

HISTORY OF WILLIAMSBURG
CHAPTER I
EARLY WILLIAMSBURG TO 1880

The proper introduction to the history of Williamsburg begins with the Dr. Thomas Walker expedition from Virginia into Kentucky through Cumberland Gap about the year 1750. (1) Dr. Walker was the first explorer of Kentucky and the first white man to build a house in Kentucky. His journal tells of his travels to Blakes Fork, Watts Creek, and Meadow Creek of present Whitley County.

We do not have any records as to what really did happen between 1750 and the early 1800's. It is thought that scouts and settlers followed Dr. Walker's trail to Watts Creek and on down the creek and up the river a short distance to Spring Ford, presently Williamsburg. Dr. Thomas Walker named this river the Cumberland after the Duke of Cumberland.

It has been reported that Spring Ford was named by the Indians because of the low shallow place in the river and two fresh water springs nearby. These springs coupled with a good ford is thought to have led to a settlement at what is presently known as Williamsburg.

Kentucky became a State in 1792 and soon thereafter there followed the creation of three counties: Jefferson, composing the western part of Kentucky; Fayette, the northern part, and Lincoln County, the southern part. Today, we find at Stanford in Lincoln County records of the people living in this area in that day.

Surveys were rapidly being made in the wild lands of Kentucky and more counties were added. About 1820, Colonel William Whitley sent Joseph Gillis to the southern part of the state to make surveys.

Whitley County became the 59th county and was formed from Knox, Pulaski, and believed Laurel. The date the charter was granted is unknown. The first fiscal court was held Monday, April 20, 1818, at the home of Samuel Cox, of whom the late Dr. W. M. Cox, Corbin, Joe Cox and Elihu Cox of Meadow Creek, are descendants. His home was a large rambling house located at the southwest corner of Second and Main Streets.

Evidently there was a large ballroom in the Cox home. There is some indication that it was a place used by travelers for overnight stops. As time progressed, it became a tavern operated in connection with a ferry.

The first court consisted of seven members: Edward Rielly, John Berry, Uriah Parks, Francis Faulkner, Sammie Clark, Samuel Cox and Isaac King. Each member of this court held his office

(1) Our appreciation to Dr. C. A. Moss for helpful information and to Mr. Foley Ruggles for permission to use parts of "The Williamsburg Story" published in the Corbin Times Tribune, June, 1952.

on the authority of commissions issued by Lieutenant Governor Gabriel Slaughter, acting as governor of the state. He had taken over as the state's chief executive at the death of Governor George Madison on October 21, 1816.

There was strong bidding from various localities of the county to become the county seat. Among these were Joefields, now Woodbine, Pleasant View, and the site on the banks of the Cumberland which then bore no name. Samuel Cox evidently influenced the commission in its selection of the county seat. He donated the land and volunteered to give half of the proceeds from the sale of lots in establishing the town should a portion of his land be that selected by the commission.

The Commission selected Williamsburg as a name for the town and Whitley as a name for the county in commemoration of the great Indian Fighter, William Whitley, whose service to the county had been so essential.

Samuel Cox gave the land and made the deed to the City Trustees of the City of Williamsburg for court house purposes.

The ford across the river and the three fresh water springs nearby together with the influence of Samuel Cox had much to do with the selection of Williamsburg as the county seat for Whitley County. This ford seemed to have been the crossroads for early pioneers moving east to west and north to south. I have crossed the river at this ford in a horse-drawn wagon. One of the springs was situated on Second Street south of Cumberland Avenue near the site of the present municipal housing project. I have seen these springs many times. In those days, Cumberland River furnished plenty of wash water and the springs furnished an abundance of good drinking water for the entire Williamsburg settlement.

The first meeting of the Whitley County Court held Monday, April 20, 1818, at the home of Samuel Cox might be called the birth place and the birth date for the town of Williamsburg. However, it was not until June 15, 1818, that the report of the commission selecting Williamsburg as the site for the county seat was actually made a part of the record.

The September election of 1818 led to further developments. The court apparently was waiting for this election before going further with plans for the erection of a court house and jail. A three-man commission for the court specified a court house to be forty feet by twenty-eight feet. It was to have a foundation of four feet, two feet under the ground and two above. The height was set at twenty feet. The interior was to be divided in four equal parts two upstairs and two downstairs. The second floor rooms were to be used for the purpose of holding court and the first floor for office purposes. The building was to cost \$2,811.00. Another \$400.00 was allotted for construction of a jail. It was to be patterned after the one at Barbourville and be the same size.

Whether the courthouse or jail was ever built at this time cannot be determined. Later, we do know that a courthouse without floor and a log jail without floors were built. The courthouse was located on the present site and the jail was just back of the Mahan Building which the Bank of Williamsburg later acquired.

Chapter CCCLXXV, page 680, Kentucky Laws Section 8, approved February 8, 1819, states "that the town of Williamsburg in Whitley County, be, and the same is hereby established."

Section 9 states that the Court of Whitley County is empowered to select two of their members to meet at the Court House and hold an election for five trustees to carry on the business of the town, collect and levy taxes. These trustees were to be elected annually by the free male inhabitants of said town above the age of twenty-one years.

Chapter 354, page 258, Section # 1, Laws of Kentucky approved March 3, 1851, states, "Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Kentucky, that the town of Williamsburg be and it is hereby incorporated; and that said town be governed in the election of trustees and other officers."

Section # 2

That the persons entitled to vote for trustees of said town of Williamsburg shall once in every four years at the time and place of voting for said trustees elect a police judge.

Section # 3

"That Jeptha W. Brawner, James C. Williams, H. H. Moss, and Pleasant Meadow, are hereby appointed commissioners, who, or any three of whom, may procession said town, and lay off and establish, from the evidence they can procure, the boundaries of said town, according to the original plan laying off said town."

Approved March 3, 1851.

There is strong evidence that this close tie between the early Whitley County government and the pioneer administration of the town of Williamsburg was a drawback and not good for the town. The late Verna Denham, in her History of Williamsburg says that the streets were laid out by Colonel Gillis whom she had entertained in her home on different occasions. But, the streets were unpaved and muddy when wet. There was no local newspaper, no sidewalks, no lights or communication service, and no organized churches. It was fertile ground for missionary enterprises. Living conditions were hard. The ballroom of the Samuel Cox home was used as a schoolroom up until about 1869.

The late A. T. Siler often commented on the earlier days of Williamsburg. He recalled riding to Williamsburg on horseback behind his mother from their rural home. "It wasn't much of a town. There was a jail and the courthouse had a dirt floor. The town has grown up mostly in my lifetime," he said.

Williamsburg had its real beginning about 1880. It was about this year that coal fields were being opened and mined. According to information from the L & N Office in Louisville, the construction of the L & N Railroad from Livingston, Kentucky through Williamsburg was

begun in 1882, and opened to London, 18 miles from Livingston, on July 1, 1882. The track reached the north bank of the Cumberland River at Williamsburg in December that same year and was completed to the state line on April 2, 1883.(2) The present L & N bridge across Cumberland River at Williamsburg was built in 1903. The depot was built just opposite to what is now W. D. Bryant's store on South Filson Street. Then it was known as Depot Street in Depot Voting precinct.

Before 1880 there apparently were no organized churches or school in Williamsburg. The Minutes of a Methodist Mission of the Kentucky Conference held at Williamsburg on December 11, 1867, states that Williamsburg, Liberty, Cumberland Falls and Pruitt's Chapel were stations on a Methodist Circuit.

The first step leading to the establishment of a church and school at Williamsburg might have been prompted through the establishment of school in the 1870's at Pleasant View, Kentucky, by a Professor Willia A. Nesbitt, who came from Pennsylvania and constructed a two-story frame building. He conducted a school called Cora College named for his wife. Unless this was a missionary enterprise, we do not know where he obtained his money to build and to open the school. But we do know that he had a profound influence on education in this area.

Williamsburg's first church organization was established sixty years after the founding of the county and town. On January 12, 1878, sixteen men signed a constitution for a new church known as the "First Gospel Association of Williamsburg." This venture was a missionary enterprise of the Congregational Church of the north for a church and a school (Williamsburg Academy, established September 7, 1881, later to become Highland College) at Williamsburg.(3) Highland College was later purchased by Cumberland College and the building was known as "Dixie Hall" until it was torn down in 1955 for the erection of the Dr. A. Gatliff Building.

Of all the happenings in and about Williamsburg in the early 1880 probably one of the most significant occurred on March 16, 1884. This was the dedication of the Congregational Church at Williamsburg. It was located on the North Side of Main Street at Fifth Street. The church building was destroyed by fire in 1907. The church relocated at a site on Maple Street near the railroad bridge, but disbanded several years ago.

This church, of course, had its roots in the north. Their teachings were rather liberal for the people of this area. It was not long until real opposition was developing especially among Baptists. The minutes of the early years of the Mt. Zion Association of Baptists, organized October 30, 1885, refer to their teaching as being foreign and urged Baptists to go to Baptist schools. Strong movement was made to organize a Baptist school. It was apparent that real trouble lay ahead for Congregational church and school.

We have selected the year 1880 as the end of this period because it was at this time the Louisville and Nashville Railroad came to Williamsburg with the development of the coal industry which brought many changes.

(2) Information from L & N Office, Louisville, Kentucky.

(3) Volume III # 5 - January 1892 - The Mountain Missionary.