

# **A Short History of Kent for Younger Readers**

## **By James F. Caccamo**

### **Chapter 1**

#### **Beginnings**

What is now Ohio was once an unspoiled forest, thick and dense with many varieties of trees and plants. Animal life was varied, and the woods were full of wolf, bear, and deer, as well as many other kinds of animal.

For centuries, many groups of native peoples inhabited the land where we live. Just before the age of European settlement of our region, the Iroquois people moved into northeast Ohio, replacing the Erie tribes who had lived in the woodlands. They enjoyed the abundance of food that the forest provided.

The government of the new United States of America was deeply concerned about knowing what the Native Americans were doing in its new territories in “the west” and used members of the army to scout the area and gather information. One of these agents, Captain Samuel Brady, was spotted by a group of Native Americans and was pursued through the wilderness. Trying to escape them, he ran eastward, and when the Cuyahoga River seemed to block his escape, he leaped across the Cuyahoga in what is now Kent, Ohio and was able to flee from his pursuers. He managed to hide by the edge of the water in a lake that is now named after him, Brady Lake, and then finished his escape.

### **Chapter 2**

#### **Coming to the Western Reserve**

Today's Kent, Ohio is part of an area named the Connecticut Western Reserve. Northeast Ohio was a section of the old frontier of the United States which was settled by people from New England and especially from Connecticut. Before the American Revolution, when Connecticut was still a colony of England, the king had given Connecticut a strip of land in the unexplored wilderness running parallel to Connecticut's borders. After the Revolutionary War, when the United States was formed, most of the states gave land they claimed outside their borders to the new federal government. Connecticut was one of the last states to do this, and it asked to be allowed to settle a part of the land that it once thought it owned. This land, which was held back or reserved for Connecticut to settle, was called the Connecticut Western Reserve. This territory covered much of present-day northeast Ohio.

In order to settle the new lands out on the frontier, Connecticut formed the Connecticut Land Company, whose job it was to survey the new territory and to make arrangements to sell parcels of land to settlers. Led by Moses Cleaveland, a survey team journeyed to the Western Reserve in 1796 and began to explore and survey the territory.<sup>1</sup> In order to sell the land, the surveyors made maps with grids

on them, each grid section being twenty-five square miles. They numbered the squares from east to west along the bottom, starting at the Pennsylvania border, and used these numbers to identify the "ranges". The survey crew then numbered the squares from bottom to top and called these the "towns." What we know today as Kent and Franklin Township was in Range Nine, Town Three.

The Connecticut Land Company planned to sell the land in the Western Reserve to investors using a "land lottery." Anyone wanting to own land in the new territory had to come up with approximately \$12,900 in order to obtain the rights to a five-mile square section of approximately 16,000 acres.<sup>2</sup> While many of the towns in the Western Reserve were bought by groups of investors, Range Nine, Town Three was purchased by a single owner, Aaron Olmstead. Since he owned all the new town, he had the right to give it a name. He chose to call it Franklin in honor of his son.

In 1803, Olmstead hired two surveyors, Ezekiel Hoover and Ralph Buckland, to explore the township and divide it into lots. That same year, a group of settlers from Hudson built a road through Franklin to provide easy travel to Ravenna. Part of that early road included a bridge over the Cuyahoga River near where Brady's Leap is today.<sup>3</sup>

The first pioneers to the new town did not come until autumn of 1805, when John and Sally Leggett Haymaker arrived on the banks of the Cuyahoga River with their children Jacob, Eve, and Catherine. They had traveled to the Western Reserve overland through Pennsylvania, coming across the Ohio country northwest from Pittsburgh. The family began living in an old log cabin left behind by the surveyors.<sup>4</sup> In 1807 the Haymakers began building a dam to use the river's energy to power a gristmill.

On September 11, 1807, John and Sally Haymaker's son, John was born, the first settler child born in Franklin. His sister, Emily, was born two years later, on November 26, 1809.<sup>5</sup> When others began to realize the value of the water power in the new settlement, other pioneers began arriving.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **Pioneer Days**

Pioneer life was difficult for the men and women who settled here. Take for example Clarissa Moore Clark, who came here with her husband Barber Clark in 1812. They traveled by ox cart, arrived in raw wilderness, and built a log cabin. As with most pioneer women, her life was an endless cycle of cooking, cleaning, sewing, washing, and preserving food for later use. She gave birth to eight children in that log cabin, and in order to protect her family, Mrs. Clark used to burn brush in the evening to frighten off wild animals.<sup>6</sup>

The early settlers had to be self-sufficient. They cleared the trees and tried to farm the land, growing crops such as corn and oats. They ground their grain with

primitive mills using the power of the river to move the grinding stones. Farm animals were an important source of food and of labor. Occasionally, the two would be in conflict. Around 1815, some of Christian Cackler's geese got loose and ate David Lilly's field of oats. Lilly killed the geese, and Cackler took him to court. The judge decided that Lilly had to pay Cackler for the animals.<sup>7</sup>

Up until 1814, the pioneers had no choice but to live in log cabins, for there was no sawmill nearby to make the boards needed to build a frame house. In 1814, Elisha Stevens built a sawmill on the river, and the settlers were able to start building houses and moving out of their cabins.<sup>8</sup>

The following year, in 1815, Franklin Township had its first election, with only twelve people voting. They were Amasa Hamlin, Elisha Stevens, George Haymaker, John Haymaker, David Lilly, Hubbard Hurlburt, Jacob Reed, Alexander Stewart, Adam Nighman, William Williams, Christian Cackler Sr., and Andrew Kelso.<sup>9</sup>

In the winter of 1815-1816, the residents established the first school in a small cabin. The first teacher was Abner H. Lanphare of Brimfield.<sup>10</sup> In 1817, residents built a small building on the east bank of the Cuyahoga River to be used as a school house and for church services. In the early days, pioneers had to depend on traveling ministers. These "circuit preachers" traveled on horseback from frontier town to frontier town, spreading the gospel to the people of Franklin and the surrounding communities.

Soon, more settlers came to the area, and two villages grew along the river. One of them, the "Lower Village" was where Stow Street crosses the Cuyahoga River, which was called Franklin Mills. The other, the "Upper Village" was near where Crain Avenue crosses the river, and was called Carthage. A post office was established in Franklin Mills on December 28, 1820, with George DePeyster as the first Postmaster.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, the two villages would grow together and the whole town became known as Franklin Mills.

## **Chapter Four**

### **The Canal Era**

In the early days of the Western Reserve, travel was difficult. The roads were rough and often filled with mud. River travel was hazardous, with many waterfalls and rapids along the course of the area's major river, the Cuyahoga.

When New York succeeded in building the Erie Canal in the 1820's, Ohio began its own program of building waterways. The Ohio and Erie Canal, which linked Lake Erie to the Ohio River, began operating in 1827. That canal aided travel north and south, but to many, it became clear that Ohio needed a faster route east and west. The Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal, often called "the Cross-Cut Canal" was begun in 1836. All 93 miles of it were in operation by 1840, stretching from the Pennsylvania border near Youngstown to the Ohio and Erie Canal in Akron.<sup>12</sup> Franklin Mills was along the canal route and prospered from all the canal traffic.

Canals, however, were a slow form of traffic, and when rail service came to the Western Reserve in the 1850's, the waterways became less important to the economy of the area. By the 1860's, much of the Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal had been filled in with dirt and in some towns, railroad tracks were built over the old right-of-way. In 1863, the State of Ohio sold the canal's stock to the Cleveland and Mahoning Valley Railroad. In 1867, the railroad leased the canal to the Akron Hydraulic Company, which wanted the water for Akron's growing industries. The canal was for the most part unused and was filled with stagnant water and a foul smell. The citizens of Kent wanted the canal closed, and even tried to secretly damage it to get rid of the water. By 1869, the neglected old waterway was abandoned and allowed to drain.<sup>13</sup> Today, though, you can still see remnants of the old canal near the waterfall in the center of Kent.

Even though the Pennsylvania and Ohio Canal died an early death, other canals in Ohio stayed in use until 1913, when continued rain caused flooding throughout the state and severely damaged the waterways. Just as it had in Kent, the rest of the state had begun to rely primarily on the railroads for transporting goods, so while the loss of the canal system was a sad event, by 1913 it did not have many long-term effects on Ohio's economy.

## **Chapter Five**

### **John Brown**

Many famous people have lived in Kent, but perhaps one of the most well-know was anti-slavery crusader John Brown. John was born in Torrington, Connecticut on May 9, 1800 and moved to the Western Reserve with his family in 1805. He grew up in Hudson and there he learned how to be a tanner or leather maker. Afterward, he moved to Pennsylvania, but when his tannery there did not succeed, he moved to Franklin Mills and entered into a partnership with Zenas B. Kent in 1835, with the idea of building a tannery along the banks of the Cuyahoga River.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, John Brown and Zenas Kent did not have a good partnership, and eventually they stopped doing business together. Around this same time, though, something exciting seemed to be about to happen in Franklin Mills. A number of investors planned to start a new company, the Franklin Land Company, with the goal of turning Franklin Mills into a major industrial city. The idea was to raise silk worms here and create an American silk industry. After all, the silk worms' major food source, the mulberry tree, grew extremely well here. (Later, of course, they would discover that silk worms do not thrive in our cold Ohio winters.) Then other industries would follow and the economy would boom.

In any case, John Brown believed that real estate in Franklin Mills was going to be extremely valuable, and that by investing early, he would end up a wealthy man. Brown borrowed large sums of money, bought over 95 acres of land, and

waited for his investment to pay off.<sup>15</sup> Instead, in 1837, the entire nation was caught up in an economic crisis. Franklin Mills never developed into a major manufacturing center, and John Brown was driven to bankruptcy. Eventually, Brown would leave Franklin Mills, returning to Hudson, then Richfield, then Akron. He switched his career from tanning leather to raising sheep.

Brown's story is not just one of economic failure, though. He had been brought up to believe that slavery was wrong, and following the example of his father, Owen Brown, John worked to try to help the slaves. Eventually, he would end up involved in a bloody conflict in Kansas Territory between those who hated slavery and those who favored it. Brown began using violence to reach his goal, and even resorted to murder.

By the summer of 1859, John Brown decided to do something about slavery once and for all. He and a group of others decided to raid a federal armory in a place called Harpers Ferry, Virginia, which is now in West Virginia. The raid, which took place on October 16, 1859, was a failure. Brown was captured, put on trial, and condemned to death for his actions. On December 2, 1859, John Brown was hanged at Charles Town, Virginia.

While John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry failed, it did force the nation to pay attention to the slavery issue. The national controversy over Brown's trial split the Democratic Party into two groups, which helped Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln win the election of 1860. Unhappiness with the results of that election led, in part, to South Carolina deciding to secede from the United States, an action which led in turn to the Civil War. When Union soldiers marched into battle during that war, many of them sang about John Brown, a man who spent much of his life in what is now called Kent.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Franklin Mills Becomes Kent**

While other towns in the Western Reserve began getting railroad service in the 1850's, Franklin Mills was not one of the towns lucky enough to become a railroad stop. That all changed when one of the town's most influential citizens, Marvin Kent, took it upon himself to make sure that Franklin Mills was part of a new main railroad line, a system that would link New York City with St. Louis on the Missouri River. In Ohio, the new rail line would provide much-needed direct service between the northeast and the southwest parts of the state.

The Atlantic and Great Western Railroad was destined for success, and Marvin Kent made sure that not only would Franklin Mills be a stop, but that the railroad's shops would be here. That meant hundreds of jobs for the little town.<sup>16</sup>

Tracks were laid in Franklin Mills in February of 1863, and the first passenger train arrived on March 7, 1863. In 1864, work began on building the railroad shops. The town was in the middle of an economic boom, and out of gratitude, the

citizens decided to change their town's name in honor of the man who made it all possible, Marvin Kent. The post office accepted the name change on August 17, 1864, and on May 6, 1867, the State of Ohio officially recognized the new name and incorporated the Village of Kent.<sup>17</sup>

In 1875, the railroad opened its new depot, a large brick structure near the waterfall on what is now Franklin Avenue. The success of its railroads allowed Kent to grow, attracting new industries to our area and providing work for an expanding population. The railroad era brought prosperity to the town and encouraged growth. Many of the wonderful old houses and business buildings we have in Kent today were constructed during this prosperous time in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Kent Gets a College**

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ohio had a shortage of teachers. The state was growing, but it did not have enough colleges and universities to train men and women to teach school. By 1909, Ohio was facing a shortage of 5,000 teachers, with the northern half of the state having the most need.<sup>18</sup> Early in 1910, the State of Ohio passed laws to create two new teachers' colleges, or "normal schools" in the northern half of Ohio, one in the west and one in the east. The western college was awarded to the town of Bowling Green and today is Bowling Green State University.

The people of Kent, as in many other communities in northeast Ohio, wanted the college in their town. To help bring the school here, in February of 1910, they formed the Kent Board of Trade. In its effort to boost community spirit, the group adopted the slogan "Kent, Home of Hump and Hustle".<sup>19</sup> By the end of 1910, a state commission selected Kent as the college's home, in part because William S. Kent donated a large piece of land for the site.<sup>20</sup>

A board of trustees was appointed in 1911 and John E. McGilvrey was named the college's first president. In 1912, the cornerstone was laid for the first of the campus buildings, today's Merrill Hall.<sup>21</sup> Through the years, the college grew, changing its name from Kent State Normal School to Kent State College, and eventually to today's Kent State University. Through the years, the university grew steadily, and after World War II, that growth became rapid. The school expanded its programs to include advanced degrees and specialty programs.

In the spring of 1970, though, Kent State University became caught up in the events that surrounded the Vietnam War and President Richard Nixon's decision to invade Cambodia. Civil unrest erupted in many places across the country, including Kent. After the downtown business district was damaged by looters, agitators burned down a building on the Kent State campus used by the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). Governor James A. Rhodes ordered the Ohio

National Guard to Kent to help preserve order. On May 4, 1970, the National Guard and a group of demonstrators became involved in a violent conflict on the campus. In the confusion surrounding the events that day, the National Guard opened fire and four students were killed.

The events of May 4, 1970 cast Kent State University into the national spotlight. Despite the negative image that the incident brought, Kent State University survived and continued to grow into the important university that it is today. The university includes the Liquid Crystal Institute, the state's only library school, and one of the country's finest programs in fashion design.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **Kent's African-American Heritage**

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many black families settled in what is now Kent. The federal census for 1830 shows a total of six blacks in Franklin including William Stewart, a free black male and his wife. By 1840, there were eight blacks in Franklin Mills and Franklin. Among these was George Jennings, a free black who would live in town for over 40 years. In addition, many fugitive slaves passed through Kent on their way north on the Underground Railroad.

The 1850 census was the first to list all residents by name. There were nine blacks in Franklin Mills and Franklin Township: George Butler, George Jennings, Levi Archer, Jeremiah Loudon (a.k.a. Lowden), Susan Loudon, Lucy Loudon, Mary A. Knight, George Dixon, and Levi Auber. Both Jennings and Loudon were land owners. By 1860, there were ten blacks in Franklin Township. They were Andrew James, Phillie James, Henry Johnson, Jennette Johnson, George Jennings, Henrietta Crosby, (who listed her place of birth as Canada), Johnathan Ramsey, Mary Ramsey, Eliza Travis, and Jeremiah Loudon. James, Jennings, and Loudon all said they were landholders.

The 1870 census lists sixteen blacks in Kent and Franklin Township: John Ramsey, his wife Mary Ramsey, and their children Charles and William; George Jennings; Jerry Loudon; Maria Cudjo and her children Henry, George, Susan, and Joanna; Archy Woods, his wife, Sarah, and their daughter Margaret; Andrew James and his wife Melissa. Ramsey, Jennings, Loudon, and Woods were all landholders.

By 1880, Kent's black population had dropped to three individuals: Jeremiah Loudon, George Ramsey, and his brother Charles. It would not be until the industrial boom in Kent early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the town's African-American community would begin to grow again.

Many African-Americans came to Kent in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to work in the railroad yards and factories that were in operation throughout the city. Others found Kent a convenient place to live while working in the Akron rubber factories. Their history in Kent parallels their history in the rest of the country, with a struggle for equal opportunity. The presence of a college here in town helped

many African-Americans from Kent achieve importance as teachers, business people, writers, and scientists.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **Kent's Industrial Boom**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw Kent grow from a small village to an industrial city. Many major corporations thought Kent as the ideal place for them to manufacture goods and provide services. Our town became the home of many important businesses, including the Davey Tree Expert Company, Gougler Industries, and the Twin Coach Company, in addition to the extensive railroad yards. Kent soon became a town where people both lived and worked, and combined with the thriving rubber industry in nearby Akron, jobs were plentiful.

In October of 1929, the stock market crashed and the United States as well as the rest of the world was sent into a deep economic depression. Some of Kent's industries would not survive the troubled times.

In 1930, the Erie Railroad decided to close its railroad repair shops in Kent, a business that once employed over 800 people.<sup>22</sup> Times were tough in Kent as they were throughout the rest of the country and the loss of the railroad yards was a major blow to the area's workers. To help with the hard times, the Kent Community Chest and Welfare Association was formed in 1936.

By the 1940's, the economy was starting to rebound. The outbreak of World War II meant a labor shortage as men went off to war at the same time that the military's needs revitalized American industry. When the war ended, Kent's population increased dramatically. The 1940 census showed 8,581 people living in Kent. In 1950, that figure was 12,418. Soldiers returning from war found that they could attend college under the G.I. Bill, and Kent State's attendance doubled, from 2,797 in 1940 to 5,488 in 1950.

It was Kent's good fortune to have a number of corporations based here. For example, having the headquarters of the Davey Tree Expert Company in Kent brought revenue to the city. Founded here in 1909 by John Davey, the company is one of the country's foremost tree care businesses. Many products are manufactured in Kent, from adhesives to florist foam to machine tools. Kent continues to attract new industry. For example, Land O'Lakes built a large processing plant here in 1983, producing hundreds of millions of pounds of butter, margarine, and other products.

## **Chapter Ten**

### **Governor Martin L. Davey**

Martin L. Davey was the only person from Kent ever elected governor of Ohio. He was born in Kent on July 25, 1884, the son of John and Bertha Reeves Davey.<sup>23</sup>

His father was a noted author on the care of trees and the founder of the Davey Tree Expert Company.<sup>24</sup>

Martin graduated from high school in Kent and went on to Oberlin College. He helped manage the family business and in 1923, became president of the company. He was elected Mayor of Kent in 1913, being re-elected in 1915 and 1917.<sup>25</sup> A Democrat, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives in 1918 and re-elected three times. He ran for Governor of Ohio in 1928, but lost. He ran for Governor again in 1936 and was elected. As a governor of an industrial state such as Ohio during the Depression, he frequently struggled with the effect the weak economy had on the state.

After his term as governor, he returned to Kent and to Davey Tree Expert Company. He died in Kent on March 31, 1946.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **The Post-World War II Era**

After World War II, a big change began happening in Kent that was also happening all over the country. As the population increased, more and more new houses were constructed in areas that had once been farmland. As more and more people bought cars and as the roads got better, residents stopped depending entirely on their local downtown districts.

In the case of Kent, two shopping centers were built in the area in the 1950s: Stow-Kent in 1956 and University Plaza in 1957. By the 1960's, indoor shopping malls began opening in the Akron area. Unlike many other nearby towns, Kent was able to keep its downtown going, but much of the town's retail growth was outside of the center.

In 1975, the old Erie Depot on Franklin Avenue was almost torn down to make a new downtown parking lot. Instead, the Kent Historical Society bought the building and renovated it, providing space for the Pufferbelly, Ltd. Restaurant on the main floor and the historical society's museum on the second floor.

Up until the 1970's Kent city government was run by the mayor's office. In 1975, the people of Kent voted to change over to a city manager form of government, an arrangement that has been in place since 1977.

In order to make downtown a more pleasant place to shop and do business, many improvements were made to the city center, including new lighting and landscaping.

In 1989, a business group proposed building a huge shopping mall near the city's southern border. Although that mall was never built, it did make many people in Kent more aware of how important it is to maintain its downtown business district.

Most importantly, our city continues its long tradition of being a place with a variety of people from many different backgrounds and with many opinions. Its residents combine into the special blend that we call Kent.

## Notes

- Hatcher, Harlan, *The Western Reserve* (New York: Bobbs, Merrill, 1949), pp. 22-24.
- <sup>2</sup>Izant Grace Goulder, *Hudson's Heritage*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985), p. 34.
- <sup>3</sup>Perrin, William H. *History of Portage County, Ohio*. (Chicago: Warner, Beers, 1885), p. 431-432.
- <sup>4</sup>Perrin, p. 432.
- <sup>5</sup>Perrin, p. 433.
- <sup>6</sup>*Memorial to the Pioneer Women of the Western Reserve, Part Four*. Ed. Gertrude Van Rensselaer Wickhan. (Cleveland: Women's Department of the Cleveland Centennial Commission, 1897.) p. 734.
- <sup>7</sup>Cackler, Christian, *Recollections of an Old Settler*, (Kent, Ohio: Roger Thurman, 1992), p. 13.
- <sup>8</sup>Perrin, p. 433.
- <sup>9</sup>Perrin, p. 434.
- <sup>10</sup>Perrin. p. 441.
- <sup>11</sup>Grismer, Karl H, *The History of Kent, Ohio*, (Kent, Ohio: Record Publishing, 1932), p. 157.
- <sup>12</sup>Hatcher, pp. 94-95..
- <sup>13</sup>Grismer, pp. 47-48.
- <sup>14</sup>Boyer. Richard O.. *The Legend of John Brown*, (New York: Knopf. 1973), p. 264.
- <sup>15</sup>Boyer, p. 270.
- <sup>16</sup>Grismer, p.41.
- <sup>17</sup>Grismer, p. 42.
- <sup>18</sup>Shriver. Phillip R. *The Years of Youth: Kent State University, 1910-1960*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press. 1960), p.7
- <sup>19</sup>Shriver. p. 13.
- <sup>20</sup>Shriver. p. 23-24.
- <sup>21</sup>Shriver. pp. 32-34.
- <sup>22</sup>Grismer. p. 138.
- <sup>23</sup>*Portage Heritage* (Ravenna, Ohio: Portage County Historical Society, 1957), p. 562.
- <sup>24</sup>*Portage Heritage*, p. 561.
- <sup>25</sup>*Portage Heritage*, p. 562.