

## **Christopher Columbus Graham: An Extraordinary Kentuckian**

Of the many colorful characters in Kentucky history, one man stands out as the epitome of an individual possessed with a quality that can only be termed as “flair.” Dr. Christopher Columbus Graham (1784-1885) could be described as a pioneer, a visionary, author, antiquarian, architect, collector, historian, physician, raconteur, paleontologist, politician, evolutionist, soldier, businessman, crack shot, silversmith, theologian, and all round quirky figure. He also found time to have a wife and children. However, he is remembered for his many adventures rather than for his domestic life.

Graham’s father, James, explored the wilderness with the men known as the “Long Hunters.” The frontier experience became a part of the younger Graham’s later development as an authority on early life in Kentucky. Few people in the 1880s could truthfully recount that they had known some of the first, and most renowned pioneers in Kentucky history. Graham could. His long life, and excellent memory made him an invaluable resource for interviewers. His knowledge of the early days on the Kentucky frontier proved very helpful to some of Kentucky’s most popular historians.

In 1872, William Belknap Allen, the author of a History of Kentucky, devoted 35 pages of his work to a biography of Graham. He called Graham a “living encyclopedia” of Kentucky history. According to those who knew Graham, he hunted with Daniel Boone, was an intimate friend of William Whitley, knew the family of Abraham Lincoln very well, maintained the record of being the world champion off-hand rifle shot of the world, and at the age of one hundred, could kill a turkey with a shot to the head without the aid of glasses.

A firm believer in the “strenuous life”, Graham fancied himself an expert at giving advice to people for the preservation of their health. He felt that Kentucky offered a too easy means of living to be healthful. He stated that the “productiveness of Kentucky’s soil, with her commerce, wealth, luxury and indolence, will certainly lead to effeminacy and consequent decay, as it did to Greece, Rome, and Spain...”

Graham noted that in his childhood diseases such as consumption dyspepsia, gout, hypochondria, hysteria, rheumatism, and suicide were unknown. “Manly” entertainments, simple food, and fresh air cured more ailments than all modern medicines. He used no tobacco or stimulants until later in life. His nervous system seemed impervious to upset. It is no wonder that Graham became a nineteenth century guru of health.

Throughout his many careers, Graham remained dedicated to being a master marksman with his favorite gun, “Old Blucher.” He formed an organization known as the Boone Club and operated a rifle range at Graham Springs outside of Harrodsburg, Mercer County, Kentucky. At one time, the Boone Club offered a purse of \$10,000 to anyone who could outshoot Graham. The challenge was published throughout the nation, as well as in Canada and a number of European nations. No one accepted the challenge and Graham’s supporters declared him to be the undisputed champion off-hand rifle shot.

When the War of 1812 broke out, Graham sold his silversmith business located in Springfield, Kentucky and volunteered his services for the war effort. With the profits from the sale of his shop, he equipped a company of volunteers to fight the British. As captain of his troop, he served three years in the military and suffered a wound during the Battle of Mackinaw, and was twice captured by Canadians and Indians.

Having survived the War of 1812, Graham continued his military adventures. He enlisted his services in the War for Mexican Independence, and in 1822 he participated in the overthrow of Mexican Emperor, Iturbide. According to his friend, William B. Allen, Graham owned a boat on the upper Mississippi and during the Black Hawk War of 1832, he ferried Chief Blackhawk and his sons across the river.

The Allen narrative of Graham's extraordinary life often boggles the imagination. Graham seemed to be everywhere, and knew everybody of any importance. He not only knew Abraham Lincoln, but also became an acquaintance of Jefferson Davis. The number of famous people that Graham counted as friends or acquaintances continued to grow throughout his long life. His amazing adventures often seems more at home in the annals of Baron Munchausen's life, than in the life of a prominent Kentucky physician. Allen regretted not having enough space in his History to do justice to Graham's life. While he assured his readers that the stories that he related about Graham were true, they might sound "romantic" to others.

As a physician (he attended Transylvania University Medical School) and mentor of health conscious customers, Graham opened one of the most successful resorts in American history. In the 1820s Graham purchased Greenville and Harrodsburg Springs. He combined the two "watering places" into Graham Springs. This spa for the well to do became one of the great social attractions of the nineteenth century.

Graham seemed to be a natural born salesman. Among his many attributes, he could easily claim to be one of the best promoters in the country. He labeled his spa the "Saratoga of the West." By 1842 the good doctor had made enough money to invest \$30,000 in the construction of one of the most magnificent edifices in the state. The main hotel for Graham Springs was a brick four-story building with a "massy colonade, rich capitals and lofty entablature." Graham declared that his new facilities could accommodate a thousand patrons.

Guests began to pour into Graham Springs. The resort became the place to go for rich plantation owners from the Deep South. Graham charged a fee of \$20.00 per month to stay at the Springs and "take the waters." Not only did guests partake of the supposedly healing waters, they also joined in a lively social season that lasted from June until September. Balls and entertainments amused the guests while they drank the mineral waters, that according to Graham, helped alleviate the aches and pains of patrons who suffered from such ailments as ague, gout, rheumatism, dropsy, neuralgia, and Autumnal fevers."

In May of 1853, Graham sold his spa consisting of buildings and 203 acres for \$100,000 to the government of the United States for use as an asylum for “aged and invalid soldiers.” The beautiful hotel burned on May 30, 1856, thus ending the last vestige of Graham Springs.

Graham’s role as a physician often put him at odds with the prevailing fashions of the day. He blasted the custom of women wearing restrictive corsets. “How can a fashionable lady with ribs crushed together and respiration thus obstructed, expect to enjoy health, or give constitution to her offspring?” He went on to say that another feminine fashion, “not so injurious, but equally ludicrous is the sticking of a peck of hair on the back of their heads (sweaty and ponderous to be borne), and all this to be crowned only with a droll, buffoonish looking thing (hat), giving to the face a most unnatural and farcical appearance.”

Throughout his long life, Graham could not seem to refrain from giving his opinions on any issue that might gain his attention. He considered himself an expert on most subjects. He wrote about climate changes, floods and storms. Often he lacked the patience or social niceties to not tell some unfortunate victim of a disaster that they should have listened to him.

When Frankfort suffered one of its worst floods of the nineteenth century, Graham wrote an article entitled “I Told You So.” He stated that at least fifty years ago he had warned the citizens of the capital city that these floods would take place. He also noted that he informed the town’s residents how to build their houses to avoid destruction from the floodwaters.

One of Graham’s most memorable adventures came when he decided to do excavations at Big Bone Lick in northern Kentucky. Known for its plethora of prehistoric fossils, Big Bone Lick had attracted worldwide attention for over a century. Not to leave any possible accomplishment off his resume, Graham, at the advanced age of 93 began work on excavating as many fossils as he could.

According to an article written by Graham for the Louisville Courier in 1877, entitled “The Mammoth’s Graveyard,” he spent thirty days at the site having ten men dig for the remains of prehistoric bones. His finds consisted of seven barrels of bones, and teeth of mastodons and mammoths, as well as buffalo skulls. With his customary lack of modesty, Graham deemed his collection of fossils one of the best in the nation.

Graham’s fame for his excavations at Big Bone Lick spread to Europe. He corresponded with Charles Darwin and geologist, Sir Charles Lyell regarding Big Bone Lick. He bitterly complained that the people of Kentucky were far too interested in the “almighty dollar” than to take time to preserve the “treasures’ of the past.

By the time the Civil War began, Graham had become an elderly man. His age did not stop him from continuing to be outspoken on the controversial issues of the day. Southern in his sympathy, he came under Union suspicion. When The Confederate Army

invaded Kentucky in 1862, Graham and a friend were accosted by Federal troops. One strapping young soldier threatened to “blow out” Graham’s brains because of his Confederate sympathy. The soldier fired his pistol, but only the cap went off. Graham grabbed the young man and began to struggle with him. Another soldier tried to bayonet Graham and succeed in driving the point of his weapon about an inch into the doctor’s body. Only then did the Union soldiers overcome him.

After his release by the military authorities, Graham continued with his adventures and business plans. He worked on a plan for a “Natural History Cabinet” for the commonwealth. He kept his physical strength and mental agility until his death at the age of 101. He could walk miles without suffering fatigue, and he certainly could engage in discussions and philosophize on numerous topics for hours on end.

With Graham’s death in 1885, an extraordinary Kentuckian passed into history. Whether all of his claims were real or not, will continue to be a matter of conjecture and will be debated by historians for many years to come.