

The Gallant Butlers



The Butler-Turpin Historic House is the center of remembrance of a family of soldiers that won fame for its exploits in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War. If their exploits are too little remembered today, perhaps it is because the history of the Commonwealth jumps too quickly from pioneer legends like Daniel Boone to the period of Kentucky's greatest national political influence, the time of "the great compromiser" Henry Clay.

But the Butlers bridge this gap. The first of the Butlers to come to Kentucky arrived in 1784, just two years after Boone fought at Blue Licks. The most illustrious, William O. Butler, was the Democratic candidate for Vice President in 1848 – when Clay's power was already on the wane. The "pioneer" Butlers, one of whom helped found Carrollton (originally Port William), brought with them an almost chivalric code of honor and a culture of learning. The Butlers who became assemblymen, congressmen, and candidates for national office never became separated from their homes between the low, forested hills and the confluence of rivers, or from the demanding life of farmers on the frontier.

The Turpin Family



The Turpin ties to the Butler-Turpin House began when Philip Turpin (left), a member of a prominent American family, married Mary Ellen Butler, daughter of Major Thomas Langford Butler. In 1859 Thomas, now a grandfather of eight children, moved into the new home with his beloved Mary Ellen and her husband Philip. The grand country home, in the Greek Revival style, was built on the Butler family farm just a short distance from the log house that was once the boyhood home of old Thomas. Mary Ellen however did not get to enjoy her life at her new home for long; she died of tuberculosis in 1860.

Like many early Kentucky families, the Turpin family had its American roots in Virginia. The Turpins had sizable land holdings in Powhatan County west of Richmond, Virginia. Philip's grandfather, Thomas Turpin, married Mary Jefferson, aunt of Thomas Jefferson, in 1730. Philip's father, Horatio, was deeded 4,300 acres of land in Gallatin County, Kentucky. The land extended south from Warsaw to just north of Sparta where the Turpins built their home known as "Beech Park." Philip's parents, Horatio and Mary Ann Bancoft Turpin, are buried in the family cemetery on this estate.

The Irish Gunsmith



Thomas Butler of Kilkenny, Ireland was a prosperous landowner who fled Ireland after a rebellion in the 1740s. Soon after, his lands were forfeited to the Crown – or his title of duke was vacated, if one Carrollton legend is to be credited. In any event, Thomas Butler, who eventually made his way to America, was already a rebel against Britain when the Colonies rebelled.

He and his sons were already opportunely engaged in the gunsmithing trade when the American Revolution became war. When the "shot heard 'round the world" was fired at Lexington, there were five Butler sons, and all became commissioned officers in the Continental Army. Before the end, even old Thomas took his rifle down and went to join them, wife Eleanor exclaiming, "Let him go! I can get along without him..." This was the family to whose health George Washington drank, and of whom Lafayette boasted, "When I wanted a thing well done, I had a Butler do it." When the British surrendered at the Battle of Yorktown, the French general, himself destined to play a role in the Revolution of his own nation, presented his sword to his young aide – barely 20, but already veteran of many battles, including Monmouth (under Mad Anthony Wayne) and Valley Forge.

This was old Thomas's fourth son, Percival, who migrated alone to Kentucky in 1784. In 1796 he acquired land near Port William, which was then little more than a blockhouse built for defense against Indians. In 1797, Percival and his wife Mildred Hawkins Butler settled on land that is now General Butler State Resort Park. They built a log house with a dog trot on this site. They raised 10 children, including Thomas Langford Butler, who lived in the Butler-Turpin House with his daughter Mary Ellen, and her husband Phillip Turpin.

The Butlers of Kentucky

Explanations for Percival's move west are not lacking: in Kentucky he was able to regain the landownership his father Thomas had lost in Ireland. Nor did he enter the still-wilderness as a stranger; his military reputation must have preceded him, for in the year of statehood (1792) he was named Adjutant-General of Kentucky, a post he retained until 1817 when the legislature would have required him to leave Carrollton and reside in Frankfort. Percival held the position of Adjutant General for twenty-four years.

Percival's education had been cut short by war, but he determined to relight the lamp of culture in his sons' minds as early as practical. His oldest son, Thomas Langford Butler, was sent to Rankin's School in Lexington, perhaps as early as age 10. He continued his studies at the fine new college there – Transylvania, which despite its frontier location rivaled Harvard at that time. A military career beckoned to Thomas in 1809, and interrupted his progress short of graduation.

But second son William Orlando Butler graduated from Transylvania just in time to volunteer as a private in Hart's Company of Kentucky Volunteers. He was then reviewed in ranks by a proud Adjutant-General, Percival Butler, on the drilling ground in front of Old Morrison Hall. It was the beginning of the War of 1812; an American force had surrendered Detroit to the British. Kentucky Volunteers crossed the Ohio and marched north to the relief of Fort Wayne.

By winter, Indian forces had been pushed back to the Wabash River. But the volunteers were unable to tolerate their own winter encampment. Preferring to freeze on the move, they marched on Detroit. The winter cold, allied with a British and Indian force which outnumbered the Americans better than 2 to 1, was merciless at the Battle of the River Raisin on January 22, 1813.

Here, though, the field-promoted Ensign Butler would display that concentrated boldness which marked his clan. The Americans, some encamped in the open, had been surprised by a night attack in which the enemy advance was supported by cannon. As the morning wore on without relief, the last commander fighting, Major Madison – all others dead or captured – saw Indians take the loft of a barn dangerously near the Kentuckians' position. British sharpshooters ran to join them. British crossfire controlled the intervening ground.

Yet at a suggestion from Madison – Who will burn this barn for me? – Butler, in a well-attested action, raced with a firebrand across the field and set fire to the barn timbers, freezing but apparently dry enough. Musket balls buzzed by his head. He calmly stepped back waiting to be sure the fire had caught. Then he started back. Only as he finally reached the fence his comrades were defending did a musket ball strike him full in the chest – to be stopped by five coats and his breastbone!

Butler's life had been spared for a soul-wrenching sight. Ordered to surrender by their own captive general, some 400 Americans were murdered by Indians while the British stood by. Only 140 survived to be marched to Fort Niagara, Butler among them, his heart scarred more by the vision of his friends' bodies put to the torch than by the musket-ball wound in his breast.

*How many hopes lie murdered here..
Lend me, thou silent queen of night,
Lend me awhile thy waning light
That I may see each well-loved form
That sank beneath the morning..
(from "The Field of Raisin" by Wm. O. Butler)*

Butler's captivity among the British was brief; he was released "sur parole," that is, upon his given word not to oppose the British in arms. Later, in a prisoner exchange in 1814, he was freed of this obligation. In that terrible year of 1813, and during months of recovery in 1814, the character of William Orlando Butler was crystallized. He renewed the emotional bond of his childhood with the hills of Port William and the ever-present rivers, and that bond would later express itself in poetry, too.

Jackson and the Butlers

Once healed and free to fight, Butler traveled to Nashville, where he obtained a captaincy and marshalled a company of soldiers. Without waiting for the new regiment to form, he bolted to join Jackson at Pensacola, where British troops and warships were massing for a move against New Orleans. As a junior officer put it, "The army of Gen. Jackson was then so inconsiderable as to render a reinforcement of a single company, commanded by an officer such as Captain Butler, an important acquisition." Butler's company was in the successful attack on the town. Jackson gained time in a race to New Orleans with this victory. When the British began to move against the city on December 23, 1814, Major Thomas Butler, one of Jackson's aides-de-camp and in command of the city itself, sent the first alarm. Brother William took command of a regiment which lost its commanding officer early in the fight – another terrible night battle for Butler. This was the most important prelude to the victory of January 8, 1815.

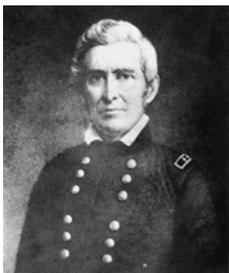
The Battle of New Orleans was almost an anticlimax. The British plodded suicidally into the witheringly accurate fire of men who shot squirrels in the head for dinner so as not to scorch the meat! Many years later, Gen. Jackson appraised Butler's contribution, "...on all occasions he displayed that heroic chivalry and calmness of judgment in the midst of danger which distinguished the valuable officer in the hour of battle. In a conspicuous manner were these noble qualities displayed by him on the night of the 23rd of December, 1814, and on the 8th of January."

*O, boatman! Wind that horn again,
For never did the listening air
Upon its lambent bosom bear
So, wild, so soft, so sweet a strain –
What though thy notes are sad, and few,
By every simple boatman blown,
Yet is each pulse to nature true
And melody in every tone.*
(from "The Boatman's Horn" by Wm. O. Butler)

Butler's Return to Carrollton

Butler returned home to marry Eliza Todd and took up the practice of law. In 1825, Butler built the Highland Avenue house near the banks of the Ohio, with its graceful fanlight and Georgian line. He had told the architect to build him something that could remind him of the houses of New Orleans..."Amid these scenes," a biographer wrote, "Colonel Butler...found that content and peace of mind, surpassing wealth, so necessary to one whose youth had been passed amid the alarms of a frontier war."

Butler remained in Carrollton, farming near his brothers Thomas and Richard, for the next 20 years. After Jackson's influence declined and the Democratic Party sought other heroes to bear its standard, Butler was drawn into a political orbit. In 1839 he won the first of two terms in Congress. In 1844, he was the nominee for Governor, losing a close race in which the hand of Whig Party Presidential candidate Henry Clay was hard against him.



The Mexican War

But Clay did not prevail in 1844. The Democrat Polk was elected – a champion of the annexation of Texas, which would win independence from Mexico. In 1846 President Polk named Butler Major General of the volunteer regiments to fight in the Mexican War. Butler was now over 50 years of age. A year later, he returned to Mexico, now in command of the army in Mexico, instructed to bring the war to a "safe and honorable conclusion" (Polk, *The Diary of a President* - document on exhibit at the Butler-Turpin State Historic House).

Butler's heroics at Monterey were not only enough for him to win in the Democratic vice-presidential nomination in 1848 on a ticket with Gen. Lewis Cass, but also won him one of six elaborately-carved gold swords which were presented to Majors-General after the Mexican War. Butler was recognized by Congress for "his gallantry at the storming of Monterey." The swords were made by the renowned Ames Manufacturing Company of Springfield, Massachusetts. Topaz and other precious stones were set in the hilt; the sheath was silver gilt with a representation of the storming of Monterey carved in relief. This sword is currently owned by Butler family descendants. Following that honor, the State of Kentucky presented Butler with a silver sword which is now displayed at the Kentucky Military History Museum in Frankfort.

The Butler Women

For two generations, stories of the famous Butler brothers were brandished about like their swords...in newspapers, in military circles and in political arenas throughout the country...stories of their bravery in the Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Mexican War; stories of their successes and failures in business; and of their ventures into politics.



But what of the Butler women? Life was very challenging for the wives of soldiers and politicians, such as Mildred Hawkins Butler, Sarah Hawkins Butler and Mary Ellen Butler Turpin (left). While their famous husbands were away waging war or dabbling in politics, the Butler women assumed heavy responsibilities. Although they were educated, cultured members of 1800s Kentucky society, they were still expected to manage farm affairs, run a household, and deal with the slave work force.

As wife of Adjutant-General Percival Butler, Mildred H. Butler socialized with the wealthy families of Lexington, then a part of Jessamine County. Moving from the stimulating political circles and social atmosphere of Lexington to the tiny community of Port William must have been quite an adjustment for Mildred. Although she probably wore her work clothes more often than her fine dresses, it is evident that she still placed great emphasis on education, social graces and patriotism.

During a recent archaeological dig at the site of the original Butler house, items excavated were those of a family of means. The Butlers owned more expensive china than common salt-glazed pottery, a simple person's kitchenware. From the broken pieces of flow blue china, transferware and pearlware found on the cabin site, one can conclude that Mildred saw to it that her children knew how to brandish a fork as well as a sword.

Wealth and fame did not shelter the Butler women from tragedy. With devastating regularity, epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, whooping cough, measles and scarlet fever decimated their ranks, not discriminating by age or social status. Tuberculosis, then known as consumption, descended upon Mary Ellen the daughter of Major Thomas Langford Butler, along with two of his grandchildren. Tuberculosis epidemics were prevalent in 1800s Kentucky. Transmitted by airborne bacteria, contaminated food or unpasteurized milk, or just through ignorance of basic sanitary practices when dealing with garbage or human waste, tuberculosis forced victims to resort to desperate measures in an attempt to cure the disease. Common "remedies" were "eating butter made from the cream of cows that graze in churchyards" or "drinking elephant's blood and milk." We do not know if Mary Ellen Turpin tried such desperate measures; we do know that she watched 3 of her children die of tuberculosis.

Disease also struck William O. Butler's family in the form of tuberculosis when it was discovered that his wife, Eliza Todd Butler, had the fatal ailment. Eliza and William had also built a beautiful new home in Carrollton overlooking the Ohio River. Although Eliza was a product of Lexington society, her life in Carrollton was largely that of an invalid. Her correspondence was filled with references to her poor health and remedies for whatever ailed her at the time. A relative of the Butlers, Dr. E.A. Taylor, advised Eliza in a letter, "I have felt more than normally anxious about you lately since 'influenza' has been so prevalent and so fatal with persons predisposed to diseases of the chest-have you had it?" ...and "I recommend an occasional small bleeding..." Eliza and William did not have children. She died in 1863 of tuberculosis. Eliza Todd was the second cousin to Mary Todd Lincoln.

Life in Carrollton in the 1800s

Port William was founded in 1792 on land originally granted to Col. William Peachy. Benjamin Craig, Sr. and James Hawkins acquired 613 acres from Peachy at "the Point," where the Kentucky and Ohio rivers ran together, and named the town Port William in William Peachy's honor. In 1838 Carroll County was created from Gallatin County and the town was renamed Carrollton, all to honor Charles Carroll, last living signer of the Declaration of Independence. The land bought by Percival Butler in 1796 was also part of the Peachy Survey.

The settlers may have thought the town's location destined it for rapid growth, since the rivers were better than roads at that time. Already in 1795, one Elijah Craig, Jr. gave notice in the Cincinnati Sentinel that on a certain day he would undertake to transport goods up the Kentucky River by keel boat. The prices: 50 cents a hundredweight to Frankfort, and \$1.25 to Dick's River, the farthest navigable reaches of the Kentucky at the time.

The coming of the Kentucky Central Railroad in 1854 put an end to this upriver trade, and Carrollton was never to grow into a commercial center like Lexington or Louisville. But its location on the Ohio meant that some fancy items were easier to come by there than elsewhere. One example is the piano forte you see in the Butler-Turpin House, made by John Telter, Fitzroy Square, London.

At mid-century, steamboats linked Carrollton to Louisville and Cincinnati. Their arrival was often festive, as described by a witness in this newspaper account: "The wharf was quite lively Sunday evening ... Brass bands and gunpowder made the welkin ring, and drew out a good portion of the population...The Blue Wing had the Great Western Star band of Louisville on board, and the Mollie Gratz, the Madison Band."

Life in Carrollton was an idyllic twilight for the Butler brothers, whose grandchildren now played on the riverbanks. A Louisville journalist who tracked them down on the anniversary of the Battle of New Orleans in 1878 wrote "Here, bowed down with age and honors," wrote the Courier-Journal's reporter, "are three brothers, Major Thomas, General William O., and Richard Butler ... Armed with a letter of introduction, I sallied forth ... in quest of food for the cormorant stomach of the metropolitan press." The reporter feasted at the table of General William Orlando Butler, smoked one of his cigars – suddenly in walks Richard Parker Butler who offers to accompany young "E.G.L." from the Highland Avenue house to this house, to visit Major Thomas Langford Butler, now the family patriarch, only a mile-and-a-half through the snow.

They went to the Butler-Turpin House and perhaps played a game of chess with the Mexican pieces kept here, which William O. Butler may have acquired as a souvenir of his travels to Mexico. When he made the walk from Highland Avenue, he may have carried the cane you see here, which his wife had gold-tipped for him and engraved with the name of Butler. Though in 1878 they were close to their end, they retained enough vital force to sober the jaunty reporter, who echoed the words of Collins' history: "Few of the prominent families of Kentucky have been so generally distinguished as this for high military bearing and gallantry ... while no other is so singularly retiring and modest, and so free from political ambition and desire for public position." As you tour this house, walking in your imagination with the friendly shadows of the gallant Butlers who were privileged to live out their lives in Carrollton near each other, the words of Collins history will become more meaningful to you.