



# Harrison Heritage News

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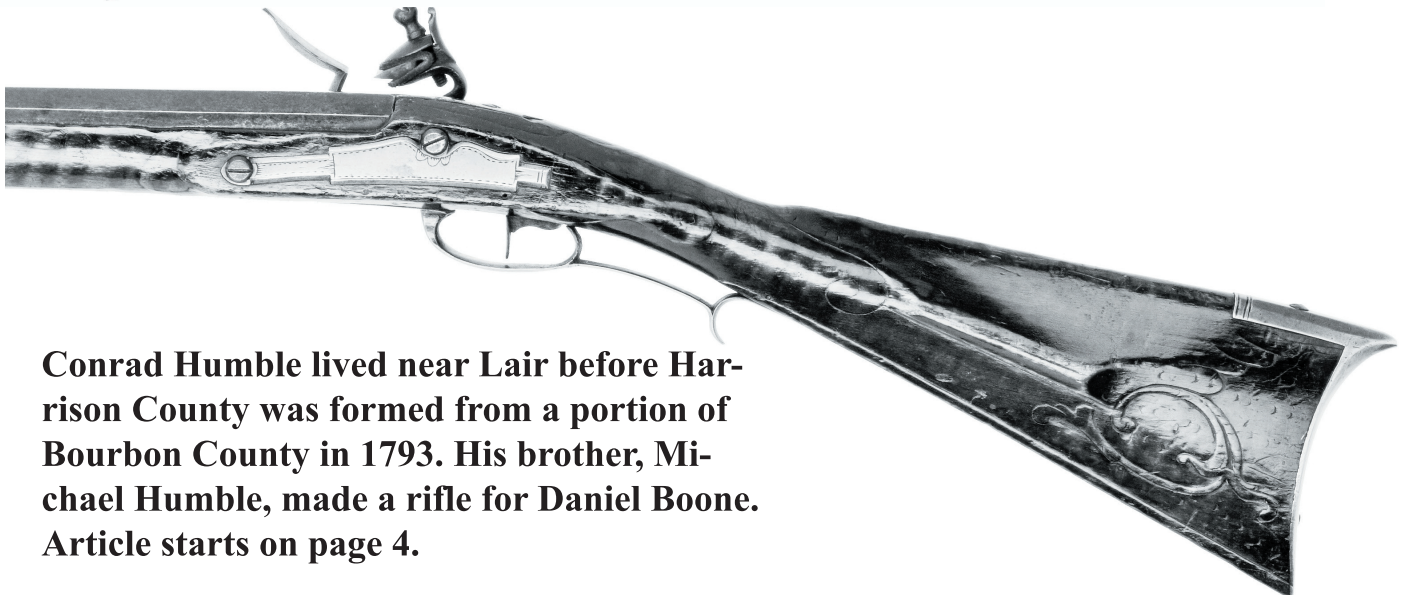
October 2011

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## *Kentucky's "Humble" Gunsmiths*

by

*Mel Hankla*



**Conrad Humble lived near Lair before Harrison County was formed from a portion of Bourbon County in 1793. His brother, Michael Humble, made a rifle for Daniel Boone. Article starts on page 4.**

*Kentucky Longrifle made in Bourbon County - circa 1785~1790 - signed: C: Humble. Photos by Ric Lambert*

## Harrison County Historical Society

Billy Fowler, President  
 Bob Owen, Vice President  
 Marilyn Bell, Secretary  
 Dorothy Slade, Treasurer  
 Bill Penn, editor: pennwma@aol.com

**Oct. 20 mtg:** President Billy Fowler announced that the demolition of the Handy Farm barns is on hold. The deadline is December 14th and it is anticipated that the work will be complete by the deadline. Sadly, despite efforts of supporters, the old Griffith Tavern is being demolished.

**Program:** Sandra Lutes Lawson, a native of the Leesburg area, gave an interesting talk about the DAR library in Washington D.C. There are three separate buildings for the library and they are located two blocks from the White House and occupy an entire city block. In addition to housing voluminous genealogical materials, the buildings are used for public purposes. The rooms are furnished and maintained by state chapters of the DAR. Ms. Lawson explained how to research family history and how to apply for DAR membership. In conclusion, she handed out materials to explain the procedures of searching for ancestors online.

Submitted by Marilyn Bell



(Left) *Sandra Lawson presented a program on the DAR library in Washington, D. C.*  
*Photo, Sharon Fowler*

### JOIN THE HARRISON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Dues are \$12 a year and includes this monthly newsletter. Send check to HCHS, PO 411, Cynthiana, Ky. 41031. Meetings are the third Thursday every month at the Cynthiana-Harrison Co. Public Library Annex (Charles W. Feix Room) on Pleasant Street behind Biancke's Restaurant, starting at 7 p.m. Everyone is welcome! Back issues of Harrison Heritage News are on our Web site.

### Harrison County History Calendar

Nov. 17---Billy & Sharon Fowler will present a program on the ca. 1830's Handy Farm barn.

Dec. 2---Joint pot-luck with the Museum, 6:00 at the First Methodist Church

Jan. 19---Show & Tell

## President's Corner

Billy Fowler  
 billyfowler@kymail.com

By now any of you who subscribe to the *Cynthiana Democrat* already know that the demolition of Griffith Tavern is underway. Just another local historic landmark about to totally disappear! But as Paul Harvey would have said, do you know the rest of the story?

As I understand it, there were discussions underway with the local Friends of Griffith Woods organization that would have transferred ownership of the historic tavern to that group when at some point the talks suddenly ended with no satisfactory conclusion. That seemed to be the beginning of the end for Griffith Tavern and its ultimate disappearance seemed certain when a salvage company was hired to demolish the tavern.

Another opportunity to save the building presented itself when a couple in a nearby county contacted another salvage company with an offer to purchase the building. Their offer was to have the tavern dismantled and reassembled on their property. We would still have lost it from our county but it would at least have been saved from totally disappearing. The interested couple had already done this with another tavern and wanted this one to be on the same property as the other one that they had saved. They approached the company that they were familiar with and trusted to proceed on their behalf. This would seem to be the best thing that could happen at this point. The first salvage company would receive the payment for demolition and would not have to do any work along with receiving payment for the building from the prospective buyers. The second salvage company would dismantle the building and reassemble it on the prospective buyers' property and receive payment for their services. The tavern building would then live on in another county along side another already saved tavern.

Along about now you are surely asking yourself what could have gone wrong with this plan. I cannot say if it was greed, stubborn rivalry or something else but, again as I understand it, the first salvage company placed a price so high on the building that it prevented the prospective buyers from moving forward. The result is the salvage company is now trying to save some of the bricks to sell while historic Griffith Tavern disappears.

Now you know the rest of the story. I did not say it would be pretty; after all it was always going to end with the disappearance of another local landmark.

# Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum

Martha Barnes, President      [www.cynthiana-harrisoncountymuseum.org](http://www.cynthiana-harrisoncountymuseum.org).



Museum scenes - (left) Guests browse through old school yearbooks. (right) President Lincoln actor (Jim Sayre) steps back in time and greets a Union officer on display at the Museum. Bring a group for a fun outing in Cynthiana. Open Fri-Sat 9-5.

## Rattling Spurs - Bill Penn

### 150 Years Ago in Harrison County

**Lucius Desha Flees to Tennessee** - As noted in last month's column, Union soldiers arrested for disloyalty the sheriff, county clerk, mayor, and county judge. State Representative Lucius Desha was warned that he would be next in line to be taken into custody. To avoid arrest, he went to the home of R. W. Robertson from September 30 to October 1, 1861. Desha's hiding place was about ten miles from Cynthiana and three miles from the mouth of Cedar Creek (near Mount Olivet, Robertson County). He was able to sidestep temporarily the fate of the other county officials. On October 3, hearing through friends that armed soldiers surrounded his home, he fled the county "to escape the arbitrary power" with about thirty men. "I finally determined to turn my back on my family and that home rendered dear to me by many hallowed memories." Desha traveled to Abingdon, Virginia, and then to Gallatin, Tennessee, arriving there November 2 to stay with relatives in Sumner County, and did not return to his home for over three months.

Many of the men accompanying Desha joined the Confederate army at Abingdon, including his son-in-law John Harmon Dills. At some point in his journey, Desha visited the Confederate camp in the Bowling Green, Kentucky area to attend to Dills, who was suffering from a serious ailment.

**Slavery Issues** - Despite assurances from the commander of Camp Frazer not to interfere with slave property,

one Harrison County citizen, James W. Berry, transported in the fall of 1861 four of his slaves to Virginia for he was "alarmed they might run off." Sheriff Glave's slave broke from jail and along with a white prisoner stole a railroad hand car and traveled almost to Covington before being spotted by an approaching train and captured.

One Harrison County slave nearly succeeded in joining the Union army early in October 1861. One night at Cynthiana Federal soldiers on a military train welcomed as a volunteer a red-headed black man who appeared to be white under the evening lamplights. Officers promptly arrested the recruit the next day in Paris after they discovered he was an escaped slave from Cynthiana.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, slaves represented nineteen percent of Kentucky's population. Although Lincoln authorized the use of African American troops in December 1862, the president did not permit recruiting within Kentucky's borders until 1864 because of widespread opposition within the state and a general outcry from slaveowners. Over 300 Harrison County slaves eventually joined the Union army in 1864-1865.

Unionist slave owners were especially torn between supporting the North or South. One Harrison family, even though they supported "southern rights," believed Kentucky should not secede "without cause," but "when the line is drawn, I want Ky to go south."

[Source: Wm. A. Penn, *Rattling Spurs and Broad-Brimmed Hats*, unpublished revised manuscript draft, 2011]

# Kentucky's "Humble" Gunsmiths

by  
Mel Hankla

Volumes have been written about the origin and development of the American longrifle. Ironically, this style of American firearm has long been dubbed the **Kentucky Rifle**, although from a lack of known examples it is generally assumed that high quality artistic longrifles were not made in 18<sup>th</sup> century frontier Kentucky.

The article **New Light on an Old Name: The Origins of the Term Kentucky Rifle** by Alan D. Gutches, discusses at length the origin of the moniker, **Kentucky Rifle**, revealing that the name was well established in American gun jargon by 1806. Stating, "*It [Kentucky Rifle] was being used to designate a type or style of American rifle, one primarily associated with the frontier, regardless of its actual place of original or intended region of use, exactly as the term is used today.*"



**C:Humble** signature on the first discovered rifle, along with his younger brothers **Mic:Humble** on a relic barrel.

Until recently, the name **Conrad Humble** was not associated with the Kentucky rifle; however, his younger brother **Michael** is well documented and for years been considered the earliest gunsmith in the Kentucky region. He established a gunshop at the "Falls of the Ohio" (now

Louisville) as early as 1777.

Conrad Humble, his wife Hannah (Adams) and their children Uriah, Jane, Charity, Noah, and Janet, settled in Bourbon County, just across the Licking River from Ruddle's Station [in present-day Harrison County, ed.] acquiring property from John and Margaret Hinkston on February 9, 1783. Conrad is buried on top of an Indian mound near the location of his home and shop. His will was probated January 5, 1791, a little over a year before Kentucky achieved statehood in June of 1792. His estate inventory contained 20 gun barrels, 10 gunlocks, 22 assorted files, a full set of smithing tools and a vast array of what would have been considered in that day luxury household items; as well as 4 slaves, 5 horses, 18 head of cattle, 8 sheep, 8 hogs, 50 chickens, a watch, a rifled gun, tomahawk, and knife.

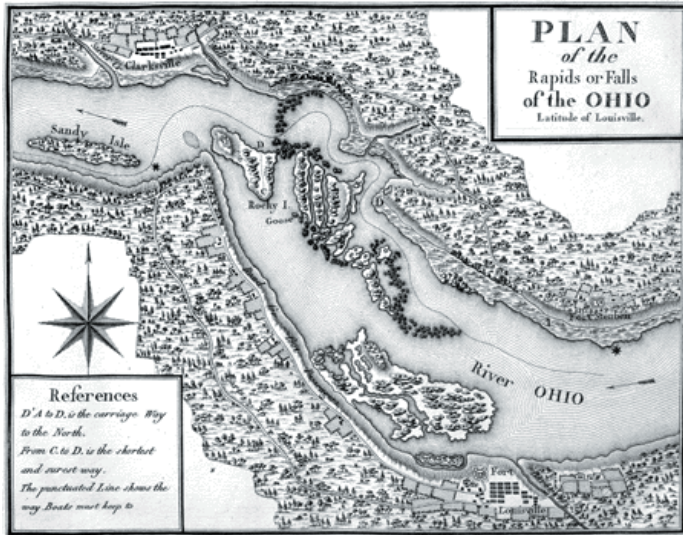
The last will and testament of **Conrad Humble**, dated January 5, 1791, states: "*I, Conrad Humble, of the County of Bourbon and District of Kentucky, Gunsmith; being sick and weak in body but of perfect mind...*" This type of document along with a signed rifle is rare and provides much credibility. This notable rifle [see cover, ed.] is well made, has pleasing architecture and is long and graceful. The .56 caliber, tapered and flared rifled barrel is 45 ¼ inches long. The flintlock is marked "Ketland" on the inside and dates from the 1780's. The stock is sugar maple and is relief carved around the breech pin and behind the cheek piece. It retains the original wooden patchbox cover which is decorated with two wedding band type moldings. The mounts are brass, including the engraved feather-hole inlay on the toe of the rifle. Legend tells us this was used to hold a Blue-Jay feather; a bird the pioneers hated and killed at every opportunity as their squawking alarm often warned the Natives of an encroaching white intruder.

**Michael Humble** is first found as a member of the party laying out Kentucky's first permanent settlement on June 16, 1774. Temple Bodley, wrote in his **History of Kentucky**, "*1774 was a year of outstanding importance in the history of Kentucky for it was then that the first attempt was made to found a settlement there. Among the men who had been members of Bullitt's party surveying lands along the Ohio two years before was James Harrod. He then learned of the rich Bluegrass region of central Kentucky and determined to settle there. On his return to the Monongahela region he gathered a party of about 50 frontiersmen and in the spring of 1774 went down the Ohio and up the Kentucky to a point afterward called Harrod's Landing, and thence a short distance overland to the head of Dick's River. There they laid out lots and began building log cabins for a town, which they called Harrodstown.*"

Michael Humble was a Captain in Colonel John

Bowman’s Company of the Kentucky County, Virginia Militia in 1777. He was under the command of General George Rogers Clark and on the muster roll of Captain James Harrods’s company in 1779. On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1780, the Virginia General Assembly and then Governor Thomas Jefferson approved the town charter of Louisville. Early Kentucky surveyor Colonel John Floyd, was placed on the town’s board of trustees and given the responsibility to plan and lay out the town. Jefferson County, named after Thomas Jefferson, was formed at this time as one of three original Kentucky counties from the old Kentucky County, Virginia. Louisville was the county seat. Humble’s gunsmith shop was near 12<sup>th</sup> and Main streets on lot # 91 under the protection of the guns of Fort Nelson. He was an armorer in the forces of General Clark and not

Not only was Michael Humble a gunsmith but also a gaming sportsman with one of the first “race paths” in the region. Lincoln County court records report that: “*April 1, 1783; The first horse race took place at “Humble’s Race Paths,” near Harrodsburg and for betting on a mare worth 12 pounds at the later, Hugh McGary was tried at Oyer and Terminer Court in August and found guilty. The opinion of the court was that said Hugh McGary, gentleman, be deemed an infamous gambler and that he shall not be eligible to any office of trust or honor with in this state.*” It should be mentioned that Hugh McGary was accused of provoking the disaster at the Battle of Blue Licks, rightfully considered one of the worst American military defeats of the Revolutionary War. This judgment may have had more to do with the politics of his actions in that event, than betting on a friendly horse race.



Map of the Falls of the Ohio, location of Louisville, Ky.

only made and repaired ordinary rifles but made Fort-Guns and wall pieces for the protection of the frontier posts in the vicinity of Louisville. Michael Humble took on James Stewart as an apprentice on February 18, 1782. This indenture reads, “...*James Steward of the County of Jefferson of the one part and Michael Humble of the county of Lincoln of the other part...*”, making it obvious that Michael had left Louisville and moved to Mercer County (then Lincoln County) by 1782.

In reading, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia ~ 1769 to 1792* by James Rood Robertson, we find that Michael Humble signed the 1785 petition to the Virginia Assembly for the request of an Act to establish a town in Lincoln County; Harrodsburg, Kentucky’s first permanent settlement. And in August 1787 he signed the act concerning the erection of the district of Kentucky into an independent state.

No evidence is found suggesting that Michael Humble ever left Kentucky after his arrival in the early 1770’s and he died there in 1818. His grave is at the site of his home, race path, and gunshop on Mock’s Branch, near the Mercer/Boyle County line.



(above) *The grave site of Michael Humble and his second wife Nancy [in present-day Harrison County, ed.]*

The posthumous notoriety of Michael Humble as a gunsmith was first brought to light by Theodore Roosevelt in 1889 when he wrote his famous works **Winning of the West** describing the backwoodsman rifle, “*His weapon was the long flint-lock rifle, clumsy, and ill-balanced, but exceedingly accurate. It was heavy, and when upright, reached to the chin of a tall man; for the barrel of thick, soft iron, was four feet in length, while the stock was short and the butt scooped out. Sometimes it was plain,*

*sometimes ornamented...". This excerpt has a footnote reference that reads; "2The above is the description of one of Boon's rifles. According to the inscription on the barrel it was made at Louisville (Ky.), in 1782, by M. Humble. It is perfectly plain; whereas one of Floyd's rifles, which I have also seen, is much more highly finished, and with some ornamentation."* Then seven years later in 1896, J. Stoddard Johnston writes in his **Memorial History of Louisville from Its First Settlement to the Year 1896**, "On lot No. 91, owned by James Harris, on Twelfth below Main, the gunsmith shop of **Michael Humble** was situated, and on No. 92, owned by Henry French, the blacksmith shop of William Spangler. Humble made and mended guns and did the finer work in metal, while Spangler turned out agricultural implements and did the coarser work. In the shop of Humble pewter spoons and plates were moulded, scalping knives made and many kinds of hardware repaired. Humble made a rifle for **Colonel John Floyd** which yet exists, and another for **Colonel Daniel Boone**, which is preserved and belongs to the writer. In the shop of Spangler implements were made, horses shod, nails wrought and all kinds of tools repaired. Scarcely anything in metal was needed by the pioneers which could not be made or mended in one or the other of these shops." These two documents provide a good description of the overall work of Mic'l Humble, the location of his early shop, and the names of the well-known owners of two of his rifles.

### Synopsis

The signatures of the Humble brothers make these the only two 18<sup>th</sup> century Kentucky made rifles known. In all probability, the majority of their work was repair or the re-stocking of barrels, locks, and hardware of broken but cherished weapons that had fed and protected the pioneers pouring into the mythical land called Kaintuck-ee. There is record of Conrad Humble buying: 500 hundred acres on Clear Creek in Jefferson County, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1780 and 1,285 additional acres - 5 miles down river from the mouth of the Licking River and on the banks of the Ohio River, August 9<sup>th</sup> 1784. Rockingham County Virginia personal property tax records show that Conrad Humble left Brocks Gap moving to Bourbon County, Kentucky Region Virginia between 1782 and 1783. From comparing this rifle to others that are dated, it is unlikely that Conrad's wood box rifle will pre-date 1782, and safe to assume that it is a product of frontier Kentucky. As there is no record of Michael Humble ever leaving the Kentucky region after his arrival as early

as 1774 and his death and burial in Kentucky in 1818, there is no doubt that his rifle was produced either in Louisville at the Falls of the Ohio, or in Mercer County between Danville and Harrodsburg.

Study of the Kentucky rifle together with numerous other Cultural Studies, is helping bring about better understanding of the early American frontier. Awareness of the utilitarian nature of America's early settlers revealed by their rifles and companion powder horns give great insight into the spirit of the daring and brave who settled our nation, winning the liberty and freedom we are blessed with today. Personalities of these pioneers, and signs of the times, are ingenuously expressed and recorded in their artwork. The Kentucky rifle is an all-important tool, made and used to forge our very existence. Borrowing words of John G.W. Dillin, "it was a model often slightly varied but never radically changed". Yet, the intrigue and study of the subtle artistic variances by these countless early American artists and craftsmen has brought many, much contentment and pleasure.

Mel Hankla

~ 2009 [Reprinted with permission, ed.]

*Mel Hankla grew up in Jamestown, Kentucky. Mel began building longrifles in 1982 under the direction of Dr. Terry Leeper at Western Kentucky University. He continues to build on a part-time basis. Mel's trademark is his initials, M and H within a circle and M. Hankla in script on top of the barrel or block letter engraving on the lock plate.*

*A historian by trade, Mel Hankla has been active in "Living History" of the frontier era since the early 80's. Coinciding with this interest, in 1984 he received a National Endowment of the Arts - Folk Arts Apprenticeship grant to work with Hershel House. This experience left him with a strong personal commitment to "pass on" what he learned from House. Biographical sketch source: <http://www.longrifle.ws/artisans/artisan.asp?ID=510&membersonly=>*

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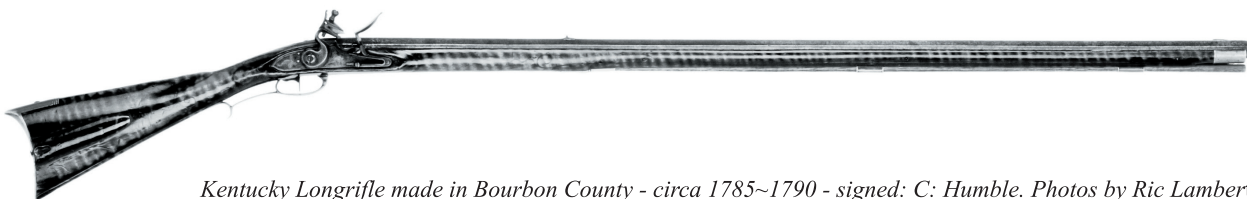
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*Kentucky Longrifle made in Bourbon County - circa 1785~1790 - signed: C: Humble. Photos by Ric Lambert*

## **Harrison County, Kentucky, Historical Publications**

available from Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum, 124 South Walnut Street, P.O. Box 411, Cynthiana, KY 41031 (859-234-7179);

*Note: Some titles may be out of print - call before ordering.*

- Boyd, Lucinda, *Chronicles of Cynthiana*. This is a reprint of the rare 1894 edition, which includes family histories, the famous account of David Sheely and his ghost, and other historical sketches and scattered accounts of persons and events connected with Cynthiana and Harrison County. 262 pp. Hardbound. \$20.00.
- June 1896 Cynthiana Democrat reprint. This was a special edition with biographical sketches and photographs of prominent men and women; many photographs of buildings; city/county government, church and school information is included. 24 pp. Paperback, 12"x18". \$5.00
- *Cynthiana Since 1790*. Virgil Peddicord (1986). Mr. Peddicord attempted to list the owners/businesses located on each lot from the founding of the city through the mid-1980s, including subdivisions added through 1923. 171 pp. (See separate index below). Paperback. \$20.00
- *Index - Cynthiana Since 1790* (William A. Penn). Mr. Peddicord did not prepare a comprehensive index for his book. This supplemental index contains about 3,500 names and a reference city street map. 30 pp. Paperback. \$3.00
- *Writings of Colonel William M. Moore, (1837-1927)* compiled by Andrew B. "Andy" Peak (2002). Includes 1921-1922 articles he wrote for the Cynthiana Democrat about his life. 10 family photographs; index; paperback, 71 pp. \$10.00/ \$3.00 shipping. Limited supply.
- *This Old House* by Katherine Wilson. Now back in print, this book tells the stories of twenty-six early Harrison Co. houses and the families who have occupied them. 70 pp., new index, paperback. \$15.00 (An index is available for earlier editions, which had no index).
- *Cromwell's Comments*, by John M. Cromwell (1862-1951) is a reprint of Cromwell's 1928-1941 Cynthiana Democrat columns on the history of Cynthiana (Harrison Co., KY). William A. Penn and George D. Slade, editors. Paperback; preface; 2 maps; 21 photos; 4 illus.; annotated; index; 200 pp. (Cynthiana Democrat, 2002), \$10 plus \$3 shipping.

Shipping/handling for above books: Please include a handling and shipping fee of \$4.00 for first book (unless otherwise noted above), \$2.50 for each additional book; you will be notified if special shipping fees apply. No shipping fee on Index - Cynthiana Since 1790, if ordered with the book. Make checks/money orders payable to "Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum." No credit cards. Prices/fees subject to change.

**Following available only from: Historic Midway Museum Store, 124 E. Railroad Street, Midway, Ky. 40347,  
ph. 859-846-4214; [www.midwaymuseumstore.com](http://www.midwaymuseumstore.com):**

George D. Slade, *Railroads in Harrison County, Ky.*, 82 pp., paperback, maps, illustrations, footnotes, index. A history of the building of the Covington & Lexington Railroad; Kentucky Central Railroad during the Civil War; L & N ownership. Appendix has L&N System Maps, photos of most bridges, and photos and original plans of L&N depots. \$20. plus \$3.50 shipping.