

***The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia.* By Gerald L. Smith, Karen Cotton McDaniel, and John A. Hardin (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2015). Pp. 684. \$49.95 cloth.**

Review by George Humphreys

The editors of *The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia*, winner of the Thomas D. Clark Medallion in 2015 for the outstanding state or local Kentucky history book, intended "to present a volume that will have lasting intellectual integrity and inspire future historians and community leaders to look even more closely with the intention of preserving Kentucky's rich black heritage." They have certainly made an important contribution to fill in a state and local historical record that too often overlooks the contributions of African Americans. The result is a volume that strives to be comprehensive and inclusive of all regions of the Commonwealth.

Most entries are biographical, with approximately 200 of them drawn from previous encyclopedias published by the University Press of Kentucky for the state, Louisville, and Northern Kentucky. There are also a significant number of topical entries that are useful, though an index to these entries would have been welcomed. There are entries for 85 counties, including a number from the Jackson Purchase. Many of those are connected to Paducah and McCracken County home to West Kentucky Industrial College (a precursor of West Kentucky Community and Technical College); but we also

find entries for Rufus Atwood, long-time president of what is today Kentucky State University, and Rufus Lenro Barfield, president of Bowie State College in Maryland named after Atwood. Both grew up in Hickman on the Mississippi River. There are also useful entries on the history of the August 8th Emancipation Celebration that began in the 1890s in Logan County and is continued today in Paducah. Cherokee Park, a segregated state park on Kentucky Lake is remembered.

A useful introductory essay introduces the reader to the history of African Americans in Kentucky. This highlights a number of noteworthy African American historical sites such as the Warren Thomas Museum in Hickman and the heritage tour in Paducah of the Washington Street Missionary Baptist Church, the Hotel Metropolitan, and Hamock Funeral House (location of Charles "Speedy" Atkins embalmed body that was displayed for nearly seventy years). Some effort to describe the contents of these sites would have been useful.

The editors' task in compiling entries, many of which came from the editors visits throughout the state in search of subjects that deserved to be covered, written by more than 100 "authors" had to be a daunting task. This may explain why the *Encyclopedia* at times at time falls short in terms of its accuracy or completeness. For example, the entry for Alice Allison Dunnigan, the pioneering reporter from Russellville whose 1982 history of Kentucky African Americans the editors claim as inspiration for this work, has her teaching at the segregated Mt. Pisgah school in Todd County from

1924-42, but her autobiography describes in detail her movement from school to schools there and in Logan County. The entry for Hopkinsville's Ted Poston, the first African American reporter employed as a full-time writer for a major metropolitan white newspaper includes a mention of his brother Ulysses, but does not discuss his important role in Marcus Garvey's black separatist movement. James Howard, a young Sturgis African American student who took on a leadership role in the 1956 effort to integrate the local high school, has an entry, but there is not one for the Clay and Sturgis riots that led Governor Chandler to send the National Guard to those Western Kentucky towns to protect black students from white crowds. The entry on "African American Hamlets" uses a 1903 Paducah *Sun* article as the source to suggest that Clarksville, "the only exclusively Negro town in Kentucky," was near Central City in Muhlenberg County, but local historians, including the author of a history of African Americans in the county, are unaware of its existence.

The editors determined that the entries would exclude white subjects with a few exceptions, notably Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan who was the lone dissenter on the 1896 *Plessy* case that became the legal basis that upheld Jim Crow segregation for more than a half century. This focus on "what black Americans did for themselves in their respective world" in some circumstances is restrictive. For example, it overlooks the impact of two important events in 1966: 1) Hopkinsville native Governor .Edward T. "Ned" Breathitt efforts to pass

the south's first public accommodations civil rights law and the impact of the 1966 and 2) the historic defeat of the University of Kentucky's all-white "Rupp's Runts" by Texas Western which featured a starting African American lineup that fundamentally changed college basketball at the highest levels. These criticisms should not detract from the importance of the *Encyclopedia* project. I would hope, as the editors suggest, that it will spur further historical work on African Americans contributions to the history of Kentucky. Perhaps it will spur someone to bring the story of race relations in Kentucky to the present similar to the recently published *Been Coming through Some Hard Times: Race, History, and Memory in Western Kentucky* by Jack Glazier that focuses on Hopkinsville.

About the Reviewer:

Dr. Humphreys earned his BA and MA in History from Murray State University. He lives in Muhlenberg County KY where he retired recently as the campus director of Madisonville Community College. Dr. Humphreys is currently writing a book on the political history of Western Kentucky since the New Deal for the University Press of Kentucky.