

Making History

Making History in Louisville - "Federation Style"

by Lora J. Felty

As you already know, the 2002 annual convention of the National Federation of the Blind will be held in Louisville, Kentucky July 2-9. But before you visit our wonderful city, here are a few interesting historical tid-bits that might encourage you to dig deeper than face value and learn more about Louisville.

First of all, the site of our convention, the Galt House Hotel, has a rich history of its own in the city of Louisville. The original Galt House was established in 1834 on the northeast corner of Second and Main Streets, and was Louisville's best-known hostelry during the nineteenth century. This Galt House played host to such notables as Charles Dickens and U.S. Generals Grant and Sherman. Dickens wrote, of his stay at the Galt House, that he and his companions had been, "as handsomely lodged as though we had been in Paris."

And it was at the Galt House, during the Civil War, where Generals Sherman and Grant met to plan the invasion that eventually led to the "March to the Sea." After being host to such historic figures, the "first" Galt House was destroyed by fire in 1865, and was replaced by an even larger and more grand Galt House in 1869, which was located at the northeast corner of First and Main. Due to financial difficulties, this hotel closed in 1919. The building was demolished in 1921.

Finally, the third Galt House, on Fourth Street and River Road, was built in 1973 as a part of the Riverfront Urban Renewal Project. The Galt House East opened in 1984. These two hotels make up our convention site.

Now that you know the history of your outstanding accommodations in our city, let's take a look at the city itself and some of its history. Louisville is currently Kentucky's second largest metropolitan area. It was settled in 1778, prior to Kentucky's statehood in 1792.

During George Rogers Clark's exploration of the territory northwest of the Ohio River, Clark and his men were accompanied by a group of Kentucky settlers who traveled down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. The settlers stopped at the Falls of the Ohio where they intended to make a new life for themselves; thus was the origin of the city of Louisville.

Its name, Louisville, bestowed in 1779, honors French King Louis XVI and his support of the American Colonies in their struggles against England. In the beginning, growth of Louisville was slow, but the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, which created an open waterway to the mouth of the Mississippi, was the catalyst for future growth of the area.

This would be a natural outlet for the agricultural products of Kentucky. Boats carrying cargo traveled down the Ohio River to Louisville, where they had to be unloaded in order to navigate the falls. Cargo was carried by wagon beyond the falls, and then re-loaded onto the boats. By 1811, the arrival of the steamboat paved the way for Louisville to prosper further, but with progress came certain civic difficulties.

Due to increased river traffic, Louisville became host to numerous rowdy boatmen. Gambling halls and brothels flourished near the waterfront. Finally, in 1828, Louisville was granted city status. This allowed the city to establish local government and law enforcement to control the bawdy activities of the thriving riverfront district. The Portland Canal around the falls opened, thus making circumnavigation of the falls possible.

In the mid-1800's, transportation shifted from water to rail. Louisville played an important role in this as well. Railways linked Louisville to Kentucky's capital city, Frankfort, and Lexington, both east of Louisville; however, the completion of the Louisville and Nashville Railroad in 1859 connected Louisville with railroads to the deep south. This link offered new opportunities of transporting goods. It is ironic that only two years later all transportation, both water and rail, were cut off to the South due to the Civil War.

Being a border city in a slave state with strong commercial ties to both the north and south made the years of the war difficult ones for Louisville. The city attempted a neutral stance, but could not maintain the status quo in the slavery state of Kentucky. Since Union army recruits outnumbered those for the Confederate army three to one, Louisville became a major military supply center, as well as base of operations for

the Union army.

Also, Louisville was home to nineteen military hospitals, one of which was located at the Kentucky School for the Blind. Amazingly enough, though, Louisville survived the war unscathed and actually prospered after the war.

It was during the pre-Civil War era when bleak educational opportunities for the blind in Kentucky began to change for the better. At the request of Bryce M. Patton, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe of the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Massachusetts visited Kentucky to demonstrate effective ways to teach blind children. Mr. Patton's brother, Otis had been a student of Mr. Howe's. They presented a proposal for a school for blind children to the state legislature; and, as a result, the Kentucky School for the Blind (KSB) was established in 1842.

KSB was the sixth school for the blind established in the United States, and the third publicly funded school. In its early years, the school moved to several locations in the city before arriving at its present location on Frankfort Avenue in East Louisville in 1855.

The original KSB building was a prominent city landmark, designed in the Greek Revival architectural style, which boasted a cupola on top. Later, in 1884, a separate school for black children was established on the KSB campus, and in 1954, the two schools were racially integrated.

It is interesting to note that the first Boy Scout Troop for blind youth was established at KSB in 1911-only one year after the beginning of the Boy Scout movement in America.

Also, in 1945, KSB became the first school in Kentucky to establish a wrestling team, and in 1961 KSB won the first Kentucky Invitational Wrestling Tournament. In 1966 KSB was proud to win the state championship wrestling tournament.

Finally, in 1967, after standing for over 100 years, the demolition of the original KSB structure made way for the modern campus that exists today. However, the cupola that stood atop the original school building has been refurbished. It was dedicated in May 1999, and now holds a prominent position at the front of the KSB campus.

A further development that enriched the lives of the blind includes the establishment of the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) in 1858 by trustees of the

Kentucky School for the Blind. These individuals realized the importance of producing materials locally, and they recognized the need for a central publishing house for embossed materials for use by blind school children.

This led the Kentucky General Assembly to establish the American Printing House for the Blind as a private, nonprofit institution. Originally, it was located in rooms at the Kentucky School for the Blind, but as the Civil War encroached, the school was commandeered as a Union hospital. This slowed down the growth of the institution; however, private funds kept it going from 1860-1865.

In 1879, grants from the U.S. government established the American Printing House for the Blind as the largest manufacturing house in the world of educational materials for blind children.

In 1932 the official adoption of Braille as the standard embossed code made production of materials more efficient because there was no longer need to produce materials in several different codes. Later APH added a recording studio, and in 1928 produced Reader's Digest, and in 1959 Newsweek in "Talking Book" format.

Other items such as writing utensils, math aids, and various educational tools followed. APH is now located next door to the Kentucky School for the Blind on Frankfort Avenue. Several additions to the facility have been made over the years.

One of the most recent additions is the APH Museum that opened in October 1994. The museum houses artifacts that span the history of embossed printing and educational materials for the blind.

In addition to the developments regarding education for the blind during the latter part of the nineteenth century, Louisville as a whole underwent substantial growth in commerce and industry. In the twentieth century, such companies as General Electric Company, the Ford Motor Corporation and United Parcel Services brought further enterprise to Louisville.

As the twentieth century drew to a close, the work force in the city began to shift from blue collar to white collar. Large corporations located their headquarters in Louisville. Some of these include Humana, Inc., Capital Holding, and Kentucky Fried Chicken.

Now that you have a general history of the city, as well as the developments in Louisville specific to the blind, it's important to learn a bit about Louisville's most

famous tradition.

On the first Saturday in May the eyes of the world look to Louisville's Churchill Downs for the world-renowned "Run for the Roses", otherwise known as the Kentucky Derby. This is one of the most famous horse races in the world.

Churchill Downs was established by Colonel M. Lewis Clark in 1875, and the first Kentucky Derby was run on May 17th that year. Clark chose the track site three miles from the city center because he could lease this land from his uncles John and Henry Churchill.

In the 1890's a new grandstand was built on the western side of the track. The new grandstand was encompassed by the imposing twin spires that have come to symbolize the Kentucky Derby, as well as, Churchill Downs itself.

The twentieth century brought notoriety to Churchill Downs, and the Kentucky Derby grew into "the greatest two minutes in sports".

This is only a glimpse of the city of Louisville's vibrant history. We of the National Federation of the Blind of Kentucky look forward to hosting you in 2002, where we will continue to make our own history - Federation Style.

Note: Historical information for this article was primarily obtained from: The Kentucky Encyclopedia Edited by John E. Kleeber, et al The University Press of Kentucky 1992