

The Role of Kentucky in America's Military Heritage

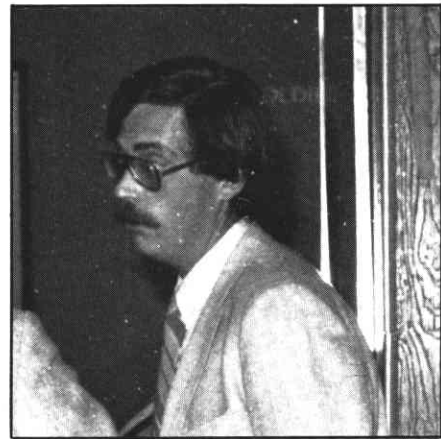
Nicky Hughes

Welcome to Frankfort and to the Kentucky Historical Society. The Society operates three museums in Frankfort; this restored Old State House, the Kentucky History Museum next door and the Kentucky Military History Museum run in cooperation with the Kentucky National Guard in the Old State Arsenal a few blocks away. From the point of view of most of you, we are saving the best for last, having first brought you here; but let me assure you that you will have plenty of time at the Military Museum. Those of you who are not familiar with that institution are, I think, in for a bit of a surprise, one that should be altogether pleasant. The mission of the Military History Museum is to portray the role of Kentucky in America's military heritage, and we do that with a collection of weapons, uniforms and equipment that we feel you will find impressive. Indeed, you will see some things today which you can only see here.

Denver Cornett asked me some time ago to speak to you today as sort of a warm-up for your tour of the Military Museum, and I feel a little bit like the second rate act that precedes the big name group at a concert. But I will try to give you an overview of Kentucky's military history that will put what you see at the museum into context. He also requested that the talk be humorous. That is something of a challenge when discussing military history, much of which is anything but humorous. But there are many episodes in Kentucky military history which can be recounted with the tongue firmly in the cheek and taken together they do tell us a lot about the state's military heritage. So that is the approach to be taken today. No doubt all the other talks you have heard or will hear during your meeting are based upon endless research to insure their absolute accuracy. I make no such claims for the content of this talk. As a former Director of the Kentucky Historical Society, George Chinn, has frequently said, "Never let history stand in the way of a good story." We will proceed in that spirit.

In a real sense, the first twenty or thirty years of Kentucky history is military history, so closely related

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were military matters with the formative period of this Commonwealth. Those years had an impact on Kentucky which is still felt today. The first Kentuckians had to fight for everything; the land, their food, the existence of their families, and even their lives. Their enemies, aside from nature, were the Indians and their allies the British. The pioneer Kentuckians established for themselves the reputation as Indian fighters and woodsmen without parallel. Later generations of Kentuckians, even those who moved into the state long after the last war whoop had faded away, seem to have felt that they naturally inherited the fighting prowess of the pioneers. They repeatedly took opportunities to demonstrate this prowess by readily answering the nation's calls for volunteer soldiers. The state early acquired a combative image which it has never really outgrown.

The close of the American Revolution brought a flood of settlers into Kentucky. The American Congress, unable to pay its veterans in cash, rewarded many of them for their services in the Revolution with grants of land in Kentucky. Many of them came here to claim their lands, while others stayed east and sold them to speculators out to profit from the great land giveaway. It soon became apparent that the new land grant claims often conflicted and overlapped with older claims by earlier settlers. The earlier claims were themselves an absurd mess of sadly unprofessional surveying. This mess led to an activity which became just about as popular with Kentuckians as fighting. That was filing lawsuits. Kentucky soon became both combative and litigious. This in turn brought to the state a species of

professional of which we have had about as many as we have had soldiers. Those were lawyers. The problem with all this legal battling was that the battlefield was located inconveniently far away. Kentucky was still part of Virginia, and appeals could only be settled in Williamsburg or Richmond, far east across the mountains. So Kentuckians began to push for separate statehood. It took ten years of argument to achieve this status, but in 1792 Kentucky finally became the 15th state in the Union, the first west of the Appalachians. So it was that military affairs led directly to the state's independent existence.

Following their combative self-image Kentuckians began a process of militarizing their new society, although by the time of statehood or soon thereafter, direct Indian threats to Kentucky were rare. Indian fighters and Revolutionary heroes like Isaac Shelby found ready acceptance in the political process, Shelby becoming the state's first governor. Like other states, Kentucky established an enrolled militia which required military training and service of nearly every able-bodied male. This system worked no better in Kentucky than elsewhere, but Kentuckians seem to have taken at least the symbolism of the militia deeply to heart. With everyone in the state in a military organization, that made for many separate units. The scores of companies all had to have captains, and the dozens of regiments all had to have colonels. Yes, Kentucky Colonels; and the tradition of conferring and using military titles still survives.

Of course, if you are a militia officer, you are automatically a gentleman, and gentlemen have the right to settle their disputes on the dueling grounds. Combative Kentuckians took to dueling with relish, and it is estimated that more militia officers fell on the dueling grounds than in combat during the first half century of Kentucky's existence. Although they were supposed to follow the rigid "Code Duello," Kentucky duels often took bizarre twists. One of my favorites involves a Frankfort newspaper editor who apparently insulted beyond tolerance one of the city's citizens. The resulting duel was to be fought in what probably seemed good Kentucky style, with Kentucky rifles. A problem arose when the would-be duelists had to decide upon a firing signal, a decision complicated by the range required for rifle dueling. It seems that one of the men was nearly blind and the other nearly deaf. No way could be found to surmount this problem, so the proposed trial by combat was called off. By the way, William Henry Harrison, the great frontier military leader, was known to lament the popularity of dueling. He feared that young

men spent so much time learning to use the pistol that they ignored the more militarily-useful rifles and muskets.

The outbreak of the War of 1812 was greeted with exuberance by Kentuckians; another generation needed its chance to whip the Indians and British. But Kentucky paid dearly for this enthusiasm. It has been estimated that over one-half of all American battle deaths in the War of 1812 were Kentuckians. Many of these were in a single day at the Battle of the River Raisin. Kentuckians in Richard M. Johnson's Regiment of Kentucky Mounted Riflemen revenged this defeat in 1813 at the Battle of the Thames in Canada. But it can be argued that this revenge sparked an even more lasting revenge in the form of the "curse of Tecumseh." Tecumseh, as you may know, was one of the foremost Indian leaders. An ally of the British, he attempted to unite all the tribes to drive out the Americans. The Indians ascribed great mystic powers to him, and it is claimed that the New Madrid earthquake which formed Reelfoot Lake was caused when Tecumseh stamped his foot. Tecumseh was killed at the Battle of the Thames. As the legend goes, as he lay dying he cursed William Henry Harrison, leader of the American forces. Granting that Harrison must be a great leader for having defeated him, Tecumseh predicted that Harrison would become President of the United States, as he indeed did several years later. But Tecumseh doomed Harrison to die in office, and cursed his successors to die likewise in twenty year intervals. The curse has held true. Harrison was dead within weeks of taking the oath of office, and in roughly twenty year intervals his successors have passed on. The current holder of the office is eligible, by the way.

Richard M. Johnson fared better, becoming another in a long series of men on white horses to gain political office on the basis of their military careers. He became a Congressman and eventually Vice-President of the United States. Some people claimed that Johnson had killed Tecumseh. He almost certainly did not, but he never took a public stand on the issue personally. His campaign song went something like, "Rump-tey-dumpty, rump-tey-dumpty, Richard Johnson slew Tecumseh." That is not exactly the kind of thing we hear on our televisions every four years now, but it was apparently effective advertising in the early 1800s. By all accounts his horse really was white.

Never underestimate the power of a song. One episode in Kentucky military history has been celebrated in several songs, and that is the Battle of New Orleans. I am certain that you know the basic outline of this battle,

so we will not go into great detail in recounting it. But did you know that many of the Kentuckians who arrived to help defeat New Orleans were not armed? It seems that by this stage of the war Kentucky's government had tired of spending money on the effort, as had most of the well-to-do Kentuckians who could supply their own weapons. Jackson was furious, raging that he had never before seen a Kentuckian without "a bottle of bourbon, a deck of cards and a long rifle." This comment and others about the conduct of some of the Kentucky soldiers during the battle embittered Kentuckians against this great westerner, and the state never voted for him in his races for President. The battle resulted in a popular song containing the lines, "For Jackson he was wide awake and wasn't scared for trifles, for well he knew what aim we take with our Kentucky Rifles." That title, as you know, stuck, and the long frontiersmen's rifles are still called Kentucky Rifles. Incidentally, while in Frankfort please refrain from calling these weapons Pennsylvania Rifles, Long Rifles, American Rifles, Pennsylvania-Kentucky Rifles or any of that other drivel. It is an article of faith here that the name of that class of weapon is Kentucky Rifle. The people of this state burned a lot of powder to earn that title, and the name means a great deal here.

In the Mexican War Kentuckians did almost as much fighting among themselves and other Americans as against the Mexicans. The number of Kentuckians who turned out in response to President Polk's call for volunteers far exceeded the quotas. As a result fist fights broke out at recruiting stations to see who would have the privilege of fighting the Mexicans. When some Kentucky units learned that they would be required to carry the regulation smooth bore muskets, they nearly mutinied. The men insisted upon using the Kentucky Rifles of their ancestors, but of course the Army won that argument.

The Civil War was, of course, the most significant and tragic conflict in the history of Kentucky and of the nation. Its effects are still felt strongly in the state today. One of my favorite episodes in the Civil War in Kentucky deals with Confederate General Felix Zollicoffer, affectionately known as "Wrong-Way Felix." In a brilliant display of military prowess, Zollicoffer accidentally rode among a line of Union soldiers at the Battle of Mill Springs in southeastern Kentucky. The Union troops were as new to the war at this early 1862 fight as was Zollicoffer and dutifully responded to the orders the Confederate general shouted at them. One wonders how long this could have gone on. Unfortunately for the General, his aide riding with him finally

figured out that a grave mistake had been made. He then compounded the error. He shouted something like, "Hey, General—they're Yankees!" loudly enough for anyone around to hear. Within seconds, General Felix Zollicoffer had issued his last order. He was the first of many generals to die in Kentucky during the war.

The interesting thing about Kentucky in the Civil War is how the popular idea of the state's role in that conflict has changed over the years. Early in the war, Kentucky was doubtless a Union state. Few people realize that perhaps twice as many Kentuckians served in the Union Army as did in the Confederate. The Federal military government of Kentucky was so harsh, however, that Kentuckians turned away from the Union as the war progressed. It has been said that Kentucky seceded from the Union only after the war had ended. This pro-Southern outlook is what has been retained by Kentuckians and those who view Kentucky from the outside. The recent growth in the popularity of genealogy has seen many Kentuckians re-discovering their Civil War ancestors. I am always amazed at the number of them who are descended from Confederate officers. It seems that something happened in the war to make Confederate officers incredibly prolific. The same disease, if that is what it should be called, made Confederate enlisted men slightly less productive, and devastated the reproductive capabilities of Union officers. It must have virtually killed off all Union enlisted men, judging from the number of Kentuckians who claim them as ancestors.

From all this you can, I hope, see that Kentucky has played an important role in our country's military history. Kentuckians are aware of that heritage and rather proud of it. In the 1850s a Frankfort newspaper editor wrote a sentence which sums up the Kentucky military self image: "There is something in the air of Kentucky that makes a man a soldier." An old saying in Kentucky claims that this country needs only three states: Massachusetts to talk up what we want to do, Virginia to provide the leaders, and Kentucky to do the fighting. At the museum today you will see many reminders of Kentucky's proud military traditions.



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