

III, Henry Rhoads, "The Godfather of Muhlenberg"

Among the pioneers who first settled that section of the Green River country which is included in what is now the northern part of Muhlenberg County were some who had fought in the Revolution under General John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg. Most of the first settlers in the central and southern sections of the county were Virginians and Carolinians, mainly of English, Scotch, and Irish extraction.

Representatives of General Muhlenberg's army drifted to this part of the Green River country from Southern **Pennsylvania** and Northern Virginia. Most of General Muhlenberg's soldiers were born in America, but their fathers came from Germany and Holland long before the Revolution. Among these was **Henry Rhoads**, "the Godfather of Muhlenberg County," who not only procured the name of his general for the county but was also a prominent pioneer in Western **Kentucky** and identified with the early development of Muhlenberg and the entire western section of the Green River country.

In Perrin's "History of **Kentucky**," page 997, a brief sketch of the life of **Rhoads** is incidentally introduced in a biography of Professor McHenry **Rhoads**, the well-known educator, who is a son of Absalom J. **Rhoads**, a grandson of Solomon **Rhoads**, and a great-grandson of **Henry Rhoads**. From this sketch I quote:

Henry Rhoads was born in Germany in 1739 and died in Logan county in 1814. [He died in Muhlenberg County.] He and two of his brothers came to America about 1757 and settled in Bedford county, **Pennsylvania**. In 1760 he married Elizabeth Stoner of Maryland. He fought for his adopted country through the great struggle for Independence, under the leadership of General Muhlenberg. After the war for Liberty, having lost heavily in the cause, he, with his two brothers and their families, came to **Kentucky**. They stopped first at Bardstown where they left their wives and children, and then went out in the wilderness to find a site to build a town. The place selected was at the falls of Green river where they started a settlement and called it Rhoadsville. After three years of peaceable possession an action was entered in the Ohio circuit court, styled "John Hanley vs. **Henry Rhoads** and others," for the possession of the land on which the new town stood. The suit was gained by the plaintiff. **Henry Rhoads** and a few of his friends then removed to Barnett's Station, on Rough Creek, where he lived five years, during which time the present town of Hartford was laid out and a few houses built. He next moved to Logan county and settled ... where he owned 7,000 acres of military land. He represented the county [Logan and what became Muhlenberg] in the legislature of **Kentucky** in 1798, [and] on its formation [in December, 1798] as a county, named it in honor of General Muhlenberg.

Collins, in his "History of **Kentucky**," under the head of McLean County, says that the first fort or station in McLean County was built where Calhoun now stands, in 1788, by Solomon **Rhoads**, and called Vienna, and that in 1790 James Inman built Pond Station, a few miles southeast of Calhoun.

Other authorities and most traditions say that **Henry Rhoads** established a station some time between 1784 and 1788 where Calhoun now stands, and that he was assisted in this work by his brother Solomon **Rhoads** and another brother whose name is usually given as David. At any rate, a few years after **Henry Rhoads** established or helped to establish Rhoadsville or Fort Vienna, he lost the title to all his land in that vicinity, and after living for a while near Hartford he moved into what is now the Browder Mine neighborhood, in Muhlenberg County, which at that time was part of Logan

County. The **Henry Rhoads** House, Near Browder

From a letter written to me by Judge Lucius P. Little, of Owensboro, the highest authority on the history of the Green River country, I quote:

"When **Henry Rhoads** came to this part of the Green River country he stopped at Barnett's Fort, on Rough River, above Hartford. He first located his claim for land at the site of the present town of Calhoun, and laid out a town in 1784 and called it Rhoadsville. When **Rhoads** was defeated by Captain John Hanley, agent for the Dorseys, of Maryland, the name of the town was changed to Vienna. **Rhoads** then went back to Barnett's Fort for a short time and soon after located in the bounds of the present county of Muhlenberg, five miles from Paradise on Green River and a mile from the present town of Browder on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad.

"Simultaneously with the departure of the Germans to the south side of the river, they erected a fortification about five miles south from Rumsey for refuge in case of Indian attack. This was called 'Pond Station.' This was in Muhlenberg until the territory embracing it was made a part of McLean County. About the same time such of the residents of Fort Vienna as owned slaves quit the fort and opened up farms north of the river, where some of their descendants are still to be found.

"As late as 1840 the settlement south of Cypress Creek and extending far enough south to embrace Sacramento and Bremen was commonly called 'The Dutch Settlement.' While these people were thrifty, yet few of them owned slaves."

In 1798, a few years after settling in Logan County, **Henry Rhoads** became a member of the State Legislature and on December 14, 1798, an act was passed creating a new county out of parts of Christian and Logan. It was **Henry Rhoads** who proposed and secured the name of Muhlenberg for the new county. Ed Porter Thompson, in his "School History of **Kentucky**," page 162, says:

General Muhlenberg was at no time a resident of **Kentucky**. His name and his deeds, however, are of interest to us because some of the gallant members of his church who followed him when he left his pulpit to fight for independence, had grants of land for military service, which they located on and below Green River, soon after the close of the Revolution, and made their homes in what are now Muhlenberg, McLean and Ohio counties. One of them, the Hon. **Henry Rhoads**, was a member of the legislature in 1798 when Muhlenberg county was established, and procured it to be named in honor of his pastor and general, ... Through the influence of one to whom General Muhlenberg had been a pastor in peace and a valiant captain in the fight for freedom, his ever enduring monument (a county's name) was erected, not in his own land, but in the wilderness of **Kentucky**.

While faithfully and successfully serving the public, **Henry Rhoads** had, for a number of years, more or less trouble in establishing his claim to the land to which he was entitled and on which he lived after he moved into what later became a part of Muhlenberg. This land, of which he finally gained possession, lay in what was up to 1798 a part of Logan County. It was part of a grant of almost 7,000 acres which he had surveyed in 1793 for General Alexander McClanahan, with the understanding that he was to receive part of it. It is possible that 1793 was the year **Henry Rhoads** first settled in what is now Muhlenberg. In 1797 the State of **Kentucky** issued to McClanahan and **Rhoads** a patent for this survey. In October, 1801, a commission of six men was appointed to divide this tract between the two and

issue a deed to each for his share. Order Book No. 1, page 1, gives the names of these commissioners, all of whom were prominent pioneers--John Dennis, Henry Keith, Matthew Adams, William Bell, Benjamin Tolbert, and Solomon Rhoads Deed Book No. 1, page 66, shows that they granted Henry Rhoads two thousand acres of the survey, for which he received a deed October 26, 1801. Thus, after a long and patient struggle, he held a title to land against which no priority of claim was ever brought. In 1798 he bought an adjoining survey of five hundred acres that had been granted to General George Matthews. Grave of the "Godfather of Muhlenberg County"

It was on this 2,500-acre tract that he built his home, shortly after his arrival from Hartford. The original dwelling has undergone many changes, but is still standing, near the Greenville and Rochester Road about nine miles from Greenville. The farm on which this house stands has passed from father to son for more than a century, and is now owned by Professor McHenry Rhoads. Near this historic house is the old family graveyard. In it, among five generations of Rhoads buried there, is the grave of the "Godfather of Muhlenberg County," on which was placed, almost a century ago, a sandstone about two feet high and marked: "H. R., B. J. 5, 1739, D. M. 6, 1814."

Henry Rhoads died on the 6th of March or May, 1814, aged seventyfive. His "last will and testament" was written April 15, 1812, witnessed by J. W. McConnell and Wm. Sumner." It was recorded in 1813 and probated in August, 1814, as attested by "C. F. Wing, Clerk," in Will Book No. 1, page 194:

In the name of God, Amen. I, Henry Rhoads, of the county of Muhlenberg and State of Kentucky, being weak in body but of perfect mind and memory, do make and ordain this my last will and testament.

First, I recommend my soul to the Almighty God, and as touching my worldly effects wherewith He has helped me, I give and dispose of them in the following manner.

First, I give and bequeath to my beloved wife Barbay Rhoads all the property she brought with her after we were married, agreeable to contract, and one cow, a large heifer and one iron pot and the corner cupboard and chest and my large Bible, and the low posted bedstead, one large and one small wheel including all the furniture we have got since we were married. I also give and bequeath to my beloved wife Barbay all that is allowed to her agreeable to the courts of a bond on my son David Rhoads bearing date August 23, 1810.

Secondly, I give and bequeath all my debts, dues and demands and all the property I own in this world except what is expressly mentioned in this my last will to my children, namely my sons, Jacob Rhoads, Daniel Rhoads, Henry Rhoads, Solomon Rhoads, David Rhoads, Susanah Nighmyoir and Caty Jackson, Elizabeth VanMeter and Hannah Jackson, all my daughters, to be equally divided among them, at the discretion of my executors at my decease.

Lastly, I do hereby nominate and appoint my brother Daniel Rhoads and Solomon Rhoads and David Rhoads as executors of my last will and testament, hereby ratifying and confirming this and no other to be my last will and testament, hereby revoking all other wills by me made as witness and seal this 15th day of April in the year of our Lord 1812 and the presence of viz: Henry Rhoads. (Seal)

When **Henry Rhoads** settled on his tract of land Muhlenberg was practically an unbroken wilderness. Many wild animals, large and small, held sway. A number of stories are told about the game that roamed over these hills in olden times. I here repeat two of these stories, because they are characteristic of life in the wilderness and because they are incidents from the life of Muhlenberg's first great pioneer, handed down by local tradition. **Henry Rhoads** (Grandson of Pioneer **Henry Rhoads**), His Wife and Daughter, in 1854

When **Henry Rhoads** was building his log house his neighbors were few and far between, but all came with a helping hand and a happy heart to take part in his "house-raising." These old-time house-raising were attended as much for the sake of their social features as for the purpose of building a house.

One afternoon, while the crowd was busily engaged on the roof of this building, a large bear leisurely wandered into sight. When the men saw the animal they stopped work and immediately started on a bear chase. Some ran after him with axes and others with guns. The women of the wilderness always lent a helping hand. In this instance one woman followed in the bear chase with a pitchfork. After an exciting time old Bruin was finally killed. That night a large bearskin was stretched on the new log wall and barbecued bear meat was served in abundance at all the other meals prepared for the house-raising party.

But the noise made by the bear-chasers evidently did not scare all the wild animals out of the neighborhood. About a year after that event **Henry Rhoads**, while walking in his wood, which is still standing a short distance north of the old house, espied a large drove of wild turkeys. He slowly raised his flint-lock rifle for the purpose of shooting a fine gobbler strutting under a white oak within close range. When he was about ready to pull the trigger he heard a rustling in the dry leaves behind him. **Rhoads** looked around, and to his great surprise saw a huge panther preparing to spring upon him. Without stopping to take sure aim he fired at the threatening beast. Luckily, the bullet hit the animal between the eyes and killed it instantly. A half-hour later **Rhoads** walked back home with the panther skin on his arm and his trusty flint-lock on his shoulder.

These old flint-locks were, as a rule, fine-sighted and unerring. They were slow but sure, although they did not kill every panther they were aimed at. Compared with modern rifles they were slow in all the operations that preceded and resulted in the discharge of the bullet.

Most of the local traditions are subject to a variety of versions. The old panther story, as I have related it, has probably changed very little from the original since **Henry Rhoads'** day. However, another version of this incident has also crept into circulation, and shows to what extent some traditions are changed. This new version has it that when **Henry Rhoads** saw the wild turkey in the woods he took steady aim and then pulled the trigger of his flint-lock. He had no more than pulled the trigger when he heard the panther back of him. **Rhoads** turned, immediately swung his gun around and aimed at the panther, then in the very act of making a long leap from a limb down upon the hunter. But the old pioneer was quicker than the discharging powder or the charging panther, for he had the gun pointed at the animal before the bullet left the barrel, and thus killed the panther with the load that, a few seconds before, had been started toward the turkey! This same version continues with the statement that the animal did not drop to the ground after it was shot, but fell across the shoulder of the hunter, who then leisurely walked home and did not throw the panther down on the ground until he reached the front of

his house. I do not adopt this version, but merely record it for its vivacity and novelty.

Henry Rhoads, as already stated, was a member of the State Legislature from Logan County when, in 1798, Muhlenberg was formed, and he was the first man to represent the new county in the House of Representatives. He was sixty years of age when the county was organized. Although he declined various county offices offered to him, he nevertheless continued to work for the good of the community, and probably did as much for the county, if not more, than any of the other early pioneers. He helped draw the plans for the first courthouse and also did much toward promoting the interests of Greenville, the new county seat. He was bondsman and adviser to a number of the younger men whom he successfully recommended for office. Tradition says that many, and probably all, of the German-American pioneers in Muhlenberg came to the county through his direct or indirect influence.

During his last years **Henry Rhoads** spent much of his time looking after his farm, tanyard, and other personal affairs, but nevertheless lost no opportunity to bring in new settlers and perform such acts as he thought would advance Muhlenberg County and its people. To-day a small sandstone is all that marks the spot where rest the bones of this influential pioneer. Some day his labors will be more fully recognized and appreciated and an appropriate memorial will then, I dare say, be erected over the grave of the Godfather of Muhlenberg County.