

Canton, Kentucky

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Knowledge is fleeting. I know because I lost the first draft of this paper that I started two years ago. Fortunately, I'd saved my primary sources. And were it not for written history we would start each generation anew, without a foundation on which to build. So join me as we preserve for just a little while the story of Trigg County's port village, Canton.

What interested me in Canton? Well, my great great grandfather settled there in 1838, when he became ill going by water from Tennessee to St. Louis. He soon died there, leaving a widow and nine children. That old man, James Henry Fuqua, had a daughter-in-law, Caroline Cash Fuqua, whose 1866 diary turned up on a Cadiz bluff behind the old elementary school. A schoolgirl found it and took it to the oldest person she knew (Alice Percy, a friend of my mother). Alice recognized the author and gave it to my mother. So ultimately I came into possession of that diary and learned a lot about the village of Canton just after the Civil War.

So tonight let's take a look at Canton through the ages.

Around 1150 A.D. there was a settlement at 36 degrees 48 min. latitude and 87 degrees 58 minutes longitude, the present day site of Canton. And much earlier than even that people had lived there, as we will soon see.

Constantine Samuel Rafinesque-Schmaltz, as he is known in Europe was born on October 22, 1783 near Constantinople. He traveled as a young naturalist to the United States and ended up in Ohio about 1815. En route from Europe he lost all his writings and specimens, a work of several years. Among other things he studied prehistoric earthworks in North America and became professor of botany at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky.

One of his theories was that prehistoric humans had migrated across the the Bering Sea from Asia to North America, a theory validated later by DNA research. He was loosely associated with John D. Clifford, a merchant who was also interested in the ancient earthworks that remained throughout the Ohio Valley. Clifford searched old documents about these mounds, and Rafinesque measured and mapped them. Rafinesque got to Canton in 1823 and mapped the site on the bluff above the Cumberland River. The map shows at least nine flat-topped mounds, both circular and rectangular. These mounds were enclosed by an earthen wall three to five feet tall and 15 to 20 feet wide. (Today only two of these mounds are visible; the more conspicuous was once some 30 ft. tall and now is only 13 ft tall.) Besides Canton he identified 147 other ancient earthworks sites in Kentucky. He sketched but never excavated.

In fact, Canton was never really excavated. But excavation of a piece of the region was done in 2011 when the replacement of the US-68 bridge began. The proposed right-of-way area south of U.S. Highway 68/Kentucky Highway 80 where the pull-off was planned was level, but this was deceptive. In the southeastern corner of the survey area, the "level" ground covered a large sinkhole, filled-in with sediment during the early 1960s when the original bridge had been

raised. Removing this fill they discovered extensive archaeological deposits – the remains of an 8,500-year-old Indian encampment – perched on the edge of the sinkhole. The fill dirt had protected the camp from the impacts of plowing. A trove of flint and stone artifacts turned up. These date to the Early Archaic Period, some 10,000 to 8,000 years ago. Bear in mind this period is roughly 10,000 years earlier than that of the Cahokia mound builders across the Mississippi from St. Louis.

Another fortuitous excavation resulted from destruction of the Canton Baptist church built near the most prominent surviving mound. Kentucky Archaeological Survey spent four weeks excavating that site in 2007. Based on Rafinesque's 1823 map (published in 1833), investigators thought the church had been built on Mound 7, described by Rafinesque as a "small mound". They were wrong. The research documented a complete thirteenth-century wattle and daub house. Native farmers had built it in a shallow basin measuring about 12 by 14 feet. Inside the house, investigators found a central hearth, and post patterns suggesting the presence of benches or partitions in two corners.

But we need to pick up the pace and traverse several centuries, arriving at modern times. Probably in 1799 (some 24 years before Rafinesque) a native of North Carolina, one Abraham Boyd, pulled his boat ashore on the Cumberland, hacked through the cane along the river bank, and trudged up the steep incline to the site now Canton. He built the first cabin on the spot of the former Baptist church, the one we mentioned earlier as hiding the wattle and daub house. With Boyd was his father-in-law, Adam Linn, who later built a settlement 3 miles inland from Canton.

Soon after his arrival Boyd began operating a horse mill and a cotton gin. In 1811 a distillery was set up nearby. In 1823 the town was laid out and the name Canton officially assigned to it. By 1830 Canton was home to 200 residents. On 23 June 1823 Rafinesque noted it was "yet a hamlet of only eight houses". By 1851 there was a tannery, by 1859 a steam mill. The Canton Baptist Church had been organized in 1814 with 24 members. Meetings were first held in private homes. The first church structure was log and was used about 20 years, until it was replaced in 1854.

This village was initially called Boyd's Landing, and river traffic facilitated its rather rapid growth. The first steamboat on the Cumberland as far as up the river as Nashville was in 1818. Within 10 years there were some 15 boats used for passenger packet service. With no locks and dams the Cumberland was too dangerous for night-time navigation, so boats stopped at Canton. (It was 131 miles from Nashville to Canton, which amounted to about one day of river travel.) This circumstance was a boon to eighteenth century tourist trade.

The first road, known as Boyd's Landing Road, led to Hopkinsville by Thompson's tan-yard, Kent's Bridge, and my Wilford ancestors' home place in Trigg County called Cherry Hill. Later this road extended to Russellville. It was part of the Bowling Green to Columbus road opened in the summer of 1819. Another road served as a stagecoach route east from Canton to Lindsay's Lock, now known as Binns' Mill, south to Lafayette, and thence on to Clarksville. A stage was normally pulled by four horses with teams changed every 12 miles. Roads were dirt tracks until December 1835, when the state authorized a graded roadbed 25 feet wide with pounded stone

9 inches thick. The right of way was 40 feet wide.

And travelling west from Canton, a ferry across the Cumberland required consent of the Indian tribes that still owned land west of the Cumberland. Overnighters could stay at Boyd's Tavern in Canton.

At this point I would like to address the old brick hotel, of which my great grandmother Nannie Wadlington was once operator and part owner. All my life I'd heard that the Marquis de Lafayette stayed there on his tour of America in 1825. In the Rafinesque note of 1823, just 2 years earlier, there was no mention of a hotel there. In point of fact Tennessee governor William Carroll chartered the steamboat *Mechanic* to carry Lafayette and his party up the Cumberland to Nashville, and Lafayette's private secretary, who kept a detailed journal, relates, "On the 2nd of May, at 8 o'clock in the evening, we entered Cumberland River, which we ascended all night, notwithstanding the darkness". Incidentally, the moon was full the night of May 2-3. And he goes on to say, "No town is met with on its shores; all the establishments are situated some distance back, and therefore we were unable to visit them". So it seems the Canton hotel visit is apochryphal.

In 1829 the post office contracted with B. E. Gray of Hopkinsville to carry mail from Hopkinsville through Cadiz and Canton to Wadesboro, 49 miles one way. He made that trip three times a week using his own stagecoach line. It left Hopkinsville every M-W-F at 6:30 A.M. and arrived at Nashville the same day by midnight. A traveller could get off a steamboat at Canton, spend the night there, and ride Gray's stagecoach to be in Hopkinsville by afternoon. The stage stopped at Cadiz to change horses and made briefer stops at Montgomery and Belleview (a village about 2 miles southeast of present Gracey). To go to Princeton there was a connecting stage line at Cadiz. The trip on to Nashville went on a dirt road through Oak Grove, Clarksville, Fredonia, Mount Henry, and Lowes. There was a shorter route from Cadiz to Clarksville that went through Roaring Spring.

In the period about 1840, each year some 900 hogsheads of tobacco were hauled from Christian County to Canton for shipping. And 25,000 actual hogs were sent this route.

By 1856 slavery held the nation's attention, and rumors of slave revolts were rampant. A purported attack was to take place Dec 24-25 of 1856. Apparently the hysteria originated in a letter a Pembroke resident, T.M. Atkins, wrote to his brother on Dec. 13, 1856. That letter was **published in the Canton Dispatch**, but no copies are extant. However, a Plymouth, Indiana, paper reprinted it on 8 January 1857 and a New Orleans paper that same date. This letter said that news of a plot by slaves at Cumberland Iron Works had reached Pembroke at noon on Dec. 3, that Dover had been attacked, and that "a marauding army of slaves was coming north to attack Lafayette". Lafayette sent for help in repelling the onslaught. Nashville hired additional police and enacted restrictions on African-Americans, forbidding Negro schools or preaching or assemblies after sundown. One slave ran away from the Cumberland Iron Works, saying he didn't want to take part in the mass escape that was planned there. The real disaster resulting from all this panic was the lynching of a free Negro preacher named Solomon Young at Cadiz. The reason Young was targeted is unclear. He was hanged on 16 December 1865 by a vigilance committee, a group of horsemen roaming the area. Never explained, he had sold his farm just

13 days before his hanging.

And the next and last aspect of Canton's history considered is the period of the Civil War itself. Surely nothing happened at this little backwater settlement. Surely there's no Canton connection.

But on 2 December 1863 a private in the 18th Michigan Infantry named Osborne writes his brother from Clarksville, Tenn. He reports that guerrillas were very active along the Cumberland River and that his unit recently returned from Canton, Ky. where they unsuccessfully attempted to prevent "300 Rebs" from crossing. In addition to describing the weather and river conditions, he boasts about Gen. Grant's recent victory at Chattanooga where he "whipped Brag (sic) all to the Devil." He observes, "I think the war is coming to a close in a short time" but adds, "But their (sic) no telling how things will turn up."

And Kentucky Historical Marker #619, located on the side of Hwy. 68 in Canton, reads, "CSA General Nathan Bedford Forrest with 6 cavalry companies joined Gen. Charles Clark, Nov. 15, 1861, at Hopkinsville. On reconnaissance learned of USA gunboat Conestoga's intent to destroy CSA supplies at Canton. They met here November 20 in 7 hours of ship-to-shore combat. Conestoga left. Forrest's command had stood ground well, first time under fire."

But it seems that this account is more from a Confederate perspective. The logs from the Conestoga record things a bit differently. They list the date of the battle as November 18, 1861, and have few details. The entry reads, "U.S.S. Conestoga, Lieutenant S. L. Phelps, on expedition up Cumberland River, dispersed Confederate forces and silenced battery at Canton, Kentucky."

So here you have a quickie overview of Canton on the Cumberland, from prehistory to the Civil War. And papers such as this one tonight hope to preserve history? Whose history? I am reminded of the professor who wrote a book called "A True History of the Confederacy, from the Southern Viewpoint".

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