

## **ENCOUNTERING THE AMERICAN WEST: THE OHIO RIVER VALLEY, 1750-1820**

**February 2002 – March 2002**

### Introduction

For more than two centuries, American national identity has been tied inextricably to the idea of the West. The western dream of individual freedom and limitless expansion has shaped American cultural values and political ideologies. Literature, theater, and film have retraced the legends of the West and reinterpreted its heroes for modern audiences. Encountering the West has become a mode of examining America itself, a way of understanding the possibility and loss embodied in the national experience.

The lure of the West began with the earliest European voyages across the Atlantic, but it was not until the late eighteenth century that a distinctively American West emerged. In the great expanse of territory stretching from the Appalachians to the Mississippi, circumstance and opportunity created an arena of complex struggles that prefigured other western eras that followed. Its promise drew soldiers, adventurers, speculators, and common folk into the rich lands of the Ohio River Valley and the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. Its potential also provoked international rivalries, struggles for political power, appropriation of Native American lands, and the expansion of slavery beyond the eastern seaboard.

*Encountering the American West* explores the trans-Appalachian West from the beginning of European American settlement to the end of the frontier period, focusing particularly on the Ohio River Valley and Kentucky. It examines how those who came to the West encountered its possibilities and challenges and how they understood and later interpreted their encounters with other western peoples and cultures.

Items on display in this exhibition are selected from materials digitized for inclusion in a new web site, "The First American West: The Ohio River Valley, 1750-1820." A grant-funded project for the Library of Congress American Memory national digital library program, "The First American West" was developed by the University of Chicago Library in collaboration with the Filson Historical Society of Louisville, Kentucky. The web site being completed this spring is the result of cooperation between the Special Collections Research Center, Preservation Department, and Digital Library Development Center of the University of Chicago Library and the library and special collections staff of the Filson Historical Society.

The Library's richest source of original materials for this exhibition and for its contributions to the American Memory web site is the Reuben T. Durrett Collection on Kentucky and the Ohio River Valley. Additional materials in the exhibition are drawn from related print and manuscript holdings in the Special Collections Research Center and the General Collection of the Library.

### **Part 1: CONSTRUCTING A WESTERN PAST**

#### **Case 1 LEGENDS AND HISTORIES**

When Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* first appeared in successive editions between 1784 and 1788, most of his readers in Europe and America knew little of the vast lands to the west of the Appalachians. Won by the United States in its war of independence from Britain, the first American West stretched from the Great Lakes south

to Spanish Florida and from the crest of the Appalachians westward to the Mississippi River. For those eager to exploit the untapped western riches described in Jefferson's book, the history of the great territory was a blank page waiting to be written upon.

Today's western historians face a far different documentary landscape. Scholars seeking to interpret the trans-Appalachian West are faced with the challenge of untangling the complex and contradictory body of written records and testimony left in the wake of the settlement era. Equally important, they must examine the past through a powerful and distorting haze of myth, legend, and folklore that has shaped American understandings of the West since the late eighteenth century. Created while the forcible occupation of Native American lands was still underway, the earliest writings on the West sought to soften the harsh realities of western conquest and transform a brutal and often bitter struggle into an inspiring and heroic narrative.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the reconfigured biography of Daniel Boone, the Carolina hunter and explorer who made an intermittent living in the newly settled Kentucky as surveyor, land speculator, and store owner. Two of the earliest western narratives to be published, John Filson's promotional tract *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucke* (1784) and Daniel Bryan's epic poem *The Mountain Muse* (1813), refashioned Boone's frontier career as an epic saga of noble adventures.

Boone's legend also emerged in more sophisticated literature. When James Fenimore Cooper published *The Pioneers* (1823), the first volume of his widely read Leatherstocking Tales, he introduced Nathaniel (Natty) Bumppo as a fictional counterpart to the mythic wilderness figure of Daniel Boone. Popular books and magazines, along with literature for children, fixed a legend of Boone and his dauntless pioneer contemporaries firmly in the nineteenth-century imagination.

Boone's legendary persona swelled not only in America but also in Europe, where he was seen as the embodiment of the ideal natural man unmarked by the complexities and flaws of civilization. Lord Byron devoted part of the eighth canto of his masterpiece *Don Juan* to a celebration of Boone's imaginatively enlarged accomplishments.

## Case 2 LEGENDS AND HISTORIES

Academic interpretations of the West emerged in the late nineteenth century as a generation of antiquarians and gentleman historians were building collections of original source materials and shaping the public image of Western history. Lyman C. Draper, an antiquarian, collector, and secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, devoted fifty years to amassing original manuscripts and interviews on the settlement of the trans-Appalachian West. Bound in more than 500 volumes, Draper's notes preserve significant and frequently unique information on western settlement. Draper's successor, Reuben Gold Thwaites, directed attention to these materials through a monumental series of historical publications.

Colonel Reuben T. Durrett, an attorney and newspaper editor in Louisville, Kentucky, followed Draper's lead in collecting all types of books, manuscripts, maps, drawings, and paintings dealing with the history of Kentucky. Durrett, like Draper, held fixed assumptions about what was worth preserving, principally material on political and military history and Kentucky's prominent families. The Filson Club founded by Durrett

and his friends was a gentleman's retreat for reminiscence over cider and cigars, but it also helped collect and publish texts and narratives essential to western history.

The transition from amateur antiquarian to professional historian occurred just as Theodore Roosevelt's triumphalist saga, *The Winning of the West* (1889-1896) was appearing in print. At a historical conference held in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Professor Frederick Jackson Turner of the University of Wisconsin proclaimed that the "existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advancement of American settlement westward, explain American development."

Strongly influential for many decades but now frequently dismissed, Turner's thesis was among the earliest attempts to craft a new and more critical understanding of Western history. Today's historians of the trans-Appalachian West are re-examining the development of the region from fresh perspectives. Drawing on materials collected by nineteenth-century antiquarians but moving beyond their assumptions and prejudices, these scholars are writing a new history that emphasizes the complexities of the settlement era and the powerful impact of race, class, and gender in shaping the western experience.

## **PART 2: CONTESTED LANDS**

### Case 3-4 NATURE'S WEST

Early descriptions of the trans-Appalachian West conveyed the astonishing richness of the natural landscape and the life it supported. Much of the area, particularly the mountain slopes and uplands, was heavily wooded. Oaks, walnuts, hickories, maples, and elms were present in abundance, as were tulip trees, Kentucky coffee trees, honey locusts, persimmons, and sumacs. The great size of many trees fascinated explorers and travelers. George Washington, on a trip to the Ohio valley, noted a huge sycamore tree at the mouth of the Kanawha River that was forty-five feet in circumference. Some ancient western trees had hollows in their trunks capacious enough to hold a man on horseback.

The variety of western wildlife was equally spectacular. Rivers held schools of carp, catfish, perch, and sturgeon. Flocks of tens of thousands of passenger pigeons darkened the sky overhead. Bison roamed in great herds, and bears, wolves, and wildcats flourished in the woods and ravines. Hunters had no difficulty stalking these and other native game including turkeys, geese, elk, deer, and squirrels. After a hunting trip to the West in 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker reported, "We killed in the journey 13 buffaloes, 8 elks, 53 bears, 20 deers, 4 wild geese, and about 150 wild turkeys, besides small game. We might have killed 3 times as much meat if we had wanted it."

Among the earliest travelers to the West were professional and amateur scientists interested in collecting and cataloging specimens of plants and animals and monitoring patterns of weather and climate. Alone or in small parties, they entered the western territory with the tools of their trade — microscopes, telescopes, crucibles, thermometers, quadrants, maps, and journals, along with materials for writing, sketching, and painting.

Ornithologist Alexander Wilson and his contemporary John James Audubon focused on collecting, describing, and depicting the rich variety of western bird life, including species not seen on the eastern seaboard. Some observers like Thomas Jefferson and Jonathan Williams were absorbed by the dramatic natural landscape and the atmospheric and environmental conditions it produced. Other students of the West were

scientists like Constantine Samuel Rafinesque, professor of botany and natural science at Transylvania University, who recorded animal life of all types and devoted particular attention to newly discovered varieties of fish observed in western waters.

#### Case 5 WESTERN EXPLORATIONS

The first explorations of the trans-Appalachian West by European Americans came in the late seventeenth century. Virginia Colonel Abram Wood made the earliest recorded visit to what would become Kentucky in 1654. At that time and for more than a century that followed, France claimed the entire region to the west of the Appalachians. French outposts were established on the Wabash, Illinois, Mississippi and other western rivers. In 1729, French traders and groups of Delaware, Shawnee, and Mingo established Lower Shawneetown in Ohio. French hegemony remained in place until 1763, when France's defeat in the French and Indian War brought the whole vast western territory into British hands.

Although a British royal proclamation forbade any settlement west of the crest of the Appalachians, explorers and settlers were already beginning to push deeper into the interior. In 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker, traveling on behalf of the Loyal Land Company of Virginia, discovered Cumberland Gap. That same year, the owners of the Ohio Company commissioned Christopher Gist to explore their western lands; after traveling down the Ohio River, Gist explored eastern Kentucky and crossed the mountains into the Carolinas. Daniel Boone first visited Kentucky in 1767, and he returned to Kentucky in 1769 with a party of hunters led by John Finley for a two-year exploration of the region. By the time Simon Kenton entered northern Kentucky in 1771, the stream of traders, surveyors, and settlers coming westward from Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina was growing larger each year.

Western explorers and the information they collected were of immediate use to American government officials and land development companies, but their reports were also an important factor in developing European interest in the West. English and French editions of books describing travels in the West conveyed the wonder and promise of the new territory and encouraged European observers to follow Americans westward over the mountains.

#### Case 6 ANCIENT MYSTERIES

When European Americans first entered the western country, they were intrigued and puzzled by numerous mounds and earthworks found in abundance along rivers and highlands. As early as 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker noted earthworks at the head of the Cumberland River in Kentucky. Clusters of earthen mounds were discovered throughout the Ohio River Valley and Kentucky, at locations such as Grave Creek in what is now West Virginia and at the site of Marietta on the Ohio. Eventually, more than 10,000 mounds were recorded in the Ohio country north of the river. Larger and more elaborate mound complexes were discovered further west and south, some of the most notable on the Ohio near the Wabash and on the Mississippi near its confluence with the Missouri. In some places, mummified human remains and other artifacts of ancient life were uncovered.

The Native American peoples living near these formations had not built them, and European Americans with dismissive racist assumptions found it impossible to believe

that any immediate forebearers of the indigenous tribes could have constructed such impressive complexes. A variety of imaginative theories were advanced to identify the mysterious “mound builders” who had created the earthforms. Some observers claimed that they had been constructed by the lost tribes of Israel or by Tartars or Greeks. Some saw clear ties to the culture of the Welsh, Vikings, Hindus, or Phoenicians. Whatever was made of their origin, most of the mounds were not considered sufficiently valuable to be preserved for more careful study. Farmers routinely leveled mounds while plowing their fields, and rectilinear patterns of urban streets were surveyed directly through rather than around the larger earthworks. Dr. Daniel Drake systematically excavated a few of the mounds in his home city of Cincinnati, but many of the ancient western earthworks, and much of the information they may have contained about their origins, disappeared in the era of settlement.

#### Case 7 NATIVE ENCOUNTERS

Anglo-Americans looking westward beyond the Blue Ridge imagined it to be a vast territory largely unoccupied and freely available for the taking. Kentucky was though to be a “happy hunting ground” shared amicably by a number of Native American tribes but not exclusively claimed by any of them.

To be sure, when explorers and settlers first arrived, the trans-Appalachian West was not very heavily populated. By 1690, many of the Native American peoples in the eastern part of the region had been driven out by the Iroquois and their allies. A scattering of groups had returned, but their communities were concentrated in a few locations along river lowlands, and they did not maintain close connections with each other. In 1797 Gilbert Imlay estimated that within the entire area between the Allegheny and Wabash Rivers and south to the Tennessee River the Native American population totaled no more than 6,000.

At the time of initial European American settlement, the principal peoples living in the upper Ohio River valley were the Shawnee and the Delaware. As Native Americans were displaced from traditional lands further to the east, they migrated into the western territory and intermingled with existing populations, resulting in the overlapping presence of Miami, Wyandots, Pottawatomi, Wea, and Piankishaw. Most of these groups moved through the region seasonally to hunt and trap, although sizeable Native American towns of several hundred residents could also be found, particularly in the Ohio country at locations such as Lower Shawneetown.

Most accounts of Native American life and culture came from European Americans responding to situations of intense danger or brutal conflict: narratives of escaped captives, military reports on expeditions and battles, or letters and stories of settlers describing bloody attacks. Even more thoughtful and sympathetic observers had difficulty understanding the character of Native American peoples or interpreting their cultures as anything but a primitive survival doomed to fall before the advance of civilization. Surviving European American texts and documents present only irregular glimpses of indigenous cultures that were forcibly diminished and dispersed before they could be fully understood.

## CASE 8        SELLING THE WEST

The opening of the trans-Appalachian West launched one of the greatest land rushes in American history. Contrary to legend, however, most of the land was won not by hardy pioneers seeking a family farmstead but by wealthy individuals and powerful companies who quickly claimed possession of all the prime areas.

One of the most famous of the corporate land developers, the Transylvania Company, was formed to exploit and colonize the area now comprising much of Kentucky and Tennessee. In March 1775, at Sycamore Shoals on the Watauga River in Tennessee, Richard Henderson and other members of the association secured a deed from members of the Cherokee tribe for all of the territory embraced by the Ohio, Kentucky, and Cumberland Rivers, a tract of more than twenty million acres. Henderson hoped to make Transylvania a proprietary colony similar to Pennsylvania and Maryland, but the project was immediately blocked by Virginia and North Carolina, which held charters for the Transylvania tracts. Although the land grant was voided, Virginia and North Carolina each awarded Henderson and his associates 200,000 acres in compensation. One consequence of the Transylvania venture was the spur it offered to immediate settlement of Kentucky. In 1774, James Harrod led the first group of permanent settlers into the heart of the Bluegrass and founded Harrodsburg. In 1775, Daniel Boone and a work party representing the Transylvania Company cut the path of the Wilderness Road across Cumberland Gap and laid out the frontier settlement of Boonesborough on the Kentucky River.

Land speculation was a big business in Kentucky in the eighteenth century, and the potential for making a quick fortune was unprecedented in American history. A few land owners were able to buy up or seize massive holdings, among them Thomas Marshall, the father of the U.S. Chief Justice, who claimed 128,000 acres; David Ross who claimed 211,417 acres; and Thomas Shore, who claimed 344,783 acres. The landholdings and claims of John May, one of Kentucky's earliest surveyors, dwarfed all of these at 831,000 acres.

The rush of land claims and settler migrations came so quickly that they overwhelmed the limited skills of many poorly-trained frontier surveyors, including Daniel Boone, and the unscrupulous practices of buyers and sellers soon left Kentucky landholding in a legal jumble. Surveying lines laid out crudely from tree to rock to creek bed could easily be misinterpreted, and "shingling" or overlapping claims of ownership for the same piece of land became commonplace. When inaccurate or spurious land surveys were used to identify land as collateral for further purchases, the resulting layered claims and counterclaims could require years of court proceedings to unravel. The consequences for the common subsistence farmer were not encouraging. In 1792, the year Kentucky was admitted as a state, 65 per cent of heads of households did not own land. By 1800, half of all Kentucky heads of households still did not own any land.

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#### Case 10      SELLING THE WEST

Virginia secured its claims to land in the trans-Appalachian West by organizing the county of Kentucky in 1776. The commonwealth awarded its western acreage to soldiers for military service and to settlers for improving a claim, and sold it to speculators and land companies for cash or on credit. Land Warrants in this period were considered commodities and often were sold many times over; patents granted might note the land's owner as the assignee of another followed by a list of other purchasers and assignees' names.

Virginia's soldiers received bounty land in both the French and Indian and Revolutionary wars. Amounts distributed were determined by rank; thus, a private would receive fifty acres and a field officer five thousand. Nonetheless, before the land office

issued a warrant, a veteran had to obtain a certificate from his commanding officer stating that he had served Virginia faithfully. With certificate in hand, the soldier had to appear before a Virginia court of record and swear an oath or offer evidence as to its validity. When signed by the court of record's clerk, the certificate would then be taken to the Virginia land office in Richmond to be registered. Upon presentation of the signed service certificate, the land office would grant a warrant entitling the veteran to claim an amount of Virginia land appropriate to his rank. Unlike settlement warrants, a warrant for bounty land was not tied to a specific parcel of land.

By 1777, the Virginia Assembly decreed that those who settled in the western country and raised a crop of corn or built a cabin before June 1, 1776 (amended to January 1, 1778) would receive clear title to a 400-acre pre-emption. A legislature-appointed land commission ruled on the validity of claims, and if an initial 400 acres was awarded, a settler was allowed to purchase an adjoining 1,000-acre pre-emption. The commission's certificate would be taken to the land office and a settlement warrant issued following payment of a fee.

Prospective land owners – whether holding military or settlement warrants, or purchased treasury warrants – had to complete several complex and time delimited procedures mandated by Virginia's Assembly before legal land titles were granted. This process involved five distinct steps:

Step 1. Land to be claimed had to be located either by the warrant holder or by a hired locator.

Step 2. Land had to be entered, that is, the warrant holder had to notify the country surveyor of the particular area or areas to be claimed.

Step 3. When a survey was made, the warrant holder had to provide and pay for chain carriers and a line marker.

Step 4. A plat and certificate furnished by the surveyor had to be delivered to the land office.

Step 5. The warrant holder had to pay all fees levied in order to receive the final patent or grant.

## CASE 11 SETTLER MIGRATIONS

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, more than 200,000 people had migrated westward over the Wilderness Road, the route first laid out by Daniel Boone for the Transylvania Company. But a majority of settlers avoided overland travel and headed for Kentucky on the Ohio River.

Boats used on the Ohio by migrating settlers varied in size and construction. Pirogues were fashioned from hollowed out logs. Skiffs were smaller boats built from wooden planks and maneuvered with oars, while keelboats were larger craft that could be ridden downcurrent and dragged or poled upstream. Flatboats, sometimes called "Kentucky boats" or "family boats," held the greatest amount of cargo and could be 40 to 100 feet in length.



The best time to descend the Ohio was in the spring, when seasonal rains raised the river's water level and made it easier to avoid snags on buried tree limbs and sandbars. Many settlers carried Zadok Cramer's *Navigator*, a frequently updated guidebook that described each stretch of the Ohio and suggested the safest course of passage down the river.

While European travelers described their western journeys in detail, relatively few migrant settlers kept diaries or wrote about their experiences. Many were illiterate, and those who could read and write were preoccupied with the daily dangers and physical demands of the journey. Once in Kentucky, settlers' attention had to turn to the immediate needs of securing a claim, building shelter, clearing land, and planting the first crop to carry a family through the winter.

## CASE 12 SLAVERY AND INDENTURE

One out of every five Kentucky pioneers was an African American. Many migrated with the initial groups of European American settlers coming from Virginia and North Carolina, where law and custom recognized slavery as an accepted institution. African Americans shared the rigors of the mountain crossing or downriver journey, and they contributed their labor to clearing land, building houses, and planting crops. Slaves also played a role in the defense of forts and frontier stations during periods of hostile attack and accompanied militia and army units on punitive expeditions against the British and their Native American allies.

Slavery in the West was not a uniform practice. By the end of the 1780s, Kentucky counties of Virginia reported varying levels of households owning slaves, ranging from 15% in western Nelson County to 31% in the Bluegrass county of Fayette. Half of Kentucky slaveowner households had only one or two slaves each. Socializing and family formation among Kentucky slaves presented more difficulties than in the Deep South because slaves were thinly scattered and, except for those on the larger hemp and tobacco plantations, physically isolated from each other.

Not all Kentuckians bound to service were African American. By 1790, six per cent of the Kentucky population was composed of white indentured servants. The indenture system held laborers to a restrictive covenant of employment for a fixed period, typically four to seven years. Those on the eastern seaboard facing poverty or escaping legal difficulties were the prime candidates for indentured service in the West. Under law, indentured servants were entitled to adequate food, clothing, shelter, and medical care, but many had masters who treated them little better than slaves.

## CASE 13 CAMPAIGNS AND CONQUESTS

From the time of the first French and Spanish expeditions into the American interior in the seventeenth century, the trans-Appalachian West was an arena of continuing conflict. Western territory was crucial to continuing international struggles for control of waterways, natural resources, and areas for settlement. As France moved south from Canada through the Great Lakes, as Spain pushed northward along the Mississippi River and across the Great Plains, and as Britain and its colonies moved inland from the Atlantic seaboard, the West was repeatedly enveloped in global geopolitical warfare.

For those living in the Ohio River Valley, recurring hostilities were marked by a succession of strikes into enemy territory, whether invading force considered the enemy to be the British empire, tribes of Native Americans, or settler outposts in the Bluegrass region. Following a cyclical pattern, western wars were frequently as brief as they were bloody. Campaigns opened with the mustering of military troops and local militias, often in the spring, followed by a forced march against the enemy, a fixed battle or series of skirmishes, and retreat or withdrawal, invariably accompanied by the burning of enemy villages, houses, and crops.

From Bouquet's expedition into the Ohio country of 1764, through Clark's attack on Vincennes in 1779, to the Kentuckians' defeat at Blue Licks of 1782, St. Clair's defeat of 1791, and Fallen Timbers in 1794, the cycle of conflict appeared irresolvable. Only after Harrison's victory over the British and Tecumseh at the Battle of the Thames in 1813 was it possible to foresee the end of warfare east of the Mississippi. The victors of the Thames returned home to write flattering narratives and claim the political power made possible by enlarged public reputations. Native Americans were left without their ancestral land and with no written accounts to document their experience of dispossession.

#### CASE 14 CRAFTING STATEHOOD

In 1776 Kentucky became a separate county of Virginia, and on June 1, 1792 it was admitted as the fifteenth state of the federal Union and the first state west of the Appalachians. The fifteen years between legal recognition by Virginia and statehood were clouded by complex maneuvers and alliances and struggles between partisans of America's nascent political party system.

Kentucky became a county just as the first waves of settlers were making their way over the Cumberland Gap and down the Ohio River. At the time of the first federal census in 1790, Kentucky already had more than 73,000 residents, more than 12,000 of them slaves. The great distance between Kentucky and the eastern seaboard and the continuing fears of attacks by Native Americans encouraged Kentuckians to feel that Virginia was not sufficiently attentive to the needs of the West. A separation movement grew in strength, and it led to nine successive constitutional conventions held between 1784 and 1791. Much was at stake, not only Kentucky's status within the newly created federal Union, but also its position on the extension of slavery and the nature of its relations with Spain, which controlled all commerce on the Mississippi south to the port of New Orleans.

In the end, slavery proved to be the most deeply divisive issue. Slavery was legal in Kentucky so long as it remained governed by the laws of Virginia, but anti-slavery activists like Presbyterian clergyman David Rice argued that it should not be retained in a new state. Pressing just as adamantly for maintaining slavery were powerful figures such as George Nicholas and John Breckinridge. The forces of slavery won the constitutional contest, with results that would leave Kentucky bitterly divided along lines of race, class, and religious belief.

#### CASE 15 IMPERIAL CONSPIRACIES

In 1798, the Federalist-dominated Congress passed the Alien and Sedition Acts granting the President power to imprison or deport aliens suspected of subversive acts

and to imprison Americans speaking out against the government, Congress, or President. The legislation was directed against Thomas Jefferson's Republican Party, which had openly expressed its sympathy for the French Revolution. Jeffersonian Republicans responded with the Kentucky Resolutions adopted by the Kentucky legislature in November 1798. Written by Jefferson himself, these resolutions declared that the Constitution established nothing more than a compact among states and that states had the right to declare void, or nullify, any federal legislation that exceeded constitutional limits on central power.

General James Wilkinson, a veteran of Revolutionary and frontier battles who had settled in Kentucky, was one of the strong voices in opposition to the federal Constitution. In 1787, he had navigated a boatload of goods to New Orleans and secured from Spanish authorities a monopoly on all American trade on the Mississippi. Taking advantage of the charged atmosphere surrounding the Alien and Sedition Acts, Wilkinson sought a grant of land from the Spanish to establish a colony and secured a monopoly on emigration to the land. Wilkinson's political enemies fastened on these and other rumored schemes to charge that Wilkinson was involved in a "Spanish conspiracy" evidenced by traitorous involvement with a foreign power and attempts to separate Kentucky from the United States. Once Kentucky was successfully admitted to the Union in 1792, the appeal of Wilkinson's schemes dissipated.

Only a few years later, however, Wilkinson became involved in another international intrigue, the Burr conspiracy. In 1804, U.S. Vice President Aaron Burr privately offered the British minister in Washington his support in separating the western territories from the United States. The next year, after his term of office had ended, Burr traveled west to Kentucky and New Orleans, securing men and equipment for his plan and enlisting the aid of western leaders, among them James Wilkinson. Burr's hopes for a western empire collapsed when Wilkinson withdrew from the plot and released the text of an incriminating coded letter he had received from Burr. Burr was tried for treason but acquitted by Chief Justice John Marshall because the government could not produce two sworn witnesses to his acts as required by the Constitution.

## CASE 16 POLITICAL AMBITIONS

Political careers in the trans-Appalachian West were shaped by a combination of influences including family lineage, land holdings, social and business alliances, and military reputation. Early in the period of settlement and statehood, power in Kentucky devolved upon a relatively small elite dominated by names such as Shelby, Adair, Breckinridge, Brown, and Henderson.

Into this group came an aspiring young attorney, Henry Clay, who was born in Virginia and in 1799 married Lucretia Hart, youngest daughter of Thomas Hart, a wealthy and influential Lexington businessman and landholder. Quickly gaining entry to Kentucky's most influential circles, Clay became widely known for his legal skills and was retained to defend Aaron Burr against charges of treason in Kentucky courts. In 1811, he was elected to Congress and chosen Speaker of the House on his first day of service. He subsequently served twenty years as one of the most powerful members of the U.S. Senate.

Clay's career was not without controversy, including a duel fought with a bitterly partisan Humphrey Marshall. Clay was also shadowed by his difficult relationship to

Masonry. The Masonic order was at the height of its prominence and proud to point to a roster of members that had included George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Patrick Henry, Paul Revere, and others of the Revolutionary generation. For the young Henry Clay, Masonic membership was an important avenue to social and political power, and he was glad to accept appointment as Master of Lexington Lodge No. 1 and Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky. With the founding of the Anti-Masonic Party in the late 1820s, however, the tide of public opinion turned, and Clay was among those who broke publicly with Masonry and attacked it for wielding a dangerous, hidden influence in American political affairs.

#### CASE 17      COMMERCE

With access to the Ohio River and astride the Wilderness Road bringing settlers westward, Kentucky was well positioned for commercial success. Agriculture became the economic mainstay of the area, and by the late 1780s burley tobacco was the primary cash crop. Kentucky was also a leading producer of the nation's supply of hemp, which was used to manufacture rope and other fiber products such as bag cloth. By the early nineteenth century, Kentucky industries included tobacco processing houses and ropewalks as well as gristmills, sawmills, ironworks, meatpacking plants, and glassworks.

One Kentucky staple crop that was initially difficult to transport was corn. By the mid-1780s, however, a number of Kentucky distillers including Elijah Craig, Evan Williams, and Jacob Beam had developed a new variety of corn-based whiskey that acquired the name Bourbon from its original county of origin. Thereafter, Kentucky's corn crop could be converted from hulled kernels into kegged liquor and readily shipped to markets in the eastern United States or down the Mississippi to New Orleans.

Kentucky's experience with banking was less successful. The War of 1812 spurred economic prosperity, but once peace returned financial difficulties threatened many with ruin. The state responded in 1818 by chartering a number of new banks that were authorized to issue their own currency. These banks soon collapsed, and the state legislature passed measures for the relief of the banks' creditors. When these measures were declared unconstitutional by a state court, the electorate became deeply divided between pro-relief and anti-relief factions, a political struggle over the proper role of banks that moved to the national stage in the 1830s with President Andrew Jackson's attack on the Bank of the United States.

#### CASE 18      LAW

Kentucky inherited its common law system from Virginia, the state of which it was a part until 1792. The opening of the trans-Appalachian West created a vast field of activity in the region for local, state, and federal courts and the attorneys and judges who built their careers on legal practice. The law was involved in every transaction of consequence to the new society in the West, from the purchase and sale of land to the formation of corporations, operation of businesses, prosecution of crime, conveyance of dowries, and settling of estates.

Legal documents provide a unique perspective on the workings of the western social order. This is especially true of legal records related to slavery, since court proceedings and other legal documents preserve some of the few surviving facts about

individual slaves of the period. Slaves were considered an important and valuable form of property, and they were thus included in court proceedings as subjects in legal contests, sales, inheritances and estates, and marriage portions and dowers. As with other forms of property, slaves could be mortgaged or used as security for payment of loans, and they were recoverable in a suit of law. Slaves could also be attached by government officers as assets for their owners' nonpayment of debts or taxes.

#### CASE 19 HOUSEHOLDS

Travelers found the log cabin to be the most characteristic settler dwelling of the trans-Appalachian West. Cabins were invariably crude buildings, sixteen to twenty feet in length and not more than twelve or sixteen feet wide. The interior typically held a single room centering on a fireplace along one wall with an unfinished loft above. Furniture was simple, a table, a few stools or chairs, and mattresses stuffed with corn shucks. Windows were few and frequently without glass, covered by wooden shutters and animal skins during the winter months.

Houses of the western gentry represented increasing levels of physical comfort and social pretension. Brick houses were more expensive than frame, and stone cost more than brick. Constructed as two-story oblongs with two or four rooms on each floor, these houses usually had a kitchen wing or separate kitchen house to the rear. Furnishings varied greatly with the financial circumstances of the family, but they usually included a few pieces brought west in the migration, a table and chairs, chest, or bedstead. Owners holding extensive tracts of productive farmland or prospering in business were able to import higher quality finished goods and luxury products from the eastern seaboard and Europe.

Families could be both large and extended. Particularly in the early years of settlement, houses were often shared by grandparents, in-laws, and cousins. Deaths from violence or disease left widows, widowers, or orphans who needed to be temporarily sheltered with family or friends. Also present, for owners of sufficient wealth, were one or more slaves, usually housed in separate cabins or outbuildings on the property, but sometimes granted a small sleeping space near the kitchen.

#### CASE 20 FARM AND PLANTATION

The patterns of Western agriculture were shaped by climate, soil, technology, and the market for fertile land. The Kentucky climate, while temperate, was not warm enough to support large plantings of crops such as cotton or rice. The soil of the Bluegrass was rich, as were expanses north of the Ohio River, but many areas of Kentucky were hilly, rocky, and difficult to till. Where the soil had supported the growth of lush native grasses and cane, wooden plows of the period proved inadequate to cut through the dense network of roots embedded below the surface.

Cutting dense forests thus became the preferred method for clearing agricultural land. Large trees were often killed by girdling, stripping the bark in bands about two feet above the roots and leaving the tree to die. Small trees and bushes were cut, piled, and burned. The ground around the stumps was broken with a light plow or hoe, and the first seeds were planted in the ashes. It was said that the average adult male could clear five or six acres of wooded land a year in this fashion.

The wealthiest farmers owned 500 to 1,200 acres or more, kept a quarter under cultivation, and raised livestock and other crops to market locally or ship downstream to New Orleans. Middling farmers had enough in savings for a down payment on a parcel of land, usually ten to thirty acres, which was adequate to feed a family and produce a surplus to reduce outstanding debt or to buy salt, gunpowder, and a horse or better plow. The smallest farms were those of the squatters, who cleared a few acres and remained until they had enough money to buy a farm elsewhere or were expelled by the legal owner.

#### CASE 21 TEACHING AND LEARNING

Education was an early interest for western settlers, but the rigors of frontier life and scarcity of trained teachers made schooling a rare and discontinuous experience for most children. Simple lessons taught by rote were the limit of most curricula, supported by a few elementary textbooks, some of them published in Kentucky. For young girls from wealthier families, female academies offered more genteel training in literature, languages, and the arts.

In 1780, Transylvania Seminary was founded by a group of Presbyterians in Danville, Kentucky. Led by the Rev. John Todd and the Rev. Caleb Wallace, the founders were able to secure a charter and endowment for the new institution. Moved to Lexington in 1787, the seminary was eventually renamed Transylvania University. Under the leadership of the first chairman of its trustees, anti-slavery campaigner Rev. David Rice, Transylvania made its reputation as the first institution of higher learning to be established west of the Appalachians.

#### CASE 22 CHURCH AND FAITH

American evangelical Protestantism first found its voice in the Great Awakening that swept the British colonies in the 1730s and 1740s. Led by ministers such as Jonathan Edwards in the north and George Whitefield in the south, this surge of religious fervor generated revivals and camp meetings and helped spur the movement of evangelicals away from the state-supported churches of the eastern seaboard. From 1740 to 1790, America experienced a Second Great Awakening, which took place primarily in the South and was led by ministers from Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian congregations.

The spiritual energies of the Awakenings impacted the West as ministers and missionaries crossed the mountains and descended the Ohio in search of souls. In the Bluegrass, Protestant denominational loyalists were joined by independent preachers and adherents of new faiths such as the Quakers and the Shakers. In August 1801, at Cane Ridge, Kentucky, 20,000 to 30,000 people were drawn to an open-air revival that saw waves of the faithful taken by great emotion, collapsing on the ground, shouting out in prayer and song, and heeding the call for conversion. The spirit of Cane Ridge led within a few years to the formation of new American denominational groups including the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the Churches of Christ.

The Roman Catholic Church was also active in western missions from the 1780s onward. In 1808, a new diocese was created for Bardstown, Kentucky, that extended over nearly all of the trans-Appalachian West from Detroit to New Orleans. In 1811, Bishop Benedict Joseph Flaget arrived in Kentucky to assume leadership of western

Catholicism, and by 1819, construction of the Cathedral of St. Joseph in Bardstown was completed.

### CASE 23 MEDICAL PRACTICE

In an age when poultices, herbal remedies, and bleeding were conventional medical treatments, illness in the West often carried the danger of death. Whooping cough, scarlet fever, and measles killed or disabled many. The “ague,” a malarial fever with chills, was associated with swamps and standing water. “Milk sick” brought death to those who drank milk produced by cows that had eaten poisonous plants. Most serious of all were the epidemics of small pox and cholera that swept through whole communities. As threatening as these diseases were for the settlers, they were often even more devastating for Native Americans, who lacked immunity to European diseases.

In the face of these challenges, the medical profession made significant advances. In 1799, the trustees of Transylvania University established a medical school and appointed Dr. Samuel Brown to teach chemistry, anatomy, and surgery. Brown introduced the practice of vaccination to Kentucky and by 1802 had vaccinated more than 500 people in the Lexington area against smallpox, the largest number of vaccinations performed anywhere in the world to that point.

Dr. Benjamin Dudley, head of the medical department at Transylvania after 1817, became one of the world’s leading surgeons in the removal of bladder stones. A Transylvania medical graduate, Dr. Walter Brashear, performed the world’s first successful amputation at the hip. Dr. Daniel Drake, another influential physician raised in Kentucky, established a notable medical practice in Cincinnati and later founded the medical departments at the Medical College of Ohio, Cincinnati College, and Miami University.

### CASE 24 ENTERTAINING PURSUITS

In a region where arduous work was a daily commonplace, recreation was particularly treasured. Activities necessary to rural life such as hunting, shucking corn, or quilting could also be made into pleasant shared events and essential points of connection for a scattered community. Dances and church socials offered other opportunities for friends and relatives in a neighborhood to gather, as did speeches offered by candidates for public office.

In villages and towns, more resources were available for popular diversion. Larger populations could support regularly published newspapers and the establishment of lending libraries. Touring troops of players presented theatrical productions, and itinerant lecturers instructed and entertained in courthouse squares and lodge halls. Musical groups assembled in parlors and public lyceums to perform, and private tutoring on musical instruments was available for the well-to-do.

Public taverns were also a center of lively interchange and entertainment. In the large public rooms of these establishments, locals and travelers mingled and exchanged gossip. In one corner of the main room or in a separate room, a bar offered refreshment. Guests made their way upstairs at the end of the evening, rarely to a private chamber, more frequently to a common dormitory room to share a bed, and often with a stranger.