

Humphrey Marshall, Kentucky Historian

Kentucky history is fascinating. It is as complex as it is colorful. A number of individuals have written on the history of the commonwealth since John Filson (1753-1788) published his 1784 work entitled, *The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke*. More promotional and testimonial for the settlement in Kentucky than a true history, Filson's work helped clear the way for future historians to relate their views of Kentucky and the western frontier.

While Filson's work is important to the understanding of Kentucky's beginnings, Humphrey Marshall (1760-1841) wrote the first genuine history of the commonwealth. In 1812 he published a one volume *History of Kentucky*. This work would become the most popular of the early histories of the state. In 1824 he revised and enlarged the work to two volumes.

The man who gave Kentucky its first true history also served his state as a statesman. Marshall was born in 1760 in Fauquier County, Virginia, the son of John and Mary Quisenberry Marshall. He received an excellent education from his uncle Thomas Marshall and later chose to study law. The road to success in America seemed to be attainable as an attorney. The profession opened doors to young men who wanted to make a mark in their community.

When the American Revolution began in 1775, Marshall's sympathies lay with the rebelling colonists. From 1778 through 1782, he served with Virginia troops in the War for Independence from Great Britain. A firm believer in the rights of the colonies, he nevertheless strongly believed in a solid central government. This belief influenced his public career. After the Revolution ended in 1783, he tended to domestic matters. In 1784 he married Mary Marshall, a sister to John Marshall who later became one of the most influential chief justices of the United States Supreme Court.

As with other ambitious Virginians, Marshall decided to move to the Kentucky frontier to make his fortune. He arrived in what is now Fayette County, Kentucky and served as deputy surveyor under Thomas Marshall until 1790. He then became deputy surveyor of Woodford County. He received 4,000 acres in Kentucky for his military service making him a substantial landowner. Much of his surveying fees were also paid with land and he soon became a wealthy and powerful Kentuckian.

Although very rich, Marshall found himself not very popular. He angered many of his fellow Kentuckians with his outspoken views. He openly attacked religion and considered himself free from superstition. His political views caused him to make a number of dedicated enemies. The Danville Political Club, the leading organization of influential Kentuckians initially refused him membership because of his outspokenness. When he did join, he quickly became one of the most controversial members of the Club.

Marshall soon found a target for much of his wit and his ire. During the 1780s Kentuckians debated the issue of separation from Virginia. Some wanted statehood.

Others wanted independence. Some wanted to become a part of the Spanish Empire. Not that Kentuckians had any love for Spain, they instead had a love for the Mississippi River that Spain controlled. The Mississippi provided the lifeline of commerce for Kentucky. The nation that controlled the river controlled the destiny of Kentucky.

In one of the most clandestine, and at times ridiculous moves made by Kentucky leaders, a small group of businessmen, wealthy planters, and ambitious politicians led by General James Wilkinson (1757-1825), decided to make Kentucky a part of the Spanish Empire. Wilkinson was a shrewd man who envisioned great wealth for himself if he handed over Kentucky to Spain. Soon a conspiracy, a Spanish conspiracy, began to take shape. Before long, Marshall began to publicly attack Wilkinson and other important Kentuckians as traitors and base schemers. Marshall's acid pen caused the participants of the "Spanish Conspiracy" to cringe. Even the reputation of such an august personage as John Brown of Frankfort, who later became the first United States Senator from Kentucky, suffered at the hands of a vindictive Marshall.

Caring very little for public opinion, Marshall made decisions based on what he felt to be right. As a delegate to the Virginia convention to ratify the Constitution in 1788, he cast his vote for ratification while the majority of Kentucky delegates voted against the measure. When Kentucky achieved statehood on June 1, 1792, Marshall allied himself with the Federalist Party although most Kentucky voters had allegiance to the Democratic-Republican Party. He served in the Kentucky General Assembly from 1793 to 1794. In 1795 he became United States Senator, serving until 1801.

While in the Senate, Marshall continued to annoy his constituents with his blatant Federalist politics. He supported the extremely unpopular treaty signed by John Jay between Great Britain and the United States. Many Americans felt that the British had taken advantage of the United States. Protests and riots broke out when the terms of the treaty became public. Marshall returned to Kentucky to face his outraged constituents.

He underestimated the feelings of his fellow Kentuckians regarding the Jay Treaty. When he arrived in Frankfort he was met by a howling mob that stoned his carriage. At one point the crowd caught him and carried him down to the banks of the Kentucky River threatening to throw him in. Marshall coolly asked the mob if any of them belonged to the Baptist Church. When some affirmed that were indeed Baptists, he asked them if they did not believe in the custom that an individual about to be immersed should say have something to say. His assailants became so amused at his audacity that they released him. However, Marshall did lose reelection to the Senate.

In 1807 Marshall won a seat in the lower house of the Kentucky legislature. While there he crossed Henry Clay over the latter's support of anti-British trade regulations. The two men nearly fought on the floor of the legislative chamber before being separated by a burly fellow lawmaker. The two men exchanged insults and a duel ensued. Both men suffered minor wounds and much hurt vanity.

Between 1806 and 1812, Marshall continued his vitriolic attacks on those men he considered to part of the Spanish Conspiracy. He attacked Judge Harry Innes of the U.S. District Court. He lashed out at anyone that associated with what he considered to be vile conspirators. Innes eventually sued Marshall and began his own campaign to tell the story of the role Kentuckians played in negotiations with Spain. Marshall in turn told his version in his History of Kentucky.

As literary masterpieces go, the Marshall's 1812 History of Kentucky left much to be desired. His writing style could be quirky, and his sense of punctuation, or lack of punctuation, can be distracting to modern readers. Yet, he rose above his lambasting of political enemies to recount a solid history of his state.

Marshall's attacks on Harry Innes grew to such bitterness that he tried to have Innes impeached. Instead, Innes' son-in-law, Thomas Bodley, had Marshall censured and expelled from the General Assembly in 1808. Not to be outdone, Marshall won reelection the next year. The animosity between Marshall and Innes continued unabated until 1815, when the two men agreed to cease publicly attacking each other. Those who knew Marshall knew that he could not remain silent. In 1824 he published a two-volume edition of the History of Kentucky. In it he lashed out at those he felt culpable for the Spanish Conspiracy.

Domestically, Marshall had more solace than he did in his public life. He and his wife had three children. His estate, Glen Willis, located outside Frankfort, became a center of intellectual activity for the community. The Marshall family had social connections, and wealth. Local legend stated that Marshall had so much money that he measured it by the peck. Prestige and riches did not however free Marshall from community outrage for some of his more outlandish statements.

One of the most hurtful of Marshall's outbursts came from his intense distaste for religion. He spoke and wrote against religion with such acerbity that he embarrassed his family. No matter what family or community might say about these diatribes, he brushed them aside and continued to say what he pleased. His descendants felt so strongly about his lack of religiosity that they burned his private papers.

Marshall died on July 3, 1841. He was buried on his farm at Glen Willis. His death ended an era of Kentucky history and politics. Despite his eccentricities, Marshall stood as a statesman who loved Kentucky and did what he thought best for the commonwealth's future.