

A Short History of Paducah, Kentucky

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The site of present day Paducah was first acknowledged by Europeans when George Rogers Clark made a short stop at the mouth of the Tennessee on the Illinois shore in 1778. While Clark “claimed” the Paducah site in 1795, the land was still part of the great Chickasaw territory until the Jackson Purchase of 1818. In May of 1827 Clark’s brother, William Clark, arrived in the area which he would name “Paducah” for the Padoucas, a Native American tribe who were annihilated by Europeans in the lands west of the Mississippi River. Paducah was incorporated in 1830.¹

In 1832, Paducah became the county seat of McCracken County. Originally part of Hickman County, McCracken County was formed on January 15, 1825, and was named after Captain Virgil McCracken, who was killed at the Battle of the River Raisin during the War of 1812.²

Paducah is located on the southern side of the Ohio River, just past the confluence of the Tennessee and Ohio rivers, only 50 miles upstream from the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi, and some 20 miles downstream from the confluence of the Cumberland and Ohio rivers. This location allowed for the early development of Paducah as a significant river port. Through the 1800’s Paducah commerce grew in large part by the port facilities used by steamboats. A factory that manufactured red bricks was established and a foundry for making rail and locomotive components was built, ultimately contributing to the river and rail industrial economy. By 1850 Paducah had a dry-dock facility, boat making operation, exchange bank, multiple denominational churches, and a private school, known as St. Mary.³

The 1860s brought Paducah, now a chartered city, into the western theatre of the Civil War. Paducah was so pro-Confederate that it was nicknamed “The Charleston of Kentucky.” On September 6, 1861, General Ulysses S. Grant captured Paducah without having to fire a shot. Afterwards, Paducah became an important Union supply base, which Confederates led by General Nathan Bedford Forrest attacked on March 25, 1864. Many of the Rebels were from Paducah and elsewhere in western Kentucky. The Confederate dead included Colonel Albert P. Thompson of Paducah who died leading

¹ John E. L. Robertson, *Paducah: Frontier To The Atomic Age* (Charleston, SC: 2002), 8-10.

² Fred G. Neuman, *The Story Of Paducah* (Image Graphics, 1979) 44-50.

³ Steve G. Gabany, *Historic Architecture of Paducah and McCracken County* 2nd ed. (Image Graphics 2008), 6.

his men in an assault on Fort Anderson, which was defended by a number of western Kentuckians, white and African American.⁴

Paducah commerce suffered during the war, but afterwards business and industrial growth was renewed. Paducah continued to capitalize on its river and rail connections. Tobacco, whiskey, iron, timber, and produce were major exports. Many jobs were created by this rise in industry. The influx of people brought a need for many changes to local infrastructure, and by 1871, the city boasted a public school system.⁵

While the dry-dock and river packet industry were still providing major economic growth in Paducah, the later part of the 19th century saw major advancement toward the railroad. Even electric streetcars were in Paducah by the turn of the century.

At the same time, Paducah became the second largest manufacturing and distribution center in Kentucky, but World War I and prohibition had a negative effect on Paducah commerce. The war greatly reduced tobacco exports to Europe, and prohibition forced distilleries to shut down. Also, much of the local timber had been cut, and farm agencies pushed local farmers to diversify crops, one of which was strawberries. The fruit would become a staple crop in McCracken County for the next 50 years.⁶

The early 20th century also saw a number of new buildings including the Carnegie Library, Hotel Irvin Cobb, Hotel Metropolitan, and a new downtown Market House. Other buildings were constructed outside the city, forcing expansion of the city limits to encompass nine square miles. Along with this expansion came advancements in public education, and in return, new schools were built including Augusta Tilghman High and Paducah Lincoln High.⁷

Also during the 1900s, two colleges were started in Paducah. In 1909 West Kentucky Industrial College, serving the African American community was started and Paducah Junior College was started in the 1930s. These schools would go through many changes until finally merging into Western Kentucky Community and Technical College, which in 2012 was recognized as one of the nation's top 5 community colleges.⁸

As Paducah became more and more industrialized, it, in turn, became less agrarian. Farm laborers took jobs in the city, and farm land began to and continues to be swallowed up by the urban sprawl.

⁴ Craig, Berry

⁵ Gabany, 6, Craig

⁶ Gabany, 13

⁷ Gabany, 19

⁸ Craig

In 1937, the Ohio River at Paducah rose significantly over its flood stage. Ninety percent of Paducah was under water. Damage estimates were in the millions. As a result of the flood, the United States Army Corps of Engineers built a flood wall to protect the city against future flooding.

World War II brought a great surge to the county and city alike. With the announcement of the new Kentucky Ordnance Works (KOW) in western McCracken County in 1942, people began to migrate to Paducah from all over the nation. Although KOW would close at the end of the war, a new uranium enrichment plant would open on the same site in the early 1950s. The great atomic power had proven to be a great population boom to the area.

Over the years a number of great businesses have made major strides at becoming national staples. Some of these include: Gilliam Candy Company, Krispy Kreme Doughnuts, Dippin' Dots.

Paducah's rich history is full of extraordinary people who have helped not only shape Western Kentucky but also the whole world. These include: saxophonist Boots Randolph, Vice President Alben William Barkley, national broadcasting journalists Jack Paxton and Gene Pell, Confederate General Lloyd Tilghman, rockabilly legend Rocking Ray Smith, multiple Grammy winner Steven Curtis Chapman, world renowned folklorist JD Wilkes, PGA members Russ Cochran and Kenny Perry, and World Series Champion baseball player, Steve Finley.

Many interesting people have been laid to rest in Oak Grove Cemetery, including humorist Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb, the king of riverboat jazz Fate Clifford Marable, Scopes Monkey Trial teacher John T. Scopes, Musicologist and Folklorist Mary Wheeler, and United States House Speaker Linn Boyd. Other famous Paducahans include WWII admirals Clifton, Paro, and Burch and national labor and civil rights leader W.C. Young.

Over the years, Paducah has expanded its city limits. With the development of Interstate 24, an abundance of commercial growth has taken place on the far western side and south side of town. This new development allows both citizens and visitors to enjoy shopping and dining in both national and regional establishments.

While the west and south sides of Paducah have seen major change through urbanization, downtown has also seen a movement towards, maintaining the beautiful historic part of the city. Here one can find many locally owned stores and eateries.

The development of the Museum of the American Quilter's Society (MAQS) (now designated by Congress as the National Quilt Museum of the United States) in Paducah in 1991 has provided a major tourist boom to the downtown area. Other tourism has

been provided by excursion boats such as the Delta Queen, River barge Explorer, and the American Queen that brought travelers from up and down the rivers into Historic Downtown Paducah. Along with the Clark Market House Museum, Railroad Museum, Lloyd Tilghman House, Yieser Arts Center, River Discovery Center, and Hotel Metropolitan, local businesses remain in downtown and supply both citizens and visitors with an amazing cultural experience.

Downtown visitors can take a stroll by the beautiful Dafford Murals painted on the flood wall, which depict multiple points of interest in Paducah history, or a walk on the Civil War walking tour. They can also enjoy national touring acts or the Paducah Symphony at the Carson Center, a theatrical performance at the Market House Theatre or stop for a visit at the McCracken County Public Library.

Organizations such as Lower town Arts District, Jefferson St Alliance, Paducah Main Street, Fountain Avenue Revitalization Program, and Renaissance Alliance have brought renewed interest in local history and culture and help continue the heritage of Paducah.

As always, the river industry continues to grow. The Center for Maritime Education Seamen's Institute, was established in 1997 in downtown Paducah. Many barge lines and dry dock facilities have made Paducah home. As long as the rivers run, they will always play a major role in the jewel of western Kentucky, Paducah.