Dogs on the Frontier:

Human-Canine Relationships in Central Kentucky, 1770-1792

During the 1780s, central Kentucky was a dangerous place. This wouldn’t have come as news to pioneer Jonathan Jennings, or to any other resident of the region, but one fateful day Jennings received a painful reminder that he would carry for the rest of his days. While out hunting with his dog, Jennings stumbled across a group of native hunters. A skirmish ensued and an Indian “knocked [Jennings] down with [his] tomahawk, and scalped him,” but “without either breaking the skull or killing him.”¹ Left for dead, alone and bleeding from a grievous head wound, Jennings’s prospects appeared dim. He later attributed his survival to his loyal dog that “licked the place ‘till he recovered…got up, and went in” to the relative safety of a fortified station. Local women might have thought of him as “that man with his bald head,” as one female neighbor described him, but Jennings certainly preferred that to an early and violent death. He also appreciated the role his canine companion played in his harrowing escape.

Historians, however, have been less inclined to recognize canine contributions to historical events.² Perhaps this is because the modern American association with dogs is so familiar as to appear almost as a given, a “natural” relationship that might evolve along with changing conditions, but that shares fundamental characteristics across the centuries. Our very familiarity with canines in our everyday lives can contribute to a tendency to overlook the dogs in the historical record and underestimate their importance. Focusing in on the human-canine

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¹ Lucien Beckner, ed., “John D. Shane’s Interview with Jesse Graddy of Woodford County,” *Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 20 (1946), 15.
² Dogs are often included in the stories historians tell, but they are rarely emphasized or analyzed. The indexes of most histories of Kentucky do not include an entry for “dog,” whereas they do have entries for other animals, such as horses, cattle or buffalo. For example see Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997) or James C. Klotter and Freda C. Klotter, *A Concise History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008).
relationship in a specific historical context can help to overcome this predisposition and reveal the significant roles canine allies played in American history. Central Kentucky during the frontier period (approximately 1770 to 1792) provides just such a case study and indicates that dogs served essential functions in the initial Euro-American settlement project. Dogs played utilitarian roles, as hunting partners, sentries and trackers that provided assistance in the difficult physical landscape, but they also filled settlers’ less obvious, psychological needs by serving as companions or by helping humans assert their dominance over the threats posed by the natural world. A close look at the period also demonstrates both profound differences and surprising similarities in the relationships between dogs and Kentuckians 230 years ago and today.

Before we turn our focus to the specifics of the human-canine alliance in this historical moment, however, a bit of context is necessary to set the stage. During the 1770s and 1780s, Kentucky was known as the “Dark and Bloody Grounds” because of what white would-be settlers viewed as “the continual wars and quarrels of the hunting parties of Indians of different tribes who all claimed…the privilege of hunting game; who murdered and plundered each other, as opportunity offered.” Yet, despite the widely held perception of Kentucky as a dangerous place, the lure of rich hunting grounds and what some termed “the best tract of land in North America, and probably the world” drew an increasing flow of migrants across the Appalachian Mountains and into central Kentucky. These migrants included not just the people who spring most readily to mind, but also a wide assortment of species that tagged along on the journey.

Some of the non-human companion species were carried west intentionally as part of the settlers’

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designs, such as wheat, hemp and horses, while others, such as bluegrass, rats and disease organisms arrived in Kentucky with pioneers’ unintentional assistance. Each of these species played a role in the drama that unfolded as Euro-American and enslaved African-American settlers struggled to transform central Kentucky from a native hunting ground into a settled agricultural landscape.

Horses and bluegrass went on to become celebrated products of the region, fostering associations Kentuckians continue to identify with down through the present, yet dogs were equally ubiquitous and equally vital to the outcome conflict. The canines that traveled with the earliest Euro-American Long Hunters were not the first in the region, however. Indeed, evidence suggests that both the seasonal native hunting parties that visited during the mid-eighteenth century, such as the Shawnee, Delaware and Cherokee, and the earlier Fort Ancient culture that occupied the landscape on a more permanent basis benefited from a relationship with domesticated dogs. At the Muir site in Jessamine County, for example, radiocarbon dating of bones left behind by the village’s inhabitants reveals the presence of dogs as early as the 11th and 12th centuries. Exactly how such groups utilized their canines is largely a matter of speculation, but we are able to speak with more certainty about native cultures during the historic period based on written evidence.

The Shawnee, for example, used their dogs in many ways that were quite similar to those of their Euro-American contemporaries. Shawnee dogs served as valuable members of hunting parties that broke off from the main group during winter. They were rewarded for their help in

5 Aldo Leopold, for example, once attributed the success of American settlement in Kentucky to the success of bluegrass as an invasive species. See Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 241.

tracking and killing game through their inclusion in the subsequent celebrations; as one early American observer described “the dogs devour the bones, and thus are supplied their insatiate appetites,” which “ends the ceremonies of the feast.”

They were also valuable allies when Shawnee hunters turned their attention to more dangerous game, such as the American Long Hunters and settlers who arrived in increasing numbers during the 1770s and 1780s, as a famous episode from the life of Daniel Boone demonstrates. Boone and his brother Edward were taken by surprise by a group of Shawnee warriors while out hunting buffalo; Edward was killed immediately, but Daniel fled into a dense canebrake, only to tracked by a stubborn little dog that led the pursuing warriors down his trail. Ultimately, Boone escaped after killing the dog, which allowed him to elude his human followers.

Other observers concurred that Shawnee dogs were adept at tracking human prey as when captive John Lancaster recalled his flight from a village north of the Ohio River “with a pack of dogs on his trail.”

The Shawnee, like the new settlers, also put their dogs to defensive uses. Canines acted as an early warning system at native camps and villages, raising the alarm at unusual noises or occurrences that happened below the threshold of human perception. When Kentucky militia raided across the Ohio and ambushed the village of Chillicothe in 1779, for example, the barking of a native dog provided the only warning the residents received and helped prevent even greater loss of life on the Shawnee side. Not only useful in conflicts with human enemies, native dogs

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7 Henry Harvey, *History of the Shawnee Indians, from the year 1681 to 1854, inclusive* (Cincinnati: E. Morgan & Sons, 1855), 146-147, 151.
9 Ibid., 297-298.
10 Ibid., 143.
were also valuable in navigating the dangerous natural landscape. For instance, young Oliver Spencer recalled an episode in which a Shawnee dog saved his life after his 1793 abduction. Twelve-year old Spencer was out in the forest collecting firewood for his adoptive Shawnee family, accompanied by their “faithful dog…when the dog…sat down near a small tree” and began “growling fiercely and striking the ground with his tail…look[ing] up toward the top of a sapling and then at me, as if to inform me there was game there and to ask my assistance.” When Spencer went to investigate he found a large wild cat perched “on a limb about sixteen feet from the ground…ready to spring upon its prey,” but Spencer did not initially perceive of the danger it posed and brazenly “threw several sticks at it to induce it to come down.” When the cat leapt down, however, Spencer realized his mistake and the dog, which Spencer described as “strong, active, and courageous,” jumped to his defense. It proved an evenly matched contest between the two animals as the dog “several times caught the [cat] by the throat, but was as often compelled to let go…so fiercely and powerfully did his antagonist…apply his sharp claws.” Fearing that the tide was turning against his companion, Spencer eventually stunned the cat with a blow to the head while the animals grappled, after which the “enraged” dog “soon finished the work of death.” Although the fight left the dog “severely wounded,” Spencer thought it acted “delighted” with the result, “now standing over his fallen enemy as if exulting in his death” and “jumping around” the boy “wagging his tail with pleasure.”

Looking back on the event, Spencer recognized that “but for the presence of the dog” the wild cat “might have destroyed” him. Yet, the opposite might also be noted, that without the boy to apply the blow to the cat’s head, the dog might not have survived the encounter. Thus, a simple story demonstrates an important truth about the human-canine relationship; namely, it was one of mutual benefit, if not outright co-

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dependence. The fact that the main players in the tale come from opposite sides of the native-settler cultural divide is equally instructive since it indicates the broad similarities that characterized both groups’ relationships with dogs. That a Shawnee dog and a Euro-American child communicated, bonded and fought to protect each other shows the remarkable flexibility of the interspecies relationship, even in the context of a simmering frontier war.

Shifting our focus onto the relationships American settlers cultivated with their canines on the Kentucky frontier reveals both similarities and differences to those of their native rivals. A dog, along with a horse and a gun, were among the few items almost every American hunter in the backcountry brought with them. On lengthy hunts, frontiersmen like Daniel Boone often brought along several dogs, especially when travelling alone. As permanent settlement gradually replaced seasonal hunting excursions as the primary framework in which Euro-Americans interacted with the landscape, Kentucky dogs took on an expanded variety of roles. Many of the region’s canines seem to have fallen within the parameters outlined by one scholar of dogs in America who wrote that “the curs” of the frontier often “served triple duty as hunters of large and small game; finders and herders of feral cattle, sheep, and horses; and protectors of the home.”

Early Kentuckians deep reliance on wild game meant that their dogs’ role as hunting companion held tremendous importance. Together they roamed across the countryside, searching out choice individuals from the region’s natural bounty including deer, buffalo, bear, beaver and turkey, amongst many other species. While most dogs appear to have been generalists in the sense of accompanying their masters on the hunt, no matter the prey, some developed a

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12 Faragher, kindle location 1488.
reputation for the skill at certain difficult tasks. For example, pioneer Daniel Trabue recalled “a first-rate bull Dog” he brought “from Old Virginia” that became renowned for its ability to tangle with bears. Trabue described the dog’s first hunt in Kentucky: “the first bear he come up with…was a very large Old he bear, and my Dog run up when the other Dogs was abaying him. My Dog sezed him, and the bear Raised up his paw and knocked the Dog Down a hill many yards” which left him “Disabled.” After killing the distracted bear, which they judged “a fine one,” the human hunters examined the bulldog’s injuries and left him for dead. Two days later, however, the dog surprised everyone by turning up at the fort, battered but breathing. According to Trabue, after that he became “one of the best hunting Dogs at the fort. He would never after that seize a bear by the head but would seize by the hinder part and when the bear would turn to him he would Jump back. Every one in the fort would get [Trabue’s] Dog” when they went bear hunting.14

While images of “a parsil of Dogs in full chase after a bair” might seem exotic to the twenty-first century Kentuckian, the broader practice of hunting with dogs is still quite familiar in our culture, even to those of us who do not engage in it.15 Dogs’ role as a source of protection on the frontier is similarly both familiar, in the general way that canines’ heightened senses allow them to alert people to unexpected visitors, and strikingly different in terms of the stakes involved.16 On the frontier, the protection offered by a loyal dog could mean the difference between life and death. William Moseby recalled that the adults at the fortified station on the Kentucky River where he spent several years of his youth followed a protocol every morning in

15 Ibid.
16 A google search demonstrates the continued strength of the cultural idea of dogs as a deterrent to home break-ins and threats.
which the dogs were the first beyond the gate, sniffing all around to check for any sign of native warriors before any of the settlers emerged.\textsuperscript{17} When away from the station, when travelling or on a multi-day hunting trip, dogs acted as virtually the only protection from enemies. If their superior senses sometimes made settler dogs paranoid and raucous campmates, prone to barking at threats whether real or imagined, the pioneers proved willing to endure the occasional false alarm for the benefits conferred by advance warning when some person or dangerous animal approached in the night.\textsuperscript{18}

The protection detail assigned to pioneer dogs extended beyond the people to whom they were allied. Indeed, their purview included much of the nascent agricultural system then under construction. Dogs played important roles in livestock husbandry, as they had for centuries, and in the frontier context of free-ranging cattle and hogs, their work often consisted of helping to track down herds or individuals and bring them back to the settlement. They also provided support for people engaged in agricultural labor as Jane Stevenson recalled. As a child a few miles from Lexington, she and her siblings milked cows while her father “stood sentry;” at the first sign of Indian attack, he fired his gun and the men from the station would “set their dogs on them.”\textsuperscript{19}

Beyond livestock, pioneer dogs also helped to protect crops. The threats posed to a field of corn might have been less dramatic than those posed to a team of horses, but settlers had to address both. Whether the threat came from rampaging squirrels or marauding Shawnee raiders, settlers leveraged their relationships with their dogs to meet the challenge. Looking back on a


\textsuperscript{18} This proved a particular issue when the dog’s evolutionary cousins, wolves, were nearby. For example, see Trabue, 65.

\textsuperscript{19} Jane Stevenson interview, vol. 11, box 83, Series CC: “Kentucky MSS,” \textit{Draper MSS}. 
childhood spent assisting his father’s efforts to carve a farm out of the Kentucky frontier, Daniel Drake recounted epic battles that he and his dog, “Old Lion,” waged in defense of the family’s ripening harvest. His opponents were largely crows and squirrels that viewed the cornfields as an easy meal until Drake and Old Lion temporarily disabused them of the notion using “a little old shot gun…the eye of a hunter” and “the self importance of a sentinel.” Drake believed his “faithful ally” Old Lion “comprehended the whole matter” and considered him a “boon companion…and co-worker” in all of his agricultural chores.20

As we can see, settlers relied on dogs to fulfill a range of practical functions in their system of frontier agriculture, but clever enemies sometimes exploited this reliance. For instance, rather than lurking near a fortified settlement in the hopes of catching a pioneer off-guard, or engaging in a risky frontal assault, native warriors sometimes drove settler livestock away from the station into some secluded spot or dense canebrake. They could then double back and confidently wait to spring an ambush when the settlers’ dogs led a vulnerable party out to retrieve the stock.21 In other circumstances, hostile natives viewed pioneer dogs as simply an aspect of the Euro-American culture to be summarily dispatched as when they killed a number of dogs, along with cattle, outside of Strode’s Station in 1781.22

This was no mistake or accident since those Indians who resisted the encroachments of white settlers understood the utility dogs provided to their adversaries, particularly since dogs participated in most physical confrontations between the warring groups. Typically clashes were small affairs between a relatively small number of people amidst a large landscape, and dogs

21 Smith, 330.
played important roles in locating and fighting one’s enemies. This was equally true for the settlers and the natives. William Clinkenbeard recalled an episode, for example, when “a little dog” with their war party chased “after the Indian that got away” in a skirmish in the woods, “jumping up by his side, three or four times” and speculated “he would have taken the Indian…if there had been anyone…near to give encouragement.” After native raids, pioneers used their dogs to try to mitigate or reverse the damage by tracking down the party and retrieving the captives and plunder. Sarah Graham described just such a successful operation when recounting the rescue of one Mrs. Kirkham and her five children after being captured at their home near Danville. With the native raiding party slowed by the children, the settlers’ dogs were able to quickly guide a group of men to the captives, who escaped the affair without injury.

While the frontier dogs certainly proved their value, and some, such as “Old Lion” and Trabue’s seemingly indestructible bear-hunting bulldog, were even singled out in laudatory terms for their service, most experienced difficult lives wrought with danger. The people they accompanied often placed the dogs in dangerous circumstances, but accepting junior partner in the interspecies relationship had proven to be a good bet for domesticated dogs, evolutionarily speaking. But individual lives do not play out “evolutionarily speaking” and difficult circumstances could turn “dog’s best friend” into an enemy. Occasionally, some settlers and natives alike turned to dog as a desperate final source of calories. For example, John Masterson remembered that during the “Hard Winter” of 1779-1780, his brother-in-law’s party got caught in an early snow, which trapped them until their supplies dwindled and “hunger drove the

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23 Clinkenbeard, 117.
24 “Reverend John Dabney Shane’s Interview with Mrs. Sarah Graham of Bath County” ed. Lucien Beckner, Filson Club History Quarterly 9 no. 3 (1935), 230-231.
stranded party to eat one of their dogs.” Harsh weather also played a part in native hunters’ failure to find game as they marched a captive Daniel Boone and compatriots north toward to Ohio River in 1778. Ultimately, they killed and ate their dogs instead, offering a share to the white captives and while many accepted, others declined. It seems that whether or not a person considered eating dog acceptable depended on both the individual and on the immediate circumstances.

The non-utilitarian roles that dogs played for people in the frontier landscape at least partially explains settlers’ reluctance to consume canine flesh. Particularly during the earliest period when American Long Hunters roamed the region singly or in small groups, dogs often provided a sense of companionship to men who might go months without seeing another person. Boone himself often turned to dogs for psychological support during his long hunts. According to a descendent, on Boone’s longest sojourn in Kentucky he “had three dogs that kept his camp while he was hunting, and at night he would often lie by his fire and sing every song he could think of, while the dogs would sit round him, and give as much attention as if they understood every word he was saying.” In the often-lonely frontier environment, dogs served an important emotional role in addition to their practical contributions. Considering that this psychological and emotional dimension of the relationship is likely most familiar to modern dog owners, it is particularly striking that it also seemed to mark the connections that both settlers and natives

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27 Faragher, kindle location 2793-2796.
28 Any therapist, psychiatrist, or philosopher would rightly question my distinction between “utilitarian” and “non-utilitarian” since psychological needs are undoubtedly real and important, but the point I’m seeking to establish here is the difference between dogs’ roles in the physical landscape and people’s psychological landscape. Also, the cultural heritage settlers brought with them certainly played an important role in the taboo against eating dog except in the most trying of circumstances.
29 *Illinois Magazine* 2 (June 1832): 401, quoted in Faragher, Kindle locations 1488-1490.
cultivated with their canines. In the episode discussed above, in which Boone killed the native dog tracking him after he and his brother were ambushed, Boone noted the “horrid yell” he heard “when the Indians came to the dead dog.”30 The emotional pain signified by the cry suggests another shared characteristic in the relationships both cultures developed with their dogs: deep psychological bonds facilitated their practical utility.

Kentucky pioneers also pressed their dogs into service fulfilling less benign psychological urges than those prompting them to reach out for a positive emotional connection with another creature. Indeed, settler dogs often played major parts in some of the most unsettling spectacles witnessed on the frontier. As historian Elizabeth Perkins emphasized in her social history of the era in the Ohio Valley, the dangers of the period meant that settlers lived in an environment saturated by fear.31 Pioneers responded to their fear of the unknown and uncontrollable aspects of the landscape, whether in the form of wolves or Shawnee warriors, through the elaborate and vicious destruction of individual stand-ins that they were able to capture. They frequently left the actual destructive task to their dogs. William Niblick, for example, recalled violent animal fights staged for public amusement in the fort yard at Lexington: they “would tie a wolf dog with the middle of the rope and then one [man] would take hold at each of the ends and keep it in the middle and make the dogs fight it.”32 In other instances, settlers would simply wound the wolf prior to throwing it “down for the dogs to

30 Bradford, 48.
31 Perkins, kindle location 1658-1691.
32 Niblick quoted in Perkins, kindle location 1660-1664.
fight.” Pioneers also caught and “baited” the other predators that preyed on their livestock like bears and mountain lions, but seemed to hold particular animus for wolves.

Most disturbing of all were instances in which pioneers used their dogs to mutilate the corpses of their human enemies. As Sarah Graham recalled “at Harrodsburgh they fed three Indians to the dogs to make them fierce. They quarreled and bristled up, ready for Indians as they ate.” Whether such tactics shaped pioneer dogs to display hostility to all natives, or only those presented to them in such a context, the very brutality of such episodes served the purpose of transforming settlers’ dogs into a psychological weapon in the conflict. Another example suggests the role of personal animosity in sparking these types of atrocities. Riding in pursuit of a native raiding party the day after finding his stepson dead and scalped, Hugh McGary recognized the young settlers’ shirt on a Shawnee warrior. McGary flew into a rage, killed the man, chopped up his corpse and fed the pieces to his dogs. These types of events acted as subtext when Kentucky’s military leaders issued threats like that of George Rogers Clark in 1777: if native warriors continued to resist and choose war with the settlers south of the Ohio,

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33 Clinkenbeard, 105.
34 These sorts of traditions continued past the frontier period into the nineteenth century, though the meaning attributed to them might have shifted toward an increased emphasis on pure entertainment. For example O. A. Forsythe advertised in the *Western Citizen* of Paris that he would be offering “RARE SPORT To the Lovers of Sport…on the 29th of December [1814]…when a three year old HE BEAR will be turned loose and five dogs will be entered every half hour to fight him.” Forsythe also promised “the half of a SHE BEAR will be barbecued and as good a dinner furnished as the country can provide.” *Western Citizen*, Paris, Kentucky, December 10, 1814.
36 Faragher, kindle location 2535-2541.
they “may expect, in four moons, to see your women and children given to the dogs to eat.” No idle threat, some settlers used their dogs to do their dirty work.

The gristly reality of these episodes, however, should not dominate our memory of dog’s role on the Kentucky frontier. Instead, they only mark one extreme along a continuum of canine-human relationships that ranged from deep emotional connection to outright hostility, with innumerable variations in between. While we might entertain the interesting counterfactual question of how the contest for Kentucky could have played out if dogs had not been involved, our speculations seem less significant than the simple fact that both sides put their canine allies to such a variety of uses. It also suggests a much richer history of the human-dog relationship in the Bluegrass state than might be evident from a trip to the local dog park.

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38 I have a couple of general thoughts on the counterfactual question. First, it seems easy to imagine Euro-American settlement proceeding along the same general lines, if less efficiently, by assigning the difficult and dangerous tasks reserved for the canine members of the party to bound laborers, whether that took the form of enslaved African Americans or indentured white children. Obviously, the human cost of this would have been tremendous, when one considers the types of dangerous tasks dogs are able to perform more efficiently than people and the greater level of risk to which people are typically willing to subject even highly valued animals. Second, based on the more complex and varied uses to which settlers assigned their dogs, one might speculate that removing the canines from the equation would have been a net benefit to the Indian groups aiming to prevent permanent Euro-American settlement. The native tactics of scattering settler livestock and quick, hit-and-run raids would have been more effective if the pioneers did not possess dogs to gather the stock or track an old trail. Whether this might have tipped the balance of the contest against the American settlers, however, is a more difficult question, though it seems unlikely.