

KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P. O. Box 641, Covington, Kentucky 41012 (606) 431-2666

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Jo Ann C. Brown

KCHS MEETING

DATE Thursday, Jan. 11

TIME 7:30 PM

PLACE Campbell Cty. Library
Rt. #27 & Pooles' Creek Rd.
Cold Springs, KY

PROGRAM Historic Canals of
Ohio and Kentucky

Speaker, Michael E. Morthorst, of the local chapter of the Canal Society of Ohio, will describe the work his group is doing concerning old canals, using slides. He will also talk about their efforts to restore one of the 3 existing canal tunnels in the country which is located at North Bend, Ohio. This program will be well attended, so come early.

Bulletin

January 2001

Land Speculation of Simon Kenton and Daniel Boone by Joseph F. Gastright

What were the motivations and enthusiasms of our early frontiersmen? Two of the greatest of them are still remembered in Northern Kentucky, but what led them both to leave Kentucky in the same year, 1799? Were they similar to other early settlers in Campbell, Kenton, and Boone Counties? Did the Virginia Land Laws influence the lives of these two gentlemen?

Nathaniel Southgate Shaler (1841-1906), a truly famous and now almost forgotten Northern Kentucky resident, gives us much insight on these questions. Shaler was born to Ann Hinde Southgate, daughter of Richard Southgate (who left a fortune of \$1,500,000 upon his death in 1868) and Nathaniel Shaler, a Harvard educated surgeon who worked at the Newport Barracks. Young Shaler was educated by tutors in Newport until he entered Harvard in 1858. He studied biology and paleontology with the famous Louis Agassiz. After graduating summa cum laude in 1862, he served as a captain in the 5th Kentucky Battery. After a teaching stint at Harvard, Shaler was appointed head of the Geological Survey extensively on caves from 1873 to to Harvard and Geology the favor-University.

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Second Kentucky . He published coal, iron, and 1880. He returned made Introductory ite course in the prolific and the best literary tic and Scribners) books and innu-articles. His *tucky*, written in lent reference. started *The Nathaniel* (1909) which writing on pre-civil war Northern Kentucky. I will quote liberally from this work as I attempt to put Kenton and Boone in the context he presents.



Nathaniel Shaler 1865

Although the measurable distance between Newport and Cincinnati is not more than a third of a mile, they were, in the "old days," much more widely apart, in all of the essentials of society, than New York and New Orleans now are. From 1800 to 1860.....they had nothing in common

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but their English speech and certain theoretical likeness of religion. Cincinnati represented the motives of the Nineteenth Century, Newport those of the Sixteenth. For there is essentially all that difference between the motives of free communities where all are of equal rights before the law, and where in the other, slavery holds.

He goes on to describe how land in Ohio had been sold mainly by the U.S. to settlers from the northeastern states. The land had been surveyed prior to sale into sections of one square mile (640 acres) but few of the farms were larger than one fourth of a section.

In Kentucky, the notorious Virginia Land Act of 1789 prevailed. Land grants were given for military service, or they were sold by the state, or you could simply go out and claim land for "cabin rights" if you cleared a field, planted a crop, built a cabin, and most importantly, made sure that the land had not been previously claimed. This got you 400 acres and the right to "preempt a contiguous 1000 acres provided it was free and clear." With a land grant, you had the right to go to the county seat, or Richmond, and make an entry, describing about where your land

was located. You then had 12 months to go back and survey the land and mark your "meets and bounds" on the site. You must then return the warrant and the survey and, for a small fee, be issued a "patent," or deed for the property. One observer stated that Kentucky surveys were never correct unless by accident.

Daniel Boone led the first party of settlers up the Wilderness Road in 1775 to establish Boonesborough. The results were chaotic. These pioneers forgot to build shelter; they forgot to clear gardens; and worst of all, they built no defenses. Until ordered to by the developer, Richard Henderson, they did nothing but survey. Roughly 200 first year settlers managed to survey over 900 entries containing almost 540,000 acres.

The "market" in those days was not in stock, but in acreage. By 1790, the London newspapers were offering millions of acres of Kentucky to the highest bidder. In short order, all of the 1st class bottom land was surveyed and surveyed again until overlapping or "shingled claims" filled the courts until sorted out by new laws enacted in the 1880s. "Clear Title" was the privilege of those with the earliest claims and the best lawyers, with the latter often more important than the former. According to Shaler:

The first movement into Kentucky was made by men of the higher social rank and by the frontier class, generally shiftless people who had the habit of the frontier, living mostly by hunting or trapping..... There were perhaps a hundred families of this kind on the lands of my kindred, the Southgates.

The frontiersmen were honest, kindly.....with no other vice than drunkenness, and this mainly in binges. Except, of course, for the fighting and feuding.....which seldom led to murder.....The shiftlessness was not mere indolence, al-

though they were characteristically lazy, but rather an entire lack of all traditions as to the relation of labour to life.

Land was the basis of the social system which was feudal at its roots.



Simon Kenton 1836

The Virginia land system led to a three tiered class system, the wealthy proprietors with thousands of acres who with their lawyers were able to protect and increase their holdings, the poor landless whites who were "tenants" on the land of the proprietors, and finally the slaves of the proprietors.

He described how land in Campbell County flowed from the smaller owners into the hands of the Taylors and Southgates as the natural outcome of what he saw as Virginia slave feudalism. The tenants were used to having little, and so didn't make a fuss. In Ohio, farm owners worked their own land. This was unthinkable in the Virginia model. Small proprietors would act as their own overseers and direct their slaves, but manual labor was socially incorrect.

Kenton and Boone and the other frontier leaders understood that land meant status, and they were able to amass large holdings. However, being uneducated men of action, Boone and Kenton didn't tend to the other side of



Daniel Boone

proprietorship. They didn't clear their titles, they didn't keep their books, and they didn't find good lawyers. Neither man was a bit interested in farming. Kenton bragged that "he had never done a day's work in his life." Spending endless hours surveying millions of acres for others wasn't work, of course. In return they usually got one half of the land for their part. This fed another all consuming thirst that they shared, the thirst for land. They didn't use it for much. The thrill was in ownership.

In 1779, Boone set out for Richmond to buy patents with \$50,000 in currency and enough surveys to use it all. Almost half of the entries and cash were his own, the rest from his "clients." At an inn in James City, Virginia, he awoke to find his saddlebags missing, even though his room was still locked. His land problems only increased as he tried to pay off his debts.

Boone could read and write but Kenton signed his name with an X until he was 30 years old. He had problems with keeping up with his land holdings in Virginia, Kentucky, Florida, Ohio, Missouri, and Indiana, and were worse as he tried to settle down. He spent two stints in jail in the 1820s, once for almost two years in Urbana, Ohio, although the door was unlocked and his family was with him.

Land debts and taxes were problems which got worse for both Boone and Kenton as they aged. It can be safely said that each of them had been owners, more or less, of at least a half million acres over time. For most of seven years they both resided near Washington, in Mason County, Kentucky. According to his son, "Kenton was land crazy. He didn't care for riches because, he didn't use it. Land in vast areas was his passionate hobby."

In 1798, both were issued arrest warrants in Mason County. Within a year Boone was a resident of Missouri, a Spanish territory. His son had received a land grant and had been encouraged by the Lt. Governor Don Zenon Trudeau to entice his famous

father to follow him. Whether he went for the 10,000 acres, or the hunting and trapping in the unsettled Ozarks, or the cheap land on all sides, we will never know. Boone summed it up as "elbow room."

He was a bitter man and had bad memories of Kentucky. In 1803, the United States bought Missouri, but refused to recognize Boone's Spanish land titles. Friends gave him 300 acres in 1819 and when he died the following

.....of the great names, which in our faces stare.

The General Boone, backwoodsman of Kentucky.

Was happiest amongst mortals anywhere.....

Lord Byron

year, he did have land in which to "inter his bones." In 1845, however, the newly proud Kentucky recaptured the old patriot and reburied him in Frankfort with great festivity along with a number of his compatriots including Elliston Williams of Kenton County.

Simon Kenton, under threat of arrest, had protected Mason County from Indians for 20 years. All of his best land was gone or under threat for his debts. He, therefore, went with his new wife to Cincinnati for the birth of her child in 1799, and determined to move on to Ohio where good land was still available. He assigned his brother John to settle his affairs with 145,000 acres of remaining land in Kentucky.

He sold a good deal of land and managed to buy a quarter of a million acres in the Symmes purchase north of Cincinnati. He continued to amass property by "locating" land for others, but by 1820, his holdings had declined. His later years were spent in an 18 by 18 foot cabin on land owned by his daughter. In 1827, Congress passed a pension specifically for General Simon Kenton and the years before his death in April, 1836, were comfortable if landless. In 1865, Ohio moved his bones to the cemetery in Urbana where he lies today

under a fancy monument erected in 1885.

These men were neighbors and landed proprietors in Mason County for a six year period in the late 1880s. They built large stone houses and lived surrounded by friends and relatives. They owned stores and taverns and treated all comers with generosity, but it didn't last.

Both Boone and Kenton achieved more than wealth, more than historical recognition, more than fame. They became legendary figures. Boone and Kenton's frontier spirit influenced the Romantic Period in the arts of Europe, including the writings of men from Lord Byron to Alan Eckardt. Gilbert Imlay, a man well known in the salons of Europe, wrote about Boone in 1797 after cheating him out of 1000 lbs. on a land purchase. Lord Byron wrote an extensive poem on Daniel Boone, after reading the writings of Imlay. Jean Francois Millet's painting, "Mazeppa Ride of Simon Kenton," was known throughout Europe, and so inspired Franz Liszt to write the Mazeppa Overture.

By 1820, these men, practically penniless, without the status of land, nonetheless had their status. They were a part of Western Culture, as the prototype "Frontiersmen."



Richard Southgate

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