Louisville: Urban Research Institute, 1990); George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

2 J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940); Leonard P. Curry, *The Free Black in Urban America, 1800 - 1850: The Shadow of the Dream* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Marion B. Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, vol 1 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Frankfort: Kentucky Historical Society, 1992); Ivan E. McDougale, *Slavery in Kentucky, 1792-1865* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania, 1918); Richard C. Wade, *Slavery in the Cities: South, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); George C. Wright, *In Pursuit of Equality, 1890-1980*, vol 2 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*.

African-Americans only to a limited extent.<sup>3</sup> These, along with numerous articles and dissertations, are all examples of outstanding scholarship. Stated simply, however, the definitive history of African-Americans in Louisville and Jefferson County remains a work in progress, particularly with respect to the frontier and early settlement periods when, to use the familiar cliché, "the absence of evidence is often mistaken for the evidence of absence." The purpose of this research is to contribute to the in-depth reexamination of the primary and secondary sources bearing on these periods.

#### POPULATION AND EARLY PATTERNS OF SLAVEHOLDING

Louisville grew slowly from a village into a small town by the early 1800s. Its location was fortuitous, particularly for river transportation and trade from east to west, but none of the forces which eventually transformed Louisville into a major city were operative as yet. As long as Louisiana and much of the Mississippi River were controlled by Spain or France, downriver trade and travel were problematic—and upriver travel and trade would be difficult until the appearance of the steamboat in western waters in 1811.<sup>4</sup>

As a farming community with some involvement in commerce, Louisville left much to be desired because of the marshy conditions near the river, the numerous mounds and ponds, and the malarial fevers of most summers. The higher, drier, and more level ground several miles inland and along the various branches of Beargrass Creek was far more conducive to the development of agriculture and the growth of settlements. Although the Falls of the Ohio determined the location of Louisville, for two generations the geography of the

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3 Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (Ashland: The Jesse Stuart Foundation, 1988; originally published in 1937); Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); George H. Yater, *Two Hundred Years at the Falls of the Ohio: A History of Louisville and Jefferson County* (Louisville: Filson Club, 1987).

4 Melville O. Briney, "Some Glimpses of Early Louisville," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 34 (1960): 105-14; Carl E. Kramer, "Images of a Developing City: Louisville, 1800-1830," *Quarterly* 52 (1978): 166-90; Yater, *Two Hundred Years*, 34-42.

Ohio Valley near the falls determined the overall patterns of settlement in Jefferson County.<sup>5</sup>

Whether in Louisville or the surrounding county, the monumental tasks of clearing the land, bringing it under cultivation, and providing for shelter and defense required a large labor force. White settlers did not migrate to Kentucky to become wage-laborers for other whites when abundant land was available for their own use. Thus, with free labor in short supply, slavery became the labor alternative of choice, and slavery became central to the patterns of settlement in early Louisville, Jefferson County, and Kentucky.<sup>6</sup>

As Lucas aptly observes, the size of Kentucky's African-American population before 1790 can only be estimated from the recollections of early settlers and surviving records, the most important of which are tax lists.<sup>7</sup> Using the first of these sources, since tax records were not available until 1787, it can be estimated that there were probably three hundred people, black and white, in Kentucky in 1775. The population decreased to two hundred in 1776 and increased thereafter.<sup>8</sup> By 1784 John Filson estimated the African-American population of Kentucky at four thousand.<sup>9</sup> There were roughly six hundred residents of Jefferson County in 1780, about one hundred of whom lived at the Falls of the Ohio.<sup>10</sup> Thus it is reasonable to estimate, based on tax lists, wills, and the racial demographics of the region in later years that one-fourth to one-third of the population of the county was black and enslaved. This was somewhat higher than the percentage of African-Americans in the state and remained so throughout the antebellum period.

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5 Reuben T. Durrett, *The Centenary of Louisville* (first publication series, no.8; Louisville: Filson Club Historical Society, 1893), 44-46; Henry and Kate Ford, *History of the Ohio Falls Cities and their Counties* (2 vols.; Cleveland, 1882), 1: 15-20; Henry McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville* (Louisville, 1819), 171-80.

6 Ellen Eslinger, "The Shape of Slavery on the Kentucky Frontier, 1775-1800," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 92 (1994): 1-23.

7 Lucas, *Slavery to Segregation*, xv.

8 Harrison and Klotter, *New History*, 30-33.

9 Lucas, *Slavery to Segregation*, xv.

10 Durrett, *Centenary of Louisville*, 47.

Similar difficulties confound attempts at in-depth analysis of population patterns using data from the 1790 and 1800 census schedules. The census schedules for the District of Kentucky in 1790 and of the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 1800 "either were destroyed when Washington was burned by the British during the War of 1812 or were not extant when the clerks of the several district and superior courts were directed to send the early schedules to the Secretary of State."<sup>11</sup> However, summary figures were preserved, and all census records for later decades are available for examination.

Table 1

African-American Population, 1790-1860:  
Kentucky and the United States

	Kentucky				United States			
	Slave	Free	Total	%KY	Slave	Free	Total	%US
1790	11,830	114	11,944	16.3	697,189	59,466	757,363	19.3
1800	40,343	241	41,084	18.6	893,041	108,395	1,001,436	18.9
1810	80,561	1,713	82,274	20.2	1,191,364	186,446	1,377,810	19.0
1820	126,732	2,759	129,491	23.0	1,538,038	238,156	1,776,194	18.4
1830	165,213	4,917	170,130	24.7	2,009,043	319,599	2,328,642	18.1
1840	182,258	7,317	189,575	24.1	2,487,455	386,303	2,873,758	16.8
1850	210,981	10,011	220,992	22.5	3,204,313	434,495	3,638,808	15.7
1860	225,483	10,684	236,167	20.4	3,953,760	488,070	4,441,830	14.1

By 1790, there were 73,677 people in the District of Kentucky, a number which increased by nearly two hundred percent to 220,955 by 1800. At the same time, the African-American population increased even more rapidly than the white population from 11,944 (114 of whom were free people of color) to 41,084 (241 of whom were free), an increase of nearly 244 percent. So the percentage of African-Americans in Kentucky's population grew from 16.3 percent

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11 G. Glenn Clift, *Second Census of Kentucky, 1800* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1982), iii.

in 1790 to 18.6 percent in 1800.<sup>12</sup>

Louisville and Jefferson County received their share of the settlers who, despite the dangers of the frontier, flocked to Kentucky in the 1780s.

Table 2

African-American Population, 1790-1860:  
Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky

	Kentucky				Jefferson County			
	Slave	Free	Total	%LOU	Slave	Free	Total	%JEFF
1790					903	5	908	19.3
1800					2,406	23	2,429	28.9
1810	484	11	495	36.5	3,863	103	3,966	19.0
1820	1,031	93	1,124	28.0	4,824	29	4,853	38.1
1830	2,406	232	4,049	25.5	2,306	39	2,345	29.0
1840	3,430	619	4,049	19.1	2,706	111	2,817	31.6
1850	5,432	1,538	6,970	16.1	5,479	99	5,578	33.5
1860	4,903	1,917	6,820	9.8	5,401	90	5,491	27.9

Continued hostilities both with neighboring Native Americans and the more distant British forces in the northwest necessitated the maintenance of a semi-wartime level of military preparedness with profound implications for the living arrangements of the pioneers, white and black alike. Although Fort Nelson (north of Main Street, between Seventh and Eighth streets) stood at the Falls of the Ohio, early settlements in the county radiated from a network of partially fortified "stations." Settlers lived in or near such stations; an estimated 187 existed throughout the Bluegrass region during the frontier period, in which they sought refuge when threatened by Native American raiders.<sup>13</sup> The vulnerability of these exposed stations was

12 Ibid., iv-xiii; C. B. Heinenmann, comp., *"First Census" of Kentucky, 1790* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Company, 1981); United States Bureau of the Census, *First Census of the United States, 1790* (Washington, D.C., 1791); United States Bureau of the Census, *Second Census of the United States, 1800* (Washington, D.C., 1801).

13 Thomas C. Fisher, "The Morgan Hughes Station and Long Run Baptist Church," *Quarterly* 20 (1946): 275; Neal O. Hammon, "Early Louisville and the Beargrass Stations," *Quarterly* 52 (1978): 147-65; Harrison and Klotter, *New History*, 29; Ford,

demonstrated repeatedly as Native American incursions persisted through the mid 1790s. Between January and September 1781 alone, "Indians killed or captured 131 people in the vicinity of the Falls of the Ohio, about one-eighth of the population of Jefferson County."<sup>14</sup> Many settlers were killed in later years as well, including Colonel John Floyd, who was ambushed in southern Jefferson County on 12 April 1783, and Abraham Lincoln, grandfather of President Lincoln, who was killed near Long Run in eastern Jefferson County on 19 May 1786.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, because of the need for salt as a preservative for meat, the primary source of food for the settlers, saltworks were established along the old deer and buffalo trails leading to Bullitt's Lick (in northern Bullitt County) in 1779 or 1780 and at Mann's Lick in modern-day Fairdale. Mann's Lick was also fortified to some degree because of its greater proximity to the falls.<sup>16</sup>

The Jefferson County population grew even as the original county was divided into smaller counties. By 1800, the few hundred settlers of 1780 had grown to 8,754. As the population of Louisville was only 359, it is evident that the bulk of the new arrivals occupied the fertile farmland away from the falls as either landowners or tenants. The 150 to 200 African-Americans of 1780 had also grown to 2,429, 28.9 percent of the county total, and a few free people of color had migrated to the area or had been manumitted.

Enslaved African-Americans lived where their owners lived and, since only more affluent whites could afford to own slaves, African-Americans came to be concentrated primarily in those sections of the early towns and counties where the landholdings of the wealthier whites could be found and spread thinly and unevenly

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*Ohio Falls Cities*, 1: 27.

14 Stephen Aron, *How the West was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 48.

15 Fisher, "Morgan Hughes Station," 275-76; Ford, *Ohio Falls Cities*, 1: 28.

16 Thomas D. Clark, "Salt, a Factor in the Settlement of Kentucky," *Quarterly*, 12 (1937): 43-46; Robert E. McDowell, "Bullitt's Lick: The Related Saltworks and Settlements," *Quarterly* 30 (1956): 241-42, 253-54; Marguerite Threlkel, "Mann's Lick," *Quarterly* 1 (1926): 169-70.

across areas occupied by poorer farmers. The only departures from this pattern involved the temporary residences of slaves hired out to individuals or businesses.

The distribution of slaves in urban areas in 1800 was relatively unimportant since there were few towns, and only Lexington, "the Athens of the West," approached the status of a small urban area. In fact, with only 359 people, Louisville ranked fifth in the state—after Lexington (1,795), Frankfort (638), Washington (570), and Paris (377)—in population.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, while Kentucky developed as a predominantly agricultural state, the most productive tillable land was not distributed evenly throughout the state. Even leaving aside the mountainous sections of eastern Kentucky, only the soils of the Bluegrass (and later some western and southern sections of the state) proved suitable for the type of agriculture which relied on moderate to large-scale slave labor.

After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made cotton cultivation immensely profitable and breathed new life into American slavery, Kentucky's temperate climate and comparatively short growing season became critical factors which limited Kentucky agriculture and shaped Kentucky slavery. Tobacco and hemp cultivation depended heavily on slave labor but did not produce the large plantations and large slaveholdings that became common in the Gulf states after the War of 1812. For example, although discrepancies exist between data drawn from census records as opposed to tax records, fewer Kentucky families owned slaves than did their counterparts in neighboring states. In 1790 only an estimated twenty percent of white Kentuckians owned slaves, compared to forty-one percent in Maryland, thirty-three percent in North Carolina, and thirty-four percent in South Carolina.<sup>18</sup> Those who owned slaves did not own large numbers. In 1790 Kentucky slaveholders owned an average of 4.3 slaves compared to 7.5 in

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17 Heinenmann, "First Census," 3.

18 U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1960), 8-15.

Maryland, 6.7 in North Carolina, and 12.1 in South Carolina. By 1800 this average remained essentially the same at 4.4 in Kentucky with roughly twenty percent of Kentucky slaveholders owning only a single slave.<sup>19</sup>

These trends would be even more pronounced in Jefferson County where in 1800, only 36.3 percent of all families (419 of 1153) owned the land on which they lived, compared to 49.2 percent statewide; fewer families (15.1 percent) owned more slaves (6.70 per household) in 1792 than elsewhere in the state. By 1800, the percentage of slaveholding families in the county had increased to 25.4 percent, compared to 25.2 percent for the state, while the average size of slaveholdings had decreased slightly to 6.45—still much larger than the 4.4 state average.<sup>20</sup>

Thus despite the importance of slave labor in the process of settling Kentucky, the "institution of slavery in the Bluegrass had outlived its usefulness" by the War of 1812.<sup>21</sup> Because of these factors, only the combination of employing enslaved African-Americans in smaller scale agriculture, livestock raising, small industries, and domestic service, along with slave-hiring and domestic slave trade, would make Kentucky slavery a "break-even" proposition as the early settlements matured.<sup>22</sup> However, although slavery had "outlived its usefulness," the success of the larger landowners and slaveholders in gaining and maintaining control of the political and economic apparatus of state power under the provisions of the 1792 and 1799 state constitutions enabled slavery to survive nonetheless, although the perception of slavery being

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19 Joan W. Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic: The Process of Constitution Making* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1979), 55; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 8-15.

20 Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic*, 37-55; U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 8-15.

21 J. Winston Coleman, "Lexington's Slave Dealers and their Southern Trade," *Quarterly* 12 (1938): 1.

22 Frederic Bankcroft, *Slave-Trading in the Old South* (Baltimore, 1931): 12-23; Lucas, *Slavery to Segregation*, 101-105.



ill-suited to Kentucky persisted through the antebellum period.<sup>23</sup>

County tax lists (see tables 3, 4, and 5 below) are a useful supplement, despite their myriad gaps, to census data in documenting the patterns of slaveholding in early Louisville and Jefferson County.

Table 3

## Slaveholding in Jefferson County: 1789-1800\*

	South/West District			North/East District		
	White	Families Slave- owning	with 10+ Slaves**	White	Families Slave- owning	with 10+ Slaves**
1789	128	36	6	264	30	4
1791	173	39	7	350	54	2
1792		47	13	390	53	12
1793		49	12	370	80	22
1795		82	13	375	76	22
1796	344		12	619		24
1797	364		13	636		26
1799	450		14	640		34
1800	496		19	693		31

\*Tax records are often incomplete or illegible. No records are available for 1790, 1794, and 1798.

\*\*Taxable, or tithable slaves, were slaves twelve years or older. Slaves older than sixteen were taxed at a higher rate.

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<sup>23</sup> Aron, *How the West Was Lost*, 143-49; Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic*, 37-55.

Table 4

Major Slaveholders in Early Jefferson County, 1798-1805:  
North/East District

Number of Slaves							
	1789*	1791*	1793	1795	1797	1800	1805
Richard Anderson		6	10	10	20	21	25
Alexander Bullitt	23	40	63	70	75	77	69
William Croghan	1	6	12	15	17	20	24
Aaron Fontaine						7	24
Lawrence Ross		6	15	17	16	27	37
Isaac Robertson						19	
Benjamin Sebastian	6		11	12		16	
Richard Terrell	2		3		13	22	
Richard Taylor (1)		6		38	52	26	35
Richard Taylor (2)		7		19	13	26	25
William Taylor	12	9		19	19	27	33
John Thompson				25	15	34	33
Samuel Wells	5		14	17	17	21	22

Tithables (i.e., slaves 12 years and older) only.

Table 5

Major Slaveholders in Early Jefferson County, 1798-1805:  
South/West District

Number of Slaves							
	1789*	1791*	1793	1795	1797	1800	1805
Armstead/Elizabeth							
Churchill	14	19	20	23	20	14	22
John Churchill	15	3	12	12	19	17	
John Clark	14	19	20	23	20		
William Clarke						16	
John Hughes	11	11	22		23	29	
Patsy Meriwether	6		19	19	21	23	
Samuel Oldham	9	9	7	17	19	25	24
Basil Prather		7	7	10	11	15	
Jenkin Phillips					17	22	20
Sharply Ross				6		15	21
John Speed						16	
John Thornton						30	
George Wilson		9	19	22	16	16	

Tithables (i.e., slaves 12 years and older) only.

Viewed together, these early patterns of settlement and slaveholding indicate a growing concentration of population in both the north/eastern and south/western districts of Jefferson County. The relatively level land above the Ohio River floodplain and located near some source of fresh water, such as Beargrass Creek or Harrod's Creek, soon became immensely valuable. The lowland sections of much of the southwest, unless they held some special attraction, such as salt at Mann's Lick, were generally less productive. Consequently, the more affluent and politically connected settlers were better positioned to acquire clear title to hundreds of acres of the best land. If they were of more moderate means but sufficiently fortunate, for example, to have survived military service, they might also come into possession of choice land. In either case, if they then survived the incessant Native-American raids of the late 1770s and 1780s and made wise business decisions, their land probably increased in value. These were the families most likely either to bring enslaved African-Americans into Kentucky (or to send them in advance) or to purchase them as soon as their finances permitted. Later migrants to the area, along with the less fortunate early settlers, had few alternatives beyond purchasing poorer quality land or renting better land from established landowners.

In Louisville, enslaved African-Americans became commonplace, but a large slave labor force was not needed, and slaveholdings were comparatively small. However, it is important to remember that the bulk of modern-day Louisville was then considered "in the county," outside the boundaries of the town of Louisville in 1800. For example, as late as 1832, Louisville remained cramped along the Ohio River between Twelfth Street on the west, Campbell Street on the east, and Prather (later Broadway) Street on the south, although few people actually lived south of Walnut Street (Muhammad Ali). As late as 1860, there were still "plantations" in the vicinity of present-day Central Park.<sup>24</sup>

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24 Hattie Herndon Harvey, "Looking Back at Louisville When It Was Small and Young," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 29 May 1914; J. Stoddard Johnson, *Memorial History of Louisville from its First Settlement to the Year 1896* (2 vols.; New York, 1896), 1:78.

The opposite tendency prevailed in Jefferson County. Population in the county and state (see tables 1 and 2) grew rapidly in the early 1800s and, by this time, slavery was deeply entrenched as evidenced by the equally rapid growth of the enslaved African-American population. By 1810, some of the "first" generation of slaveholders remained; many had passed away (naturally or otherwise), and many new families that would be prominent in later years had migrated to the area, as summarized in table 6 (tax lists for 1811 were used since the 1810 records were incomplete).

Table 6  
Jefferson County Slave-holdings of 20 or More: 1811

	Number of Slaves	Location	Acreage
Allison, H.	23		
Anderson, G.	31		
B----	37	Goose Creek	1400
Bates, S.	60	Beargrass	420
Bullitt, Alexander	69	Beargrass	950
Breckenridge, Robert	21	Beargrass	600
Brown, James	20	Beargrass	450
Barbour, A.	28		250
Barbour, T.	22		600
Churchill, Samuel	36	Beargrass	415
Chambers, William	28		100
Coleman, Robert	30	Beargrass	300
Croghan, William	34	Beargrass	656
Chew, Samuel	43		
Fontaine, Aaron	24	Harrods Creek	353
Gwathmey, Owen	20	Harrods Creek	335
Hughes, John		Ohio River	988
Love, Matthew	25	Mill Creek	320
Lewis, Nicholas	32	Mill Creek	623
Lawrence, Benjamin	26	Beargrass	962
McGruder, Enoch	23	Harrods Creek	244
Meriwether, William (1)	20	Beargrass	480
Meriwether, William (2)	30	Ohio River	550
Miller, Isaac	33	Mill Creek	600
Oldham, Samuel	20	Beargrass	275
Ormsby, Stephen	24	Goose Creek	684
Phillips, Thomas	28	Mill Creek	1000
Peay?, John	20	Ohio River	200
Prather, Thomas	35	Chenoweth Run	135
Pope, William	35	Beargrass	575
Ross, Lawrence	50	Beargrass	696
Ross, Sharpley	22	Harrods Creek	260
Tarrascon, John	20	Ohio River	73
Taylor, Richard	30	Beargrass	400
Taylor, Reuben	35	Harrods Creek	250
Taylor, James	31	Harrods Creek	450
Thompson, Elizabeth	44	Beargrass	390
Wells, Samuel	27		656
Wood, John	22	Harrods Creek	300
Woolfork, Robert	22	Harrods Creek	336
Ward, David	90	Beargrass	2455

The forty-one families (between one and two percent of the county population) referenced in table 6 owned 30.2 percent (1,297 of 4,292) of all slaves in the town and county. Still, there were numerous small slaveholders, who owned or rented smaller and often less desirable tracts of land in the midst of a county dominated by a few large slaveholders who, typically, owned significant tracts of the best land. This was an elaboration of, rather than a departure from, the earlier pattern. The institutionalization of slavery was accompanied by a significant increase in the average price of slaves. To illustrate, in 1800, a "prime field hand" could be purchased for \$400.00 in Louisville, compared to \$350.00 in Richmond, Virginia, and \$500.00 in Charleston, South Carolina. By 1813, the price of slaves on the Louisville market had increased to \$550.00 (by 37.5 percent), compared to \$400.00 in Richmond, and \$450.00 in Charleston.<sup>25</sup> The cost of female slaves "of good quality" typically ranged between sixty-five and eighty-five percent of the cost of the most desirable adult males.<sup>26</sup> As long as slave prices were higher in Kentucky than in the states east of the Appalachians, economic conditions were favorable for slave trade from east to west and within Kentucky. When "King Cotton" drove slave prices up in the Gulf states in the 1800s, conditions for east to west trade in the border states deteriorated, but conditions for trade between the upper south and the lower south became extremely favorable.<sup>27</sup>

The rising cost of slaves also made slave hiring an attractive alternative source of labor for whites who could not afford to purchase slaves outright since it was possible to "rent" a slave for ten to twenty percent of the purchase price. Because the cost of hiring slaves was higher in Kentucky than in the east, this practice became both a

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25 Ullrich B. Phillips, "The Slave Economy of the Old South," in Eugene D. Genovese, ed., *Selected Essays in Economic and Social History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 142.

26 John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 114-18.

27 Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 94-99.

lucrative supplement to the income of many slaveholders and a perceived necessity to many businesses and whites of more moderate means.<sup>28</sup> Thus, much as land values increased as the population and prosperity of the area grew, the value of slave property increased as well.

#### SLAVERY: CONDITIONS OF LIFE AND "RACE RELATIONS"

As mentioned previously, whether in the town of Louisville or the surrounding county, some African-Americans preceded or accompanied the more affluent of the early settlers; others were acquired as the fortunes of pioneers improved. In essence, enslaved African-Americans were the farm machines and the household appliances of this era which whites believed necessary both for their comfort and for the productivity of their lands and other enterprises.

Because of this, slavery was first and foremost a labor system, and work—often intense physical labor—was the one constant in the lives of adolescent and adult slaves. Two basic types of labor organization were used by slaveholders in the colonial and antebellum periods: the task system, common in rice-growing regions along the Carolina and Georgia coastal regions and the gang-labor system, common in cotton- and sugar-growing regions.<sup>29</sup> However, Kentucky, even in the 1800s, was neither a rice- nor a cotton-growing state. Hemp and tobacco were the cash crops often cultivated on the larger plantations, but most slaveholdings were committed to the cultivation of food crops, such as wheat, corn, and the raising of livestock which dictated how slave labor was organized and used. While frontier conditions prevailed, enslaved African-American men, often alongside white men, worked primarily to clear land, build houses and other farm structures, grow crops, assist in defense, and labor in the nascent industries of the area, such as salt and rope-works. Since

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28 Eslinger, "Shape of Slavery," 14.

29 Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 1-48.

African-Americans were armed only in the direst emergencies, they were seldom responsible for hunting game. Similarly, enslaved African-American women often shared responsibility with white and black men for agricultural work but more often assisted with or relieved white women of the drudgery of cooking, spinning, weaving, sewing, laundry, and other household tasks.<sup>30</sup>

Early white settlers had few amenities, and slaves had even fewer. Until the construction of slave quarters could be undertaken, enslaved African-Americans often lived outside or in a separate section of the same structure occupied by their owners. Slave cabins in the late 1700s were typically small, usually around sixteen by fourteen feet, built of logs or natural stone from the surrounding area, with brick or stone fireplaces, chimneys made of sticks or clay, dirt floors, and few, if any, windows. Although slaves in Kentucky were considered "well housed" by many, the greater sturdiness of slave quarters in the state compared to those farther south was more a function of the need for protection against occasionally severe winters. Beyond considerations related to climate, the quality of slave housing depended largely on the wealth and "attitude" of the slaveholder.<sup>31</sup>

Most enslaved African-Americans and most white slaveholders had limited wardrobes made from available materials and suited to the extremes of Kentucky's climate. Even the relatively affluent had few, if any, changes of clothing. Slaves wore similar clothes but lacked the "fancier" or more costly items of wearing apparel. The comparatively cold winters of the Bluegrass region made rough fabrics of adequate weight and shoes, at least in season, a necessity.<sup>32</sup> As with clothing and shelter, whites and enslaved African-Americans ate similar foods. Nevertheless, less food was available to slaves and what they grew or received through rations had less variety and was of

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30 Pratt Byrd, "The Kentucky Frontier in 1792," *Quarterly*, 25 (1951): 190-91; Durrett, *Centenary of Louisville*, 83-85; Threlkel, "Mann's Lick," 170-73.

31 Coleman, "Slavery Times," 66.

32 Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 12-13.

lower quality. In some cases, slaves had "private" gardens or shared a common garden (provision ground) where vegetables were grown. Some slaveholders also allowed slaves the opportunity to fish or hunt small game as a means of supplementing their diet and even to keep small livestock, such as chickens, near their cabins. As an example, on 24 September 1802, Alexander Bullitt of Oxmoor hired out nine slaves to the local business of Lowman, Ormsby and Campbell and specified that they were to:

provide for and allow each of them at least three quarters of a pound of Bacon or one pound of fresh meat per day together with an adequate quantity of good bread or good sound meal to make bread and in case the said Bullitt . . . shall chuse to furnish the said negroes with two milch cows he or they shall have a right to do so, the said Campbell shall be bound to feed them, as his or their cattle of the like kind are fed.<sup>33</sup>

This diet was typical for enslaved African-Americans in the late eighteenth century and did not change appreciably through the antebellum period. At best, it was adequate but repetitious and often unappealing.<sup>34</sup>

Beyond the essentials of labor, food, clothing, and shelter, the everyday lives of African-Americans in early Louisville, Jefferson County, and Kentucky were affected by several other factors—some objective and some wholly subjective. It is important to remember that African-Americans were involuntary migrants to Kentucky. Despite the many dangers, Kentucky embodied the promise of land (and possible wealth) and adventure for whites. For enslaved African-Americans, however, the prospect of being taken across the mountains into hostile territory and being compelled to provide much of the labor required to tame a virgin land was seldom welcomed.

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33 Bullitt Family Papers. Contract between Alexander Bullitt and Lowman, Ormsby and Campbell, 24 September 1802. Department of Special Collections, The Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky.

34 William D. Postell, *The Health of Slaves on Southern Plantations* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 85-86.





*Former Slave Quarters, Boone County, 1868*

The Filson Club Historical Society

Whites could choose to cross the mountains or remain in more familiar surroundings; African-Americans could not.

The overland journey into Kentucky was arduous, the more so since slaves usually made the trek on foot, while whites usually rode on horseback or in wagons once roads had been opened.<sup>35</sup> The trip downriver was viewed with equal trepidation. Regardless of how enslaved African-Americans entered the trans-Appalachian west, they faced almost certain separation from friends and loved ones—from the circumscribed world to which they were limited by slavery but in which they had spent their lives. For those who did not leave friends and family behind, there was the strong possibility that separation might occur through sale or being hired out in the west.<sup>36</sup>

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35 Daniel Drake, *Pioneer Life in Kentucky, 1785-1800* (New York, 1948; originally published in 1870), 176.

36 Eslinger, "Shape of Slavery," 4-5.



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35 Daniel Drake, *Pioneer Life in Kentucky, 1785-1800* (New York, 1948; originally published in 1870), 176.

36 Eslinger, "Shape of Slavery," 4-5.

In the frontier period, white men and enslaved African-American men were more likely to venture into Kentucky. However, by the 1790s, the number of African-American females approached that of males. This more balanced sex ratio established one of the preconditions for natural population increase—although, since African-American men were not always the biological fathers of the children of African-American women, this precondition was not always essential. As a consequence, tax records reflect the presence of substantial numbers of African-American children (nontithable slaves) by the late 1780s; roughly one-third or more of the African-American population of Jefferson County was below twelve years of age.<sup>37</sup> Thus, as the pace of settlement accelerated in the 1780s and 1790s, the African-American population in early Louisville, Jefferson County, and Kentucky began to resemble closely the demographic configuration of the African-American population of the United States. Ironically, the white population would remain heavily “male” for decades. For example, by 1820 the female-to-male ratio in Louisville was .58 for whites compared to .86 for free people of color and 1.08 for enslaved African-Americans. By 1850 the ratio for whites was still only .86, compared to 1.20 for free people of color and 1.25 for enslaved African-Americans.<sup>38</sup>

Despite favorable demography, family and social relations were decidedly problematic for African-Americans in early Kentucky from what can be inferred from available sources. Although a few whites owned large tracts of land and significant numbers of slaves, it was likewise true that most owned no slaves and many others had small slaveholdings or hired one or a few slaves. For example, by 1800 nearly twenty percent of all slaveholders in the “west” owned only one slave.<sup>39</sup> Thus, while many enslaved African-Americans lived with or near others of their race and status, many more lived relatively

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37 Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789, microfilm, Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Louisville, Kentucky.

38 Curry, *Free Black in Urban America*, 8-12, 252-53; Wade, *Slavery in the Cities*, 23-25.

39 U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 8-15.

isolated lives in the service of whites scattered across a thinly populated landscape. The freedom to travel was limited by law and by the dangers of the countryside. The number of free people of color, who could move about more freely, was negligible.

At best, slavery distorted human relationships between slaves, but it was possible at least for enslaved African-Americans to establish family and social relationships with one another. Since the master-slave relationship was one of unequal power, social relations and interaction of any kind were virtually impossible for those African-Americans living in isolation. African-Americans may have enjoyed greater relative equality with whites during the frontier and early settlement periods, but they were still enslaved. One can only imagine and empathize with the inner bleakness and loneliness of their lives.

SLAVEHOLDING AND THE "FIRST FAMILIES"  
OF EARLY LOUISVILLE AND JEFFERSON COUNTY

The human tapestry of early Louisville and Jefferson County was created by interweaving the lives of whites and African-Americans. However, although African-Americans were a highly visible presence in the lives of the early settlers, particularly the more notable ones, they are often invisible in the histories and biographies of this period. What is omitted from the standard accounts is often as interesting as what is typically included.

In 1776 Abraham Hite (b.1755) visited both Harrodsburg and Jefferson County. After serving in the Continental Army during the Revolution, Hite returned in 1782 to settle permanently on 975 acres located eight miles south of Louisville along the South Fork of Beargrass Creek near modern-day Bardstown Road. In partnership with his father Colonel Abraham Hite and his brothers Isaac and Joseph, Hite owned thousands of acres in Jefferson, Oldham, Jessamine, and Shelby counties. Hite was appointed a County Court judge and a trustee of the town of Louisville in 1790, and he served as

one of five Jefferson County magistrates in the early 1800s.<sup>40</sup> The Hite family were moderate to large slaveholders with thirteen tithable slaves in 1789, seventeen in 1790, and fourteen slaves in 1791, at least thirteen in 1792, fifteen in 1793, and fourteen in 1800.<sup>41</sup>

In late 1773 James Francis Moore (b. 1751) accompanied his first cousin James Harrod during the establishment of Fort Harrod in the central Bluegrass. In 1779 Colonel Moore moved from Maryland and built a cabin on his two-hundred-acre tract two miles south of modern-day Okolona along the Wilderness Trail near a cluster of springs known as "the Fishpools." Because of its location, his home, the "Fishpools Plantation," became a refuge for travelers. It is believed that Colonel John Floyd died in Moore's cabin after having been mortally wounded by Native Americans in April 1783.<sup>42</sup> Colonel Moore entered Kentucky with his slaves and remained a small slaveholder until his sudden death in 1809. Moore was one of the early leaders of Jefferson County and also served in the Kentucky Senate.<sup>43</sup>

In 1780 Moses Tyler (1755-1839) moved to Kentucky with his father Edward and his brother William. By 1795, Tyler and his family owned roughly one thousand acres in eastern Jefferson County. Tyler's home, now known as Blackacre, was built on his section of this large family complex—the entirety of which may have been the Old Wilderness Fort. In 1798 Tyler established one of the first licensed distilleries in Kentucky. This productive rural settlement in modern-day Jeffersontown relied on a small-to-moderate-sized slave

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40 Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Site File JF 208, Jefferson County Urban County Government Center.

41 Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789-1800, microfilm, Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives.

42 Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Site File JF 96; Louise Warren, "Heritage Flows from 'Fish Pool Plantation' History," *Voice of St. Matthews*, 12 October 1983, p. 18.

43 Donald Dearing, "James Francis Moore: Soldier, Frontiersman, Politician," Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, 1992; Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789-1820.

labor force. Still a working farm and nature preserve, many of the original buildings, including slave quarters, have been maintained.<sup>44</sup>

William Croghan (1752-1822) was the surveying partner and eventual brother-in-law of General George Rogers Clark. Croghan acquired extensive landholdings in several Kentucky counties and built his large showplace home, Locust Grove, in northeastern Jefferson County around 1790. For many years, under Croghan and his descendants, Locust Grove was considered the "cultural and social center" at the Falls of the Ohio and was visited by such notables as John James Audubon, Aaron Burr, Andrew Jackson, and James Monroe.<sup>45</sup> Croghan owned six slaves in 1789; the number increased to forty-one by 1820.<sup>46</sup> It was this "invisible" labor force which built and maintained Locust Grove and served its many occupants and distinguished guests.

Richard Chenoweth (1734-1802) was a key figure in the early history of Kentucky who is largely unknown to the present generation. Chenoweth visited Kentucky in 1776 and, with his wife and children, joined George Rogers Clark's expedition that reached the Falls of the Ohio on 27 May 1778. Chenoweth performed several critically important services in the early years of settlement, the first of which was overseeing the construction of the on-shore fort to which the Corn Island settlers moved in the autumn of 1778. Even more significant, Chenoweth was principally responsible for building Fort Nelson, largely at his own expense. Because he was never repaid, Chenoweth was dogged by creditors, lawsuits, and claims against his property

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44 Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Site File JF 298; Robert C. Jobson, *A History of Early Jeffersontown and Southeastern Jefferson County, Kentucky* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1977), 12-13.

45 Eugene H. Connor and Samuel W. Thomas, "John Croghan (1790-1849): An Enterprising Kentucky Physician," *Quarterly* 40 (1966): 355-59; Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Site File JF 524; Samuel W. Thomas, "The History and Restoration of 'Locust Grove,' near Louisville, Kentucky, built ca. 1790," *Register* 65 (1967): 271-77; Samuel W. Thomas, "William Croghan, Sr. (1752-1822): A Pioneer Kentucky Gentleman," *Quarterly* 43 (1969): 30-61.

46 Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789-1820; United States Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics*, 8-15.

from 1784 until the end of his life. Apart from his work as a builder, Chenoweth was elected one of the first seven trustees of Louisville in April 1779. Also, as early as 1779 he worked as superintendent, perhaps the first, of the Bullitt's Lick saltworks and produced forty-two bushels of salt for Clark's army in December 1779. Between 1780 and 1782, he served as sheriff of Jefferson County and as justice of the peace of the Jefferson County Court from 1783 to 1785.<sup>47</sup>

In 1783 Chenoweth moved his family to Chenoweth Station near modern-day Middletown. He and the other settlers in this outlying area were dangerously exposed to Native-American raids. Predictably, the family suffered an attack in 1786, which left Chenoweth's son James with a crippling leg wound. In 1787 another son Thomas was captured and taken to Detroit where he was held for more than two years. However, the most serious and memorable attack occurred on 17 July 1789 as part of a far-flung Native-American "offensive" against Kentucky settlements. According to several contemporary accounts, the family and the men assigned to guard Chenoweth Station were attacked at dinnertime. One of the soldiers was overcome and later burned at the stake; another was killed outright and scalped in the house. Three Chenoweth children, Peggy, Polly, and Levi, were killed. Chenoweth himself, his son James, and daughter Amelia were wounded. Another young child was overlooked. Chenoweth's wife Margaret was wounded, scalped, and left for dead. However, she survived the "Chenoweth Massacre" and wore a skull-cap for her remaining years to conceal her scarred and hairless head.<sup>48</sup>

Reminiscences of the descendants of Richard Chenoweth, particularly those of his son James are a useful (although not always reliable) supplement to the historical record and are at times at variance with other official documents or commonly accepted

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47 Blaine A. Guthrie, "Captain Richard Chenoweth: A Founding Father of Louisville," *Quarterly* 46 (1972): 147-60.

48 *Ibid.*; Alfred Pirtle, *James Chenoweth: The Story of One of the Earliest Boys of Louisville* (Louisville, 1921), 31-38 and "Where Louisville Started," pamphlet, 1910, Filson Club Historical Society.

viewpoints. These recollections, published by a family descendant who as a child listened to the elderly James Chenoweth recount the events of his childhood, are subject to the usual vagaries of memory and the "halo-effect" of family biography.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the variances are most interesting and most dramatic with respect to the role and presence of African-Americans in early Louisville and in the lives of the Chenoweth family.

James Chenoweth recalled that enslaved African-Americans were numerous in early Louisville and Jefferson County. He noted that most slaves "were brought from Virginia" but that those belonging to his family "were bought here in Kentucky." This, of course, suggests that slave-trading occurred, prompted by the labor needs of early settlers and often by their ability to convert (barter) land into slave property. Chenoweth also remembered that, as was common in slaveholding societies, "children, white and black, were companions until we grew up" and that, before his family moved to Chenoweth Station, his father "built a good double cabin" and "then cleared more land, built cabins for the negroes, stables for the horses and cribs for the corn."<sup>50</sup>

In an April 1788 lawsuit against the elder Chenoweth, based on the claim that he unscrupulously attempted to sell the same land to two buyers, Chenoweth, claiming he owned no land of equal value, offered to settle by transferring ownership of "Negro slaves to the amount of 500 acres."<sup>51</sup> Tax records for 1789 and thereafter do not indicate that Chenoweth owned any enslaved African-Americans, and he was judged insolvent when he died in 1802.<sup>52</sup> However, James Chenoweth remembered cabins built for and probably occupied by "the negroes" in the early 1780s before reliable tax records were kept and stated that, when the "Chenoweth Massacre" occurred in 1789, "there were negroes in the cabins."<sup>53</sup>

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49 Pirtle, *Chenoweth*, 1.

50 *Ibid.*, 24-27.

51 Guthrie, "Chenoweth," 155.

52 Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789-1820.

53 Guthrie, "Chenoweth," 159; Pirtle, *Chenoweth*, 31.



While it is probable that Richard Chenoweth's financial difficulties would have ultimately forced him to sell his most valuable property, including his slaves, this does not mean that he had done so by the summer of 1789. Beyond this, James Chenoweth's memory of perhaps the most frightening and tragic incident of his life was not likely to dim over the years—and this memory included the presence of "negroes in the cabins." Most intriguing of all, and perhaps most bitterly ironic, is the simple question: If enslaved African-Americans were present at the "Chenoweth Massacre," what was their fate? Were they killed? Captured? Both Chenoweth and the historical record are silent on this point.

The Bullitt family played a prominent role in both the early and subsequent history of Louisville, Jefferson County, and Kentucky. Captain Thomas Bullitt led one of the early surveying parties to the Falls of the Ohio in 1773. Bullitt's nephew Alexander Scott Bullitt (1762-1816) came to Kentucky with his future father-in-law William Christian in 1784. Christian, himself the brother-in-law of Patrick Henry, had acquired roughly one thousand acres of prime land along Beargrass Creek, several miles east of the Falls of the Ohio, and sent his slaves to begin construction of a dwelling place thereon before removing to Kentucky himself.<sup>54</sup> After Bullitt married Priscilla Christian in 1785 and William Christian was killed by Native Americans in 1786, Bullitt inherited this land. In 1787 he built a six-room, two-story, white frame farmhouse on the property, which was called Oxmoor. The house was enlarged in the years and generations that followed.<sup>55</sup>

Along with being a major landowner, Bullitt played a central role in the formation of Kentucky. Bullitt was recommended as county

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54 Kathleen Jennings, *Louisville's First Families: A Series of Genealogical Sketches* (Louisville, 1920), 20.

55 Thomas J. Bullitt, "Oxmoor and the Bullitts," paper presented to The Filson Club, 1980, Filson Club Historical Society; Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Site Files JF 312-314; Susannah M. Wilson, "Room for Books: An Extraordinary Library in Kentucky," *Southern Accents* (1980): 80-84.

lieutenant for Jefferson County in 1786.<sup>56</sup> Bullitt County was named in his honor.<sup>57</sup> He was among the leaders of the effort to counter opposition to slavery at the 1792 Kentucky Constitutional Convention, served as speaker of the Kentucky Senate (1792-1800) and as president of the 1799 Kentucky Constitutional Convention; he became the first lieutenant governor of the Commonwealth in 1800.<sup>58</sup> Bullitt was also one of the largest slaveholders in Jefferson County—and in Kentucky as well.

According to Jefferson County tax records, Alexander Bullitt owned twenty-three slaves in 1789 and forty slaves in 1790. By 1792, there were 824 enslaved African-Americans in Jefferson County and Bullitt owned fifty-three of them. From 1795 to 1814, the size of Bullitt's slaveholding fluctuated between sixty-five and eighty, quite large for this period.<sup>59</sup> Thus in early Jefferson County Alexander Bullitt was master of a showplace plantation and a member of the economic and political elite of the Commonwealth.<sup>60</sup>

When Bullitt died, his property, including his slaves, was divided between his second wife Mary Churchill Bullitt (1770-1817), sister of the slaveholding Churchills (see tables 5 and 6), and the surviving children of his first marriage, Ann, Cuthbert, William, and Thomas. His other surviving daughter, Helen, who was married to Henry Massie at the time of Bullitt's death, had already obtained her share of the estate. Such a complex division of human property resulted in ninety-eight slaves being mentioned by name in Bullitt's will.<sup>61</sup>

These records and other Bullitt family documents indicate that Alexander Bullitt was extremely active in farming (eventually, Oxmoor would produce a large hemp crop), the buying, hiring, and

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56 Jefferson County Court Order Minutes, Book 2: 13, microfilm, Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives.

57 Jennings, *Louisville's First Families*, 20.

58 Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic*, 23, 129.

59 Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789-1820.

60 Coward, *Kentucky in the New Republic*, 23.

61 Jefferson County Wills, Book 2: 37-40, microfilm, Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives.

presumably the selling of enslaved African-Americans. The number of African-American children mentioned in Bullitt's will, moreover, suggests that, even if enslaved African-American women were not being encouraged to reproduce, they certainly were not being discouraged from doing so.

As noted previously, Colonel John Floyd (1750-1783) was one of the earliest and certainly one of the most historically significant settlers of Jefferson County. Floyd, described as being of mixed white and Native-American (Powhatan) ancestry, was appointed deputy surveyor of Fincastle County, Virginia, by Colonel William Preston and was dispatched to the west in April 1774 to survey lands granted to Preston and other veterans of the French and Indian War.<sup>62</sup> Floyd spent long periods in the Kentucky country in 1774, 1775, and 1776, visited Boonesborough and other early settlements, and gained a well-deserved reputation as a skilled woodsman, a natural leader, and even a scholar. Floyd accompanied Daniel Boone in pursuit of the Shawnee and Cherokee who kidnapped Boone's daughter Jemima in July 1776.<sup>63</sup> On 8 November 1779, Floyd settled permanently in Jefferson County, six miles east of town on Beargrass Creek and began building the house and stockade known as Floyd's Station. Parts of modern-day St. Matthews, Breckinridge Lane, Seneca Park, and Bowman Field now occupy the land surveyed by Floyd in 1774 and settled by him in 1779.<sup>64</sup>

Because of his considerable abilities, Floyd became a central figure, not only in early Jefferson County but in Kentucky as well.<sup>65</sup>

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62 Hambleton Tapp, "Colonel John Floyd, Kentucky Pioneer," *Quarterly* 15 (1941): 1-24.

63 Anna M. Cartlidge, "Colonel John Floyd: Reluctant Adventurer," *Register* 66 (1968): 317-66; Tapp, "Colonel John Floyd," 1-24.

64 Alexander G. Booth, "Floyd-Breckinridge Graveyard," *Quarterly* 24 (1950): 53-57; Draper Collection (DC), 5B63-5B64; Jefferson County Historic Preservation and Archives, Site File JF 315.

65 Cartlidge, "Reluctant Adventurer," 317-66; DC, 51J89, 60J140; *Jefferson Reporter*, 29 September 1967; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 4 November 1966, 24 September 1967; *Louisville Times*, 23 September 1967; Tapp, "Colonel John Floyd," 1-24.

Floyd died in April 1783 after having been mortally wounded by Native Americans two days earlier—an ambush he literally invited by wearing his bright red wedding shirt.<sup>66</sup> This heroic young adventurer was born in a slaveholding society and into a family that, in times of good fortune, owned slaves; Floyd's mother grew to adulthood in a family that owned ten to fifteen slaves.

Floyd, as he rose to ever higher office, owned slaves in both in Virginia and in Kentucky. It is known, for example, that when Floyd moved to Kentucky in 1779 with his wife and newborn son, he was accompanied by his "Negro man Bob."<sup>67</sup> Between the beginning of this journey in September and its conclusion in November 1779, Floyd visited Harrodsburg to establish his land claims before commissioners from Virginia. On 29 October, in addition to his lands in Jefferson County, Floyd was certified the owner of fourteen hundred acres at Woodstock (land in Fayette County surveyed for Preston). Floyd was promptly offered "six fine Virginia born Negroes" in exchange for this land.<sup>68</sup> Floyd demurred but regretted his decision when Bob died after losing most of his right foot attempting to fell a tree for Floyd's cabin. Interestingly, Floyd was forced to complete the cabin himself, which he considered a great burden, if not an indignity. It is also interesting that one of the probable causes of Bob's death was frostbite. Building a cabin for Floyd's family was the first priority, and Bob had no shelter in the extremely severe winter of 1779-1780 since Floyd, however much he needed Bob's labor, would not allow a slave to huddle in the corner of his own living quarters.<sup>69</sup> One can only wonder if Floyd's solicitude varied in direct proportion to Bob's value, and an enslaved African-American with only one foot had very little value.

In his will, Floyd directed that all lands to which he held title were:

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66 Cartlidge, "Reluctant Adventurer," 364.

67 *Ibid.*, 347.

68 DC, 17CC184.

69 *Ibid.*, 17CC135-37.

to go and descend to my wife and all my Children. . except so much thereof as may be thought by my Executors should be sold for the purpose of purchasing Slaves for the benefit of my family for paying for building or finishing a house . . . and all slaves which are owing to me or that may be purchased for my estate, are to be divided among my wife and all Children.<sup>70</sup>

While the promising career of John Floyd ended in premature death, George Rogers Clark (1752-1818), generally considered the founder of Louisville, descended into a strange blend of legend and obscurity long before his demise. Clark's greatest achievements occurred before he left military service in 1783, the most important being his victories against the British and the Native Americans in the Ohio Country and other sections of the Northwest.<sup>71</sup> Incessant money problems haunted Clark, as he had indebted himself to finance some of his campaigns, and neither Virginia nor the Continental Congress nor the U. S. government compensated him adequately. Most problematic of all, however, were the rumors of Clark's habitual drunkenness that began to circulate in the 1780s.<sup>72</sup> Thus Clark, who could have been one of the major figures of American history, faded into the shadows. Eventually, he moved to the home of his sister Lucy and her husband William Croghan, at Locust Grove near Louisville—where he died on 13 February 1818, virtually penniless.<sup>73</sup>

As major figures in the settlement of the trans-Appalachian West, the Clark family supported slavery and enjoyed a long and intimate association with enslaved African-Americans. Clark's parents John and Ann Rogers Clark were slaveholders and viewed slaveholding and land acquisition as did most upwardly mobile Virginians of their generation. Consequently, on Clark's second visit to the west (ca.

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70 Jefferson County Court Order Minutes, Book A: 65-67.

71 Lowell H. Harrison, *George Rogers Clark and the War in the West* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1976); Hambleton Tapp, "George Rogers Clark, A Biographical Sketch," *Quarterly* 15 (1941): 133-51.

72 Harrison, *George Rogers Clark*, 100-10; Richard Lowitt, "Activities of Citizen Genet in Kentucky: 1793-1794," *Quarterly* 22 (1948): 252-67.

73 Jefferson County Wills, 5 November 1815, Book 2: 412.

1772), he was accompanied by his father, a friend, and two enslaved African-Americans.<sup>74</sup>

When John and Ann Clark moved to Jefferson County, they moved with their slaves, and in 1784 they built a home at Mulberry Hill on their three-hundred-acre landholding on Beargrass Creek south of modern-day Eastern Parkway near Poplar Level Road.<sup>75</sup> According to county tax records (see table 5), John Clark owned fourteen enslaved African-Americans over twelve years of age in 1789, nineteen in 1791, twenty in 1793, twenty-three in 1795, and twenty in 1797.<sup>76</sup> When John and Ann Clark died in 1799, John Clark bequeathed land in Jefferson County and elsewhere to his sons, Jonathan, William, and Edmund and divided "his Negroes" among his sons and sons-in-law. George Rogers Clark received only "one Negro man and a negro woman" and her children who would attend him after he moved to Clarksville in 1803 since, although Indiana was "free territory" under the terms of the Northwest Ordinance (1787), the U. S. Constitution provided that enslaved African-Americans did not become free simply by escaping or being taken from a slave state.<sup>77</sup>

George Rogers Clark slipped quietly into obscurity in his later years, but the Clark family would remain a significant force in the shaping of the "west" through the career of his younger brother William. Also, through William Clark, the Clark family would establish two fascinating relationships with African-Americans—the first largely hidden and the second well known.

Although William Clark would marry twice after returning from the Lewis and Clark Expedition—in 1808 to Julia Hancock and after her death to her cousin Harriett Redford in 1822—he had another "family" before departing on his journey to the Pacific. Among the enslaved African-Americans bequeathed to Clark by his father in

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74 Harrison, *George Rogers Clark*, 4.

75 Ludie. J. Kinkead, "How the Parents of George Rogers Clark Came to Kentucky in 1784-1785," *Quarterly* 3 (1928): 1-4.

76 Jefferson County Tax Lists, 1789-1820.

77 Jefferson County Wills, 28 July 1799, Book 1, 86.

1799 was "Betty," a Virginia-born mulatto woman who "was the mother of two children by William Clark . . . Michael and Evelina."<sup>78</sup>

While such liaisons were common, Clark was atypical in that he "did not neglect his colored children." Before embarking on the expedition, "this part of his family were moved to Cincinnati for their safety" and emancipated under Ohio law. Michael Clark married three times, the last to Eliza Jane Morris, herself the product of a similar "Jefferson-Hemings" relationship and the younger sister of Shelton Morris, who would figure prominently in the formation of Louisville's free African-American community.<sup>79</sup>

Peter H. Clark (1829-1925), his son by his second wife, later became a prominent educator and leader in Cincinnati and St. Louis. When Peter Clark died in 1925, his relationship to "Major Billy Clark" was even noted in his obituary.<sup>80</sup> Years later, another article revisited this relationship:

Because the American bar sinister has put a taboo on the white-Negro marriage relation, has classified it as miscegenation and kept it hush-hush, the natural relation of a heroic grandfather and as equally heroic a grandson has been kept in the darkness of misunderstanding.<sup>81</sup>

Far better known are William Clark's contributions to the exploration of the west. In this respect, the record of his career as an explorer would always be linked with that of an African-American because in 1799 he also inherited from his father a "Negro man named York," along with York's parents and sister Juba. York would become perhaps the most famous African-American resident of early Louisville and Jefferson County and the only one who exists in the historical record as a unique personality.

Because York was William Clark's "servant" and Clark referred to their being childhood playmates, it is highly probable that York was

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78 Ernestine G. Lucas, *Wider Windows to the Past: African-American History from a Family Perspective* (Decorah, Iowa: Anundsen Publishing Company, 1995), 94.

79 Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation*, 95.

80 *St. Louis Argus*, 21 June 1925.

81 *St. Louis American*, 22 September 1964.

born between 1770, when Clark was born, and 1775. As boys growing to adolescence, both Clark and York would have assisted in clearing fields, constructing buildings, and hunting, and they shared some of the adventures and dangers of frontier Jefferson County. When Clark received the invitation from Meriwether Lewis to share leadership of the proposed expedition to the west, he decided to take York along.<sup>82</sup>

The expedition departed from St. Louis on 14 May 1804. It included thirty-one men, most of whom were either soldiers or volunteers from settlements between the Appalachians and the Mississippi, one woman—the legendary Sacagewea of the Shoshone nation who joined the party with her French husband in the Dakotas, and York.<sup>83</sup> By the time of their return on 23 September 1806, they had traveled eight thousand miles and had visited lands that only the Native Americans had seen before—out of which eleven new states would eventually be created.<sup>84</sup> York performed physical labor, served Lewis and Clark, was present at meetings with the Native Americans of the Lower Missouri (who had seen African-Americans before), and in general became a center of attention when the party reached the Dakotas. There, the Native Americans, who had never beheld a black man, called York “the big medicine,” and they “all flocked around him and examined him from top to toe.” York, for his part, joked with them and performed feats of strength and even danced; it became readily apparent to Lewis and Clark that he could be not only a servant and laborer but also an asset in their dealings with the Native Americans of the Great Plains.<sup>85</sup>

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82 Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark* (Boulder, Colorado: Colorado Associated University Press, 1985), 84-85, 102-103; William C. Kennerly, *Perstimon Hill: A Narrative of Old St. Louis and the Far West* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948), 11-12.

83. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 68-80.

84 Betts, *In Search of York*, 1-5.

85 Nicholas C. Polos, “Explorer with Lewis and Clark,” *Negro History Bulletin* 45 (1982): 90-96; Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-06* (8 vols.; New York, 1904-1905), 1:186-250.



When the party returned to St. Louis in 1806, York was lionized along with his comrades. However, while Lewis and Clark received prestigious appointments and each of the other men received double pay and a 320-acre land grant for his services, York (and Sacagewea, who left the expedition with her husband and child in the Dakotas) received nothing.<sup>86</sup> Nor did Clark free York after the expedition—rather, after Clark was appointed brigadier general of the Louisiana territorial militia and superintendent of Indian affairs in 1807, York accompanied him to St. Louis and managed his household for the next several years. From letters that Clark wrote to his brother Jonathan it becomes clear that York pressed Clark for his freedom upon his return from the expedition. The fact that York had a “wife” who was enslaved in Louisville was also introduced in this correspondence, although questions regarding whether York was “married” before or after the expedition, or whether he had any children, cannot be answered. By 1808 York’s demands for freedom had caused a deep and bitter breach in his relationship with Clark. Eventually, Clark stated on 9 November 1808 that he would:

send York and permit him to Stay a few weeks with his wife, he wishes to Stay there altogether and hire himself which I have refused. He prefers being Sold to returning here (but) he is Serviceable to me at this place, I am determined not to Sell him, to gratify him, and have directed him to return . . . to this place, this fall.<sup>87</sup>

Clark believed that York had been ruined as a slave because “he has got Such a notion about freedom and his emence Services.” Clark decided to hire York out in Louisville after all, but when York returned to St. Louis in May 1809, Clark wrote that he was “of very little Service to me, insolent and sukly (sic) “and that he “gave him a severe trouncing.” It is a bitter but illuminating irony that York would receive worse treatment “at home” than on his long and perilous

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<sup>86</sup> Thwaites, *Original Journals*, 5: 390-95.

<sup>87</sup> James J. Holmberg, “‘I Wish You to See and Know All’: The Recently Discovered Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark,” *We Proceeded On* 4 (1992): 7-9.

journey—and would be beaten “and denied not only his freedom, but his wife and, we may suppose, children.”<sup>88</sup> The last reliable reference to York dates to 1811. He was still not free but had been allowed to hire himself out in Louisville again.<sup>89</sup>

In 1832, the famous author Washington Irving asked Clark what happened to York and reported that Clark replied as follows:

His slaves—set them free. . . a third he gave a large wagon and team of 6 horses to ply between Nashville and Richmond. They all repented and wanted to come back. The waggoner was York. . . He could not get up early enough in the morning—his horses were ill kept—two died—the others grew poor. He sold them, was cheated—entered into service—fared ill. . . He determined to go back to his old master—set off for St. Louis, but was taken with the cholera in Tennessee and died.<sup>90</sup>

The final thread of evidence concerning York provides an intriguing alternative explanation of his eventual whereabouts. Zenas Leonard was a fur-trapper who in 1832 met an “old Negro” in a Crow village in northern Wyoming. Before departing, the “old Negro” recounted that:

. . . he first came to this country with Lewis and Clark with whom he also returned to the state of Missouri, and in a few years returned again with a Mr. Mackinney, a trader on the Missouri river, and has remained here ever since—which is about ten or twelve years . . . He has rose to be quite a considerable character, or chief, in their village . . .

Leonard returned in 1834 and found the old black man still living with the Crows in “perfect peace and satisfaction.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite the hearsay and “sour grapes” evidence reported by Clark, there is no entry reflecting York’s death; as a free man his death would have been noted in the vital statistics records of Missouri,

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88 Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 458.

89 Betts, *In Search of York*, 112-13.

90 John F. McDermott, ed., *The Western Journals of Washington Irving* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1944), 82.

91 John C. Ewers, ed., *Adventures of Zenas Leonard, Fur Trader* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959): 51-52, 138-39.

Kentucky, or Tennessee. Of course, assuming York was freed, finding documents concerning York's life after manumission and his death is complicated by the fundamental problem of his name. Enslaved African-Americans were often, but not always, named by whites. Since African-Americans rarely had surnames, freed persons, even if they retained their first names, still had to choose a last name. The easy assumption that former slaves simply adopted the surnames of their former owners is a weak generalization at best. Once freed, African-Americans often discarded their "slave" names as part of the process of discarding their slave identities. In other words, as famous as the name of York had become, York may not have wanted to be York "Clark"—particularly given the nature of his relationship with Clark in later years. But if not Clark, who did he become?

York may have lived and died in his later years as Clark stated. However, in the absence of conclusive evidence to the contrary, it is, perhaps, only fitting to imagine that York died in the only land in which he had ever known the taste of freedom—thousands of miles from Mulberry Hill. It is unlikely that we shall ever know.

#### DISCUSSION

As indicated by the data and brief historical sketches of notable individuals and families reviewed here, the transplantation of slavery from the "east" into Kentucky occurred early. African-Americans were intimately involved in settling and building Louisville and Jefferson County, and their presence "in the cabins" was an everyday fact of life for the earliest residents of the area. Conversely, the limitations and dangers of being enslaved were everyday facts of life for African-Americans who helped lay the foundation of and labored to produce the prosperity of the region. However, the nature of slavery itself meant that the fruits of their labor accrued not to them but to those who "owned" them.

Slaveholding and landholding became the twin pillars supporting the wealth and political power of the "upper class" minority, and in Louisville, Jefferson County, and Kentucky, the early emergence of an inherently unnatural social structure can be observed and documented. This social structure, however, did not seem unnatural

at all to most of the early white settlers. The pioneers from Virginia and elsewhere who ventured west of the Appalachians were products of a slave society—with the history, culture, and habits of thought and behavior of a slave society. Slavery and the racial myths which excused its abuses would be both a profound contradiction and a moral blind spot for most of the early explorers and settlers of Kentucky. This blind spot enabled men and women, who were often quite admirable in their dealings with other whites, to dehumanize and exploit human beings who happened not to be white. Some white Americans of the era perceived this contradiction; most did not. These ideas and customs crossed the frontier into the “west” with the early Kentucky pioneers, took root in early Louisville and Jefferson County, and established fundamental patterns of racial, social, and economic relations that would persist through the antebellum period.