

THE HISTORY OF BOWLING GREEN AND WARREN COUNTY

**NANCY BAIRD
CAROL CROWE-CARRACO
CONSULTANTS**

**Dr. Wayne Hoffman
Director of the Center for Local Government,
Western Kentucky University**

**Amy Huot
F. Grant Whittle
Design and Layout**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARYv
THE EARLY YEARS1
THE POST CIVIL WAR DECADES3
20TH CENTURY BOWLING GREEN4

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In its near two centuries, Bowling Green has developed from a clearing in the wilderness to a thriving community of 50,000. Cheap and rich land attracted the earliest settlers to the area. More recent residents have found the town a fertile atmosphere for business enterprises as well as a center of cultural and educational endeavor.

Many of Bowling Green's first inhabitants came to the area to claim land promised by Virginia to her Revolutionary War veterans. As the area's population increased, so did the need for organized local government, and in December, 1796, Kentucky's legislature created Warren County out of the northeast section of Logan County. During the following year, the county's officials built the first courthouse and jail on what is now Fountain Square Park, and George and Robert Moore donated land for the town of Bowling Green.

From its birth, the community's economic welfare relied heavily on the Green and Barren rivers, down which rafts and flatboats took farm products to market. To improve river transportation, the state authorized in the 1830s a series of locks and dams, making possible steamboat navigation upriver to Bowling Green. Improved river travel and the 1859 completion of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad through Bowling Green assured the town of its role as a center of trade and commerce.

At the onset of the Civil War, the area's population was about 3-1 pro Union. Nevertheless, most local families provided soldiers for both armies. Each belligerent wished to control Bowling Green because of the town's strategic location. A large Southern army occupied the area for five months, and at least a garrison of Union troops camped in the area for more than three years. The bitterness resulting from military rule and divided families left economic and emotional scars that required years to heal.

Bowling Green emerged from the Civil War in a sorry plight, but gradually the damage was rectified. In addition to rebuilding roads, bridges, and public structures, the community constructed the county's third courthouse. The land on which the old courthouse had stood became Fountain Square Park.

The post war decades also witnessed other changes. The city's five man board of trustees was replaced with a mayor-council form of government. The railroad stimulated the development of new industries, utility companies provided modern services, and paid fire and police departments increased the security of town residents. The town's first public elementary schools opened in the 1880s, and two private secondary schools, Potter College for Women and Ogden College for Men, attracted young people from across the South. The Southern Normal School also opened in the 1880s and when Potter College closed its doors in 1909, the teachers' school (forerunner of Western Kentucky University) purchased Potter's hilltop campus.

The Twentieth Century witnessed continued growth. The mushrooming popularity of automobiles stimulated a myriad of allied businesses, as did the short-lived oil boom of the early 1920s. Despite other economic troubles, the Depression decade witnessed the construction of several public works and the opening of the town's first radio station. Industrial expansion, begun after World War II and continuing to the present day, enlarged job opportunities for area residents and attracted new settlers. Improved transportation facilities, including the completion of I-65 and the Green River Parkway on the town's outskirts, further increased the town's potential as a business community. Expanded shopping facilities, the creation of an arts commission, and the emphasis on the restoration of historic structures enhanced Bowling Green's residential qualities.

Bowling Green nears its 200th birthday as a strong, diverse community. From a tiny clearing in the wilderness to a thriving city that serves as the hub of south central Kentucky, Bowling Green continues its forward journey into the 21st century.

THE EARLY YEARS

Because few records were kept or have been preserved, little is known about the earliest explorers and initial settlers in the Warren County area. A group of a dozen or more "long hunters" apparently camped along the Barren River in the early summer of 1775 and carved their names and the date on a couple of large beech trees. Hunters and explorers who followed Indian trails from the eastern and northern portions of Kentucky to what is now Middle Tennessee often crossed the Barren River at a shallow spot near the present I-65 bridge. Unfortunately, few of these visitors left accounts of their experiences. When Kentucky achieved statehood in 1792, an undetermined number of settlers inhabited the area. Four years later, the region south of the Green River opened to Virginia's Revolutionary War soldiers and land hungry settlers from the eastern seaboard poured into the area. Many of the new residents held land warrants that granted acreage in payment for military services. Some had purchased warrants or land from veterans. More than a few were squatters.

Newcomers generally staked claims along water courses and in heavily forested areas that provided building supplies and fuel. Many of the earliest settlers avoided the "barrens," a woodless, crescent-shaped region that extended from the present areas of Glasgow, Bowling Green, Franklin, Guthrie, and Hopkinsville. Residents soon discovered that the barrens' soil was rich, not thin and poor as originally supposed. They concluded that perhaps the Indians had periodically burned the land to prevent forestation and encourage the growth of vegetation that attracted game.

As the population grew, the need for local government increased. In December, 1796, the state legislature approved a petition submitted by a group of residents living in the northeast portion of Logan County to create the state's 24th county. The name selected for the new county honored Dr. Joseph Warren, a hero of the Battle of Bunker Hill. At their first meeting, the commissioners of Warren County appointed and swore in officials necessary for the orderly government of the area; at subsequent meetings they set tavern rates, approved the construction of several mills, and called for the clearing of roads

to link all portions of the county. In the summer of 1797 the county officials arranged for the construction of a one-and-a-half story log courthouse and small log jail. Both buildings stood on a two acre plot (now Fountain Square) donated by George and Robert Moore.

The following March, at the first meeting held in the new courthouse, the commissioners proposed the creation of a town to surround the public buildings. The Moores donated 30-40 acres for the settlement. According to the meeting's minutes, the town would be "called and known by the name of Bowling Green." The extant records give no clues as to who chose the name or why.

Following Bowling Green's creation, a surveyor mapped a town around the two-acres on which the tiny courthouse and jail stood. In May, 1799, the first town lot (the east half of Park Row) sold for sixteen dollars. By 1810 a few stores, a brick tavern, and several modest homes faced the square, and the federal census taker counted 154 town residents. In January of 1812 the state legislature passed an act for the "regulation of certain towns," including Bowling Green and determined that the responsibility for the town's well being rested in the hands of five trustees, to be elected annually by the white male inhabitants. At their initial meeting, each group of trustees selected one of its members as a presiding officer and another to act as secretary.

The honor of being designated the "county seat" involved a half-decade battle between the tiny village of Bowling Green and two proposed communities that speculators intended to create on the river bank. Eventually, however, the legislature specified Bowling Green and in 1816 the county commenced construction of a fine brick courthouse which stood in the middle of the town square. In 1821, the Bank of the Commonwealth established a branch office on the square, and by 1827 the town boasted a locally owned and printed newspaper, a resident physician, a private school for boys (a school for girls opened in the mid-thirties), a Masonic lodge, at least one church, a number of mercantile shops and an array of other business establishments. A stagecoach line connected Bowling Green to Louisville, Nashville, and Hopkinsville. Three times a week the stage rumbled into town to discharge and pick-up passengers willing to

endure lengthy and uncomfortable trips to their destinations. The cost of a round trip ticket between Bowling Green and Louisville was \$12.

From its inception Bowling Green depended on the Barren River as an avenue for commerce. In the winter when the river was high, flatboats loaded with tobacco, hams, whiskey and other farm produce began an arduous trip from a warehouse on the river's edge to New Orleans. Goods imported for Bowling Green's shops generally came by wagon from Louisville, an erratic and expensive mode of freighting. The trip from Bowling Green to New Orleans by flatboat and return by wagon or on-foot required about six months.

After the advent of the steamboat on the Ohio, local businessmen urged that the narrow, winding, and snag-filled Green and Barren rivers be improved sufficiently for a steamboat to ascend to Bowling Green. Without such river trade, warned the newspaper editor, "we can never be independent or prosperous." Discussion and delay followed, but eventually a company of young volunteers cleared the worst snags and overhanging trees. In January 1828, a tiny, single stack steamboat, the *United States*, arrived at Bowling Green. On docking, its cargo was unloaded and displayed on the river bank.

A few years later, the state authorized improvements on the Green and Barren rivers and eventually provided for the construction of locks and dams. With these improvements, paddle-wheelers could ply upriver to the Bowling Green boat-landing. To facilitate transportation between the wharf and the center of town, James Rumsey Skiles, Jacob Van Meter and others organized a stock company that built the Portage Railroad. Completed about 1832, small mule-drawn wagons carried passengers and goods from the river to a depot near the site of the present courthouse on Tenth Street.

Prior to the 1830s, Russellville, a decade older than Bowling Green, was the most prosperous and populous town of the area. With the genesis of steamboat travel, however, Bowling Green assumed a role as the commercial center of south central Kentucky, and the town's growth reflected her economic importance. In the late 1850s, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company built tracks through Bowling Green, thus providing the town with an additional

commercial asset. Many of the laborers on the railroad were German and Irish immigrants, and more than a few made Bowling Green their permanent home. In a town that had previously been settled by Protestant natives of Virginia, Pennsylvania, and the Carolinas, these Roman Catholic newcomers added a new facet to the south central Kentucky character.

As the population increased, the problems of providing water, streets, police and fire protection and other municipal services also multiplied. The board of trustees continually wrestled with the task of maintaining services on a microscopic budget. Derived from property taxes, fines, license fees, and a "head tax," Bowling Green's income in 1823 was about \$500; by 1860 the revenues and the demands on them had been increased tenfold.

War clouds appeared on the horizon in 1860 as the nation divided over the states rights and slavery issues. Most area residents opposed secession. Throughout the summer of 1861, Kentucky's refusal to choose sides gave temporary respite, but the state's neutrality melted in the warm rainy days of late summer. Both belligerents were eager to control Bowling Green, for the town guarded the avenues between Confederate Tennessee and Unionist Kentucky. On September 18, the first group of Confederates arrived at the Bowling Green depot; eventually, about 20,000 southern troops camped along area waterways.

For five months, a large Southern army occupied the town and countryside. They fortified the surrounding hills, including a mound behind the hilltop home of Larkin Baker on the north side of the river; a rise on the Webb farm overlooking the river; and the area at the top of Main Street. Believing their defenses would withstand any attack, they dubbed Bowling Green the "Gibraltar of the West."

In late November, 1861, after Bowling Green was proclaimed the Confederate capital of Kentucky, the Confederate "governor" and his council attempted to establish a government. However, they had no authority beyond their shrinking military lines. Bowling Green's distinction of Confederate capital was a fleeting honor, and following defeats at Mill Springs (in Eastern Kentucky, on the Cumberland River) and Columbus (on the Mississippi) as well as the south-

ward advance of Union troops from Louisville, the Confederates decided to evacuate to Nashville. The retreat began on February 11, 1862 and the last troops left Bowling Green on Valentines Day. On the following day Union troops entered town.

For a brief period, a sizeable Union army remained in the Bowling Green area, but by mid spring most of the Federal soldiers had moved south. Throughout the remainder of the war, large Union armies en route to Tennessee passed through from time to time, but only a few hundred troops remained to garrison the area. Union or Confederate, the presence of soldiers for nearly four years drained the town and countryside of its resources. The destruction of property, the strain of divided sentiments (most families furnished soldiers for both sides), the loss of loved ones, and the indignities of real and imagined ill-treatment created bitterness that remained long after the shooting stopped.

THE POST CIVIL WAR DECADES

Bowling Green emerged from the Civil War in a sorry plight. Although the majority of the town's residents had been loyal to the Union, the victorious Federals treated them like foes. Martial law and the suspension of habeas corpus remained in effect for six months after Appomattox, and from 1866 to 1870 the efforts of the Freedmen's Bureau's to help blacks stirred racial antagonisms. The town's physical alterations were more apparent. During the Confederate retreat, some of the downtown buildings had been burned either by design or accident. Surviving establishments were in varying states of disrepair; the railroad depot lay in shambles and the streets were riddled with potholes, becoming impassable quagmires in damp weather. Although the Union army had repaired the railroad bridge, the destroyed footbridge across the Barren River had been replaced only with a pontoon.

Gradually, and at first in piecemeal fashion, residents began to reconstruct the town. Street repairs started in earnest and a new covered bridge eventually spanned the Barren. A magnificent three story brick and stone courthouse, which cost \$125,000 paid by private subscription,

became a great source of pride for area residents on its completion in the autumn of 1867. A picturesque little park with a bubbling fountain and reflecting pool replaced the dilapidated 1816 courthouse in the center of town. At its 1872 dedication, Louisville newspaperman Henry Watterson labeled the park an "enchanted green gem" and predicted that it would be a "thing of joy and beauty forever." Other changes in the town included the opening of a new cemetery (Fairview), the formation of a privately owned gas company that made possible lights for town streets as well as some homes and businesses, and the completion of a city waterworks. River water, filtered and pumped from a station at the base of present day Chestnut Street to a cement lined reservoir at the top of the Main Street hill, was conveyed to homes through cyprus (later iron) pipes. The new system significantly reduced the incidents of illnesses caused by contaminated wells.

An increased awareness in public health resulted from the new water works, the cholera epidemic of 1873 that killed 68 in Bowling Green and nearly as many in nearby Woodburn, the formation of the Kentucky State Board of Health in 1878, the yellow fever epidemic of 1879 that felled at least 26 Warren countians, and the 1880 appointment of local physician Joseph N. McCormack to head the State Board of Health which was located in Bowling Green until 1920. The post Civil War decades also witnessed other changes. In 1870, Bowling Green altered its government. Instead of the five man Board of Trustees elected at large, the new form provided for the election of a mayor and two councilmen from each of the city's three wards. These officials, like the trustees who preceded them, served as unpaid public servants. Other changes included improvements that increased the community's economic importance. Following the rebuilding of the train depot, a machine shop and roundhouse were added; nearby businesses catered to travelers who, prior to the introduction of Pullman cars in the 1880s, detrained at Bowling Green to sleep and eat. Many employees of the L&N lived in close proximity to the railroad; an important part of the town's social and economic scene revolved around the railroad and the union activities in which some of Bowling Green's railroad men participated.

The availability of reliable and relatively cheap transportation stimulated area business and agriculture. The tonnage of livestock increased more than five fold during the 1890s. Strawberries, as well as other food stuffs became important cash crops for area farmers and profitable commodities for local merchants who supplied Warren County foods for distant kitchens. The railroad carried carloads of locally made barrel staves and tool handles to big city manufacturers. Gleaming white limestone, nature's most elegant building material, was quarried in the county, fabricated in the town's stone mills and shipped by rail to urban areas. Between the 1880s and the 1920s, local stone companies filled orders for hundreds of structures, including the Governor's mansion in Frankfort, Presbyterian Theological Seminary and Sacred Heart Academy in Louisville and public and private edifices in Boston, New York, Washington and other metropolitan areas.

Local building projects also utilized local materials. In the years immediately after the Civil War, carpenters patched and repaired structures, but eventually stone and brick buildings replaced the wooden shanties around the square. In 1885, the Bowling Green Gazette boasted of 623 new buildings erected in town during the previous three years. The 1880s saw the introduction of electricity and telephones and the establishment of a paid fire department. Using horse drawn pumpers, the department (often supplemented by volunteers) answered the call for help. Among the town's biggest conflagrations was the July 3, 1898 fire that destroyed the Potter Opera House. Located on the corner of Main and College, the structure housed a variety of businesses and a large auditorium where most of the community's theatrical productions were held. Despite the efforts of the department and hundreds of volunteers who answered the call of distress, the fire raged for fifteen hours and destroyed the 1866 building. The structure was rebuilt and currently houses the Bowling Green Bank and Trust.

During the 1880s, a public education system began and several private colleges came into existence. The city's public schools boasted two modern brick buildings—an elementary school on College and State for white children, and a smaller structure at Second and State for the

town's black children. The curriculum included the 3 Rs, music and art, composition, speech, and spelling. Because the system did not provide secondary educational opportunities until after 1910, Potter College for Women and Ogden College for Men, both high school equivalents rather than the modern colleges, opened on adjoining campuses on the town's southern perimeter. In 1884, the Southern Normal School and Business College moved from Glasgow to Bowling Green and conducted both academic and commercial programs; a quarter-century later one of the school's owners, Henry Hardin Cherry, purchased the facilities of the defunct Potter College and moved the Southern Normal School to its hilltop campus. Through the years, the school has been known successively as the Western Kentucky Normal School, Western Kentucky State Teacher's College, and Western Kentucky University. The Business School (Bowling Green Business University), which remained downtown, achieved a reputation for excellence and was absorbed by the university in the 1960s.

20TH CENTURY BOWLING GREEN

At the beginning of the 20th century, Bowling Green bankers, businessmen and investors capitalized on the advances made during the previous decades. An electric trolley system replaced the mule drawn cars introduced earlier. The arrival of the automobile encouraged growth of hotels, restaurants and related businesses. Leisure time increased. Parks gained popularity, and the ranks of bicycle clubs, fraternal organizations, and literary societies swelled. During the decade preceding World War I, temperance was one of the pressing questions of the day. Church and social groups pushed for local option and then campaigned for a temperance law. Led by the community's women, prohibitionists marched around the square, carrying signs urging men (women could not vote) to vote YES. For a brief period, the town went dry and one of the saloon owners converted his Main Street establishment into an ice cream parlor. Prohibition remained an explosive political and social issue until the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919.

The years between 1900 and 1915 were halcyon ones for many Bowling Green residents who seemed blissfully unaware of war clouds gathering in Europe. Yet, when the call to arms came in the spring of 1917, citizens of Warren County responded with gusto. About one thousand young men served in the armed forces; four received Distinguished Services Crosses; two were awarded the Croix de Guerre and many were cited for bravery in battle. Forty-nine gave their lives.

The decades between the two world wars witnessed many changes. The automobile introduced the need for better streets, and in 1920 the city purchased a steam roller and four trucks with which to maintain and improve roadways; the budget for that year also permitted a generous \$60,000 allocation for the city's schools. Modernization appeared in a number of the town businesses, following the example set by Sam Pushin in 1922 when he opened his department store and used uniquely modern display and merchandising techniques.

Oil was a magic word in the early twenties as speculators, drillers, and oil company representatives flocked to Bowling Green to pump black gold from shallow wells. The boom stimulated every industry in town, from hotels to dry cleaners. Housing was at a premium; many workers who came to the area during the boom lived in out-buildings and even tents. Some made fortunes but more merely increased their misery. The deaths of two children from malnutrition and exposure in their family's inadequate quarters on Woodford Street stimulated a number of area women to organizing relief programs for less fortunate residents of the community. They founded the Welfare Home on Adams Street to care for the city's destitute and funded their activities through bazaars, fiddling contests, football games, plays and concerts. In addition to providing food and shelter, women's clubs held story telling hour for small visitors at the Adams Street home and other groups provided camp scholarships for summer fun. When the depression struck the nation a few years later, Bowling Green already had in operation the nucleus of a social services group.

The local oil boom was short lived. Because gushers also flowed elsewhere and the railroad rates rose, the oil men moved on, leaving the

town to recover from a whirlwind dream of great wealth and civic splendor. In many ways, life in Bowling Green slowed to a more placid pace, only changing its tempo from time to time to host visits from the Kentucky Press Association, National Fox Hunters and American Legion, and to celebrate the opening of the community's first hospital as well as the construction of a new armory and a new bridge at the base of State Street.

The Depression years witnessed numerous building projects funded by the WPA (Works Project Administration). Cherry Hall, the Kentucky Building, the county jail, and the city sewer system provided work for area residents. The post office received an annex, two new tobacco warehouses opened, and WLB radio station went on the air in June 1940. As part of the federal defense program, the national government appropriated \$334,000 for a municipal airport. Despite the jobs provided by these projects, the county's unemployment rolls contained more than 500 families during the darkest days of the depression. Taking advantage of a few available funds, Mayor John B. Rodes, shamed the town into cleaning and revitalizing the old cemetery, an "ugly and neglected spot," and to add flower gardens and tennis courts to Reservoir Park. During the mid-thirties the city also acquired sixty acres on the eastern edge of town, making possible the creation of Covington Woods Park and a municipal golf course.

Troubles in Europe and Asia changed the tempo of life in the late thirties and by December of 1941 volunteer groups had already mobilized. Merchants provided space for the collecting and packaging of handmade socks, scarves, sweaters, hospital gowns, and rolled bandages. War mothers established a canteen at the railroad station and operated a USO on weekends at the American Legion Hall. Red Cross blood drives netted more than the area quotas. Everyone made sacrifices in time, money, or lives. Of the 3600 Warren County youths who served in the armed forces, 130 did not return.

The end of WWII initiated an era of industrial expansion which has continued to the present. Prior to 1940, Pet Milk with 140 employees, and Honey Krust Bread with 80 employees were the city's largest employers. Most area businesses were small, locally owned companies. In 1941,

however, Union Underwear, a company offering hundreds of new jobs, was invited to open a plant on Church Street and shortly thereafter GE's Ken-Rad established a factory on West Eleventh. During the war, each hired more than 900 workers. Because the community's experience with Union Underwear and Ken-Rad had been positive, post war city officials and the Chamber of Commerce worked zealously to attract more outside capital. They leased lots, planned an industrial park, and even invited businesses to submit lists of requirements. Their hard work paid off. In the next three decades they attracted such industrial giants as Holley Carburetor, Detrex Chemical, L.F. Strassheim, Master Vibrator, Firestone Textiles, Chrysler Airtemp, FMC, several meat packing companies, and the GM Corvette plant.

Industry attracted new residents and stimulated the building trade. A seven-man planning commission, established in 1940, studied annexation requests and approved the admission and development of new subdivisions and the construction of apartment complexes. In the late 1960s, a 190 unit housing project opened. The population jumped from 19,000 in 1940 to 22,800 in 1950, 28,228 by 1960 and 36,705 by 1970. Assessed property values also rose, from \$9,500,000 in 1947 to \$18,000,000 in 1954 and \$39,000,000 by 1963. As the town grew and the number of automobiles increased, traffic became a major problem. Parking meters appeared on the square and the US 31W Bypass opened in 1949 to channel through traffic away from the downtown. But the town's intense building program during the 1950s and 1960s expanded beyond the Bypass; instead of going around the town, the Bypass was engulfed by it. The completion of I-65 in the mid 1960s and the opening of the Bowling Green-Owensboro Parkway a decade later effected both traffic and economics.

The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s saw Bowling Green become large enough to receive second class city status, forbid the sale of fireworks, go dry and then wet again, build a new public library and youth center, open a TV station, construct a second hospital, establish a landfill, begin urban renewal, join an area development coalition, and continue industrial development.

The postwar years were also marked by tensions. Integration of area schools came only after

a federal suit, but segregation of the facilities ended quietly and smoothly, fulfilling the circuit court judge's premise that he had more faith in the community than the school board had. The decades also witnessed a crime wave which shocked local citizens. Bowling Green literally shook as cars, homes, liquor stores, garages, and office buildings were dynamited. By 1971, according to the *Courier-Journal*, the area had a murder rate of 3.7 per 1000. Finally, groups of concerned citizens offered hefty rewards for pertinent information. The police redoubled their efforts, a few "timely deaths" occurred among the criminal element, and peace was restored.

Although the violence made headlines, less spectacular events had a more far reaching effect on the town. In the early seventies, the state Chamber of Commerce thrice voted Bowling Green an All-Kentucky City. With the receipt of a federal Model Cities grant, rehabilitation of the north side of town adjacent to the business district began, as did downtown renovation of the historic Fountain Square area. An appreciation of historic structures stimulated the preservation and renovation of other public and private buildings scattered throughout the town and county. The National Register lists about 500 buildings in the city and county, many of which have been restored to their former splendor.

Industrial development has continued a pace, according to the Chamber of Commerce, with a new plant being built every one-and-a-half years. A decade ago, the multi-million dollar Greenwood Mall opened on the rapidly expanding Scottsville Road corridor and stimulated construction, which has turned acres of farmland into shopping centers, car lots, restaurants and motels. But progress has not been confined solely to business ventures. In 1981, the Arts Commission completed renovation of the old Capital Theatre and converted it into an all purpose arts center. From its stage and gallery, local talent and nationally acclaimed stars have offered area residents art, music, dance, and theatre.

Bowling Green completes its second century as a healthy and progressive city of 50,000. It offers the economic, educational, and cultural advantages of a city and the traditional relaxed atmosphere of a rural setting. For residents seeking metropolitan amenities, a brief drive via interstate highway connects Bowling Green with

Louisville, Nashville, and other cities as well as to major urban areas within the state. From a tiny clearing in the wilderness to the hub of south

central Kentucky, Bowling Green continues its forward journey to the 21st century.