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Wasting Paradise: The Destruction of the Bison on the Kentucky Frontier

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The Destruction of the Bison on the Kentucky Frontier

After his first hunting trip through the region in 1769, Daniel Boone declared Kentucky “a second paradise.” He based his appraisal in large part on the staggering number of game animals his party encountered.¹ He reported “an abundance of wild beats of all sorts,” noting particularly the “buffalos were more frequent than I have seen cattle in the settlements, browsing on leaves of cane...fearless because ignorant of the violence of man...hundreds in a drove, and the numbers about the salt springs were amazing.”² Boone exclaimed to his companion that they were “as rich as Boaz of old, having the cattle of a thousand hills.”³ Yet by the 1840s and 1850s when an antiquarian traveled the countryside interviewing former pioneers, his subjects wistfully recalled buffalo as a long vanished hallmark of a former environment. William Clinkenbeard, for example, mused that the settlers “did destroy and waste them...at a mighty rate.”⁴

The elimination of the buffalo by the 1790s in what became Central Kentucky stood out as one of the most prominent changes in a rapidly transforming environment.⁵ During the 1770s and 1780s, Euro-American settlers in the region relied on the American bison for their very survival. The huge herds of the large animals astounded the first white hunters to visit the area. They returned east with tales of the abundance waiting on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains and inspired others to migrate, first in a trickle and then in a flood. Early arrivals

¹ Filson, 54.

² Filson, 49.

³ John Mack Faragher, *Daniel Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer* (Henry Holt and Co., Kindle Edition) location 1372.

⁴ “Shane’s Interview with Pioneer William Clinkenbeard,” *Filson Club Historical Quarterly*, volume 2, 1928, 114-115.

⁵ For more on the history of buffalo in their more familiar American environment, the Great Plains, see Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

often relied on their guns to provide the necessities of life while they struggled to establish permanent settlements amidst a difficult landscape. The depth of this reliance, compounded by the rising tide of emigration and wasteful hunting practices, soon placed local buffalo numbers on the decline. Many settlers recognized the trend early on. Some even attempted to institute restrictions designed to alleviate pressure on game populations. Yet, these attempts proved woefully inadequate to stop, or even slow, the destruction of bison on the Kentucky frontier. Ultimately, the buffalo were casualties of the imposition of a new ecological order on the landscape as it underwent a transformation from hunting ground to agricultural system in the Euro-American model.

The environment of central Kentucky when first visited by white hunters boasted an impressive bounty of resources. Their reports caught the imaginations of men like Felix Walker who subsequently accompanied Boone in the party that established the first permanent settlement in the region in 1775. Walker recalled that the group felt themselves “as passengers through a wilderness just arrived at the fields of Elysium, or at the garden where [there] was no forbidden fruit.”⁶ His dreams of an Edenic garden were shattered however, when hostile natives accustomed to utilizing Kentucky as an important seasonal hunting ground ambushed the group. They limped on west to the south bank of the Kentucky River where “On entering the plain we were permitted to view a very interesting and romantic sight. A number of buffaloes, of all sizes, supposed to be between two and three hundred, made off from the lick in every direction; some running, some walking, other loping slowly and carelessly, with young calves playing, skipping, and bounding through the plain. Such a sight some of us never saw before, nor perhaps never

⁶ Felix Walker, “Narrative of an Adventure in Kentucky in the Year 1775,” *De Bow’s Review* 16, no. 2 (February, 1854): 152.

may again.”⁷ While the pioneers named the settlement Boonesborough, after their leader, they might have easily named it Buffaloborough for the herd their arrival displaced. As they set about establishing a fortified community to withstand raids and sieges from Ohio Valley natives, the settlers “lived plentifully on wild meat, buffalo, bear, deer, and turkey, without bread or salt.”⁸ This established a precedent followed by thousands of migrants over the next two decades.

The first residents of Boonesborough, like those at other settlements in central Kentucky, also quickly discovered that extensive hunting and wasteful practices could lead to local scarcity of a seemingly abundant resource in a remarkably short time. Already by May of 1775, mere months after the first arrivals frightened hundreds of buffalo away from the site, hunters ranged widely across the landscape in search of game. Richard Henderson, the leader of the Transylvania Company that sought to establish an independent colony in what became Kentucky and who had hired Daniel Boone to establish the settlement, remembered that “Fifteen or 20 miles was as short a distance as good hunters thought of getting meat, nay sometimes they were obliged to go thirty” to find any buffalo.⁹ He correctly attributed the change to the arrival of the settlers and particularly to their hunting practices. He lamented the “great waste in killing meat” caused by hunters shooting “three, four, five or ½ a dozen buffaloes” but taking less than “half a horse load from them all.”¹⁰ During the initial meeting of infant, and short-lived government of the Transylvania Company, Boone brought a motion to draft a bill “for preserving game” in order to address the issue of wasteful hunting. The measure passed, joining eight other

⁷ Ibid., 153.

⁸ Ibid., 153.

⁹ Quote in George W. Ranck, Appendix I, “Judge Richard Henderson’s Journal of a Trip to “Cantuckey” and of Events at Boonesborough in 1775,” *Boonesborough: Its Founding, Pioneer Struggles, Indian Experiences, Transylvania Days, and Revolutionary Annals* (Louisville: John P. Morton, 1901), 176.

¹⁰ Ibid.

rudimentary laws to designed to govern the fledgling colony.¹¹ But any salutary affects on the local buffalo population were minimal. Complaints about the scarcity of meat continued until the Company collapsed, rendering their laws meaningless. In fact, the Boonesborough example, under the temporary government of the Transylvania Company, only hinted at the widespread changes set to unfold across ever greater sections of central Kentucky as migration to the region accelerated during the 1770s and 1780s.

Throughout the region, the initial months and years of settlement saw a deep reliance on wild game, particularly before sufficient crops had been produced to sustain the pioneers. Along with cane, a native bamboo that grew in dense stands and nourished settler livestock, animals like bison allowed settlers to establish a foothold in Kentucky despite the distance from eastern settlements and the hostility of regional tribes. Former pioneer James Wade speculated that “Kentucky never could have been settled in the way it was had it not been for the cane and game” as “Their stock and themselves would have starved in the winter,” but since “they had cane for winter and abundance of game for both summer and winter” all they had to do was “keep the Indians from killing them” and work diligently to get the agricultural project up and running.¹² While the buffalo and other game animals helped pioneers survive in trying circumstances, settlers nonetheless often grew weary of such a meat-heavy diet. Some recalled the practice of using buffalo, which they deemed “mighty coarse meat; [a] good deal like corn bread” as a bread-substitute to go along with the fatty bear flesh they considered the actual “meat” of the

¹¹ Ranck, 204-206, 211-212.

¹² Roseann R. Hogan, ed., “Buffaloes in the Corn: James Wade’s Account of Pioneer Kentucky,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (Winter 1991), 30.

meal.¹³ Despite such culinary innovations, however, the settlers missed their more familiar diet and sought to cultivate corn, grains and vegetables at the earliest opportunity.

This inclination to plant crops stood the pioneers in good stead since the on-going flow of migrants and the border war with tribes across the Ohio River meant that the number of mouths continued to threaten to outstrip the supply of provisions for years. In addition to on-going agricultural shortages, the difficulty and danger of procuring salt also contributed to the pressure settlers' hunting placed on local buffalo populations. Salting was the favored technique to preserve meat for the pioneers and once their initial supply ran out they faced the choice of allowing a huge portion of the meat from each kill rot or venturing to a regional salt lick to boil down the saline rich water to yield the precious white mineral.¹⁴ For example, when Daniel Trabue arrived at Boonesborough in the spring of 1778, he found the settlement to have plenty of meat, but no salt, and set out to boil some of his own. He and his party spent two weeks working at a nearby lick and found that their dinner often presented itself on a veritable platter; they saw "buffeloes every Day in sight of our works" and "killd them when we needed them."¹⁵ The danger came in the fact that such locations were well known to both sides in the border conflict due to the attractive qualities they presented to both animals and humans. Subsequently, native warriors frequently targeted pioneer men on excursions to gather salt.

¹³ Lucien Beckner, ed., "John D. Shane's Interview with Benjamin Allen, Clark County," *The Filson Club History Quarterly*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (April, 1931), 69-70.

¹⁴ Some pioneers adopted the native technique of "jerking" or drying the meat over a low fire for an extended period to preserve buffalo, but the high visibility of such a process, which required a fire burn for hours and the party to remain in place the whole time, mitigated against its widespread use during the period of border conflict. See for example Nicholas Cresswell in Ellen Eslinger, *Running Mad for Kentucky: Frontier Travel Accounts* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004) 84-85.

¹⁵ Trabue, 73.

Whether settlers possessed salt at any given moment and were therefore *capable* of preserving a greater portion of the meat from each animal killed, however, was only a single factor in the degree of waste entailed by pioneer hunting practices. The tendency to focus only on the choicest parts of the buffalo encouraged those with discriminating taste to leave most of the carcass behind to rot; one settler recalled that “Many a buffalo was killed by the whites, and only a little of the rump taken out, or a thigh bone for the marrow.”¹⁶ An English visitor to the region rhapsodized about “the hump, which” he believed made “the finest steaks in the world” but had only faint praise for other cuts of salted or dried bison which he described as “ranker” than beef.¹⁷ When buffalo appeared to be abundant, which seems to have been whenever hunters happened across a herd, such tastes manifest themselves in hunters killing greater numbers than would otherwise have been necessary to satisfy their appetites.

The degree of waste was also influenced by the other uses to which the pioneers put the buffalo. For example, William Clinkenbeard recalled that they used buffalo wool to make clothing and noted that “yearlings and two year olds always had the best wool,” particularly during the spring when it was longest and softest.¹⁸ This particular preference held important implications for regional herds since female bison typically reach sexual maturity during their second year; not only were pioneer hunters killing large numbers of buffalo indiscriminately, they also specifically targeted the rising generation putting an additional pressure on the herds’ ability to reproduce.¹⁹ Settlers deemed buffalo hides to make inferior leather compared to those from domestic cattle and they were of much less monetary value than deerskins, yet some

¹⁶ Joshua McQueen interview with John D. Shane, quoted in Perkins, Kindle location 910-921.

¹⁷ Cresswell in Eslinger, 56, 85.

¹⁸ Clinkenbeard 114.

¹⁹ “Bison,” National Wildlife Federation. <http://www.nwf.org/wildlife/wildlife-library/mammals/bison.aspx> (accessed April 7, 2015.)

nonetheless tried to use them as a medium of exchange.²⁰ John McGuire once contracted to “furnish a man with 100 buffalo hides” in trade “for a [single] mare.”²¹ The ratio reveals the devaluation of buffalo due to their continued abundance in some sections of the landscape and the ease of procuring large numbers after finding a herd.

Beyond such utilitarian, but non-meat, uses, buffalo hunting also served important non-utilitarian functions for early settlers. From all accounts, it seems that hunting bison was an exhilarating experience. The thrills of taking down the largest land animal in North America, which can reach upwards of six feet in height, weigh well over a ton and exceed thirty miles per hour, pervade the pioneer recollections.²² Stories of hunters often focused on the tremendous size of their prey, either individually or as a “gang” and on dramatic episodes in which seemingly slain animals sprang back to life or when the hunted turned the tables on the hunters and forced pioneers to flee on horseback or up a tree.²³ These tales convey some of the excitement they felt in the moment.²⁴ Hunting buffalo also represented a masculine ideal in the frontier environment.²⁵ The hunt was an activity through which individuals asserted their manhood in a public venue. Joshua McQueen remembered, “Many a man killed a buffalo, just for the sake of saying so.”²⁶ Another settler concurred, noting that hunters often killed buffalo “for sport” and

²⁰ On the relative value of deerskins, see Aron 55.

²¹ Clinkenbeard 123.

²² “Bison,” National Wildlife Federation. <http://www.nwf.org/wildlife/wildlife-library/mammals/bison.aspx> (accessed April 7, 2015.)

²³ Lucien Beckner ed., “John D. Shane’s Interview with Benjamin Allen” *The Filson Club Historical Quarterly* vol. 5, num. 2, 1931, 76.

²⁴ Cresswell in Eslinger, 84-85 and Clinkenbeard 104.

²⁵ See Aron, particularly chapters one, “The Meeting of Hunters” and two “The Parting of Hunters,” for more on the masculinity of hunting on the Kentucky frontier.

²⁶ Joshua McQueen interview with John D. Shane quoted in Perkins, Kindle location 910-921.

left their corpses to rot.²⁷ Indeed, the desire to prove one's capability by shooting bison transcended gender on the Kentucky frontier as some women also got in on the act. On a journey from the early settlement at Harrodsburg to the Falls of the Ohio in 1778, for example, "mistress Harrod Killed a Buffeloe as an exploit on the rout."²⁸ All of these pressures added up to a recipe for disaster for regional bison herds. They created the circumstances in which Clinkenbeard thought nothing of joining three other men in slaughtering twenty-four young buffalo solely for their wool, but decades later looked back regretfully at the settlers' waste.²⁹

Many pioneers, however, came to similar realizations without the benefit of hindsight. The dramatic declines in buffalo populations in such a short period made the phenomenon easy to identify in real time. The *Kentucky Gazette* described the situation during a particularly trying stretch:

The great influx of people into Kentucky in the latter part of the year 1779, and the early part of 1780, occasioned a scarcity of provisions in the country, bordering on a famine. Many families never tasted bread, until the corn was fit to make meal of, their dependance was entirely on the game, of which the Buffalo was the principal; but the settlements were so closely watched by the Indians, and the game having retired from the neighbourhood of the stations, it was with great labour and hazard, that provisions could be procured. All the traces contiguous to the stations were waylaid by the Indians, therefore the hunters found it necessary to start early enough to get out in the woods 3 or 4 miles before day; and on their return, to travel a like distance after night to their homes.³⁰

Such adaptations on the part of the hunters, traveling further from the settlements in search of dwindling game, only spread their impacts further across the landscape. These impacts weakened the herds' ability to respond to the next obstacle they encountered and made them vulnerable to

²⁷ John Hedge interview with John D. Shane, *Draper MSS*, "Kentucky MSS," vol. 11, Box 83, Series CC.

²⁸ Trabue, 56.

²⁹ Clinkenbeard, 114-115.

³⁰ Thomas D. Clark, ed., *The Voice of the Frontier: John Bradford's Notes on Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), 31.

environmental stressors, such as the harsh weather that accompanied the “Hard Winter” of 1779-1780. As one settler wrote, the “Grate magazeen of providential blessings peculiar to this Countrey now has faild (The Buffalo)” due to the weather and predicted that great “numbers must perish for want of provision.”³¹ Ultimately, the scarcities that began locally in the neighborhoods of the stations expanded to include the entire region.

Some efforts were made to curb the rapid decline of buffalo herds. This was the case in the first months at Boonesborough, as we have seen, but it also describes the situation at other early Kentucky settlements. Around the Blue Licks during the early 1780s, for example, the rapid decline in game populations caused local settlers to agree to a scheme in which only the best hunter in the neighborhood would be allowed to kill buffalo.³² While this measure also aimed to reduce the smell from rotting carcasses (itself an indication of the continued overhunting) and the lure such carcasses presenting to wolves, it represented a different approach to buffalo hunting than that which eventually won out. Rather than a hunting free-for-all in which each man (or woman) with a gun asserted his or her right to kill and dispose of bison as they chose, such schemes proposed to limit the waste that was already apparent through a more rationalized system of resource utilization. They sought “a little obligatory law,” in the words of Richard Henderson, to protect the regional game populations from the settlers, themselves.³³ The ultimate failure of such approaches should not blind us to their existence, however brief.

³¹ Letter from Harrodsburg, January 30, 1780, Harrodsburg, KY, The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Ky.

³² Aron, 55-56.

³³ Quote in George W. Ranck, Appendix I, “Judge Richard Henderson’s Journal of a Trip to “Cantuckey” and of Events at Boonesborough in 1775,” *Boonesborough: Its Founding, Pioneer Struggles, Indian Experiences, Transylvania Days, and Revolutionary Annals* (Louisville: John P. Morton, 1901), 176.

Yet, one must be careful not to overstate the significance of such efforts. After all, the destruction of the bison continued apace and many settlers in the region never encountered one. When Jesse Graddy, for example, arrived in 1787 the buffalo “were [already] gone” and he “Never saw a wild one.”³⁴ A few remained in the settled portions of the region as semi-domesticated remnants of the former wild populations, as Graddy indicated. One “Old man Strode,” for instance killed a mother buffalo while out on a hunt and separated her calf from the rest of the herd and induced it to follow him “clear home” where he ran it with his domesticated cattle for three or four years until it “began to get cross” and the women became “afraid to go out to milk” at which point Strode “sold it to some person from Virginia.”³⁵ The rapidity of the disappearance of such a prominent feature of the frontier environment contributed to the nostalgic and slightly regretful tone many former pioneers took in their commentary on the buffalo.

Conclusion: Taken as a whole, however, the former settlers approved of the broader transformations of the regional environment. They viewed the disappearance of the buffalo and other features of the earlier landscape as a necessary byproduct of their agricultural success. By the 1790s, the only place left for the American bison in central Kentucky was as a novelty in an agroecological system dominated by species such as cattle and horses, but above all by humans.

³⁴ Lucien Beckner, ed. “John D. Shane’s interview with Jesse Graddy of Woodford County,” *The Filson History Club Quarterly*, (Louisville: vol. 20, 1946) 13.

³⁵ Clinkenbeard, 108.