

FILSON'S KENTUCKE, A CORNERSTONE OF EXCELLENCE

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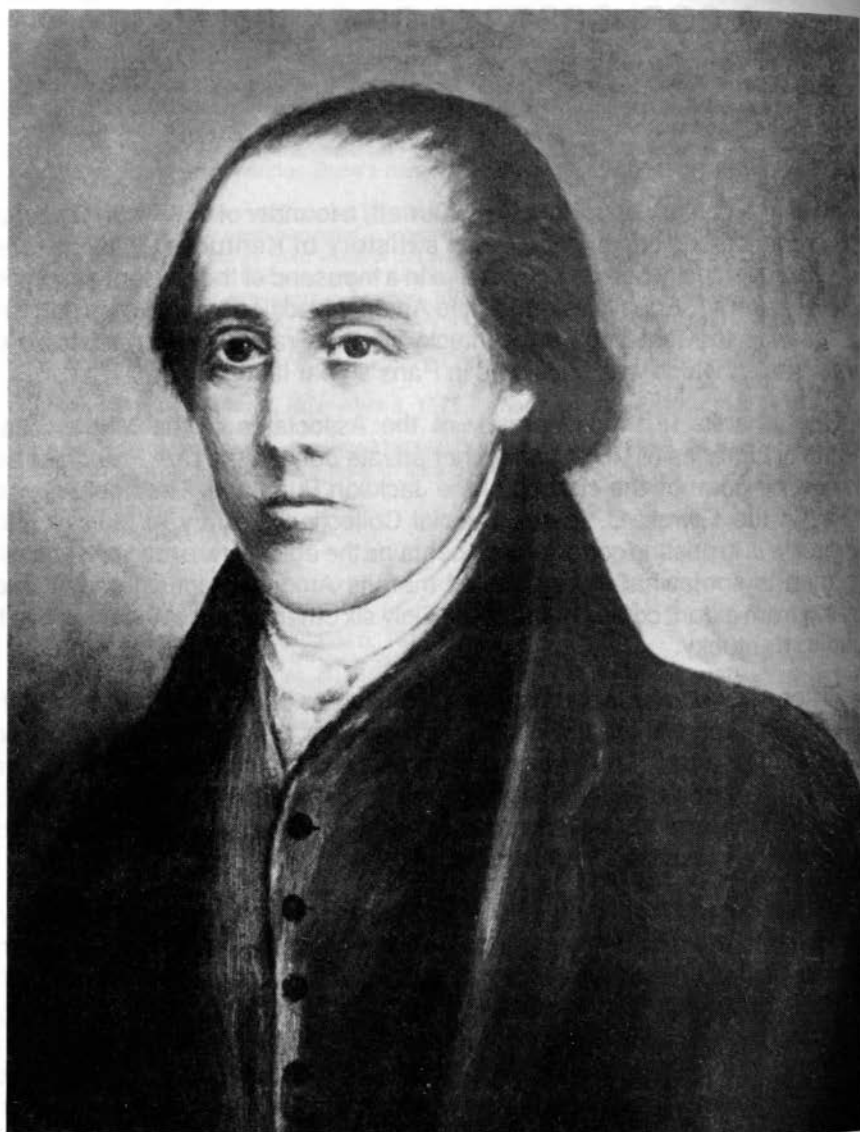
Writing a century ago, Reuben T. Durrett, a founder of the Filson Club, said of the American edition of John Filson's **History of Kentucke**, "It is the rarest of the rare Kentucky books, and not one in a thousand of the present generation has ever seen it."¹ Equally as rare as the American edition, which when published in 1784 was the first book on Kentucky, is the French edition, **Histoire de Kentucke** . . . which was published in Paris a year later.²

Now, thanks to the generosity of the Associates of the Murray State University Libraries (AMSUL) and other private donors, the rare French edition can now be seen by the citizens of the Jackson Purchase. The book, now on display in the Forrest C. Pogue Special Collections Library at Murray State University, is in pristine condition and contains the equally rare map of Kentucky. The map is somewhat more detailed than its American cousin and is often missing from extant copies of the book. Only six other copies of the book can be found in Kentucky.

Filson's **Kentucke** is probably the most famous book ever written about the state and is generally regarded as a cornerstone of any collection of distinction of works on the state. The French edition was presented to Special Collections at AMSUL's spring meeting at the Pogue Library on April 5, at which the dean of Kentucky historians, Dr. Thomas D. Clark, Professor Emeritus of the University of Kentucky, spoke about the life of Filson.

Little is known about John Filson, and perhaps this lack of hard information has added to the air of mystery and romance which surrounded his life—and more particularly his death—and has enhanced the image of his book in the popular imagination. Filson was born about 1747, in Chester County, Pennsylvania, and for a time followed the profession of schoolteacher. He is thought to have been wounded in the Revolutionary War. With the end of that war, he joined the ever-increasing numbers of settlers who looked across the Allegheny Mountains to the west for the cheap land which promised new beginnings. In 1782, he is known to have been teaching in Lexington, although he soon became heavily involved in land speculation, fur trading, and surveying. His name dots early court records as he sued and was sued in numerous disputes over land and the collection of debts. In the next few years, he made at least three trips back to his home in Pennsylvania before selling his property there, apparently intending to make Kentucky his home. Of this new land, he wrote that Kentucky was "the most extraordinary country upon which the sun has ever shone."

Although Filson maintained that the sole purpose of his writing of the history of Kentucky was "to inform the world of the happy climate and plentiful soil of this



John Filson, 1747?-1788. The portrait was made from a drawing which had been made on the flyleaf of a book once owned by Filson, *Admonitions from the Dead in Epistles to the Living*. Traditionally, it has been assumed to be a likeness of Filson, although no one knows for sure.

favoured region," it seems probable that he wrote the book as a means of increasing the demand for land by publicizing the virtues of Kentucky. Rather than being a history, the book is more of a description of the country—boundaries, animals, climate, springs, rivers, mountains, canebrakes, forts, roads, towns, etc. Kentucky, after all, had a history of little more than ten years as far as white settlement was concerned. The book, which admittedly leaned heavily upon information obtained secondhand from other settlers and explorers, included a long interview with Daniel Boone, an essay on the Indians of the region, an extract of the Treaty of 1783, a table of distances between eastern and western points, and other information useful to the prospective settler and purchaser of land.

Since there were no printing presses in Kentucky, Filson journeyed eastward in 1784, and his book was published in Wilmington, Delaware, and the map in nearby Philadelphia. Approximately fifteen hundred copies were published, the map and book being sometimes sold together and sometimes separately. The price seems modest—Filson is known to have sold a copy of his book to a traveling companion for the equivalent of forty-one cents and the map for eighty-three.

The work sold well and was republished with some changes and expansions in Paris the following year, possibly for the European land market. Although the map contains more detail than the American edition, it too covers the area west only to Owensboro and omits a portion of southeastern Kentucky.

Filson was also interested in land speculation in the Illinois country and made two dangerous trips to Vincennes with a view to acquiring holdings in that area. With a purpose undoubtedly similar to that of his history of Kentucky, he began a manuscript for the book on the Illinois country but which was never completed. In October of 1788, while he was engaged in surveying the site of present-day Cincinnati, he walked into the forest one afternoon and was never seen again. Neither his body nor any of his effects was ever found, and it was generally assumed that he had been killed by the Indians.

Surprisingly, Filson died penniless. His writings, however, have left his adopted home a legacy which endures to this day. Despite its inaccuracies, Filson's history spurred interest in the settlement of Kentucky, and his narrative of Daniel Boone's western adventures is largely the source of whatever information we have of Boone. Through his pen, Boone became immortal, a larger-than-life folk hero whose very name evokes images of the adventure of the early exploration and settlement of the state. The wonder and excitement of that distant era now lives on in the pages of the book which now graces the collections of the Murray State University Libraries.

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1. Durrett, Reuben T. **John Filson, The First Historian of Kentucky**. Louisville, Kentucky: John P. Morton & Co., 1884, p. 40. Filson, John **The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke**. Wilmington, Delaware: John Adams, 1784.
 2. John Filson, **Histoire de Kentucke, Nouvelle Colonie a L'Ouest de la Virginie**. Paris: M. Parraud, 1785.

In addition to the works cited above, the following works may be consulted with profit:

William H. Masterson, **John Filson, The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke.** New York: Corinth Books, 1962. (Introduction).

Michael A. Lofaro. **The Life and Adventures of Daniel Boone.** Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1978, viii-ix.

Captain Thomas Speed. "John Filson's a Toast." **The Filson Club History Quarterly**, July, 1951, pp. 281-85.

R.C. Ballard Thurston, "Filson's History and Map of Kentucky." **The Filson Club History Quarterly**, January, 1934, pp. 1-38.