

Rhoda Drake

Compiled by Harry G. Enoch, Draft, August 2003

According to historian G. W. Ranck, Rhoda Drake “was the first white woman born in Kentucky,” of that “there can not be the slightest doubt.”¹ Sadly, after this supposed illustrious origin Rhoda Drake died in poverty in Lexington during the Civil War. Evidence suggests that Rhoda was born at Fort Boonesborough, her father the prominent pioneer leader, Col. John Holder, and her mother a well-born Virginia lady, Margaret Drake.

Margaret Buchanan Drake came to Boonesborough with her husband Joseph Drake in the early spring of 1778. By late August Joseph was dead, killed by Indians near the fort, and Margaret was left alone on the frontier with two small children. She later married William Jones and died in Franklin County, Tennessee. Sometime while Margaret was still living in Kentucky, she had a daughter by John Holder. This daughter was Rhoda Drake. Rhoda was living with or near Holder on Lower Howard’s Creek when she married in 1797.

Margaret was the daughter of John Buchanan, a prominent citizen of Augusta County, Virginia. He was a wealthy landowner who lived on the James River just west of the Blue Ridge, near the present-day town of Buchanan in Botetourt County. He was a surveyor and land trader and operated a ferry and gristmill. Colonel Buchanan also had a distinguished military career, culminating in his appointment as county lieutenant in command of the militia. Margaret was named after her mother, who was a daughter of another icon of western Virginia, Col. James Patton. Patton was killed in the Indian massacre at Draper’s Meadows in 1755. John Buchanan died in 1769, leaving a widow, a married daughter, three sons, and three young daughters. These three sisters would all wed Kentucky adventurers. Margaret and Joseph Drake were married at the Town House, the home of her cousin about 17 miles east of Abingdon in 1773. Her sister Jane married Col. John Floyd, and sister Anna married Ephraim Drake, Joseph’s younger brother.²

Joseph Drake was an early Kentucky explorer. He was one of the Long Hunters who came in 1769 and returned several times on later hunts.

Col. James Dysart, aged 65 years, deposes in Lincoln County, 22d June 1808. In 1769 deponent and Joseph made a hunting tour of seven months in Kentucky; again in 1771 a tour of nine, and in 1772 a tour of eleven months. Deponent and Col. Buchanan came from same neighborhood in Ireland.³

Drake was along on a tour of the Barren River country in 1775. Someone in the company carved the names of thirteen men, including “J. Drake,” in a beech tree that stood about 3 miles east of present-day Bowling Green. Nearby Drake’s Creek and Drake’s Pond take

¹ George W. Ranck, *History of Lexington* (Cincinnati; 1872), pp. 116-117.

² F. B. Kegley, *Kegley’s Virginia Frontier* (Roanoke; 1938), pp. 368-371. Contains a brief biography of John Buchanan and family.

³ *John Drake vs John Campbell*, quoted in Lyman Chalkey, *Augusta County Court Records*, Vol. II, p. 172.

their names from Joseph. A number of episodes that occurred on these early visits to Kentucky are described in the Draper manuscripts.⁴

Drake saw extensive militia duty, served in companies commanded by William Christian and John Floyd, and participated in several military campaigns in the area that later became Ohio and West Virginia. Lyman C. Draper prepared a brief biography of Drake, excerpted in a history of Dunmore's War:

Joseph Drake early settled on the frontiers of West Virginia, and was one of the leaders of the "Long Hunters" (1770-71). He served as a private in Bouquet's Ohio expedition (1764); married (1773) Margaret, daughter of Col. John Buchanan; and served the next year in Christian's regiment on the Point Pleasant campaign. Among the early adventurers he visited Kentucky in the spring of 1775, and in June aided to pilot a party to explore the region of Green River; and the same year he settled on a tract of land six miles below Abingdon, Virginia. He removed to Kentucky in March, 1778, and was killed by Indians in sight of Boonesborough, in August following. He was a rough, fearless man, well-fitted for frontier life and hardships.⁵

Drake was at Fort Boonesborough a number of times before removing to Kentucky in 1778. He was mentioned in Richard Henderson's diary for 1775:

Wednesday May 3d—Finished the magazine. Capt John Floyd arrived here conducted by one Jo. Drake from a camp on Dicks River where he had left about 30 men in his company from Virginia, and said he was sent by them to know on what terms they might settle our lands.⁶

In November 1777, Drake signed a petition at Boonesborough urging Virginia to erect a salt works in Kentucky.⁷

After moving his family to Boonesborough in 1778, Drake made a "settlement" on the Ohio River, 2 or 3 miles below the mouth of the Little Kentucky River in present-day Trimble County. The term "settlement" meant that he resided in Kentucky at the time he built a cabin, planted corn, or made some other improvement on the land he claimed.⁸

Joseph Drake's name appears on a list of settlers killed at Boonesborough in 1778; the list accompanied the petition for a town charter.⁹ The date is further corroborated in a deposition given by Joseph's son John.

Orator is John Drake of Kentucky. John Buchanan of Augusta died testate, leaving remainder to three younger daughters or the survivors of them come of

⁴ Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky, Vol. II*, (Covington; 1874), p. 512; Draper MSS 3 B 50-65.

⁵ Reuben G. Thwaites and Louise P. Kellogg, *Documentary History of Dunmore's War, 1774* (Madison, WI; 1905), p. 78; Draper MSS 3 B 251.

⁶ Richard Henderson, "Judge Richard Henderson's Journal of a Trip to "Cantuckey" and of Events at Boonesborough in 1775," in George W. Ranck, *Boonesborough* (Louisville; 1901), p. 174.

⁷ Petition No. 6 in James R. Robertson, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky to the General Assembly of Virginia, 1769 to 1792* (Louisville; 1914), p. 43.

⁸ Certificate Book of the Virginia Land Commission, 1779-1780, p. 225.

⁹ The list is on file at the Virginia State Archives and is copied in Nancy O'Malley, *Searching for Boonesborough*, Lexington, 1989. Also see Petition No. 9 in Robertson, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky*, p. 48.

age. Orator's father, Joseph, in 1773 married Margaret, one of the daughters of John Buchanan. Prior to 1778, Joseph moved to Kentucky, where in that year he was killed by the Indians.¹⁰

Following his death, John Floyd presented Drake's claim for a 400-acre preemption to the land commissioners sitting at Harrodsburg in February 1780. Floyd placed the claim in the name of "John Drake heir at Law to Joseph Drake deceased."¹¹

At his death, Joseph left Margaret with a son John, a daughter Mary and several slaves. Margaret's brother William may have come to Kentucky about the same time she did. William Buchanan was in the siege of Boonesborough in September 1778. He served in John Holder's company at the fort and was killed in Holder's defeat at the Upper Blue Licks in 1782.¹² Margaret had two other brothers, John who was killed at the battle of Saratoga in 1777 and James who was living in Kentucky in 1807.¹³

With the help of friends and family at the fort, Margaret was able to obtain 400 acres of land in her own name. In December 1779 at Boonesborough, she placed her claim for a preemption before the Land Commission, based upon a settlement (i.e., improvement) made in March of that year. This tract, located on the waters of Drowning Creek in present Madison County, was surveyed by Christopher Irvine in 1785 and patented to Margaret Drake in 1787.¹⁴

Margaret Drake appeared on the tax list for Fayette County in 1787; on June 7 she was assessed for four slaves and four head of cattle. She was listed on the tax rolls again January 11, 1790. Sometime after 1790, Margaret married William Jones. William and Margaret lived in Franklin County, Tennessee, near the children of John Holder and Fanny Callaway (i.e., John W. and Fanny) as well as children of Samuel Henderson and Elizabeth "Betsy" Callaway. In an 1810 deed Margaret Jones, "now living in Franklin County, Tennessee, widow and relict of William Jones, deceased, also of Joseph Drake [sold land to] John Drake of Bedford County, Tennessee." In 1813, she gave her power of attorney to "my friend and beloved son-in-law" Presla Anderson, for the purpose of selling the 400 acres she still owned in Kentucky, the land being "about six miles from the town of Richmond on Drowning creek." Her signature (she signed with her mark) was witnessed by John W. Holder and James Estill. Presla Anderson conveyed part of her 400-acre tract to Samuel Williams of Madison County for \$262 in horses and \$285 in cash. Margaret left a will in Franklin? County in 1826.¹⁵

In June 1797, Eli Vaughn and Rhoda Drake were married in Clark County by Rev. Robert Elkin. John Holder gave his consent, a role usually provided by a parent or guardian of the bride. There were four Vaughns who married in Clark County between

¹⁰ Deposition of John Drake, June 8, 1807, in *Drake vs Campbell*, op. cit.

¹¹ Certificate Book, p. 225. As John was a small child at the time, the certificate for 400 acres was issued to James Drake, a possible brother of Joseph. John Drake received a patent for this land in 1797. Old Kentucky Grants, Book 7, p. 304.

¹² Deposition of William Buchanan in Petition No. 7, Robertson, *Petitions of the Early Inhabitants of Kentucky*, p. 45; interview with James Wade, Draper MSS 11 CC 29-30; R. S. Cotterill, "Battle of Upper Blue Licks," *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* (1927) 2:29-33.

¹³ Answer of John Campbell, in *Drake vs Campbell*, op. cit.

¹⁴ Certificate Book, p. 101; Old Virginia Surveys, Book 7, p. 379; Old Virginia Grants, Book 13, p. 424.

¹⁵ Fayette County tax records; Washington County (Tenn.) Deed Book xxx; Madison County Deed Book I:252, K:563. Have not yet found her will.

1797 and 1802—Eli, Elijah, Enos, and Nancy—who may have been siblings from Frederick County, Virginia.¹⁶ Eli and Rhoda lived on Lower Howard’s Creek for many years. In 1817, Eli appeared before Justice of the Peace Ambrose Christy at the mouth of the creek, where Christy was taking evidence in a lawsuit between John Jouitt and John Holder’s heirs. In his deposition, Eli stated

that he has been living within a mile & a half of the place where an ash tree is marked . . . for John Jouits beginning [on the cliff above the mouth of Howard’s Creek] & upon examination finds the trace not to be either of the old ones traveled from McGees & Holders Stations to Boonesborough, but one newly made, that is sometime since his removal to the neighbourhood.¹⁷

In 1826, Eli Vaughn was involved in a lawsuit over ownership of one of the slaves of Joseph Drake. The suit was brought by John Stovall, a son of Mary Drake (Margaret’s daughter by Joseph Drake).¹⁸ The case was styled as *John D. Stovall, Administrator of the estate of Joseph Drake, deceased vs Eli Vaughn*, and the papers are found at the Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives in Frankfort. Eli’s response to Stovall’s complaint gives a chronology of events and, though she is not mentioned by name, explains his wife Rhoda’s relationship to John Holder:

The answer of Eli Vaughn to a bill in chancery filed against him in the Clarke Circuit Court by John D. Stovall.

This defendant for answer states that he does not admit that the complainant is the legal administrator of Joseph Drake, deceased. That the County Court of Madison had no power to grant to him administration because, he avers, there was no estate of the said Joseph, deceased, in Madison County to give the court jurisdiction, and furthermore he avers that many years since, to wit in 1783, the County Court of Fayette County, which court had jurisdiction of the subject, granted letters of administration upon the estate of the said Joseph Drake, deceased, to a certain Margret Drake, the widow of the said Joseph, deceased.

That she duly and legally executed, bound with Flanders Callaway and Bartlett Searcy, her securities, agreeably for the administration of said estate. The record of which proceeding has unfortunately for the defendant been consumed by fire some years since, when the office, records &c of that court was burned up.

That the said Joseph Drake was considerably indebted, and not having personal estate sufficient to pay the debts, it became needful for the administratrix to sell a part of his slaves to pay the debts aforesaid.

That she did in the year 1783 expose to sale agreeably to law the negro Celey, in the bill mentioned together with some others. That a certain John Holder

¹⁶ George F. Doyle, editor, *Marriage Records of Clark County, Kentucky, from 1793 to 1800, Inclusive, and Marriage Bonds of Clark County, Kentucky* (Winchester; 1933). Rev. John Shane wrote, “While at Mr. Niblick’s [in Clark County], I met with Elijah Vaughn of Madison, from whom I got the following. He was born in Frederick County, Virginia. Came to Kentucky the year before Con Jackson’s defeat. . . . Con Jacson’s defeat 1780.” Draper MSS 11 CC 84.

¹⁷ *John Jouitt vs John Holder*, Fayette Circuit Court, 1793, copies of the court papers found in Special Collections, M. I. King Library, University of Kentucky.

¹⁸ According to Lois Allen of Kansas City, MO (1995), Mary Drake married Jesse Stovall in about 1796. As indicated in the suit, John D. Stovall was their son.

became the purchaser for a full & valueable consideration and took possession of her.

That this defendant married a daughter of the said Holder and became possessor of said negro by virtue of said marriage, she having been given by said Holder to the wife of this defendant before ther marriage aforesaid.

That the other negroes in the bill mentioned are the children of the said Celey and all born since this defendant became possessed of Celey, which possession has been uninterrupted for more than twenty nine years.

That the legal heirs of the said Joseph Drake resided in the state of Kentucky many years after this defendant became possessed of said negroes, and never to his knowledge set up any claim to thim. The heirs ware John Drake & Polly Drake, who afterwards married the father of the complainant, and he avers they ware well acquainted with all the facts in this cause.

This defendant denies that he [illegible] threatened to run said negroes out of the state and sell them in parts unknown. On the contrary, soon after he heard of the pretended claim of the complainant, he took legal advice upon the validity of this defendant's title, of counsel in whom he confides, and has always been informed that he had nothing to fear as to his title to said slaves.

He admits that since the institution of this suit, he has concealed a part of the negroes from the sheriff. That his motive for doing so was to prevent their being taken out of his possession untill he could bring the legality of the interlocutory order made by your honor before this court [illegible].

This answer produced this day in court, October 2, 1826.¹⁹

In September 1826, the case was discontinued at the request of the complainant. A document filed with the court papers indicates that the case was revived and later went to the Court of Appeals, where Stovall must have lost again, as he refiled the case in Montgomery Circuit Court in 1832. The legal issue which Stovall attempted to establish was that Margaret was only entitled to a dower interest in Joseph Drake's estate, that no such division was ever made by the court and, thus, the slaves given to Rhoda by Margaret were not Margaret's to give. Vaughn's position was that the slaves were legally sold to satisfy debts owed by Drake's estate, that one of the slaves was legally purchased by John Holder and given by him to Rhoda. Vaughn's position evidently prevailed. The reason for Stovall's dogged persistence in prosecuting this case was that Celey had nine children, all of whom were in Eli Vaughn's possession in 1826 and, according to Stovall in his complaint, "said slaves are of the value at least of \$3500," a large sum in those days.

Rhoda Vaughn died in Lexington in June of 1863 and was buried in the Old Episcopal Cemetery, **her tombstone marked** 1776-1863.²⁰ Although the birth year is questionable, Rhoda always maintained that she was "the first white woman born in Kentucky." Her obituary was published in *The Guardian Monthly* in January 1873 and

¹⁹ *John D. Stovall, Administrator of the estate of Joseph Drake, deceased vs Eli Vaughn*, Clark Circuit Court, 1826.

²⁰ Frances K. S. Barr, *Old Episcopal Burying Ground* (Bowie, MD; 2002).

essentially reprinted word for word in Ranck's *History of Lexington*. Ranck's version is copied below:

The first white woman born in the savage wilds of Kentucky lived for many years in Lexington. Here she died, and here she sleeps. Many now living still remember the venerable Mrs. Rhoda Vaughn, the first born of the wilderness. She was the daughter of that Captain John Holder, spoken of by Boone in his narrative, as the man who pursued the Indians who had attacked Hoy's station in August, 1782. Captain Holder was one of the old pioneer's earliest companions. He assisted in building and defending Boonesborough fort; and within the palisades of that noted stronghold, and about the year 1776, his daughter, afterward Mrs. Vaughn, was born. Her earliest recollections were of savages, sufferings, alarms, and bloodshed; and she passed her infant years in the midst of memorable sieges and desperate conflicts. When she grew to womanhood, and was married, her father started her in life with a home and servants, but she lost both in a few years, by her husband's mismanagement, and after his death, times with her grew worse and worse.

At a very early day, she settled in Fayette county, and subsequently made Lexington her home, and here she remained and raised her children. One of her sons was the gallant adjutant, Edward M. Vaughn, a Lexington volunteer, who fell upon the bravely contested field of Buena Vista, in 1847. His blood-soaked gauntlets were carried reverently to his mother, and they told at once, to her stricken heart, the same tragic and eloquent story that the armless and battered shield expressed to the Spartan mother in the classic days of old. Other afflictions and misfortunes followed; and destitute and desolate, the brave old lady struggled on through a life, not unfrequently made brighter by kind and sympathetic friends. Mrs. Vaughn lived for some time in the residence lately occupied by Rev. J. D. Matthews, on Winchester street, between Limestone and Walnut. She died, however, at the residence of Mrs. Susan Craig, on the south side of Short Street, between Georgetown and Jefferson street, in the month of June, 1863, aged about eighty-seven years, and was buried in the Whaley lot, in the Episcopal Cemetery, where her remains still repose.

The only relic of the venerable heroine known to be in existence is a patch-work quilt which she made with her own hands, and gave to a sympathetic lady of Lexington, who was a friend to her in her days of sorrow and affliction.

That Mrs. Vaughn was the first white woman born in Kentucky, there can not be the slightest doubt; the fact is placed beyond dispute by the frequent declarations of many of the earliest settlers of this state to persons still living. Mrs. Vaughn, herself, always declared that she had never heard a statement to the contrary. [This paragraph does not appear in *The Guardian* version.]

Mrs. Vaughn was a woman of excellent mind, warm heart, and sincere piety; and neither her true pride, nor the beautiful characteristics of her christian life, were abated by her poverty and misfortunes. How strange were her experiences. The fate-star of sorrow, which beamed upon her birth, seemed ever to follow her with its saddening influence. She was born when the tomahawk and the torch were busiest; the hope of her declining years died upon a field of battle, and she

breathed out her own life in the midst of a terrible civil war. Her parents helped to reclaim and settle an empire; their daughter died without a foot of land that she could call her own. Will justice, even now, be done to her memory? Will the state appropriately mark the spot where rest the mortal remains of the first white woman born in the now great Commonwealth of Kentucky.²¹

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Following this history of Rhoda Drake, this section takes up the question of her date of birth, which has implications not only regarding her claim to be “the first white child born in Kentucky” but also for understanding the relationship between John Holder and Margaret Drake. Reports for the date of Rhoda’s birth range from 1776 to 1782.

As John and Margaret were not married, Rhoda kept her father’s surname. That Rhoda was John Holder’s daughter appears to have been well known to those who lived at Boonesborough and on Lower Howard’s Creek. She and her husband, Eli Vaughn, stated at various times that she was. Since Rhoda knew her father (and possibly her mother) until the time she was an adult and married, it seems reasonable that she would know when she was born, and since she was described as a sincere and pious Christian woman, it seems reasonable that she would have had some basis for her claim of being the first white child born in Kentucky. Unfortunately after examining all of the data, much of it conflicting, a definitive answer to this question is not possible. The weight of evidence, however, seems to contradict her claim.

Several sources state that Joseph Drake brought his family to Kentucky in early 1778. If that is true, then Margaret could not have had a daughter by Holder prior to 1778 unless he knew her in Virginia, but then Rhoda would not have been born in Kentucky. Drake’s hunting companion, James Dysart, stated that “in 1776 on account of Indians, Joseph Drake moved to New River near his father’s.” New River is in present-day West Virginia.²² Known sources do not place Holder in that area.

If the dates of the Drakes’ removal are incorrect and Margaret accompanied Joseph Drake to Kentucky on earlier visits, then she could possibly have encountered Holder at Boonesborough. However, while there are claims for Holder being at the fort in 1775 and participating in the rescue of the Boone and Callaway girls in 1776, definitive proof is lacking. He cannot be reliably placed at Boonesborough until September 1777, when he arrived at the fort with the company of William Bailey Smith.

The other problem of timing is that if Rhoda Drake was born before August 1778, it would have preceded the death of Joseph Drake. While such relationships did occur, it seems a little less likely in this situation. One might presume that a liaison with a married woman in a crowded frontier fort would be not only a very foolish enterprise but also a very dangerous one.

Another version of Rhoda’s birth maintains that the widow Drake went to live with or near her brother, William Buchanan, at Holder’s Station and that Holder took up with Margaret there.²³ The problem with this scenario is that Holder’s Station was not

²¹ Ranck, *History of Lexington*, pp. 116-117.

²² Deposition of Col. James Dysart, in *Drake vs Campbell*, op. cit.

²³ See for example, Michael E. Drake, *The Search for the Ancestors and Descendants of Henry Brasater Drake of Coles County, Illinois* (Bowie, MD; 2002), pp. 104-108.

occupied until 1781 or 1782, a date much too late to sustain Rhoda's claim to be the first white child born in Kentucky. A further problem is that Holder had married Fanny Callaway by this time.

The available evidence can be used to construct another possible scenario. Her husband's death in August 1778 placed Margaret in a precarious situation, but she seems to have been a determined and independent woman. In similar circumstances, with small children to support, most women on the frontier remarried quickly. Margaret did not. She was still unmarried twelve years later, when she appeared on the Fayette County tax rolls in 1790 as "Margaret Drake." She may have had resources of her own, as her wealthy father left much of his sizeable estate to his three young daughters. She had some of her kin to call on at Boonesborough: her brother, William Buchanan, as well as a sister and brother-in-law, Anna and Ephraim Drake. Margaret was resourceful enough to stake a claim to 400 acres during the land-grabbing times of 1778-1779.

John Holder was living at Boonesborough during this period. He may have helped Margaret obtain her land claim. At that time, he was personally engaged in locating lands on the Kentucky River tributaries in the area between Boonesborough and the three forks at present-day Beattyville. Margaret's claim was in this area. Holder purchased a slave from Margaret, which reportedly helped her settle her deceased husband's debts. Whatever brought John Holder and Margaret Drake together, a romance must have followed. Given that he was a handsome young bachelor and she an attractive widow, this part of their relationship is not surprising. If Holder's attentions aiding and consoling Margaret occurred in late 1778 or early 1779, then Rhoda may have been born at the fort in 1779. That John and Margaret did not marry after the birth of their daughter is more difficult to explain. One may speculate that the Holder-widow Drake liaison was a brief one. They may have quarreled or she may have lost interest in him or she simply may not have wished to marry him. We do know that about this time, Holder turned his attentions to young Fanny Callaway.

While we are speculating, let us consider Rhoda Drake's claim to be the first white child born in Kentucky. Evidence appears strong that she was mistaken. We surmise that she did not get her information from her father or mother, who were in a position to know otherwise. She may have arrived at the conclusion on her own from the legends that developed in the early 1800s regarding the rescue of the Boone-Callaway girls. One of the myths that grew out of event was that the future husbands of all three girls were among the rescue party. Further embellishments had the three rescuers already engaged to the girls and the marriages occurring soon after the rescue (1776).²⁴ Rhoda, knowing she was born before her father married Fanny Callaway, could have logically inferred that she was born not only before any of Fanny's children but also before any of the Samuel Henderson-Betsy Callaway or the Flanders Callaway-Jemima Boone children.

Another contributing factor was that no one seemed to know who was the first native white child in Kentucky. Authoritative evidence to identify the first native white child in Kentucky is still not available. Historian Richard Collins examined the claims

²⁴ Ranck, *Boonesborough*, pp. 49-53; R. S. Cotterill, *History of Pioneer Kentucky* (Cincinnati: 1917) , pp. 104-105; H. Addington Bruce, (New York; 1910), pp. 155-157; John M. Faragher, *Daniel Boone, The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (New York; 1992), pp. 131-139.

for ten individuals, Rhoda Drake among them. He concluded that Rhoda was unlikely the first born:

Mrs. Rhoda Vaughn, a daughter of Capt. John Holder, of Boonesborough, is claimed in Ranck's History of Lexington as the first white child born in Kentucky. She was the mother of the gallant adjutant Edward M. Vaughn, who fell at the battle of Buena Vista, Mexico, in Feb. 1847; she died at Lexington, in June, 1863. It is probable that she was born early in 1777, but not probable that she was the first native child.²⁵

In Collins' judgment, Fanny Henderson, born May 29, 1777 the daughter of Samuel Henderson and Betsy Callaway, probably preceded Rhoda. Fanny is credited with being the first child in Kentucky of parents married in Kentucky. Betsy Callaway was John Holder's sister-in-law and Fanny his niece.

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²⁵ Collins, *History of Kentucky, Vol. I*, p. 512.