

KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 641, Covington, Kentucky 41012

Bulletin

January 1999

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K.C.H.S. MEETING

DATE January 12

TIME 7 P M

PLACE Kenton County
Library
5th & Scott Streets
Covington, KY

PROGRAM Captain Sharp,
famous Confederate of Morgan's
Raider

John M. Pruitt will speak of
Captain Stephen G. Sharp and
his life. He was appointed U. S.
Marshall of Northern Kentucky.

Kenton County: Some Well known Facts and Some You May Have Missed

The first men to set foot on Kenton County soil were Christopher Gist and a party of explorers from the Ohio Land Company in 1751. They landed at a place called "The Point," bounded on three sides by the Ohio River.

Today that spot is in the middle of the thickly settled Greater Cincinnati area on the Kentucky shore. It is bordered by Boone and Campbell Counties, also heavily populated, although its population is largest of the three.

Gist was followed into the area by many noted explorers, including Simon Kenton, the county's name sake, and George Rogers Clark. Clark used it as a gathering place several times during his fights with Native Americans. From the site of George Rogers Clark Park in Covington, the famous explorer made two excursions, in 1780, and 1782. The first was a move against the Native Americans during his famous Northwest Expedition. The second was to avenge the Revolutionary War Battle of Blue Licks.

The county was Kentucky's 90th when it was organized in 1804 on land taken from Campbell County. The county is bound by two waterways, the Ohio River on the north, and the Licking River on the east. It was named for one of the frontiersmen, Simon Kenton.

What is now the city of Covington was know to French explorers in the mid-seventeenth century. But it was in 1793 that the first permanent settlement was made near the mouth of the Licking River. Known then as Kennedy's ferry, it was the namesake of Thomas Kennedy, who bought the principle area of "The Point" for \$750.

Chartered in 1815, it was already a trading center for settlers coming down the Ohio to make their homes in Kentucky. It was given the name Covington to honor General Leonard Covington who served with distinction in the War of 1812. Covington, however, was never a resident of the area of Covington.

Independence is the county seat, (although Covington has had a courthouse since the 1880s). Independence was named to celebrate the independence of Kenton County. It's courthouse was built in 1840.

Other towns in Kenton County are fast-growing suburban areas of Crescent Springs, Crestview Hills, Fort Mitchell, Erlanger, Edgewood, Lakeside Park, Park Hills, Taylor Mill, Villa Hills, and Fort Wright. Many of these towns were named for the commanders in charge of fortifications during the Civil War. The hills around Covington were advantageous sites of these forts, the major ones being Fort Mitchell, built in 1861.

The city of Covington has an appearance comparable to that of cities of the Rhine River Valley in Germany and, like Cincinnati it has strong German traditions. These traditions began in the area with the strong wave of German immigrants in the 1880s. On the steep hillsides there are many churches with tall spires. Spanning the river between Covington and Cincinnati is a noted landmark, the Roebling Suspension Bridge, which dates from 1866. Five other bridges also carry traffic between the two metropolitan areas.

Covington's Riverside historic district is listed in the national Register of Historic Places. Within a four-block area here are about forty buildings dating from 1815 to 1920. It is believed that John Roebling, the designer of the famed Suspension Bridge as well as the Brooklyn Bridge in New York, lived in this area during the bridge's construction.

Near the George Rogers Clark Park in this area is a stone marking the site of Thomas Kennedy's tavern and ferry dock. On East Second Street is the Carneal-Spathgate House, dating from 1815 and believed to be the first brick house in Covington. A stone tunnel on the grounds of the Carneal House is reputed to be the last stop on the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. It is said that the owner, Thomas D. Carneal, aided the refugees from slavery, and that "Eliza" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one of them.

The boyhood home of the founder of the Boy Scouts of America, Daniel Carter Beard, is on East Third Street. On Garrard Street is the home of John G. Carlisle, built in 1859. Carlisle became a state senator in 1865, a U. S. Congressman in 1877, and Secretary of the Treasury during the Cleveland Administration.

At 12th and Madison Streets is the Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption, a familiar sight on the Covington skyline since 1901. The Gothic cathedral was patterned after the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It features tall spires atop the front towers, mural by a Covington artist, and the largest stained-glass window in the U. S. The Mother of God Catholic Church in Covington has an organ built in 1876 by Koehnken and Grimm, one of only two left in the world.

Captain Robert Benham: His life and Survival on Kentucky's Early Shores

Editor's Note: We are indebted to Judy Adams for supplying the following information about Robert Benham, her distant relative. The story on Robert Benham was found in *History of Warren County*.

This pioneer and soldier, whose name is familiar to readers of the early history of the Ohio Valley, was born in Pennsylvania in 1750. He was an officer in the Revolutionary war, and, after the close of that struggle, became one of the early settlers in Symmes' Purchase. He is said to have built, in 1789, the first hewed-log house in Cincinnati and to have established the first ferry over the Ohio at Cincinnati on February 18, 1792. He served under Oarmar in his campaign against the Indians, was in the bloody defeat of St. Clair and shared in Wayne's victory. He settled upon a farm southwest of the site of Lebanon, his home until his death. He was a member of the first Legislature of the Northwest Territory and served several years on the first Board of County Commissioners of Warren County. Judge Burnet, who served in the Legislature with him says: "He was possessed of great activity, muscular strength and enterprise: had a sound, discriminating judgement and great firmness of character. He was the grandsire of the accomplished Mrs. Harriet Prentice of Louisville." Joseph S. Benham, his son, became a distinguished lawyer and orator of Cincinnati, and delivered the oration on the reception of LaFayette at Cincinnati. Robert Benham died early in the spring of 1809, and was buried at Lebanon, a troop of cavalry following his remains to the grave.

The most interesting event in the life of Captain Benham is his survival after being wounded at Rodgers' defeat, and his life on the battlefield. Strange as this story is, its truthfulness has been endorsed by Judge Burnet and other careful historians. The account below is from "Western Adventures."

"In the autumn of 1779, a number of keel boats were ascending the Ohio under the command of Major Rodgers, and had advanced as far as the mouth of the Licking without accident. Here, however, they observed a few Indians standing upon the southern extremity of a sand-bar, while a canoe, rowed by three others was in the act of putting off from the Kentucky shore, as if for the purpose of taking them aboard. Rodgers immediately ordered the boats to be made fast on the Kentucky shore, while the crew, numbering seventy well armed men, cautiously advanced in such a manner as to encircle the spot where the enemy had been seen to land. Only five or six Indians had been seen, and no one dreamed of encountering more than fifteen or twenty Indians. Rodgers believed he had completely surrounded the enemy, and was preparing to rush upon them from several quarters at once. Suddenly, several hundred savages sprang upon them, front, rear and both flanks. They instantly poured in, closely discharging their rifles, and then, throwing them down, fell upon the survivors with tomahawks. The panic was complete and the slaughter prodigious. Major Rodgers, together with forty-five of his men, were quickly destroyed. The survivors made an effort to regain their boats, but the five men who had been left in charge immediately put off from shore in the hindmost boat. Disappointed in their attempt to flee, they turned furiously upon the enemy. Aided by the approach of darkness, they forced their way through enemy lines. At length, the men effected their escape to Harrodsburg, leaving behind the severely wounded.

"Among the wounded was Capt. Robert Benham. Shortly after breaking through the enemy's line, he was shot through

both hips, and he fell to the ground. Fortunately, a large tree had lately fallen near the spot where he lay, and, with great pain, he dragged himself into the top and lay concealed among the branches. The Indians, eager in pursuit of the others, passed him without notice. By midnight, all was quiet.

"On the following day, the Indians returned to the battle-ground. They stripped the dead and took the boats. Benham, although in danger of famishing, permitted them to pass without making known his condition. He supposed, correctly, that his crippled legs would only induce them to tomahawk him upon the spot to avoid the trouble of carrying him to their town. He lay close until the evening of the second day when he saw a raccoon descending a tree near him. He shot it, hoping to devise some means of reaching it, could kindle a fire and make a meal. Scarcely had his gun cracked when he heard a human cry, about fifty yards off. Supposing it to be an Indian, he hastily reloaded his gun and remained silent. Presently, the same voice was heard again, much nearer. Still Benham made no reply. He cocked his gun and sat ready to fire as soon as an object appeared. A third hallo was quickly heard, followed by an exclamation of impatience and distress, which convinced Benham that the unknown person must be a Kentuckian. Then he heard, "Whoever you are, for God's sake answer me!" He replied with readiness, and the parties were soon together.

"Benham, as we have already observed, was shot through both legs. The man who now appeared had escaped from the same battle with both arms broken. Thus each was enabled to supply what the other wanted. Benham, having the perfect use of his arms, could load his gun and kill game with great readiness. His new friend, having the use of his legs, would kick the game to the spot where Benham sat who then cooked it. When no wood was near them, his companion raked up brush with his feet, gradually rolling it within reach of Benham's hands. Benham fed his companion and dressed his wounds, as well as his own, tearing up both their shirts for that purpose. It was difficult to get water at first, but at length Benham took his hat, placed the rim between the teeth of his companion, directed him to wade into the Licking up to his neck and dip the hat into the water (by sinking his own head). The man who could walk was thus enabled to bring water by means of his teeth. In a few days, they had killed all the squirrels and birds within reach, and the man with the broken arms went out to drive game within gunshot distance of Benham's confinement. Wild turkeys were abundant in those woods, and his companion would walk around and drive them toward Benham, who seldom failed to kill two or three of each flock. In this manner they survived for several weeks until their wounds had healed sufficiently enough to travel. They then shifted their quarters and put up a small shed at the mouth of the Licking, where they encamped until late in November, hoping for the arrival of a boat which would take them to the falls of the Ohio.

"On the 27th of November, they observed a flatboat moving leisurely down the river. Benham hoisted his hat upon a stick and called loudly for help. The crew suspected them to be Indians with the intention to decoy them ashore. They paid no attention to their signals of distress but instantly put over to the opposite side of the river, and manning every oar, passed them as rapidly as possible. Benham beheld them passing him with a feeling of despair. The place was much frequented by Indians, and the approach of winter threatened them with destruction. After the flatboat had passed them nearly half a mile, he saw a canoe put off from its stern. It cautiously approached the Kentucky. He called for assistance, mentioned his name and made known his condition. After a long parley, and many evidences of reluctance on the part of the crew, the canoe at length touched the shore, and Benham and his friend were taken on board.

"Their appearance excited much suspicion. They were almost entirely naked, and their faces were garnished with six weeks' growth of beard. The one was barely able to hobble upon crutches, and the other could manage to feed himself with only one of his hands. They were taken to Louisville, where their clothes (which were in the boat which deserted them) were restored to them and after a few weeks' confinement, both were perfectly restored."

It is stated in "Western Annals," that Benham afterward bought and lived upon the land where the battle took place, and built two log cabins on it, one for his family and one for the family of his deceased brother, Peter. His companion, whose name is given as John Watson, afterward lived at Brownsville, Pennsylvania.

Additional notes:

Captain Robert Benham was one of six children of Peter Benham and Anna James, of Freehold, New Jersey. Peter was descended from John Benham of Plymouth, England, who came to America on the "Mary and John" arriving near Boston in 1630.

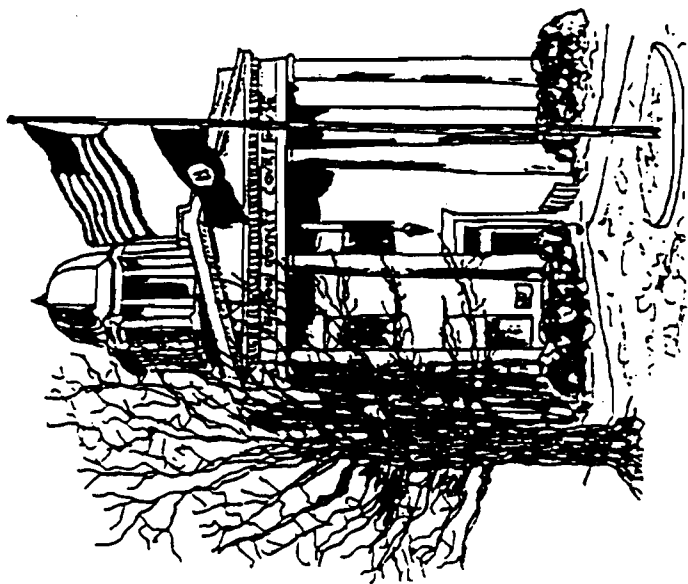
Four of Peter's six children were destined to come to the great Miami Valley. Daughter Catherine was to become the great-grandmother of the Wright Brothers, Orville and Wilbur. Catherine's son Benjamin VanCleve was a founder of Dayton, Ohio.

Yearning for open spaces and a place to breed horses, he moved to 640 acres of land 3 miles southwest of Lebanon, Ohio. His log cabin still stands and is lived in by the Robertson family.

The genealogies of the Benhams edited by E. Cooley, *The Benham Bothers, Robert, Peter, and Richard* was published in the 1954 bulletin of the Ohio Historical and Philosophical Society (now the Cincinnati Historical Society).

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