INTRODUCTION

KENTUCKY AFRICAN AMERICANS: "SO MUCH REMAINS TO BE TOLD"

By Gerald L. Smith

State Historian James C. Klotter's 1982 article, "Clio in the Commonwealth: The Status of Kentucky History," offers a standard by which to measure the current status of scholarship on Kentucky African Americans. Klotter wrote that, "Over the years, Kentuckians have proved themselves a history-minded people, both aware and proud of their past." But this noble conviction was in "contradiction" to the number of historical works which have actually been published. Although Kentucky was "blessed historically" in some fields of study, Klotter concluded that the state paled by comparison to the level of scholarship produced by other states. As histories of other states expanded in volumes written, historical recordkeeping, analysis, and publication, Kentucky historiography lagged behind. Courthouse fires, the failure to retain records, and the belated effort to collect primary sources had created a great challenge for those wanting to write about Kentucky. However, as the twentieth century progressed, the opportunities to conduct scholarly research eventually improved.[1]

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[1] James C. Klotter, "Clio in the Commonwealth: The Status of Kentucky History," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 80 (1982): 65 (hereafter *Register*); "Bibliographic Essay," *The*

Klotter proposed several research projects on Kentucky history. He recommended writing city and county histories, establishment of political quantification studies, and biographies of state politicians, literary figures, and women. He proposed work on social, political, and economic historical topics, including studies of African Americans. Klotter believed studies on slavery, the African American community, leadership, and voting patterns were especially important initiatives. He concluded his perceptive analysis on the status of Kentucky history with an image of the vast opportunities awaiting scholars interested in researching and writing about the state:

> Just as Kentucky's first 'historian' John Filson portrayed Daniel Boone looking out over the state and viewing with amazement and anticipation the 'wonderful level of Kentucke,' historians of today can survey Kentucky history and feel similar excitement. Historigraphically, it remains a place of few settlements and much mystery. The answers await their own explorers—the Boones of history.[2]

While documentation of Kentucky history was slow to evolve, the Kentucky African American story faced even greater challenges. But in 1970, the Kentucky General Assembly issued a resolution for state agencies to incorporate the African American experience into the narratives of Kentucky history taught to all students. The following year the black history committee of the Kentucky Commission on Human Rights produced *Kentucky's Black Heritage*. Written for seventh- and eighth-grade students "as a supplement to existing texts on Kentucky history," this booklet of one hundred and sixty-two pages offered a sweeping overview of Kentucky black history. The four units of the book covered a basic narrative of American history: slavery, the Civil War, segregation, and the civil rights struggle.[3] It was an admirable work, though more summary than analysis.

In 1982, Alice Dunnigan's *The Fascinating Story of Black Kentuck-*

Kentucky Encyclopedia, ed. John E. Kleber (Lexington, 1992), 977.

[2] Klotter, "Clio in the Commonwealth," 88.

[3] *Kentucky's Black Heritage: The Role of the Black People in the History of Kentucky from Pioneer Days to the Present* (Frankfort, 1971), ii-iv.

ians: Their Heritage and Tradition gave readers an encyclopedic version of black history. Dunnigan was born near Russellville, Kentucky, in 1906. After attending school in Kentucky, she taught in rural schools and wrote for various Kentucky newspapers. In 1942, she moved to Washington, D.C., where she became a member of the Associated Negro Press. She was extended access to presidential press conferences. In 1948, she accompanied Harry Truman on a trip throughout the West, becoming the first African American to travel with a U.S president. Dunnigan later served on the Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity under presidents John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson.[4]

Having experienced the difficulties and challenges of racial oppression and discrimination while succeeding against the odds, Dunnigan understood the value of promoting black pride in Kentucky and America. She made clear that her book was "not intended for exclusive use as a textbook, packed with dull, dry, historic incidents designed only for scholarly classroom teaching. Rather it is a document formulated into simple, chatty, everyday language intended for easy and pleasant reading. It is spiced with funny anecdotes, amusing folktales and humorous poems by or about Kentuckians."[5]

Similar to *Kentucky's Black Heritage,* Dunnigan's work gave further evidence of the rich black history of the state. Meanwhile, historian George C. Wright was evaluating the state of black history in Kentucky. Wright began reconsidering the works of early historians who had written about black Kentuckians. "Far too many scholars writing in the 1970s still somehow came to the conclusion that to be black in Kentucky meant that one was much better off than blacks in other places," recalled Wright. He was "convinced that scholarship on Kentucky blacks was an 'untapped area' of historical investigation."[6]

In 1985, Wright published his first scholarly monograph on Af-

[4] Alice Allision Dunnigan, *The Fascinating Story of Black Kentuckians: Their Heritage and Traditions* (Washington, D.C., 1982), 375; Rena Milliken, "Alice (Allison) Dunnigan," Kleber, ed., *Kentucky Encyclopedia*, 274.

[5] Dunnigan, *Fascinating Story of Black Kentuckians*, xiv-xv.

[6] George C. Wright, "The End for Me, But a Beginning For Others: My Years of Research on Kentucky Blacks," *Register* 89 (1991): 342.

rican Americans. In *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930*, he documented the kinds of challenges Louisville African Americans faced as well as how they sought to confront racial inequality. His book provided clear evidence of the resilience of the black community through the institutions and networks they created. It also explained how upper-class whites were concerned with keeping "racial order in the city." He noted that whites were selective in their support of black interests and expected that "blacks be passive and remain in the place assigned them in Louisville society."[7]

Wright's book led to further historical inquiry on Kentucky African Americans. Five years later, he published a study that traced the outright violence African Americans experienced following emancipation. *Racial Violence in Kentucky* is an exhaustive study on lynchings, mob rule, and what Wright defined as "legal lynchings." Using a series of tables, this work chronicles the violence African Americans suffered well into the twentieth century.[8] This book undoubtedly established him securely as the leading scholar of the Kentucky African American experience. His research projects had taken him around the state conducting oral interviews, visiting public libraries, and collecting primary-source material. At the time, no other scholar in the state was as completely focused and actively writing about the black experience in Kentucky as George Wright.

In 1992, Wright and Marion B. Lucas, a Western Kentucky University history professor, completed the two-volume *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*. It had been ten years since Klotter's review of Kentucky historiography. In volume one, Lucas provided a topical and chronological narrative of black life from the frontier years thorough much of the nineteenth century. His use of primary sources spanned the lives of different slaves as well as the transition of the black community into freedom. In a more tightly organized format, Wright explored race relations, education, and the struggle for racial

[7] George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville, Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge, 1985), 2.

[8] George C. Wright, *Racial Violence in Kentucky, 1865-1940: Lynchings, Mob Rule, and "Legal Lynchings"* (Baton Rouge, 1990).

equality through the 1970s. Together, the books filled a major void in Kentucky history.[9] Jason H. Silverman wrote in his review essay that because the authors did not use "the esoteric jargon that plagues far too much academic reading, these volumes present popular, narrative history the way it should be presented." He noted that Professors Lucas and Wright "by no means have provided all the answers to all the questions; nor should they have. Indeed, in many places they have given readers abundant opportunities to pause, ponder, and pursue."[10]

Since the 1990s, those of us interested in Kentucky history have *paused*, *pondered*, and continued to *pursue* the field with passion. Wright has moved on to achieve much success in the ranks of higher-education administration, but his books have certainly served as "a starting point for others."[11] Historical works on black Kentuckians and Appalachia, civil rights, education, migration, slavery, and the Underground Railroad have enriched the narrative history of the state.[12] To be sure, traditional primary sources, such as newspapers, organizational records, census accounts, and maps, have been helpful for analyzing the social, political, and cultural dimensions of black life. And the collection and availability of photographs, oral interviews, church histories, and family papers have served to encourage researchers to explore new questions in the field.

Nearly twenty years after "Clio in the Commonwealth" was published, Klotter revisited the scholarship on Kentucky history. He

[9] Marion B. Lucas, *From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, vol. 1 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1992); George C. Wright, *In Pursuit of Equality, 1890-1980*, vol. 2 of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky* (Frankfort, 1992).

[10] Jason H. Silverman, "'Meaningful Change and Unceasing Continuity': An Essay Review of *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*," *Register* 91 (1993): 75.

[11] Wright, "The End for Me, but a Beginning for Others," 361.

[12] A selected list of monographs published since 1990 include: Luther Adams, *Way Up North in Louisville: African American Migration in the Urban South, 1930-1970* (Chapel Hill, 2010); J. Blaine Hudson, *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland* (Jefferson, N.C., 2002); Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky, 1945-1980* (Lexington, 2009); John A. Hardin, *Fifty Years of Segregation: Black Higher Education in Kentucky, 1904-1954* (Lexington, 1997); Gerald L. Smith, *A Black Educator in the Segregated South: Kentucky's Rufus B. Atwood* (Lexington, 1994); Douglas A. Boyd, *Crawfish Bottom: Recovering a Lost Kentucky Community* (Lexington, 2011); Catherine Fosl and Tracy E. K'Meyer, *Freedom on The Border: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement in Kentucky* (Lexington, 2009).

noted the historical reference works, county histories, and interpretive studies which had been completed since his article appeared. In the "sheer number of studies," he found, "African American history surpassed all areas of research. "Yet, in the end," wrote Klotter, "we still have only begun to hear parts of Kentucky's story. So much remains to be told—and be told well."[13]

The publication of this special issue represents the growing interest in Kentucky African American history.[14] The project evolved following a panel session in 2009 on "African American History in Kentucky: A Tribute to George C. Wright" at the Southern Historical Association Annual Meeting in Louisville, Kentucky. The papers of J. Blaine Hudson and Gerald L. Smith were presented at the conference. Other papers were solicited for this special publication, but only five were completed in time to be included. Collectively, the essays serve as a solid portrayal of black community life, institutions, organizations, and individuals in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century Kentucky. Each article depicts varying levels of African American agency—"a sense of active involvement, of people empowered, engaged in struggle, living their lives in dignity, and shaping their own futures."[15]

Louisville is the central site of three of the articles. J. Blaine Hudson provides an historical evolution of the free-black community which grew and prospered parallel to the rest of Louisville. His article weighs the significance of African American institutions and organizations in creating a productive living space during the antebellum era. Drawing upon maps and census data, Hudson examines the geography, composition, and distribution of the free-black community in the city. He proves that by the end of slavery, African Americans had established a community that was vibrant,

[13] James C. Klotter, "Moving Kentucky History into the Twenty-first Century: Where Should We Go from Here?" *Register* 97 (1999): 84, 95, 103, 112.

[14] At present, John A. Hardin, Karen C. McDaniel, and Gerald L. Smith are the general coeditors of the Kentucky African American Encyclopedia Project. The encyclopedia will consist of more than thirteen hundred entries and several topical essays. The book is scheduled to be completed in 2014. Additionally, a "Notable Black Kentuckians Database" is housed with the University of Kentucky Libraries in Lexington, Kentucky.

[15] Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *The New African American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., 1996), 3.

empowered, and a symbol of success. It was this kind of community that would years later engage in the process of challenging the walls of segregated education.

John A. Hardin's essay surveys the legal battle to desegregate higher education in the state through lawsuits filed by three black Louisville residents, Alfred Carroll, Charles Eubanks, and Lyman T. Johnson, between 1939 and 1949. Hardin captures the collective influence the cases wielded in the pursuit of educational equality, the intraracial struggles which took place, and varying levels of white resistance. He reveals that the desegregation of the University of Kentucky and other higher-learning institutions in the state was a complex and challenging process.

Joshua D. Farrington's article reviews the political engagement of the Louisville African American community in the 1960s. He examines the creation of the powerful black voting bloc in Louisville which led to the passage of a local public-accommodations bill. His analysis of African American political party allegiance, voting activities, and civil rights organizations provides insight into the blurred line between politics and civil rights.

While Louisville had a large African American population actively engaged in civil rights demonstrations, other smaller communities engaged in their own struggle using nonviolent direct-action protests. My study of the Congress of Racial Equality explores the rise and decline of five Kentucky CORE chapters. The work of each chapter established a history of local civil rights movements in Kentucky. The article ultimately serves as an assessment of protest activities, and an examination of white resistance and civil rights leadership. It provides a connection between local movements and national influences.

On a much different level, Sallie Powell writes about the push for racial and gender equality from both an individual and community perspective. Her essay explores the identity construction and experiences of Brenda Lee Garner Hughes, an African American basketball referee. Hughes became the only woman to officiate games at the Kentucky Girls High School State Basketball Tournament during the twentieth century. Powell examines Garner's construction of

womanhood and the power she claimed through her various roles as a daughter, wife, mother, sister, and referee. Garner's ties to the Lexington, Kentucky, African American community as a recreation director provided her with the support she would use to overcome racial and gender biases.

The central theme of this special issue is the success of African Americans overcoming challenges which had historically been placed before them. Through community building, community organizing, community institutions, and community protest, African Americans created their own strategies for erasing vestiges of racial discrimination. The following articles clearly illustrate this ultimate agenda. Each essay will serve as a springboard for questions on the black experience as well as a source of answers for explorers of Kentucky African American history.