

**FILSON CLUB PUBLICATIONS NO. 32: THE
FILSON CLUB AND ITS ACTIVITIES, 1884-1922;
A HISTORY OF THE FILSON CLUB, INCLUDING
LISTS OF FILSON CLUB PUBLICATIONS AND
PAPERS ON KENTUCKY
HISTORY PREPARED FOR THE CLUB, ALSO
NAMES OF MEMBERS, PP. 5-63**

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OTTO A. ROTHERT

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Filson Club, Louisville, Ky.

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ITS ACTIVITIES
1884-1922

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BY

OTTO A. ROTHERT
Secretary of The Filson Club



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A HISTORY OF THE FILSON CLUB

Read before the Club, April 3, 1922

The Filson Club was organized May 15, 1884, in Louisville. From the standpoint of continuous existence it is the oldest historical association in Kentucky, and one of the oldest in the Middle West. The thirty-one books of Kentucky history written by its members and printed as Filson Club Publications are well known among students of national and Kentucky history and can be found in many of the large libraries in the country. These Publications, however, represent only one phase of work accomplished by the Club. Other activities are shown by the papers written for the Club and by sundry materials gathered by members and now preserved in its Archives.

Historical societies in other states and cities have done much good work, but few, if any, were handicapped as has been The Filson Club in not owning a home of its own. A Filson Club building and money to maintain it would have encouraged even greater activities among the members and resulted in greater contributions to the Archives. Because the Club had no fireproof building much material in Kentucky pertaining to the State's history has passed into the hands of libraries and historical societies in other states. Its chief activity has been the encouragement of research work and the issuing of Publications. These Publications have given the Club a position among the best historical societies in America.

Historical societies have been organized from time to time in Kentucky for the purpose of gathering material, but they were short lived and such materials as they had collected were dissipated. Most of the pioneers who made early Kentucky history were then dead and gone, and even those who had heard them tell of the exploits of themselves and their contemporaries, were long past middle age and were rapidly dying out. Men like Dr. Lyman C. Draper had been holding interviews with pioneers and their families for many years, obtaining such written evidence as they were able to gather, with the purpose of writing one or more works dealing with those stirring events and the active, hardy people of pioneer times. Dr. Draper's wonderful

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collection of material long ago passed into the hands of the Wisconsin State Historical Society.

Much, if not most, of the material that was then gathered was collected by non-residents of Kentucky and removed from the State. Some Kentuckians began to recognize that it was high time the descendants of those who made the Mississippi River instead of the Appalachian Mountains the western boundary of our "Thirteen United States," and who built up the grand old Commonwealth, should bestir themselves and begin to collect and save what was left.

Accordingly, on May 15, 1884, Reuben T. Durrett, Richard H. Collins, William Chenault, John Mason Brown, Basil W. Duke, George M. Davie, James S. Pirtle, Thomas W. Bullitt, Alexander P. Humphrey and Thomas Speed, ten of the leading spirits of Louisville, met at the residence of Colonel Reuben Thomas Durrett—202 East Chestnut Street, at the southeast corner of Brook—and organized an association for the purpose of collecting and preserving Kentucky history. Colonel Durrett, the chief instigator of this movement, was a journalist, lawyer, a man of affairs, and a student of Kentucky history. He was elected president, with Thomas Speed secretary and E. T. Halsey treasurer.

The organization was named The Filson Club. It was so called in honor of John Filson who, one hundred years before, in 1784, published the first history of Kentucky—*The Discovery, Settlement and Present State of Kentucke*. The first paper read before the Club was by Colonel Durrett, and with equal appropriateness an enlargement of this paper was its first Publication—JOHN FILSON, The First Historian of Kentucky, An Account of His Life and Writings.

For the benefit of new and prospective members Colonel Durrett published the following synopsis of the career of John Filson: "The Filson Club is an historical and literary association of ladies and gentlemen, located in Louisville, Kentucky. At its first meeting the association was named The Filson Club, in honor of John Filson who was the author of the first history and the first map of Kentucky. Filson's history, a quaint little volume of 118 octavo pages, entitled *Kentucke*, was published at Wilmington, Delaware, in 1784, and his map appeared in Philadelphia the same year. The book and the map have now become very scarce, and when sold bring high prices.

History of the Club

"John Filson was a Pennsylvanian by birth, and was born on the Brandywine, probably in 1747. His education, though below the standard of modern times, was sufficient to qualify him for surveyor, school-teacher and author. He must have known something of Greek, Latin and French, as he used a word from each of these languages in giving a name to the town first established where Cincinnati now stands. He laid out a town there in 1788 and named it Losantiville. This name seems to have been made up of the initial *L* for Licking, the Latin *os* for mouth, the Greek *anti* for opposite to, and the French *ville* for the city, meaning all together the city opposite to the mouth of the Licking River. The name of Losantiville disappeared after the death of Filson, and was succeeded by Cincinnati.

"Filson probably came to Kentucky in 1782 as one of the host of adventurers who sought lands here to be paid for with the paper money of Virginia issued during the Revolutionary War. In 1783 he located in Fayette County 12,368½ acres and in Jefferson County 1,500 acres, making a total of 13,868½ acres. He also located lands in the Illinois country, but how many acres or where situated cannot now be ascertained because of the burning of records at Vincennes in 1814.

"While Filson was roaming over the country in search of lands, he was also gathering information for his history and map of Kentucky. He was constantly thrown with Daniel Boone, Levi Todd, James Harrod, Christopher Greenup, John Cowan, William Kennedy, and others who hunted game and fought Indians over the whole country and were well acquainted with every part of it. It is said of Boone that he was so perfect a woodsman that he could walk up and down a long creek or river and then tell every stream that came into it, and designate every peculiarity on both banks. From such men as these Filson got the facts for his history and map, and hence they were wonderful productions for their day. In his history he inserted the biography, or rather the autobiography, of Daniel Boone, which not only secured the immortality of the old pioneer but made the first and most valuable chapter in early Kentucky history. On his map were laid down all the forts or stations which shielded the pioneers from the Indians, and it is not too much to say that no one can at this day properly understand the early history of Kentucky without Filson's history and map.

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"While he was at work upon his town of Losantiville in 1788, he went with a surveying and exploring party to the Great Miami River. After ascending this stream some miles he became separated from his party, and he was never seen afterward. Search was made for him, but nothing of his remains was ever found. Neither did intelligence of him ever come from any Indian tribe into which he might have fallen by capture. Whether a straggling Indian slew him or a wild animal made way with him, or his own exhausted heart ceased to beat, may never be known. The grand old sycamores of the Miami Valley beneath which he disappeared have told no story of the manner of his departure."

Six meetings of the Club were held in 1884, at varying intervals. In February, 1885, the time for regular meetings was agreed upon—the first Monday night of every month, except July, August and September, the summer vacation. Nine regular meetings have been held every year since then, on the nine specified Monday nights, though special meetings have occasionally been called.

The Club was incorporated on October 6, 1891. Its purpose is thus set forth in one of the articles of incorporation: "The principal place of business of this corporation is Louisville, Kentucky. The general nature of the business to be transacted is the collection and preservation and publication of historic matter pertaining to the State of Kentucky and adjacent states; and the cultivation of a taste for historic inquiry and study among its members. The Club shall have power to collect, maintain and preserve a library and a museum, and to acquire suitable grounds and buildings in which to place them."

As to qualifications for membership, anyone interested in Kentucky history was then, and still is, eligible. Preparing a paper for the Club never was obligatory.

From 1884 to 1913 meetings were held in Colonel Durrett's library at his residence, the main feature being a prepared paper, a set lecture or an informal talk, followed by an open discussion of the subject, and, frequently, by personal reminiscences. Then a closing recess, as it were, took place; all present became Colonel Durrett's personal guests. Cider was served and the gentlemen who smoked were supplied with "Filson Club" cigars made by a member of the Club.