

King's Study  
of the  
Settlers and the Land  
of  
Harlan County, Kentucky

A Paper Presented

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It has been said that you cannot talk about Harlan County without talking about coal and violence and all sorts of negative aspects. However, with the exception of a few lines those points will be absent from this paper.

Harlan County is located in the Southeastern corner of Kentucky along the Virginia border within the Cumberland Plateau of the Appalachian Mountain system. It is a mountainous region of mostly narrow ridges, steep-walled and narrow valleys and thousands of tiny streams forming a few major winding rivers that flow into a major portions of the state. It is an area of dense forests, once abundant with wild game, poor soil and thick veins of coal.

To the "outsider" Harlan County is often thought of as "hillbilly" and "Daniel Boone" country; an area whose settlers were fiercely independent and whose descendents now live in abject poverty. But, you will find the same conditions right here around you. It is just easier and less stressful to point to other areas than your own backyard.

The town which is now Harlan was unmapped land when Virginia claimed it under her 1609 Charter. The Cherokee Nation and the Big Six Iroquois Tribes claimed it as their hunting ground in 1763. The Indians used the land primarily as common hunting grounds for food and fur; only a few lived there permanently.

Kentucky County was divided into three counties in 1780; Jefferson, Fayette and Lincoln. Lincoln was the largest of the counties stretching from the borders of Southwest Virginia and Northeast Tennessee into portions of the BlueGrass and on into far Western Kentucky to the Ohio and Mississippi River boundaries. After Kentucky became a state in 1792, Lincoln County eventually was carved into several small counties that included Knox County in 1800 which contained our subject area with Harlan becoming the sixtieth (60th) county on January 28, 1819. It was named named for Major Silas Harlan, who had been killed in the 1782 Indian Battle of Blue Lick. The first Harlan County census of 1820 showed a population of 1,961 people. The high population mark was just over 75,000 during the coal boom years of the 1940's and now lists about 40,000 residents. It ranks 17th in land area in Kentucky covering 469 square miles. It is approximately fifty miles long and 20 miles wide with Cumberland Mountain running down its Eastern border along Virginia and Pine Mountain running down its Western border with three river forks (Martins Fork, Clover Fork and Poor Fork) meeting near Harlan to form the Cumberland River.

Now, let us look into the settlers of Harlan County. Samuel Howard is credited with being the first white settler of the area. Howard, who sometimes spelled his name H-O-A-R-D and H-O-R-D, was born in Buckingham County, Virginia in 1762. Samuel served in the Revolutionary War from 1778, at the age of 16, as a private in Carrington's Company of Fleming's Virginia Regiment and was with George Washington at Yorktown for the surrender of Cornwallis at the end of the war in 1781.

In relating to the surrender of Cornwallis, Howard said that Washington took the sword of Cornwallis, and after examining it, handed it back to him, remarking, "This is a very fine sword". Then, one of Washington's officers accepted the sword as a token of surrender.

Howard returned to Buckingham County, Virginia, for a short time in 1781, then moved to Greenbriar County and resided there until 1788. Over the next few years he moved around from Big Holston in Hawkins County, Tennessee to Lee County and Russell County, in Virginia and even back to Greenbriar County. During this period he ventured into the Kentucky area and eventually he, his wife Chloe and their family became the first white settlers of Harlan, then known as Mount Pleasant.

Their eighth child, Wilkerson Howard, was born in 1796, the first white child born in Mount Pleasant. The family pitched camp under a cliff near the "Y" of the Clover Fork and Martins' Fork of the Cumberland River; secured a grant from the Commonwealth of Kentucky in 1804 and later received various land grants for service in the Revolutionary War, grants that led to the settlement of the Poor Fork and English Creek areas. Some of this land is still held by direct descendents of Samuel Howard. While many of Samuel and Chloe's descendents are buried in a hillside family cemetery at Ross Point, within sight of the Poor Fork of the Cumberland River, the founding couple are buried on another hillside a few miles away marked by a simple white stone erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

The first white settlers of Harlan County migrated from a reasonably well-developed section of Virginia into an unknown wilderness of thick forests, abundant game, plenty of pure water from hundreds of streams. The mountainous terrain was difficult to clear for cultivation. Frost killed the first corn crop. Supplies were exhausted and they lived through the first winter mostly on wild meats. The game was so plentiful that Samuel Howard went bear hunting one morning and killed seven bears with only seven shots from his rifle. And, all before breakfast. Now, that's the breakfast of a champion! The early inhabitants were practically self-sustaining with very little trading or bartering in the first several years. They raised their crops, their sheep, cattle and chickens. Good hunting provided meat, skins and furs. Timber was plentiful for building. But, the ruggedly beautiful mountains always made life difficult. So difficult that cutting and moving big logs was not possible with so few people. Thus, the first shelters were cliff overhangs and caves with buildings made of poles or small logs daubed with clay and sod.

The first settlers found most of the Indians in the area to be friendly and hospitable. They gave the white man furs to sleep on and shared many things with them. Some people think that this early treatment by the Indians is one reason Mountain people are noted for their generosity and hospitality. Later, some Indians became concerned about losing their lands but the more hostile Indians were soon driven out. The more friendly Indians remained for many years. Some married into the white community and many Harlan Countians boast of having Indian ancestors. The chief tribes were Cherokees and Quadrules and were scattered in small bands throughout the county.

The Cherokees seemed to be unfriendly and lived apart from their white neighbors and eventually moved away. But, Elmon Middleton's 1934 county history relates the story of one old Cherokee named Sam Whitson who still lived on the mountain near Coxton in the early 1930's. He wore his coal black hair in long pleated braids dangling down his back. The Cherokee blood runs thru the veins of several mountaineers. One of them was a co-worker and good friend during my first job in radio and now owns the radio station where we both started to work; an association that I treasure.

The Quadrule Indians were friendly and mingled freely with the newcomers. They were adept at spinning and weaving woolens and flax and making beautiful pottery. The Quadrule women wore beautifully colored clothing and were fond of brightly colored pottery. They made the pottery from clay around Wallins Creek and generally lived in that area but most of them went West after the Civil War. Some of the older Indians returned to the county after the Western colonization and lived in scattered areas around the county and became absorbed in the white man's culture.

During the early 1900's several Indian relics....tomahawks, arrowheads, flints, beads, pottery and skeletons were found by workmen excavating during construction in the city of Harlan. And, even in the 1970's and 1980's relics were found while construction was in progress on additions to the Harlan County Courthouse. The courthouse and several commercial buildings are located on mounds of earth that are believed to cover ancient Indian burial grounds but it has remained untouched.

The Howards, Turners and Middletons were among the first families to settle Harlan County. Other early families included the Cawoods, Kellys, Sargeants, Brittain, Cornettes, Creeches and Jones. These and a few other families who settled before 1850 intermarried so that nearly all of the natives can trace their ancestors back to Revolutionary War soldiers. Revolutionary War soldier Barry Cawood of Virginia served as an Indian Scout and a spy and accompanied General George Rogers Clark in his famous march through the Kaskaskia River country of Illinois and Indiana and the capture of Fort Vincennes. He settled in Harlan County and died at Cawood in 1848. Cawood has another famous native most Kentuckians know. His last name is Ledford.

Many of the Revolutionary War veterans also served in the War of 1812 and took part in the battle in which the famous Indian Chief Tecumseh was killed. Tecumseh was the greatest Indian leader of the time and was allied with the British. One of Harlan's earliest inhabitants, Walter Middleton, served with the Kentucky group that defeated and killed Tecumseh in a famous 1813 battle. History says Colonel Richard Johnson fired the fatal shot, but Middleton claimed he did. The story would make a great movie.

The Civil War affected the people of Harlan the way it did so many people. They were divided. Some men joined the Confederate Army and others chose the Union Army. Many tried to remain neutral. Very few of the citizens had slaves so the slavery issue meant nothing to them. To many people in this isolated area it was merely a war between Democrats and Republicans.

There also seemed to be a territorial division among the people affecting their feelings for the Union or Confederacy. The County is naturally divided into four major sections by its mountains and rivers and the people in certain sections favored one side or the other. While no major battles were fought in the county, there were several skirmishes and roving bands of mauraders wreaked havoc on innocent citizens without regard to their sympathies. There are literally thousands of stories of brutish and senseless actions by both sides. Harlan County suffered not only from both armies who commandeered everything in sight, but from bands of renegade pseudo soldiers who had stolen uniforms off dead men and went over the county raiding and stealing. Indeed, the Harlan County Courthouse was burned in such a renegade action.

The people of Harlan County recovered more rapidly than other Southern communities from the Civil War, because they had less to lose. Their isolation and self-sustaining ways were their strength to recovery. But one cannot help but wonder if the war created an uncustomary distrust of strangers and friends alike for many generations. The war brought in outside influences and when many soldiers returned they began opening small stores, turned to trading and lumbering. Logs were cut and went to the mills floating down the Cumberland River. Wagons and teams of mules plodded over the mountains to Virginia and Tennessee carrying ginseng, skins and furs and returning with needed goods. And, then, the first railroad came in 1910 and opened up a new world of coal, riches, misery, distrust and eventually a better way of life. It was not an easy transition but that is another story.



Samuel Howard, the original settler of Harlan, and his wife Chloe had eleven children. Today he would find no bears to kill for food and fur. No more panthers. Still some wildcats and deer, rabbits and squirrel. He would see no more logging down the Cumberland River but he would still see great and beautiful forests. He would still find some wagon and mule trails but he would also see broad, modern highways that straighten to some degree, the Poor Fork Valley, Martins Fork and Clover Fork. An area often ravaged by the lightning quick, rampaging, devastating flooding of the Cumberland River is now being controlled and in a manner that almost defies imagination. A ten year project is underway that will change the course of the Clover Fork of the Cumberland by tunnelling through Ivy Hill Mountain and will provide both flood relief and more level land area for development. The Martins Fork area boasts modern shopping and medical complexes. Higher into the area Samuel would love the beautiful fishing and scenic lakes areas of Martins Fork Lake and Cranks Creek Lake. The narrow wagon path into Pennington Gap, Virginia is a scenic highway. The Cumberland River path towards Pineville is practically a parkway. The high winding trail up to Big Black Mountain on the Virginia border is still a twister but it is blacktopped and there is a U.S. radar and weather station at the top of this highest point in Kentucky. On the leisurely drive up he would see hundreds of varieties of wildflowers, trees, ferns and multitudes of birds and squirrels. Squirrels and chipmunks so numerous you can hardly drive without hitting one. And, breathtaking view after breathtaking view. The view on the way back down is equally dramatic, but, the best is yet to come.

Pine Mountain is a magnificent ridge that reaches approximately 125 miles from near Jellico, Tennessee to Elkhorn City, Kentucky. Much of this Southeast-Northwest mountain is located in Harlan County. While the geologic story of this natural gem is believed to be more than 400 million years old, and much has been written in geologic literature it has only been in recent years that the average person has realized the dramatic beauty this mountain range offers. Elevations range from 2,200 feet to 3,200 feet. There are only seven land gaps cutting through the 125 mile ridge and only three streams cut through the mountain; the only one in Kentucky is the Cumberland River at Pineville. Hanging Rock hangs out over Highway 421 up the mountain from Harlan and just a half mile from the southwest terminus of Little Shepherd Trail. The name, Hanging Rock is enough description. Little Shepherd Trail winds along the crest of Pine Mountain at between 2,700 and 2,900 feet. Special lookouts atop craggy sandstone bluffs and other points along the trail offer panoramic views of God's handiwork. The western slope looks down 1,500 feet to the Valley of Line Fork, where tributaries begin forming the Kentucky River that flows thru the state capitol. Part of the eastern slope overlooks the settlements of Ross Point and other tiny communities along the Poor Fork Valley of the Cumberland River from Harlan to Cumberland. The natural beauty is endless. Cumberland Mountain forms a rugged and steep eastern boundary of Harlan County along the Virginia border. Between Pine and Cumberland Mountains are several ridges and peaks. The most prominent is Black Mountain , the highest elevation in Kentucky at 4,139 feet. As you reach the top you're on the way down into Virginia.

Little Black Mountain is a similar range with elevations over 3,600 feet along the Kentucky-Virginia border in Southeastern Harlan County and is roughly south and parallel to Big Black Mountain and has given up millions of tons of coal. Some of which brought warmth to arctic and antarctic polar explorers

Mountain people and the industrial and banking conglomerates that have controlled so much of the land and economy over the years have not been good stewards of the land. But, I believe that is changing. Trash used to be seen everywhere creating ugliness in the midst of so much natural beauty. The coal mining industry, especially the strippers have been cursed and criticized for years for creating ugly scarring and pollution. Visiting in Harlan twice over the past year I noticed visible signs of cleaner roadsides and river banks. Construction of various kinds have created more level land for homes and businesses. Not level land as we know it here, but level enough to help create a better lifestyle.

Today, in the Ross Point area along the Poor Fork, Samuel and Chloe could see the modest homes of his great and great-great grandchildren. And, a few apple trees away he would see the modern two story brick home of his great-great-great grandson complete with game room, satellite TV, swimming pool and sauna. And, just a stone's throw above that is a hill owned by his great-great-great granddaughter. A hill that would make a dramatic home site but remains in its wild, natural state; a small parcel of land that has been handed down for two hundred years. Indeed, this is a land of great contrasts and it is right before your eyes.

It is an area that tens of thousands have left to seek employment elsewhere, but when the local high schools hold reunions, several thousand return for a Labor Day weekend of reunions that may be unequalled anywhere. Over 3,000 people attended the Evarts High School reunion in 1989. To paraphrase that old country expression, "you may take the boy out of the mountains but you can't take the mountains out of the boy."

Now, ladies and gentlemen, you may think that I am a native of Harlan County, employed by the Tourist Commission and Chamber of Commerce. No. I was an "outsider" and lived in the county for only five years in a coal company community in the sight and shadow of Little Black Mountain; in fact, while the post office name is Kenvir, it is better known as Black Mountain. During four years as a student at Evarts High School and a year following Navy service, I made friends and shared experiences that influenced my thoughts about a vocation, about beauty, about ugliness, about right and wrong, about people.

Samuel and Chloe Howard probably would not have come here tonight to tell you this story or ask that you visit the area or think kindly of it. **They** liked it and that was all that was necessary. Their great-great-great granddaughter **is** here and she simply does not like to hear unkind remarks about the mountains. It is her legacy and her hillside that has been handed down for over two centuries. She is my wife. And, I never even heard of Samuel Howard until several years after we were married. Those mountain people do make an impression on you. May I suggest that a few days enjoying the brooding and brilliant beauty of Harlan County will be a memorable experience.

## SOURCE MATERIAL

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- 18 - Visits to the various sites listed.
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- 20 - The people of Harlan County.