

# Why The Mother Town?

By MISS MARTHA STEPHENSON



---

Read at the unveiling of "The Mother Town" marker at  
Harrodsburg, June 16, 1926, under auspices  
of the Woman's Club.

---

---

# Why The Mother Town?

By Miss Martha Stephenson, Harrodsburg, Ky.

---

History is built on testimony and we weigh testimony by the character of the testifier. Therefore I will proceed to quote the testimony of some of those who have received undisputed recognition for being the highest authorities. George Rogers Clark, in his memoirs, written probably in 1791, in compliance with the request of Jefferson and Madison, begins by saying:—"I must commence with the first settlement in the district . . . The first settlement **attempted** in Kentucky was by Colonel James Harrod with some few followers at Harrodstown in the Spring of 1774, but the party made but small progress in building, etc., before they were obliged to abandon the country on account of the war with the Shawanoes. They marched through the wilderness and joined Colonel Lewis' Army.

At the close of that war they again took possession of **their town** in the Spring of 1775 (Eng. Life of George Rogers Clark, &c., Vol. 1, pg. 457)."

How perfectly this agrees with the simple but graphic story told by Collins where he says: "Capt. Harrod and his company encamped at the big spring on the East of the place where it was agreed to lay off a town . . . and on June 16th, 1774, they laid off a town, giving each man a half acre inlot and a ten acre outlot, &c." (Collins, Vol. 2, page 517).

I would impress you with several features of this familiar narrative: First, that Harrodstown was really founded in 1774, not just named and intended. It was surveyed and platted and cabins built and occupied. It was the rallying or concentration point of all the company. Second, the expanse of beautiful lands raised in the minds of these pioneers visions of future settlements and fortunes to be made, and they scattered through the country, each man selecting some site and putting on it a low roofed cabin

---

---

or some other improvement (so called) to identify it as his. Where two or more men wanted the same site they cast lots for it. But these isolated sites could not by any stretch of reason be called settlements until they became such in after time. But note in the narrative that these Harrodstown cabins were occupied until July 10th, when their occupants went to join Lewis' Army and that at the close of Dunmore's war, they returned and lived in the cabins, some of them until 1777. Collins gives his authority for this history, Abraham Chaplin, Robert B. McAfee and other pioneers (Vol. 2, page 517.)

Other testimony we find in Timothy Flint's "Geography and History of the Western Country," written in 1826. It reads as follows: "In 1774, the first cabin for family habitancy was built on the present site of Harrodsburg by James Harrod. This habitation answered the double purpose of house and Fort." James Harrod, founder of this settlement was another character like Daniel Boone."

Next we look in Mann Butler's History (page 26). He says: "In the course of 1774, James Harrod, who led a party from the country on the Monongahela ascended the Kentucky river and proceeding across the country, built the first log cabin in Kentucky." (He should have said, like Flint, for habitation). He also says: "In the spring of 1775 the returned Harrod party arrived at Harrodstown 15 days before Daniel Boone reached the site that became Boonesboro."

This fact, corroborated by all standard historians, settles the dispute about which is the older of the two settlements; Harrodsburg is older by one year and fifteen days. But hold, says one, Boonesboro's Fort is older than Harrodstown's and families were brought first to Boonesboro. Let us see. Both Boonesboro and Harrodstown had initial defenses and a permanent fort. Some historians seemingly have overlooked this fact, and confused the little fort built by Daniel Boone and rejected by Henderson, with the fort of history which was not completed until the Summer of 1776, about the same time Harrodstown's big fort on the hill,

---

---

west of the first cabins and palisades was built. Authority for this statement is found in John Floyd's letter written at Boonesboro, July 21, 1776, about the same time, to General Preston, in which he tells graphically the story of the capture of the Boone and Calloway girls and describes the precarious condition of the settlers, and says: "We are about finishing the fort here and I understand they are doing the same at Harrodsburg, &c." Collins in a footnote, page 239, refers to the Floyd letter. Mann Butler quotes part of it on pages 30-33, but does not quote what is said about the forts, but the letter is given in full in Perrin, Butler and Kniffin's history (page 82).

The same day that Daniel Boone's family arrived at Boonesboro, the wives of Harrod, Denton and Hogan arrived at Harrodsburg (Collins, Vol 2, pgs. 518-520, Butler (pages 28-30).

Now a few quotations from Marshall. On page 48 we find the statement: "This place (Harrodsburg) had usually been from the time of settlement, the strongest in the country." "Many settlements were begun in 1775, but in times of danger Fort Harrod was the chief refuge." "At the end of 1777, only three forts remained, Harrodsburg, Boonesboro and Logan's." "Harrodsburg had three times as many men as Boonesboro and more than four times as many as Logan's." (Marshall, pg. 55).

Early in the Spring of 1775, George Rogers Clark came to Harrodsburg, and from there visited the various settlements, taking notice of their needs and conditions. His commanding personality was recognized and he was given command of the irregular troops. He returned to Virginia in the autumn but came again to Harrodsburg the next Spring and announced his purpose in these words: "I have come to see what you brave fellows are doing, and to lend you a helping hand if necessary." (Collins, Vol. 2:610), Butler, Vol. 1:35, &c.)\* He saw it was eminently necessary, called a convention at Harrodsburg, the sequel to it being that he and Gabriel Jones were sent to the Virginia Assembly as delegates. They secured the erection of Kentucky county. There is not time, were it necessary, to recount all the history. My single purpose

---

---

is to draw your attention to Harrodsburg as the base from which proceeded the organization of the first civil and military government in Kentucky. The Henderson proprietary government though it served some good purposes, was **transient** and **invalid**.

Kentucky county was organized with territorial boundaries about the same as constitute the state today. It was allowed two representatives to be elected by the settlers, to sit in the Virginia Legislature; it was allowed a county court of civil jurisdiction in matters of both law and equity, justices of the peace, militia officers, Sheriff, Coroner, and surveyors. The Court was opened quarterly at Harrodsburg. It was composed of six or eight of the most competent men in the country and they were entitled to hold monthly sessions for ordinary business if necessary. Colonel John Todd and Colonel Richard Calloway were the first representatives from Kentucky county. All citizens were placed in companies of militia under commissioned officers, "so that," in the language of Marshall, "in reality the county in effect assumed the appearance of an infant commonwealth."

This information may be verified by consulting any standard history. I have drawn from Marshall, pages 47-48.

Harrodsburg was the seat of government for Kentucky county from December 31, 1776, until the autumn of 1780. For years, in fact it was a "frontier capital" and it is called such in Perrin's History, pg. 164.

As surveys and settlements increased, the confusion of overlapping and interfering land grants became so entangled that secure titles were almost impossible. For the purpose of bringing order out of chaos, the Virginia land act of 1779 set up a Court of four commissioners to examine the land claims and certify valid titles to those who could comply with the conditions of the law. The four commissioners or Judges of this court were Col. James Barbour, Colonel William Fleming, Colonel Edward Lyne and Colonel Stephen Trigg. Of the eight terms of this Court, three were held at Harrodsburg, two at St. Asaph's and one each at Louisville and Boonesboro. Harrodsburg at the time, accord-

---

ing to the estimate of Colonel Fleming, had a population of four hundred and was the most important station in Kentucky. (Judge Samuel Wilson's Land Court).

But Harrodsburg's star of supremacy began to wane when in 1780 Kentucky county was divided into three, Lincoln, Fayette and Jefferson, and separate courts were organized with full powers for local government.

With rapid increase of population and a greater competition for land and every other commodity, necessity arose for a firmer organization and higher judicial powers, which resulted in the union of the three counties in a District and the establishment of the Supreme Court of the District of Kentucky. The Court met first at Harrodsburg holding sessions there three days, March 3rd, 4th and 5th, 1783. And from here on we find the beginnings of Danville.



