

# The Genealogy Box



A supplemental newsletter for genealogy and family history research in Harrison County, Kentucky.

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## Writing the “1-Hour Autobiography”

Many people take up genealogy and family history research for various reasons, usually from the point of having just started a family to having recently retired and taking up family research as a new hobby.

No matter where you come from, almost any genealogy or family history that you will research will have one person in common . . . You! Every family history has a beginning, and why not begin your research with that which is most familiar to you, your own life story.

Decades were spent in getting the technology of film development down to one hour or less, and now no one needs it, everything is digital. While the length of the life that is the subject of an autobiography may vary from twenty to a hundred years, the brief time hour it takes to write it a “1-Hour Autobiography” may last a hundred or more, and so the effort will definitely be well spent, and the only technology needed is as simple the old pen or pencil and a piece of paper.

One good way to begin your research efforts is to write a “1-Hour Autobiography” using the following set of questions or framework of suggestions regarding elements of your life. The project can usually be completed within an hour (Unless you are a modern-day Benjamin Franklin or Leonardo DeVinci!!!).

Begin with your name. Simply write “My name is . . .” Tell how you got your name, what it means, your nicknames, etc. If you were named for your father, mother, aunt or uncle be sure to make note of it.

Now write everything you know about where you were born: the name of the hospital or the address of the house or the location of the farm. Add details about the weather, the time of day, and the day of the week. When and where were you baptized/christened, if such was the case?

List the names, birthplaces, and birthdates of your parents and brothers & sisters, and make note of where any of them were born, married or perhaps died.

Name the schools (pre-, kindergarten, grade, high, private, public, military, or religious) that you attended, including colleges or universities, and when you attended and/or graduated.

List the organizations you joined as a youth--Cub Scouts, Brownies, Boy Scouts, Girls Scouts, 4-H. Did you take part in high school athletics or play for the marching band? What about after-school clubs and activities?

List the date, location, and other significant details of how and when you met your children’s Mom/Dad and/or of your marriage(s). Then list your children and their birth dates. Mention important changes in your family--a child’s marriage, deaths, divorces, moves, and jobs. Remember, keep to the bare bones of your life story. You only have one hour, so stick to the facts (You

can leave the skeletons in the closet . . . for now!).

Try to write in a brief narrative paragraph or paragraphs of how you have spent your adult life, at work, as a homemaker, or in volunteer efforts. Any military experiences?

And that’s all there is to do!

After completing this little exercise not only will you have a nice introduction to any genealogy or family history research project that you may complete, but you will also have discovered that what you consider important to your own life story is much the same as what you will be looking for in order to fill out the life stories which make up any genealogy or family history that you research.

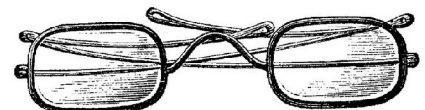
You no doubt would be able to prove each one of the biographical elements of your story by documentation such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, diplomas and the like. However, to locate these documents, all you probably have to do is go a desk drawer, safety deposit box, or closet. In researching the lives of others you will have to use other resources, both private (family) and public (libraries & courthouses), which is what learning about family history research is all about!

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### Notable Quote

**Biography in a Nutshell** - Born, welcomed, caressed, cried, fed, grew, amused, reared, studied, examined, graduated, in love, loved, engaged, married, quarreled, reconciled, suffered, deserted, taken ill, died, mourned, buried and forgotten.

*The Cynthiana (Ky.) Democrat,*  
Special Edition,  
June, 1896



# Biographies @ HarrisonCountyKy.US

A New Resource for Harrison County, Kentucky History & Genealogy Research

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[This month new pages were added to the author's website at [www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/biographies](http://www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/biographies). The texts which follow form the introduction for the new site, which may be of some aid in your own research, whether you have an interest in Harrison County, or not.]

Today when one considers what the natural subject of a published biography may be, one's own very humble ancestors do not often come to mind, and one typically thinks of texts written about the great feats and noble minds of the men and women who made America (Although, nowadays, many biographies are written by and about people who are known more for having had their foot in their mouth than anything great or noble!). Sometimes a halfway decently written obituary is all that any local or family historian can hope for when it comes to locating any kind of narrative about his research subject. Yet many biographies in fact have been written about people that neither you nor I would have ever thought would have been the subject of one before taking up a genealogical quest.

A majority of these biographical sketches, at least those found and transcribed for the new site at [HarrisonCountyKy.US](http://HarrisonCountyKy.US), were originally published after the Civil War, beginning around the time of the nation's Centennial. Some of these compendiums of submitted biographies have been derisively referred to as "mug books," published by "vanity presses" who were prepaid to include the profiles of their "subscribers." As the editors and publishers were paid to include the biographical content, little review may have been done to check for accuracy. Many thousands of Americans had done their part in writing the chapters of a uniquely American history and now they had the opportunity to have their own part in it recorded for posterity, and so they did.

**Signs of Their Times** - Viewed with a jaundiced eye of the 21st century citizen it might seem that most of the biographical sketches published in the 19th and early 20th centuries were about well-off, well-bred, white guys. Many subjects were, indeed, wealthy, educated, in a profession or trade, or at least a landowning farmer. They were of European descent, mostly from England or Scotland, some from Germany or France, and likely to be descended from a Revolutionary War patriot, a Mayflower passenger, or perhaps even an early pioneer or settler. All seem to have been red-blooded

heterosexual males; if they were gay, it wasn't told, and if it was, only the old-fashioned sense of the word was intended. If the subject was a woman, then she was probably only referenced by her relation to her husband, even a dead one, or perhaps by her relation to a successful son or father, yet many women came to a marriage with an established pedigree of their own, which often was considered well worth mentioning . . . even if only her paternal line! After the Civil War African Americans may have applied themselves equally as hard at earning a living as any of their contemporaries and achieved similar successes, but apparently need not have applied to have a sketch published, for, so far, the collection of Harrison County profiles doesn't include a biography for any African American subject.

Despite the failures of these texts, at least as far as 21st century American sensibilities are concerned, the facts contained in them can be a treasure trove of historical and genealogical information, some of which may not be readily available anywhere else. For example, the research of a female line of descent can stall completely with the inability to find a marriage record for her, but the biographical sketch for any married male almost inevitably provides this information about her family name and lineage. While African Americans are not the subjects of sketches themselves, information about a slave-owning family's background can provide clues to more fully develop an African American pedigree.

**Truth Be Told?** - A good dose of skepticism should be applied before accepting any account as entirely authentic. Many texts follow a particular formula or format and the actual author of each sketch is unidentified. We cannot determine today who supplied the information then, whether it was the subject himself or close family members or acquaintances, or determine just how reliable the informant's own information, research, or memory, was known to be.

A majority of sketches are relatively brief, but packed with names, relationships, and dates, which may or may not be entirely accurate, and such information about the individual's family may not be all-inclusive. For instance, details about the subject's wife and children may be recorded, but the fact that the subject may have



been married more than once, and/or had children by other spouses, may not be mentioned.

Also, be aware that while you may be able to confirm many details mentioned . . . and you should try to . . . there may be several facts which can never be confirmed. This does not necessarily mean they are not true, it could just be that the biography is the only evidence left of the event itself to fall into the hands of the modern researcher. Try not to infer too much about the individual by what may be missing from a profile; for example, if the first wife or their children that you discovered through other records weren't mentioned, it does not mean that a slight was intended or that a rift in the family existed just because their existence wasn't acknowledged.

A majority of sketches were published contemporarily with the lives of their subjects, but in many cases the information about parents and other ancestors postdates the deaths of those earlier generations, and so should be used cautiously.

If you can find a biographical sketch for your ancestor, you should consider yourself fortunate, but you shouldn't consider your research to be over. If you are like many, by the time you find a biographical sketch for your research subject, you probably already have collected a basic set of primary resource materials, records which were contemporarily with the lives of those you are

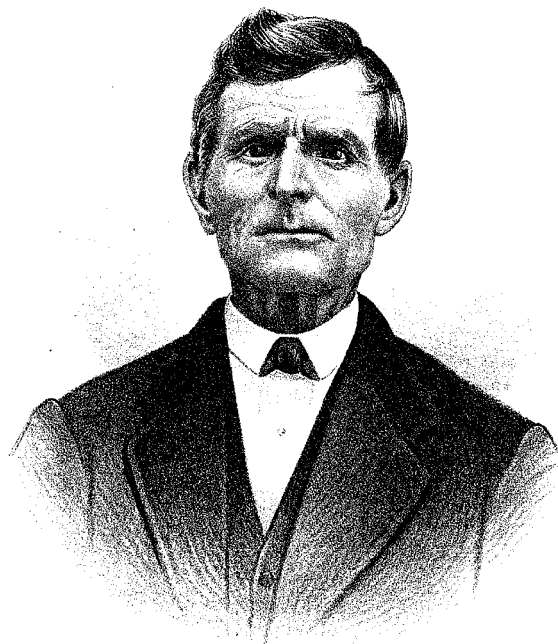
researching, such as U.S. Census records, marriage records, maybe even a few birth and death records. Whether early in your research or late in the game, your work may have just begun. At best, the biography will confirm everything you have found so far, and add even more details about their lives which you never would have thought to look for or which may never have been recorded anywhere else. With time and research, the facts presented may be confirmed in their entirety, or at least pass as plausible and authentic.

From my own experience, many of the biographical sketches which touch on the personages of my family tree have been found to be entirely accurate or "almost there." For example, so far no fault has been found with the sketch published in 1882 about my 3rd-great-grandfather, George Cummins, except for the spelling

of his name in the sketch (Cummings). The spelling of the family name alternates between Cummins and Cummings in contemporary county records, but Cummins is considered the correct version. The profile of his brother, John Cummins, published in an Illinois county history, helps to confirm the spelling of the family name, along with additional details, and provides a very welcome bonus, an image of John Cummins (see below), which is the only known image of any of the thirteen children of their parents, Joseph and Lydia (Fleming) Cummins.

In researching my 2nd-great-grandmother, Corilla (Langley) Elmore it was discovered that two of her brothers had profiles or sketches published during their lifetimes, in 1882 and 1901, both full of details, yet with some were contradictions (Ironically, the shorter bio was more fully accurate, yet the longer one contained

details found nowhere else). Both sketches agreed that the brother's grandfather was Isaac Langley, but one text recorded that he had drowned in Kentucky's Dix River, while the other said Isaac had died of the cholera. While the causes of death were details not to be found anywhere else, his probate records were later to be discovered on file in Mercer County, Ky., which is bordered by the Dix River, thus confirming the one account. Both brothers' sketches reported that they were each one of the twelve children of Abraham Langley, one bio



even named all twelve, but the list didn't include the name of my own ancestor, who was the sister of the subject of the sketch! The upside of the sketch was that it listed siblings whose names did not appear in any other local record, but which were confirmed by a Bible record discovered some years later. And then one wonders about the details left out. Neither mentioned that the widow of Isaac Langley, their grandmother, had remarried, or that their oldest brother what was born "out of wedlock."

**Sources** – A majority of the nearly 600 biographical sketches which fill out the content of these pages were found in Kentucky resources, i.e. local and family histories devoted to Kentucky, its counties, cities, communities, and people. W.H. Perrin's 1882 *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison and Nicholas Counties, Kentucky* was

an obvious resource with which to begin, and it supplied 271 of the sketches (They were already part of the texts available online at [www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/1882-history](http://www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/1882-history)). *Chronicles of Cynthiana* by Lucinda Boyd was also a useful resource for locating local bios. The five volumes of Kerr's 1922 *History of Kentucky* supplied the second largest supply of biographies of "persons of interest" to the Harrison County researcher. Gresham's 1896 *Biographical Cyclopedia of the Commonwealth of Kentucky* was also consulted, as well as several histories of Kentucky counties. In addition, profiles of prominent men were found in random issues of two late 19th and early 20th century Harrison County newspapers, the *Cynthiana Democrat* and the *Log Cabin*, in addition to the 1896 and 1905 special commemorative editions of each.

**You Can Help** - More texts which touched on the lives of those originally from Harrison County were found in volumes devoted to the histories of Arizona, California, Colorado, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, Oregon, and Texas, or some smaller political divisions thereof. No doubt people from Harrison County settled in parts of the other thirty-five states as well, it is just that their biographies have yet to be brought to my attention . . . and this is where you can help. Do you know of a biographical sketch of a person who had ties to Harrison County, whether they were born or died in the county, whether they married a native or who had in-laws from Harrison County? Maybe the subject of the sketch was descended from a native or resident of the county? Maybe their education or career brought them to the county for just a short time, perhaps working the land to earn the money to move further west, ministering to the faithful, attending a local school, or apprenticing in a local law firm or medical practice in the county? Please let me know of any texts you may have discovered so that they may be added to the site and shared with others.

**More Biographies on the Web** – [HarrisonCountyKy.US](http://HarrisonCountyKy.US) is by no means contains comprehensive supply of biographies relating to Harrison County research. To view a list of biographies for anyone whose biographical sketch includes a reference to Harrison County and which are not included at [HarrisonCountyKy.US](http://HarrisonCountyKy.US), you should visit the home page of the Kentucky Biographies Project ([www.rootsweb.com/~kygenweb/kybiog/search.html](http://www.rootsweb.com/~kygenweb/kybiog/search.html)), a site originally established to collect and transcribe historical biographies published in histories of Kentucky. The site features a search form. Leave the



first name and surname boxes empty, and use the scroll box to bring up the name of Harrison County. Click on the "submit" button and nearly 450 entries will be listed for you, of which 300 focus on Harrisonians.

[Ancestry.com](http://Ancestry.com) offers a searchable database of the contents of Perrin's 1882 *History of Bourbon, Scott, Harrison, & Nicholas Counties, Kentucky*, however, it may require a subscription to access it. Ancestry also offers searchable databases for many other histories which contain biographies, and so does [HeritageQuest.com](http://HeritageQuest.com).

Perrin's texts have also been posted online at [www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/1882-history](http://www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/1882-history), and one can simply browse the pages to see the biographies in their original context.

**Hardcopies** - You can get your own hardcover reprint of Perrin's 1882 history (Southern Historical Press (1999)) which includes an every name index of approximately eight thousand names, for only \$55 plus \$5.00 shipping and handling from William A. Penn ([pennwma@aol.com](mailto:pennwma@aol.com)). To order contact him directly by e-mail or at the Historic Midway Museum Store, 124 East Railroad Street, Midway, Ky. 40347 (Phone: (859) 846-4214).

The texts of *Chronicles of Cynthiana* by Lucinda Boyd are available at [www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/chronicles-of-cynthiana](http://www.HarrisonCountyKy.US/chronicles-of-cynthiana), or a hardcover reprint of the original can be purchased from the Harrison County Historical Society. Just visit the society's website and click on "Publications" for details or look for the most recent list of publications in the *Harrison Heritage News*. *Chronicles of Cynthiana* and the 1896 and 1905 commemorative editions of the *Democrat* and *Log Cabin* are also available at the Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum.

For originals of any other texts you may discover, one can always search at [Alibris.com](http://Alibris.com), [Biblio.com](http://Biblio.com), or [Abebooks.com](http://Abebooks.com), but be ready to see some prices which may cost you more dearly than you might expect.

**Only the Nose Knows** – No doubt, some white lies or tall tales have made their way into the text of biographical sketches, some intentionally, while others are there by accident, but they won't necessarily be as plain as the nose on Pinocchio's face. Only the genealogist's eye for detail and own nose for uncovering the truth will determine the reliability of information provided by any sketch. Through solid research you may be able to locate even more about the family than was ever told, or that you ever knew possible.

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What is research but a blind date with knowledge?

Will Henry