

The Myth of Kentucky As A "Dark and Bloody Ground"

The Myth of the "Dark and Bloody Ground"¹ asks us to believe that before people of European and African descent arrived in Kentucky, native peoples had hunted and fought over the land and its resources, but had never lived permanently anywhere in the Commonwealth.

The most likely source of the Myth was a statement made by Dragging Canoe, a Cherokee leader, in March 1775 during treaty negotiations at Sycamore Shoals between the Cherokee Nation and Richard Henderson's Transylvania Company. These negotiations transferred a large part of what is now Kentucky to the Company. As the transaction was being completed, Dragging Canoe reportedly said that a dark cloud hung over the land, known as the Bloody Ground.

Dragging Canoe's statement implies that the region Henderson was purchasing was linked to some kind of conflict. But it is difficult to tell if Dragging Canoe was reciting historical fact or if his statement was meant as a warning for the future.

In 1775, the region was, indeed, being contested. The Cherokee, along with other native groups, used portions of it with permission from the Shawnee, who claimed much of it. But the Iroquois wanted to control it, encouraged by their English allies, and the colonies of Virginia and North Carolina also laid claims to part of the region. Henderson's new claim could only complicate matters. Dragging Canoe's words also could have been a warning about things to come. Certainly the struggle for land a few years later between the settlers and native peoples on the Kentucky frontier gives support to his words.

However, the colonial land speculators, and the settlers who followed them, interpreted Dragging Canoe's statement to mean that a conflict existed *between Indian groups* over Kentucky lands and that, therefore, the land was not claimed by any of them. Thus, If Kentucky was not the property of any particular Indian group, the land speculators could justify selling this "free" land to settlers; and the settlers had every right to move in and establish farms.

It is possible that during the years immediately following 1775, the conception of Kentucky as a contested land was applied to the present and immediate past history of just the Bluegrass Region in central Kentucky. For at that time, most native peoples had moved their farming villages north of the Ohio River and returned in small groups to hunt and camp during the winter.

But it is one thing to imply that the control of a particular region had been disputed in the past or would be in the future. And it is a completely different matter to interpret Dragging Canoe's statement to mean that native peoples had always fought over and never lived in the area that is now Kentucky. Yet, even before Kentucky became a state in 1792, the idea had taken on an all-encompassing meaning: all of Kentucky was never the permanent home for any indigenous groups. It had been merely a "happy hunting ground" or the scene of prehistoric battles.

There are several reasons why the Myth developed:

- the differences between the colonists' and the native peoples' conception of land ownership;
- the distinctions the settlers noticed between historic American Indian cultures and the remains left by prehistoric groups they encountered (burial mounds and the stone tools they

- unearthed as they plowed their fields);
- the benefit colonial land speculators got from encouraging the myth;
- the violent conflicts that took place between Indian peoples and the colonists in the 1770s and 1780s;
- the myth's 1784 circulation in a widely read book, entitled *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucky*, in which author John Filson referred to Kentucky as the "Middle Ground" throughout, except in two instances, where he called it "Bloody-Grounds".

There are several reasons why, despite the fact that "Kentucky" is simply the name of a political entity created in 1792; despite the fact that many place names in our Commonwealth refer to Indians; and despite the fact that no similar myth applies to the indigenous heritage of most of the states that surround Kentucky (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, or Tennessee), the Myth persists to today:

- the lack of any tribal lands set aside as reservations in Kentucky;
- its repeated mention in children's books, scholarly books and journals, textbooks, and history books;
- the reticence of Kentucky residents to openly acknowledge their native ancestry for fear of discrimination; and
- the lack of access to information about Kentucky's rich prehistoric cultural heritage.

The truth of the matter is that, as in all the other states situated in the Ohio River drainage, native peoples arrived in Kentucky about 12,000 years ago, and have never left. Research at archaeological sites in every county in the Commonwealth has documented evidence of Kentucky's permanent indigenous inhabitants: from the earliest migratory hunters late in the Ice Age; through the Archaic hunter-gatherers; to the moundbuilding small-time gardeners of the Woodland period who traded with distant peoples for copper and marine shell; to the farmers whose permanent towns held upwards of one-thousand people. And people who trace their native ancestry back to groups historically documented in this region, like the Shawnee, Cherokee, Miami, Tutelo, and others still call Kentucky "home."

¹ There is no single etymology for the name "Kentucky" (Kentucke, Cantucky). One of the first recorded uses of the name is in a deposition describing the capture of a group of traders by Indians allied to the French on January 26, 1753 at a place they called "Kentucky." They described the location of this "Kentucky" as being south of the Allegheny River about 150 miles from the lower Shawnee Town, which sat at the confluence of the Scioto and Ohio rivers. Various authors offer a number of other opinions concerning the word's origin: an Iroquois word (Kentake) meaning "meadow land"; a Wyandot word (Ken-tah-the) meaning "the land of tomorrow"; an Algonquian term (kin-athiki) referring to a river bottom; a Shawnee word meaning "head of a river." The name does NOT mean "dark and bloody ground" in any language.