

The Trotter Family, Gunpowder, and Early Kentucky Entrepreneurship, 1784-1833

by Gary A. O'Dell

When James Trotter came to Kentucky in 1784 to settle near Lexington, this western frontier of Virginia was still a wild land. The Bluegrass town had been in existence less than five years, and the sturdy fort of Lexington still stood amid the cluster of houses and business establishments that had blossomed about it. Though the community had become substantial and the influx of pioneer families swelled the population, the Indian danger remained. The dead of the Blue Licks battle were not yet two years buried, and the Ohio River, water road to the Kentucky lands, remained a dangerous route to travel. The Wilderness Trail through the Cumberland Gap was safer, but still arduous and not without hazard. Nevertheless, the immigrants came, the initial trickle growing to a flood as they sought a new life in the El Dorado of Kentucky.

It was to this new life that thirty-year-old James Trotter came with his wife Margaret (Downey) and two young sons, Samuel and George. Accompanying them was nearly the entire Trotter clan, headed by his elderly father, and including his mother, brothers, and sisters. Though the Trotters had been prosperous in Augusta County, Virginia, the Kentucky frontier had lured

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them as it had so many others. They settled in Bourbon County, nine miles east of Paris.¹

The Trotter family became prominent in the early history of that county, but James and his younger brother, George, soon moved to Fayette County and established mercantile businesses in Lexington.² James Trotter was to become one of the most noted citizens of Lexington. Not content to grow quietly wealthy on the proceeds of his Main Street store, he was heavily involved in the affairs of the town and region. During the period of Indian wars in the Northwest, James served as a militia colonel on two expeditions into the Ohio country. In 1786, he accompanied Benjamin Logan on a foray to destroy the Shawnee villages along the Mad River. Four years later, Trotter served under General Josiah Harmar in an expedition against the Shawnee and Miami tribes; ineptitude on the part of the commander resulted in the disaster now known as Harmar's Defeat. No stain was attached to Trotter, however, and two years later he was elected to help frame the first state constitution at the Danville Convention in April 1792.³

James continued to be active in the community, serving in the legislature until 1823. In 1795, he helped secure subscriptions for the first library in Kentucky, and ten years later became a trustee of Transylvania University, the first institute of higher learning west of the Alleghenies. In December 1797, busy with his political career and other pursuits, James retired from business and turned the store over to his two eldest sons (a third son, James Gabriel, had been born in 1791). A notice was placed in the *Kentucky Gazette* directing customers owing the firm to "make payments to Samuel and George Trotter."⁴

¹Lyman Chalkley, *Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement of Virginia*, 3 vols. (Rosslyn, Va., 1912-13), 2:118; Preston Trotter, "Extracts from a letter written by Preston Trotter, son of George Trotter Sr. and a nephew of Col. James Trotter of Boonsborough, Va., Jan. 14, 1852," *Historical Collection of the Joseph Haberman Chapter of the DAR of Atlanta, Ga.*, 334, copy in Trotter Family Files, Kentucky Historical Society (hereafter KHS).

²Lexington Reporter, 18 October 1815.

³William Henry Perrin, *History of Fayette County, Kentucky* (Chicago, 1882), 275; Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1847), 43; Charles G. Talbert, *Benjamin Logan: Kentucky Frontiersman* (Lexington, 1976; orig. pub. 1962), 211-14; Wallace A. Brice, *History of Fort Wayne* (Fort Wayne, 1868), 124.

⁴George W. Ranck, *History of Lexington, Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1872), 177-80; Perrin, *History of Fayette County*, 384; Fayette County Circuit Court Deed Book B, 717,

Samuel was James's oldest son, and while no date of birth is known for him, he was probably about twenty-five when he and brother George took over their father's establishment. Samuel had worked for a while in the store of Charles Wilkins, another ambitious and prosperous Lexington merchant, and so was well prepared to assume the responsibility. George, however, nineteen years old at the time (and usually referred to as George, Jr., to distinguish him from his uncle), was more inclined to the dash and glory of the military than to the rather mundane matters of business and bookkeeping. Even so, under Samuel's steady hand, the business prospered.⁵

Their uncle George also did very well. In 1794, he traded in partnership with Alexander Scott under the name of Trotter & Scott in a store also located on Main Street. George and his wife Sarah (Scott), along with the two sons of Colonel James Trotter, came to own substantial portions of downtown Lexington. The firm of Trotter & Scott operated until November 1803, when the partnership was dissolved; George Trotter remained as its proprietor.⁶

The business dealings of the Trotter family in Lexington are a tangled, perplexing maze that has been a source of endless confusion to later researchers. Complicating the situation has been the duplication of family names, particularly those of George and James. George Trotter, brother of James Trotter and uncle to Samuel and George Trotter, Jr., after the turn of the century had a son whom he named George, Jr., so that, in addition to George Trotter, Sr., there were in Lexington simultaneously two men by the name of "George Trotter, Jr." Many historians have failed to distinguish adequately among them.

For two decades the brothers Samuel and George Trotter, Jr., remained in partnership, owning and operating one of the largest financial empires in Lexington. William A. Leavy later commented in his memoirs, "The Wholesale business of Saml.

7 October 1805; Charles Mitchell, "The Trotter History and Family Records," undated notes in Trotter Family Files, KHS; Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 16 December 1797.

⁵William A. Leavy, "A Memoir of Lexington and Its Vicinity," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 40 (1942): 258. Leavy was a son-in-law of Samuel Trotter.

⁶Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 6 December 1794; Chalkley, *Chronicles of the Scotch-Irish Settlement*, 2: 347; various deeds for property in deed books of Fayette County Courthouse Annex; Fayette County District Court Deed Book D, 123, 17 July 1802.

& Geo Trotter was for a series of years immense. Nothing had equalled it in amount or consequence before . . . their Sales amounted to sixty thousand dollars per month for some length of time together.” By the advent of the War of 1812, the two sons of James Trotter owned large tracts of downtown property, several farms, a ropewalk, a white lead manufactory, and a powder mill. It was this latter establishment that was to prove one of the most remunerative enterprises of all.⁷

In 1801, the firm of George Trotter, Sr., and Alexander Scott had come temporarily into possession of one of the prime saltpeter-producing caves of the state, the Great Saltpetre Cave in present-day Rockcastle County. Trotter & Scott had taken a mortgage on the property in 1801 from James Kincaid of Madison County. Following Kincaid’s default, Alexander Scott purchased the cave tract at a forced auction in April 1804. The cave and mining operation subsequently passed into other hands, but the brief possession marked the technical debut of the Trotter family into one aspect of what was to become an increasingly lucrative business, the Kentucky saltpeter and gunpowder industry.⁸

Saltpeter, or potassium nitrate, is a substance that occurs naturally in the soils of rockshelters in the state. A similar compound, calcium nitrate, is found in abundance in many of the caves of the regions surrounding Lexington and, in the Trotters’ day, could be easily processed into saltpeter on site. Saltpeter is the primary ingredient of black powder, constituting about three-

⁷Fayette County Deed Book X, 70, 28 August 1812; Perrin, *History of Fayette County*, 266; J. Winston Coleman, Jr., *Lexington’s First City Directory — Published by Joseph Charless for the Year 1806* (Lexington, 1953), 5, 9; idem, *Lexington’s Second City Directory — Published by Joseph Charless for the Year 1818* (Lexington, 1953), 16-17; Leavy, “A Memoir of Lexington,” 118; C. Frank Dunn, “Old Houses of Lexington,” 2 vols., unpublished typescript, Lexington Public Library, 2: 619.

⁸Fayette County District Court Deed Book C, 520; James Kincaid of Madison County to Trotter & Scott of Fayette, 13 January 1801, mortgage on 9,500-acre tract in Madison County [present Rockcastle] including a cave and saltpeter-making apparatus; Fayette County Circuit Court Deed Book B, 15, Commissioners Andrew McCalla, John Jordan, Jr., and Thomas Wallace of Lexington to Alexander Scott of the same town, 8 May 1804, forced sale of Kincaid property; Fayette County Circuit Court Deed Book B, 200, Alexander Scott of Lexington to Thomas Hart, Jr., and Samuel Brown of the same town and Richard Pindell of Maryland, 21 November 1804, sale of 1,000-acre tract containing Kincaid’s Cave; Fayette County Circuit Court Deed Book B, 290; Alexander Scott to James Kincaid, 1 March 1805, release of unsold portion of tract; Angelo I. George, “Interim Chronology of Historic Events at Great Saltpeter Cave, Rockcastle County, Kentucky,” *Journal of Spelean History* 22 (April-June 1988): 7-11.

quarters by weight of a given quantity. As such, it became a valuable item of commerce on the frontier, often substituting for money as a medium of exchange in the cash-poor western lands.⁹

Starting about 1806, the S. & G. Trotter store had carried on a brisk trade in saltpeter and gunpowder manufactured by local industry. Barnett Metcalfe, long-time clerk for the firm, in 1812 reported "most of the Powder was sold to regular customers residing in the state of Kentucky, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, and designed for home consumption." From April 1806 to July 1812, the Trotter store had resold almost fifty thousand pounds of gunpowder made in the Bluegrass mills of the Foley family, Daniel Bryant, John B. Miller, William Roman, and Nathaniel Pettit. The Trotters reported in 1812 that they had sold Kentucky-made articles, "*Cotton, Tobacco, Yarns, Salt-Petre, Powder &c.* to a very considerable amount to citizens of our neighboring states and territories, which not only promoted our own interest, but we trust was somewhat beneficial to this state in procuring markets for our manufactures and productions."¹⁰

With this background, it was quite natural that George Trotter, Jr., had been appointed by his fellow Lexington trustees in January 1808 to draft an ordinance which contained provisions concerning gunpowder. The law specified that, within one-half mile of the courthouse, no person was to store or transport gunpowder in excess of twenty-eight pounds except in special cases where adequate precautions were taken. During the following year, this regulation was adopted into the city by-laws.¹¹

In February 1810, Samuel Trotter had purchased for \$4,125 a tract of 164 acres along the Town Branch of Elkhorn Creek; the acreage fronted on what was known even then as the Old Frankfort Road. On this farm Samuel soon began the construction of a powder mill.¹²

⁹Angelo I. George, "Saltpeter and Gunpowder Manufacturing in Kentucky," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 60 (1986): 189-217.

¹⁰Samuel Trotter and George Trotter, Jr., "TO THE PUBLIC" (broadsheet), Lexington, 22 July 1812, Joseph M. McCalla Papers, West Virginia University Library (hereafter WVU). McCalla was a Kentucky veteran of the War of 1812 and editor of the *Kentucky Gazette* from 12 February 1824 to 21 April 1825, and for a brief period in 1829.

¹¹Lexington town trustees, *Minute Book 1781-1811*, 326, 329-30, 366 (meetings of 4 January, 17 February 1808, 5 June 1809), typed transcription, KHS.

¹²Fayette County Deed Book D, 379, 1 February 1810.



The Filson Club

George Trotter, Jr., with his elder brother Samuel, was co-owner of one of the largest gunpowder mills in the state, the Trotter Mill on the Old Frankfort Road in Lexington. This mill operated from about 1811 to 1833 and was only one aspect of the diverse Trotter interests.

Although in the years since the Fort Greenville treaty of 1795 relations between the Indians and the settlers of their western lands had been generally amicable, the growing confederation of tribes united under the great Shawnee warrior Tecumseh had filled many whites with unease. By 1811, incidents and death from Indian encounters had become all too common: the British in their northern and western forts sent agents among the tribes to encourage a renewal of hostilities. On the high seas, British provocations rapidly were becoming intolerable. War seemed inevitable.

In July 1811, Samuel Trotter had given notice in the

American Statesman, in an advertisement that ran for several months, that he would give “the highest price, in cash, for salt petre.” Samuel was likely stockpiling for his own mill by this time as well as trading in this important commodity. By the following January, this ad was replaced by one stating that the firm of Samuel & George Trotter was purchasing saltpeter at their store in Lexington. Variations on this advertisement were to run almost continuously throughout the war.¹³

On 28 August 1812, Samuel and his brother George, Jr., executed a complex set of agreements which delineated the ownership and control of their many business pursuits. The articles clearly showed the business acumen of Samuel Trotter, and a substantial portion dealt with the operation of the powder mill on his farm. The firm of “S. & G. Trotter” was established as the operating entity for the mill, rather than any individual, with provisions for withdrawal and reversion should the firm be split.

Samuel, residing in town, leased his farm and powder mill to the firm, the latter for an annual rent of five hundred dollars, and agreed to “sell to said firm at prime cost all of the stock and materials belonging thereto and to hire the negro men employed on said farm and in the Powder Mill establishment at Eighty five dollars each per year and the boys and women at a fair price.” Further, the firm was to furnish the workers with “Boarding, Lodging and Cloathing and to pay the Taxes” and to insure the Trotters personally against “any injuries that may be sustained by the negroes at work by the explosion of Powder or Saltpetre.” One year later, on the anniversary of the 1812 articles, further refinements of the agreements between the brothers were recorded in the Fayette County books.¹⁴

With importation of European powder cut off, first by the ill-advised prewar Embargo and Non-Intercourse Acts passed by Congress and subsequently by the blockade of the American coast, the Ordnance Department of the fledgling United States military was eager to obtain and stockpile a large supply of gunpowder. Although prices paid by the government would be less

¹³Lexington *American Statesman*, 20 July 1811, 7 January 1812; various other advertisements in regional newspapers through 1814.

¹⁴Fayette County Deed Book X, 74, 28 August 1812; Fayette County Deed Book X, 279, 28 August 1813.

than those obtainable for powder on the open market, the sheer size of the contracts led many powdermakers to bid for the right to supply military powder. James Morrison, deputy quartermaster in Lexington for the War Department, early in 1812 sought to secure contracts for ordnance supplies of local manufacture. In January, he had received from Washington samples of high-quality gunpowder, and used these as standards to judge the worth of the local product. Morrison wrote, in a letter to Secretary of War William Eustis, that he had tested the samples in the presence of the Lexington powder makers, and that all had declared themselves able to supply powder of equal or better quality. He noted that, because few of the powdermen possessed capital, it would be necessary to provide an advance equal to the cost of the required saltpeter. Additionally, Morrison stated that both powder kegs and cannon balls could be manufactured in Lexington.¹⁵

Eustis subsequently recommended to a congressional committee the purchase of certain "Munitions of War," including five hundred tons of saltpeter and five hundred tons of lead. Referring to this, Morrison wrote on 4 March 1812, "I know of no place these articles can be procured within the U. States, save in this section of Country." He informed Eustis that he had retained attorney Henry Clay to draw up contracts with the secretary of war. The saltpeter was to be delivered to Baltimore or Philadelphia and the lead shipped to New Orleans.¹⁶

By late March, Morrison received samples from the local gunpowder manufacturers, and reported that it was of entirely satisfactory quality. He warned, however, that Lexington powder could not be obtained for less than forty-five cents per pound, with transportation costs to be added on. On 12 April, he wrote again to Eustis and enclosed two small tin cases containing samples of local gunpowder. In this latest communication, Morrison informed Eustis that, due to a recent rise in the cost of saltpeter to as much as thirty cents per pound, a pound of gunpowder must now cost at least forty-eight cents. Morrison praised the Kentucky powder, stating that he had tested samples

¹⁵U.S. Deputy Quartermaster James Morrison to Secretary of War William Eustis, 8 January 1812, in Richard C. Knopf, ed., *Document Transcriptions of the War of 1812 in the Northwest*, 10 vols. (Columbus, Ohio, 1957-62), 6(1): 8.

¹⁶Morrison to Eustis, 4 March 1812, Knopf, *Documents of 1812*, 6 (1): 71.

sent him from the Philadelphia arsenal which were greatly inferior to that manufactured in Kentucky. He continued, "As I have taken much pains with the powder makers in this state, I could calculate on having powder made [stronger] than the samples now sent — but I am satisfied the Government have never had a quantity of powder from Dupont Nemours Co. — or from any other house equal to these samples." Morrison indicated that he had tested at least twenty samples of DuPont gunpowder.¹⁷

General William Hull, who in a few months would achieve ignominy as the commander who incredibly surrendered the strong fort of Detroit and a large American army to an inferior British force, in early May had just arrived in Cincinnati to make final preparations for his march to that place. He reported to Secretary Eustis that there was insufficient gunpowder on hand to make enough cartridges for the planned campaign. To remedy this shortage, Hull sent an express to Lexington with orders to purchase quickly three thousand pounds of local gunpowder. Other small lots of powder, by this time, had also been purchased outright by Morrison and shipped to points of greatest need.¹⁸

On 13 May, Morrison wrote that he would engage to have manufactured fifty thousand pounds of Kentucky powder, to be shipped to Newport or to Shippingport below Louisville. He had made contracts with two unspecified local powdermen, stipulating that the powder should be tested or "proved" before it left the mills. To secure powder of the very best quality, Morrison allowed an additional five and one-half cents per pound. He declared to Eustis that he had more experience than most military men in determining quality of various makes of gunpowder, and "having a provette, cannot be deceived." An eprouvette resembled a small flintlock pistol in which a carefully measured charge of powder to be tested was fired. The firing moved a lever set atop the pistol and the force exerted could be read on a scale marked in degrees. The Kentucky powder was contracted at fifty cents per pound, with cost of casks, cloth to cover, and shipping to be added. Eustis's reply authorized him to proceed with the gunpowder contracts "as expeditiously as possible."¹⁹

¹⁷Morrison to Eustis, 23 March, 12 April 1812, *ibid.*, 7 (1): 103, 128.

¹⁸General William Hull to Eustis, 8 May 1812, James Taylor to Eustis, 16 May 1812, Morrison to Eustis, 29 May 1812, *ibid.*, 6 (1): 190, 218, 243.

¹⁹Morrison to Eustis, 13 May 1812, *ibid.*, 6 (1): 209.

In his 13 May letter, Morrison reported that saltpeter had risen another three cents in price since his letter enclosing the samples, and that both saltpeter and sulphur were cash articles in the western country. Four days later, he wrote that only two thousand pounds of sulphur were available locally, not nearly enough to make fifty thousand pounds of gunpowder. Morrison had consequently placed an order with the Gratz firm in Philadelphia for six thousand pounds of sulphur. Hyman Gratz, of this company, three months later purchased a major interest in Mammoth Cave, one of the major sources of Kentucky saltpeter. In his 17 May letter to Eustis, Morrison indicated, "I am about erecting a powder mill," and would like to sell his output exclusively to the government. It is not known whether Morrison actually began production in his own mill.²⁰

James Maccoun, senior partner of J. & D. Maccoun in Lexington, like the Trotter family was also a wholesaler of saltpeter and gunpowder, though he possessed no mill. Maccoun had formerly been associated in a mercantile with John Tilford; the partnership ended in 1806 when Tilford left to enter business with his new father-in-law, George Trotter, Sr. James subsequently took brother David into his firm and operated as J. & D. Maccoun until 1816. It was from Maccoun that James Taylor had secured powder for General Hull. It may be that gunpowder from the Trotter mercantiles also had been purchased by Morrison, though it is not certain whether Samuel Trotter was one of the two powdermen whom Morrison, in May, had engaged for production of fifty thousand pounds. The Trotter mill may not yet have been put into complete operation.²¹

Many men of Kentucky were prompted to begin gunpowder

²⁰Morrison to Eustis, 13, 17 May 1812, *ibid.*, 6 (1): 209, 224; Eustis to Morrison, 26 May 1812, *ibid.*, 8:32; Angelo I. George and Gary A. O'Dell, "Damage to the Saltpeter Works at Mammoth Cave Caused by the New Madrid Earthquake of 1811-1812," *Filson Club History Quarterly* (in press). One sure way to quick riches during the period was to be a U.S. Army quartermaster in wartime. Morrison became so, and no stain was attached afterward to his name, though many elsewhere in his position enriched themselves at considerable expense to the government. Morrison's will later endowed the construction of Morrison College, a magnificent building erected on the grounds of Transylvania University.

²¹Taylor to Eustis, 25 January, 24 May 1812, Knopf, *Documents of 1812*, 6 (1): 30, 236-37; James F. Hopkins et al., eds., *The Papers of Henry Clay*, 9 vols. to date (Lexington, 1959), 2: 176.

manufacture, anticipating the greatly expanded demand created by wartime needs. Samuel Trotter was not about to be left out. Richard M. Johnson of Great Crossing, then serving in the Kentucky House of Representatives, wrote to Eustis on 19 July, at Samuel's request, with an offer to supply fifty thousand pounds of Trotter gunpowder. Johnson wrote that Trotter, "a merchant of the first respectability, punctuality, & integrity," was "the greatest wholesale merchant in the western Country, & has the means from his arrangements of procuring more salt petre than any individual perhaps in the state of Kentucky." Johnson gave his opinion that the manufacture of powder in Kentucky should be encouraged, and that the state could provide a plentiful supply for the government. He concluded the subject by writing, "In a personal interview I could urge many considerations in favor of such a contract."²²

Eustis sent a favorable response to this proposal, stating that it was the desire of the War Department to encourage the gunpowder industry in the western country. He enclosed powder samples in his letter to Johnson, to be used as standards, and indicated that "when your friend [Samuel Trotter] makes his proposals for furnishing powder of these proofs," a contract would be executed.²³

A month later, on 12 September, the secretary of war directed Morrison to deliver the Kentucky gunpowder to the Newport arsenal as quickly as it could be made. Six days later, Eustis sent Morrison notification of his appointment as deputy quartermaster general to William Henry Harrison's army. Morrison departed Lexington to join the Army of the Northwest, and spent the following months traveling between Kentucky and the settlements of Ohio and Indiana.²⁴

Morrison faced increasing difficulty in obtaining contracts for supplies and equipment required by the army, because banks and merchants were beginning to show reluctance to honor drafts upon the United States government. This hesitancy was brought about by a local shortage of specie. In a series of letters of increasing agitation, James Morrison repeatedly adjured the secretary

²²Richard M. Johnson to Eustis, 19 July 1812, Knopf, *Documents of 1812*, 6 (2): 111.

²³Eustis to R. M. Johnson, 3 August 1812, *ibid.*, 8: 54-55.

²⁴Eustis to Morrison, 12, 18 September 1812, *ibid.*, 8: 83, 89.

of war to place on deposit, in Lexington, sufficient funds for him to carry out the business of supplying the army. By November 1812, Morrison's frustration had reached such a state that he threatened resignation if an abundant fund upon which he might draw were not established. He estimated the need at "not less than One million of dollars, and before next March you may double this sum." The situation was quickly corrected by shipments of specie to Kentucky banks.²⁵

By this time, the Newport arsenal was stocked fully with Kentucky gunpowder, most of it obtained through the Maccoun firm. On 26 September, Eustis wrote to the deputy quartermaster at that facility, Captain James W. Bryson, and instructed him to ship one hundred barrels of gunpowder to New Orleans. If this could not be done without reducing the stockpile in the magazine below fifty barrels, more powder was to be obtained from Lexington. Previously, on 30 July, Morrison had arranged to ship six thousand pounds of gunpowder (fifty barrels cannon and ten barrels musket powder) from Lexington to Detroit; presumably this never reached its destination, for General Hull surrendered that post on 16 August.²⁶

In December 1812, Colonel Decius Wadsworth of the Ordnance Department in Washington wrote to Callender Irvine, commanding general of purchases in Philadelphia, regarding the offer made by the Trotter firm of Kentucky to supply "Gun Powder, Cannon and Musket." Wadsworth recommended that a contract be made. In April 1813, a contract was executed, and a copy sent to Captain Abraham R. Wooley in Pittsburgh. His duty would be to see that the contract was carried out and to determine the quality of the powder received in that river port. For this latter purpose, Colonel Wadsworth wrote, Wooley would be sent "in due time" an eprouvette for testing the powder. The contract called for an "average proof of from twelve to fifteen degrees. . . ." This requirement should have posed little difficulty, because Morrison had earlier reported Kentucky powder as consistently testing to at least seventeen degrees.²⁷

²⁵Morrison to Eustis, extensive correspondence 1812, in *ibid.*, 6 (1,2,3,4); Morrison to Eustis, 1 November 1812, *ibid.*, 6 (4): 81-82.

²⁶Eustis to Morrison, 30 July 1812, Eustis to Bryson, 26 September 1812, *ibid.*, 8: 52, 93.

²⁷Decius Wadsworth to Callender Irvine, 10 December 1812, Ordnance Department

The contract received by Captain Wooley stated that the firm of S. & G. Trotter would, within twelve months of the date of the contract, manufacture and deliver seventy thousand pounds of "good and approved Cannon, musket, & Rifle powder" in the following proportions:

Fifty barrels of Cannon, one hundred & fifty barrels of Musket and fifty barrels of rifle powder are to be delivered at Pittsburgh Pa. Seventy Barrels of Musket Powder, and eighty barrels of rifle powder are to be delivered at Newport Kentucky and one hundred & fifty barrels of Cannon Powder forty barrels of Musket and two barrels of Rifle Powder are to be delivered at New [Orleans].

Powder delivered to Pittsburgh and Newport, Kentucky, was to bring fifty-five cents per pound and that brought to New Orleans sixty cents, each shipment payable on demand. The powder was to be shipped in "good and substantial barrels containing 100 pounds in each barrel," but copper hoops would be furnished at the expense of the government. Although arrangements had been made for Wooley to test the powder received at Pittsburgh, the contract noted that Colonel Wadsworth, the commanding general of ordnance, would himself in Lexington test or "prove" the powder destined for New Orleans.²⁸

The contract was a fat plum for the Trotter firm. One week after its execution, on 20 April, Wadsworth wrote to Lewis Saunders of Lexington, who had made a separate offer to furnish the army with powder, and informed him that "engagements have already been made for a sufficient quantity of Powder on the Western Waters for the approaching Campaign."²⁹

A powder magazine had been constructed at Newport in 1804, for storage and shipment of powder on the Ohio. On 28 June of that year, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn had writ-

Letter Book No. 1, 1812-1814, 35, Record Group 156, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Contract between U.S. Ordnance Department and firm of S. & G. Trotter, 5 April 1813, Entry 78, Contracts for Ordnance and Ordnance Supplies, 1813-1828, 1: 1-2, Record Group 156, National Archives.

²⁸Contract between U.S. Ordnance Department and firm of S. & G. Trotter, 5 April 1813, Entry 78, Contracts for Ordnance and Ordnance Supplies, 1813-1828, 1: 1-2, Record Group 156, National Archives.

²⁹Wadsworth to Lewis Saunders of Lexington, Kentucky, 20 April 1813, Ordnance Department Letter Book No. 1, 1812-1814, 174, Record Group 156, National Archives.

ten to President Thomas Jefferson concerning the series of fortifications being built at Dearborn's directive along the western frontier from the Great Lakes to the Gulf. These forts were intended to extend American influence into the area and undermine that of the British. The stockades, with blockhouses, were to be constructed of timbers, "slightly hewed . . . and of the most durable kind to be obtained at the respective places." Each of the outposts was to have a conical powder magazine of brick, capable of storing up to one hundred barrels of powder.³⁰

The Newport facility was constructed under the supervision of Major James Taylor. Henry Dearborn finished his 28 June letter to the president and picked up his pen again, sending a directive to Taylor regarding the finishing details of the powder magazine:

It is not necessary that the inside of the Magazine should be plastered. It was intended that wooden columns of eight inches square should be placed under the beams of the upper story to prevent their swagging.

As you have no means at present of proving the powder with accuracy, you will receive it presuming it to be good but if there should be any doubt in your mind you will endeavor to satisfy yourself by the best means you possess whether it is as good as ought to be expected.³¹

Nine years later, the military ordnance depots on the Ohio still possessed no reliable means at hand for testing gunpowder quality. James Morrison's eprouvette was apparently the only one then in the region. In early May 1813, Captain Wooley at Pittsburgh wrote to Wadsworth concerning the testing apparatus to be sent to him, and was informed by the deputy commanding general (in Wadsworth's absence) that the eprouvettes to test the Trotter powder were being constructed "by a very respectable and ingenious Character (more as a favor to us than profit to him) and Col. W. Could not possibly hurry him, as he might have done some other," and that perhaps Wooley could test part of it "in the ordinary way" or put it off until further instruc-

³⁰Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to President Thomas Jefferson, 28 June 1804, *American State Papers: Indian Affairs*, 1: 695.

³¹Henry Dearborn to Major James Taylor of Newport, Kentucky, 28 June 1804, James Taylor Papers, KHS. General Taylor was present at Detroit when General Hull surrendered the fort and army to the British. Out of disgust, Taylor refused to sign the articles of capitulation.

tions from Colonel Wadsworth. In July, Wadsworth informed Wooley by letter that the eprouvette would soon be on its way, in care of one or two officers sent to him as assistants. In the event that Trotter's powder arrived before the testing device, he wrote, "make Proof of the Powder in some other way, which will satisfy you as to its goodness." Should there still be doubt as to the quality, the use of the eprouvette would make the final judgment.³²

Trotter powder must have been found quite satisfactory, for in April 1814, a second contract was executed for an additional seventy thousand pounds of powder to be supplied by the Trotter mills. This contract was almost identical with the first, save that delivery was scheduled for no less than six months from date, and the price per pound had dropped to 49 cents.³³

By this time, Captain Wooley in Pittsburgh was engaged in constructing facilities for storage and testing of gunpowder. On 3 June 1814, Decius Wadsworth wrote to him that he did not like the situation of the powder magazine, and that it might be best to move it further from the public road. Wadsworth suggested that Wooley undertake to construct a small building nearby, two stories high, for use as an office and for the scales and equipment needed for testing powder. He stated that the building should be located some distance from the magazine and

may be built of wood, and will serve to dry powder in, to overhaul it and sift it. For Powder which is to be kept many years ought to undergo these operations once in two or three years, and yet oftener if the magazine should prove damp.

Trotter powder was swiftly, though carefully, manufactured according to specifications of the military contracts, and by mid-summer 1813 was on hand in the Newport arsenal, ready for use by the volunteer troops crossing from Kentucky into the northwest country.³⁴

³²[James?] Morton to Captain A. R. Wooley, 15 May 1813, Decius Wadsworth to Captain A. R. Wooley, 9 July 1813, Ordnance Department, Letter Book No. 1, 1813-1814, 199, 295-96, Record Group 156, National Archives.

³³Contract between Ordnance Department and firm of S. & G. Trotter, 2 April 1814, Entry 78, Contracts for Ordnance and Ordnance Supplies, Vol. 1, 1813-1828, 9-10, Record Group 156, National Archives.

³⁴Wadsworth to Wooley, 3 June 1814, Entry 78, Ordnance Department Letter Book 2, 5 April 1814, 18 August 1815, 48-50, Record Group 156, National Archives.

In late 1812, the Trotter brothers were infuriated when they learned of a rumor being spread in Lexington, which, in effect, accused them of treason. Immediately, they printed and distributed a broadside sharply refuting this charge:

In justice to ourselves and our friends, we feel bound to notice in this public way, a *malicious* and *wicked* slander, which has been circulated concerning us; which we have reason to believe originated with ELIJAH FOLEY of this county, and in its circulation has assumed various forms and diversity of character. The substance of the slanderous charge is — that we were supplying the British or Canadians with Powder, and of course unfriendly to our country. To those who know us, and who know the author of the report, it would be unnecessary to do more than to deny the charge, and more particularly when it was known to have originated with a man, who, from habitual intoxication has become considerably deranged in his intellects. His motives (if any he had) are unknown to us, except that more than three years since he was discontinued as a manufacturer of powder for us.³⁵

Elijah's father, Richard Foley, in 1793 had begun production at the first commercial powder mill of the state, on his property at South Elkhorn in Fayette County. Though Richard had died only a year later, the several Foley brothers had in turn operated the mill. Prior to the War of 1812, Elijah Foley was the powderman at South Elkhorn. As the Trotter broadsheet indicates, beginning in 1809 the store of S. & G. Trotter (and, most likely, those of the other Trotters) refused to carry Foley gunpowder, although formerly it had been stocked. The loss of this market outlet must have been a severe blow to Elijah's fortunes.³⁶

Just about this time (1812) Samuel Trotter began making gunpowder at his farm on the Old Frankfort Road. It was a large-scale operation and backed by the well-padded Trotter purses; it doubtless came quickly into production using, what was for Kentucky, state-of-the-art equipment. Elijah, who recently had been advertising his own powder for sale in the *Kentucky Gazette*, now faced serious competition.³⁷

³⁵Trotter broadsheet, 22 July 1812.

³⁶Gary A. O'Dell, "Bluegrass Powdermen: A Sketch of the Industry," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 87 (1989): 102, 104; Trotter broadsheet, 22 July 1812.

³⁷*Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 12 November 1811. There was a notable technology lag between the eastern manufacturers and those of the frontier region. Improvements

It was doubtless in a somewhat resentful mood that Elijah made the remarks attributed to him, in answer to a speculative query passed casually in late 1811 while traveling in company from Lexington. Elijah, John Keller, Jacob Keller (John's son), William Pollard, Elijah Pollard, and John B. Miller (Jessamine County powderman and near neighbor to the Foleys) were en route to the Republican Meeting House on the Higbee Mill Road. Along the way John Keller remarked, "I wonder where all the powder went that was made for Trotter's in this neighborhood?" Elijah Foley is reported to have replied, "They sent it to Canada, for his brand was seen there." John B. Miller deposed that Foley insinuated that the Trotters were well aware that their powder was being received by the British.³⁸

In their 22 July broadsheet, the Trotters reported that one form the rumor had assumed was that ". . . we had shipped large quantities of Powder to Pittsburgh, with directions to send it to Canada." The Trotter brothers reported that in the previous two years only about a thousand pounds had been shipped to Pittsburgh. William Brown deposed:

I resided with Mr. James Adams [merchant at Pittsburgh] from Dec. 1805 until the latter part of the year 1810, and during that time he received frequent supplies of Powder and other articles from S. & G. Trotter, all of which articles were sold to merchants and others residing in Pittsburgh, and the neighboring towns and country.

A former Trotter clerk (September 1807 to March 1812), Barnett Metcalfe, similarly swore that Trotter gunpowder had gone to legitimate customers, and pronounced the circulating rumor as "false and malicious."³⁹

Elijah immediately printed up a somewhat incoherent handbill of his own, in which he denied having spread any such rumor. Purportedly sworn statements were attached. Curiously, these

in powder mill technology were made in France and Great Britain and the eastern industrial region. Kentucky powder mills never improved beyond colonial techniques and machinery; the industry here died before new technology could infiltrate.

³⁸George Trotter, Jr., "TO THE PEOPLE" (broadsheet), 31 July 1812, McCalla Papers, WVU, with attached depositions of Jacob Keller, John B. Miller, and others.

³⁹Trotter broadsheet, 22 July 1812, with attached depositions of William Brown and Barnard Metcalfe.

testimonies seem to do more damage than good. One such declaration, used inexplicably as exoneration by Foley, read:

WILLIAM POLLARD says, before witnesses, that he never heard Foley say that the said Trotters had sent powder to Canada but once, and then Capt. Foley was in a state of intoxication, and knew not what he was saying.⁴⁰

George Trotter, Jr., who only a few weeks before had declared his candidacy for the state legislature, marched promptly and angrily into the printer's shop and came out with still another broadsheet on 31 July:

From the peculiar manner of Foley's hand-bill, in selecting me individually to bear the force of his *slandorous insinuations*, and imputing to *me* electioneering motives in making a defence to charges against our reputation as men — I am induced to make this publication, to expose his persevering villainy; and trust the following certificates will sufficiently demonstrate to the world the correctness of the information upon which our former address was predicated. The public can compare *Mr. Foley's account* of the declarations of those men, (to whom we referred in our former address) and the subjoined certificates; and determine how far *truth* has been respected by Mr. Foley — of whom I now take leave, and shall not notice further.

Beneath this opening declaration were appended depositions by, or concerning, several of the men whose supposedly sworn statements had previously appeared on Elijah Foley's handbill — and they were in direct contradiction. In depositions of greater length, Foley's neighbors indicated that they or those known to them either had given no prior statements to Foley or that, if they had been interviewed, he later had printed twisted remarks or those not made at all. George Trotter obligingly reprinted the "depositions" of Elijah Foley's 28 July handbill on his own bill so that readers might draw their own conclusions.⁴¹

The heated broadsheet exchange no doubt caused hard feelings between the Foleys and the Trotters, in a town and in a season

⁴⁰Trotter broadsheet, 31 July 1812, containing reprint of depositions from broadsheet of Elijah Foley, 28 July 1812. The actual Foley handbill was not available to the writer. In fairness to Elijah Foley, it must be noted that the account in this article of the handbill war is wholly taken from sources necessarily favorable to the Trotters.

⁴¹Trotter broadsheet, 31 July 1812.

when feelings already ran high. Late July 1812 was a very sensitive time for the Trotters, particularly on such an inflammatory matter. By his 1805 marriage to Eliza Pope, George Trotter, Jr., had become brother-in-law to prominent politician John Pope, who, in that summer of 1812, became for a time one of the most hated men in Kentucky.⁴²

Pope had been a resident of Lexington since about 1803, and since 1807, United States senator from Kentucky. A former Federalist, he had, by his own declaration, converted to a staunch Jefferson Republican about 1800. By the time of the 1812 war, his was the majority party in Kentucky and also the line followed by state legislator (1809, 1811) George Trotter, Jr. There are several other indications that the Trotter and Pope families were fairly close. One significant clue is a letter from S. & G. Trotter to William Worsley, dated 11 May 1811, canceling their subscription to the *Lexington Reporter*. This step was taken at a time when the *Reporter* had grown increasingly hostile in its criticism of the politics of John Pope.⁴³

Pope's chief political rival was Henry Clay, who, though also a Jefferson Republican, was one of the "Young Warhawks" ardently in support of an aggressive policy against the British. Factions grew around both men, though Clay came increasingly to dominate. The stand taken on the war question in 1812 by Pope alienated many Kentuckians in a growing atmosphere of war fever.

Kentuckians were firmly anti-British, and the state legislature sent to Congress in January 1812 a resolution condemning Great Britain and pledging the arms and resources of Kentucky to the forthcoming contest. On 1 June, a reluctant President James Madison bowed to the will of the people and instructed Congress and the nation to prepare for war. The war bill swept through the House, but was held up for twelve days in the Senate, largely through the delaying tactics of John Pope.⁴⁴

⁴²*Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 5 February 1805; Orval W. Baylor, *John Pope, Kentuckian: His Life and Times, 1770-1845* (Cynthiana, Ky., 1943), 29.

⁴³Baylor, *John Pope*, 27, 37, 59-81; Ranck, *History of Lexington*, 178; S. & G. Trotter to William Worsley, *Lexington Reporter*, 11 May 1811, Draper MSS 5CC14.

⁴⁴Resolution, "On the subject of Foreign Relations," 13 January 1812, *Kentucky Acts* (1812), 252-54; Baylor, *John Pope*, 82-87; Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (Lexington, 1960), 127.

Sincerely convinced that the United States should not go to war with Great Britain, Pope had left Kentucky for Washington before the state legislature had convened and passed their resolution. He was not a pacifist, but believed that the country was not ready to fight a war against Britain, the leading world power; in addition, Pope felt that the actions of France had placed that country at equal culpability with Great Britain. In several handbills, circulated in Lexington a year later, he explained his position and his reasons for casting his vote against the war. In Kentucky, Pope had been subjected to harsh criticism and outright vilification in the press and through handbills. To many Kentuckians, John Pope's actions to delay the declaration of war, and his subsequent "no" vote, were nothing less than treasonable. He was burned in effigy in the streets of Nicholasville and Mt. Sterling during the summer of 1812. Pope pointed out that he had adhered to his beliefs and to his stated position, and could not honorably have voted any other way. Although he was well aware that he was committing political suicide, given the mood of the country, he stood his ground. In print, Senator Pope declared:

My countrymen, an awful crisis is I fear fast approaching, which will require the best efforts of all true friends to their country, and instead of abusing each other about matters of opinion, and calling hard names, we had better unite for our common safety.⁴⁵

Events on the high seas, and the actions of France and Great Britain in Europe, were followed keenly by the inhabitants of the western states. In Kentucky, the war was real and had commenced long before the actual paper declaration; the people were in no mood to appreciate the political niceties of the situation. Many Kentuckians blamed the British for provoking the northwestern tribes into forsaking the Greenville treaty and renewing hostilities along the frontier. One man, who signed himself "Atticus" in a letter to William Worsley for publication in the

⁴⁵John Pope, "TO THE PEOPLE" (broadsheet), 18 August 1813, McCalla Papers, WVU; John Pope, "TO THE FREEMEN OF FAYETTE COUNTY" (broadsheet), 2 August 1813, McCalla Papers, WVU; Baylor, *John Pope*, 87, 91-92; Clark, *History of Kentucky*, 127.

Reporter, perhaps expressed the opinions of many of his fellow Kentuckians:

Let it not be presumed that because some few individuals ride out a few miles from Lexington, dine with Mr. Pope, drink some appropriate toasts and then return to Lexington, that Mr. Popes conduct meets with the approbation of any real friend to his country.⁴⁶

Among those who still called at the home of John Pope after the adjournment of Congress in 1812, for dinner and drinks, were doubtless the members of the Trotter family. Before the actual declaration, George Trotter had placed his own political career in jeopardy by adopting the same antiwar stance as his wife's brother. A widower, Pope had remarried in 1810 to a Washington socialite, Miss Eliza Johnson; no doubt the new Mrs. Pope was grateful for social contacts in a strange state suddenly grown hostile to her husband. Pope refused to give up his seat as senator, and on the expiration of his term in 1813, rather defiantly entered his name in the race for the state legislature. His esteem among Kentuckians was then so low that he did not obtain victory, but eventually his political fortunes reversed and he continued a long and distinguished career in public service.⁴⁷

On 24 July 1812, just two days after the first broadside of the Trotter brothers had appeared to squelch rumors that they had sold powder to the enemies of their country, George Trotter, Jr., brought out a broadsheet in which he reaffirmed his own candidacy to the Kentucky General Assembly. Appended to the sheet was his carefully neutral statement concerning the question of Pope's reelection to the United States Senate. Because George had learned that his brother-in-law would not run again for this office, he indicated that the question was thus moot and did not require a reply. Trotter declared simply that, if elected, he would support the candidate who best represented the interests of the people.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Atticus to William Worsley, n.d., Draper MSS 5CC75.

⁴⁷Baylor, *John Pope*, 29, 87, 91-93; Pope broadsheet, 2 August 1813; Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 547; *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 15 November 1815, eulogy of George Trotter, by "an Officer of his Brigade."

⁴⁸George Trotter, Jr., "TO THE INDEPENDENT VOTERS OF FAYETTE" (broadsheet), 5 August 1812, McCalla Papers, WVU.

A broadsheet signed by "A LEXINGTON MECHANIC" appeared on 5 August, defending the record of George Trotter, Jr.:

Have you seen the persecution against Trotter? — Certainly you have. Why, let me ask, is he singled out as the object of PROSCRIPTION? Did any man ever condemn his votes while your Representative? Surely, I think not. What has he to do with John Pope? Could he have controlled his vote? — or has it become a fact that one man is chargeable *for* the acts of another? Has not Col. Trotter told you, in plain terms, that if elected *he will have a due regard to your opinions* in the choice of a Senator to congress — in other words, that your will shall be his? Who has done more toward ARMING AND EQUIPPING THE VOLUNTEERS to fight the battles of their country than he? It is a fact that he has given 250 to 300 dollars for this purpose, and that too *after* he had been overlooked by the Executive in the arrangement for Field Officers to command the Volunteers, by appointing a younger Colonel from the same division to command? ACTIONS speak louder than words.

At the very moment that George Trotter, Jr., found himself confronted by a very sensitive political situation, the rumored taint of treason began to make its way through the voting population of Fayette County. Though the Trotters passed this crisis, and retained the respect of their fellows, both George Trotter, Jr., and subsequently John Pope lost their bids for the state legislature. There would not be another Trotter elected to public office until 1822, when James Trotter, age sixty-eight, again was elected to the Kentucky General Assembly.⁴⁹

War with Great Britain had been officially declared on 18 June 1812. Kentuckians responded to the call for volunteers with an enthusiasm notably lacking in the eastern states. George Trotter, Jr., though overlooked in the selection of field officers, was not about to miss the forthcoming action and took a voluntary rank reduction in order to lead a mounted company. George and his younger brother, James Gabriel Trotter, served valiantly in the Northwest during the latter part of 1812. Samuel, nearly forty, fulfilled his patriotic duty (and made a good profit) at home by producing gunpowder for the campaigns. William Henry Harrison selected Captain George Trotter as his personal aide-de-

⁴⁹A Lexington Mechanic, "TO THE FARMERS OF FAYETTE" (broadsheet), 5 August 1812, McCalla Papers, WVU.

camp, until the expiration of George's first enlistment in early January 1813.⁵⁰

The early months of the war had been dismal for the Americans; the country was unprepared for war and, for the most part, led by inept and aging Revolutionary War veterans. The year 1813 began with the disaster of the River Raisin on January 22, in which many of the Lexington troopers perished. As the year progressed, however, the situation improved greatly. In September, Oliver Hazard Perry defeated the British fleet on Lake Erie and forced the British to abandon Detroit. A large army, consisting primarily of volunteers from Kentucky and jointly commanded by Harrison and Kentucky Governor Isaac Shelby, pursued the retreating force of British regulars and Indians into Canada. George Trotter was present on this expedition, promoted to general, and placed in command of a brigade. Decisively defeated on 5 October, the British and Indians never again posed a serious threat to the northwestern country.⁵¹ Trotter gunpowder was used in great quantity in these engagements. Samuel Trotter knew that his brother's very life might depend upon the quality of the powder he made in Lexington.⁵²

In 1814, Napoleon was exiled to the island of Elba, following the capitulation of Paris, and the British were now free to turn their full attention and military might to the war in North America. Invasion seemed imminent everywhere, and the need for stocks of arms and powder was more urgent than ever before. Commanding the seas with a powerful navy, the British could land nearly anywhere along the coast; the newly acquired and strategic Mississippi port of New Orleans seemed particularly vulnerable.

Early in 1814, Decius Wadsworth wrote to Callender Irvine at Philadelphia concerning Trotter powder that might still remain

⁵⁰Lexington Reporter, 18 October 1815; Perrin, *History of Fayette County*, 420-21; Anderson C. Quisenberry, *Kentucky in the War of 1812* (Frankfort, 1915), 86, 92, 177, 186, 192; "General Trotter's Tomb," *Kentucky Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 1 (1899): 21-25; Harrison to Eustis, 24 December 1812, in Logan Esarey, ed., *Governor's Messages and Letters: Messages and Letters of William Henry Harrison*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1922), 2: 252-53.

⁵¹Harrison to War Department, 30 September 1813, *Washington National Intelligencer*, n.d., in Knopf, *Documents of 1812*, 5 (2): 236; Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 77-79; Ranck *History of Lexington*, 253-68.

⁵²"Trotter's Tomb," 21.

at Newport, pending shipment to the East: "If it is remaining in Store there, it will be proper to send it to New Orleans, as by the late Return a great deficiency appears there." A month later, in mid-March, he wrote to Captain Wolstonecraft in New Orleans and informed him that two hundred barrels of Kentucky powder were on the way to that city, and an additional two hundred barrels were being shipped from Philadelphia via Pittsburgh, destined either for New Orleans or Natchez. Enclosing a report of the inspection of the Trotter powder, Wadsworth reported that "Captain Wooley writes me from Pittsburgh, that the Kentucky powder is superior to any he has received from Philadelphia. . . ."⁵³

The British invasion of the continent was three-pronged and massive. In the north, ten thousand red-coated regulars advanced from Montreal and were defeated at Lake Champlain by the Americans under Captain Thomas McDonough. A second force, though much smaller, landed on the Potomac below Washington and marched into the city against only token resistance, burning the public buildings. The same force, similarly attempting to raid Baltimore, was stopped by the fierce resistance of Fort McHenry. In the Gulf, the expected attack came in December against New Orleans by seven thousand British troops. Only the indecisiveness of Sir Edward Pakenham, the British commander, prevented the American positions from being overrun by the first onslaught. Pakenham's vacillations bought precious time for the forces under Andrew Jackson, reinforced at the last minute by nearly two thousand Kentucky militia. After making a series of bloody advances, the British were defeated in the famous battle of 8 January 1815. Victory was obtained in battle, though, in an irony of warfare, peace between the two countries had actually been agreed upon some weeks before in Ghent.⁵⁴

As the war progressed, more and more men throughout the Bluegrass saw the profits to be gleaned quickly during a wartime economy; the number of powder mills and saltpeter speculators proliferated. During the war, within twenty miles of Lexington,

⁵³Decius Wadsworth to Callender Irvine, Philadelphia, 19 February 1814, Decius Wadsworth to Captain Wolstonecraft, 16 March 1814, Ordnance Department Letter Book No. 1, 1812-1814, 467-68, 516, Record Group 156, National Archives.

⁵⁴Ranck, *History of Lexington*, 279-80; Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 79-87.

there were no fewer than a dozen gunpowder manufactories. The Trotter mill, with the strong financial backing of the multifaceted Trotter interests, was the largest and most important of all. The two military contracts landed by the firm amounted to 140,000 pounds of powder; by comparison the DuPont mills of Delaware, the largest maker of powder in the country, supplied approximately 750,000 pounds to the government during the course of the 1812 war.⁵⁵

Samuel Trotter continued to advertise that he would pay the “highest price, in CASH” for saltpeter to supply his mill, but he was not the only person seeking to gather large supplies of the substance essential in powder manufacture. Competition was fierce for the existing supply, and Lexington, centrally located with respect to the cavernous, niter-producing areas of the state, became the major marketplace for trade in this commodity. Not only local powder mills bid for Kentucky saltpeter; by far a greater amount was shipped to factories in the East, notably the DuPont company.

The saltpeter trade in Lexington is reflected in the correspondence between Charles Wilkins, the same Lexington merchant who earlier had employed Samuel Trotter at his store, and Archibald McCall, the DuPont agent in Philadelphia. Wilkins, who became one of the major shippers of Kentucky niter during the war, wrote in March 1811 that “I expect considerable competition — There are persons in every direction buying it and sending it to the southward in Waggons —” In fall the same year, he wrote to McCall:

The difficulty of procuring large quantities has increased much — It has become a custom to purchase it up on the frontiers & it is now sold only in wagon-loads at this place . . . 22 to 25 cents are now the current prices in the neighborhood of the caves

To assure a constant supply, Wilkins purchased Mammoth Cave and, with Fleming Gatewood, established a major mining operation there.⁵⁶

⁵⁵O’Dell, “Bluegrass Powdermen,” 100; *DuPont: The Autobiography of an American Enterprise* (New York, 1952), 21.

⁵⁶Archibald McCall to E. I. duPont, 11 March 1811, Group 5, Series A, Longwood Manuscripts, Hagley Library and Museum (hereafter Longwood MSS); George and O’Dell, “Damage to Mammoth Cave.”

The price of saltpeter began to decline as the war progressed, primarily due to price-fixing agreements among speculators and their major clients. At the prices allowed to them, the saltpeter miners were more reluctant to engage in their trade. Too, much of the saltpeter was used locally. In spring 1814, James Maccoun informed McCall that "The manufacture of Powder is greatly extended in this state & a large quantity of [saltpeter] is used in that way. . . ." ⁵⁷

With the end of the war, the demand for gunpowder dropped sharply, and the many saltpeter speculators and men who had commenced powder factories found they lacked markets to sustain their operations. An entire industry collapsed virtually overnight, its depressed situation reflecting the postwar economy of the nation as a whole. Unlike many of their contemporaries, though, the powder operation of Samuel and George Trotter, Jr., weathered the hard times and continued to flourish. With no more powder contracted to the government, however, the Trotters now found it necessary to advertise their gunpowder at their store in Lexington, "where they have constantly on hand for sale by the quantity GLAZED GUNPOWDER warranted of a superior quality." ⁵⁸

The local market, however, could absorb only so much of the gunpowder made by numerous Bluegrass mills struggling to remain solvent, and the Trotter firm found another outlet. In summer 1815, Jacques Antoine Bidermann, married to Evalina DuPont and active in the business of that company, made a surreptitious tour of the saltpeter-producing southern states, posing as a real-estate speculator, in order to spy out the situation of this commodity first-hand. In July, he wrote from Louisville (not having yet visited Lexington) that:

I saw here powder made by Mess. S. & G. Trotter; it looks very good and the hunters are said to think it excellent. . . . Their principal market, however, is not in Kentucky, for there are many other manufacturers here, and as you told me, many of the hunters make their own powder; but they sell much of it for the Indian trade in the direction of St. Louis and up the Wabash; ordinary good powder is sold to the Indians at a dollar

⁵⁷McCall to E. I. duPont, 27 June 1814, Group 5, Series A, Longwood MSS.

⁵⁸O'Dell, "Bluegrass Powdermen," 105, 109-11, 117; *Lexington Reporter*, 12 July 1815.

a pound. Mess. Trotter have established an agency for that market at St. Louis where they sell a considerable quantity.

And so, ironically, Indians were purchasing the very powder that had helped defeat other Indians not two years prior.⁵⁹

The Trotters, as prominent citizens, had been continuously active in public affairs. Like his father James Trotter, George, Jr., had entered politics, serving two terms in the state legislature before the war. George had been elected a trustee of Lexington, 1806-09, as had Samuel in 1811 and 1812. George and Samuel served jointly as treasurers for Lexington for several years. Both men were active in securing improvements for the town, from street paving to organizing fire companies, churches, and banks.⁶⁰

Shortly before the war there had developed in the country a craze for merino sheep, whose value became tremendously inflated. Samuel made a personal profit of fourteen hundred dollars in trading these sheep, and arranged to have Samuel Long build a residence on Mill Street for which partial payment was to be two or three merinos valued at twenty-five hundred dollars. Samuel's house, completed in 1812, was situated at the corner of High and Mill streets in Lexington. (The rear portion of the house still remains as 318 South Mill Street.) Unfortunately for Long, the price of merino sheep had dropped drastically by the time construction was finished. With good grace, Long accepted his payment, barbecued the sheep, and invited the Trotter family to the feast.⁶¹

In the 1812 articles of agreement between Samuel and brother George, Jr., the small firm of Robert Dudley had merged with the Trotters; the Trotters provided the capital, and Dudley's store gave them another location. In September 1815, an additional article was entered by the county clerk in regard to Dudley's

⁵⁹Antoine Bidermann to E. I. du Pont, 6 July 1815, in B. G. duPont, *Life of Eleuthere Irenee du Pont from Contemporary Correspondence 1814-1819*, 10 vols. (Newark, Del., 1923-26), 10: 98.

⁶⁰Ranck, *History of Lexington*, 178, 281; *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 5 March 1811, 7, 21 January 1812; *Minute Book 1781-1811*, 276, 299, 301, 309, 323, 350, 421 (meetings held 18 January 1806, 2, 6 April 1807, 4, 7 January 1809, 2 March 1811).

⁶¹Ranck, *History of Lexington*, 238; Dunn, "Old Houses of Lexington," 2: 521; Fayette County Deed Book X, 70, 28 August 1812; William A. Leavy, "Memoir of Lexington," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 41 (1943): 57-59.

possibly also becoming involved in the Trotter powder mill.⁶² It was not to be. Less than a month later, on 13 October, “after a severe illness of 15 days,” thirty-seven-year-old George Trotter, Jr., unexpectedly passed away. All agreements were subject to reevaluation.⁶³

Fortunately, the brothers had made astute advance arrangements sufficient to deal with such a situation. Aside from the detailed articles of 1812, George had made his will some years before and thereby ensured the smooth transition of the business. The terms of the will gave Samuel preference in purchasing, on reasonable credit and terms, “any or all of the property, debts and funds belonging to the partnership under the name of Samuel & George Trotter. . . .” Samuel Trotter was himself one of the executors of the estate, along with his father, his brother’s wife, and her brother John Pope.⁶⁴

The various business enterprises of the Trotter brothers suffered little from George’s early demise, for Samuel all along had been the guiding force. The agreements with Robert Dudley, both those longstanding and the recent powdermill option, were swiftly dissolved, and Samuel now operated the concerns as sole proprietor. For the sake of continuity, and perhaps as a memorial to his brother, the firm continued to be known as S. & G. Trotter.⁶⁵

The gunpowder market remained depressed for a time after the war, but by the end of the second decade of the century it had recovered sufficiently in Kentucky to warrant the establishment of several new powder manufacturing concerns. Consequently, in March 1822, the *Kentucky Gazette* observed, “On other occasions we have referred to the flourishing state of manufactories in this country generally; but those of Powder and White Lead are in a state of operations which deserve particular notice. . . . Our Powder is of the best, and is sent to Pittsburgh and into the countries southwest of Kentucky in great quantities.”

⁶²Fayette County Deed Book X, 73, 28 August 1812; Fayette County Deed Book X, 75, 23 September 1812.

⁶³Lexington *Reporter*, 18 October 1815.

⁶⁴Fayette County Will Book C, 510, 1 April 1807.

⁶⁵Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 25 February 1820.

The Trotter family had been pioneers, on a large scale, of both enterprises in the Bluegrass.⁶⁶

For a time after the war Samuel had faced only slight local competition. On the Russell Cave Pike at the northern limits of Lexington operated the McCoy Mill, reportedly established in 1808. Like the Trotter manufactory, it had furnished powder during the war and survived the postwar transition. At the opposite end of the county was the Foley Mill. In 1816, John Higbee apparently had taken over the Foley operation at South Elkhorn, due to the increasing mental incapacity of Elijah Foley, the owner and Higbee's near neighbor. However, in 1818 a new powder operation began with the purchase of a four-acre tract on the Woodford Road (present-day Versailles Road) by the Reverend Spencer Cooper.⁶⁷

In March of that year, only one month after the purchase of the land, Cooper ran an ad in the *Kentucky Gazette* which stated that he had entered into partnership with Joseph and George Boswell to manufacture gunpowder. Cooper's powder would be available either at the Boswell's store in Lexington or at the mill one mile west of Lexington — Cooper's Powder Mill, by a fine coincidence, was located adjacent to that of Samuel Trotter, though the properties fronted on different roads. In the years ahead, additional land purchases by Cooper would cause the two powder mills to share property lines in common.⁶⁸

Thus began the Lexington powder war between the two neighbors, in all likelihood a friendly competition. After the passage of three years with virtually no mention of gunpowder or saltpeter in the local press, a flurry of advertisements suddenly appeared in the newspapers of Lexington and the state. In his first ad, Cooper had stated that he would give "the highest price for SALTPETER, delivered at J&G Boswell's Store, on Cheap-side, Lexington. . . ." The same advertisement appeared again in several succeeding issues. It is doubtful that Cooper received

⁶⁶O'Dell, "Bluegrass Powdermen," 109-11; Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 21 March 1822.

⁶⁷Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 17 April 1815; Gary A. O'Dell, "The Spencer Cooper Powder Mill," *Journal of Spelean History* 22 (1988): 12-14.

⁶⁸Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 27 March 1818; O'Dell, "Spencer Cooper Mill," 12-14.

much response in his efforts to obtain saltpeter from a defunct Kentucky industry.⁶⁹

It took Samuel almost a year to respond to the challenge; possibly he had been distracted by the minor explosion at his own mill on 21 April, or by his involvement in the many other businesses, as well as his new position as a director of the United States Bank in Lexington. It may be that he did not consider Cooper, at first, a serious challenge to his own established powder market. Regardless of the causes for the initial delay, twelve months after Spencer Cooper's business debut the Trotter family responded vigorously. Samuel began an extended advertising campaign across the state, through his distributors, that would continue unabated for the next two years. The primary intention seemed to be to maintain a share of the lucrative Louisville market.⁷⁰

Spencer Cooper was not caught napping. In the same issue, 20 February 1819, that the advertisement for "Trotters Warranted Gun and Rifle Powder" appeared in the Louisville *Public Advertiser*, notice was given of fifty kegs of powder "Just received from manufactory of Spencer Cooper and Co. Lexington, and equal to any manufactured in the United States. . . ." In April, Cooper again placed a large ad in the *Gazette* of Lexington, but a month later the Trotters had a surprise for him.⁷¹

In May 1819, an advertisement in the *Gazette* broke the news that [John] Tilford & [James] Trotter had entered a partnership with William Roman to manufacture gunpowder at their new Eagle Powder Mill. This mill was located on Roman's 150-acre tract on the Hickman (present-day Nicholasville) Road about three and one-half miles from the boundaries of Lexington at the time (approximately at the intersection of Higbee Mill Road). The same ad ran concurrently in the newspapers of Louisville, Maysville, Cincinnati, Chillicothe, St. Louis, Nashville, and Vincennes. It was a bold move in the game of financial chess, and by the following year newspaper advertisements showed the solidarity of the Trotter family as gunpowder distributors

⁶⁹Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 27 March 1818; Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 10 April 1818 and following.

⁷⁰Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 21 April, 21 February 1818, 21 May, 20 February 1819.

⁷¹Louisville *Public Advertiser*, 21 February, 28 April 1819.

announced that they had “. . . on hand and will be constantly supplied with Roman, Trotter & Co.’s and Samuel Trotters best rifle powder, in kegs and half kegs, pound and half pound canisters.”⁷²

William Roman was a good investment for James Trotter and John Tilford. He was forty-five years old in 1820; by virtue of his pre-1803 marriage to Amy Foley, he had become part of that family of Fayette County powdermakers. Amy was the daughter of Richard Foley, and though her father had died of measles in 1794 shortly after establishing the South Elkhorn mill, the powder mill had continued as a family operation. Roman had been listed as a supplier of gunpowder to the S. & G. Trotter mercantile prior to 1812, thus was steeped in powder-making technology from an early date, and had both sufficient experience and interest to manage a large powder mill. When Amy died in the 1833 epidemic, he married Juretta Higbee, a mature woman from yet another family with a tradition of powdermaking.⁷³

The Eagle Powder Mill, while not so large an operation as that on Samuel Trotter’s farm, was equal in size and extent to that of Spencer Cooper. Samuel’s mill annually produced between 125,000 and 140,000 pounds of gunpowder, while Eagle manufactured 45,000 and Cooper about 50,000 pounds. With finished gunpowder then selling for forty-five cents per pound, the combined sales of these three companies alone amounted to well over one hundred thousand dollars, a very substantial sum for the early nineteenth century. It is obvious that the gunpowder industry was, even after the 1812 war, an important segment of the Kentucky economy.⁷⁴

The day-to-day operations of the Trotter mills were carried out by slaves, both those owned by Samuel and more skilled workers hired from their owners, probably on long-term con-

⁷²Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 14 May 1819; Fayette County Deed Book T, 281-82, 20 March 1870. William Roman property and powder mills, “and the raw materials of every description on hand as also any gunpowder,” are deeded as security to Leslie Combs, should Roman fail to repay debts to William Pollock and A. Farrow totalling \$3,214.36; Louisville *Public Advertiser*, 17 June 1820. Previous research had indicated George Trotter, Sr., was a partner in the Eagle mill. Deed research has disclosed James Trotter as the partner of Tilford and Roman. See O’Dell, “Bluegrass Powdermen,” 109-110.

⁷³Roman Family Files, KHS; O’Dell, “Bluegrass Powdermen,” 109-10.

⁷⁴Angelo I. George, comp., “United States 1820 Federal Census of Manufacturers, Kentucky: Gunpowder and Saltpeter,” in author’s possession.

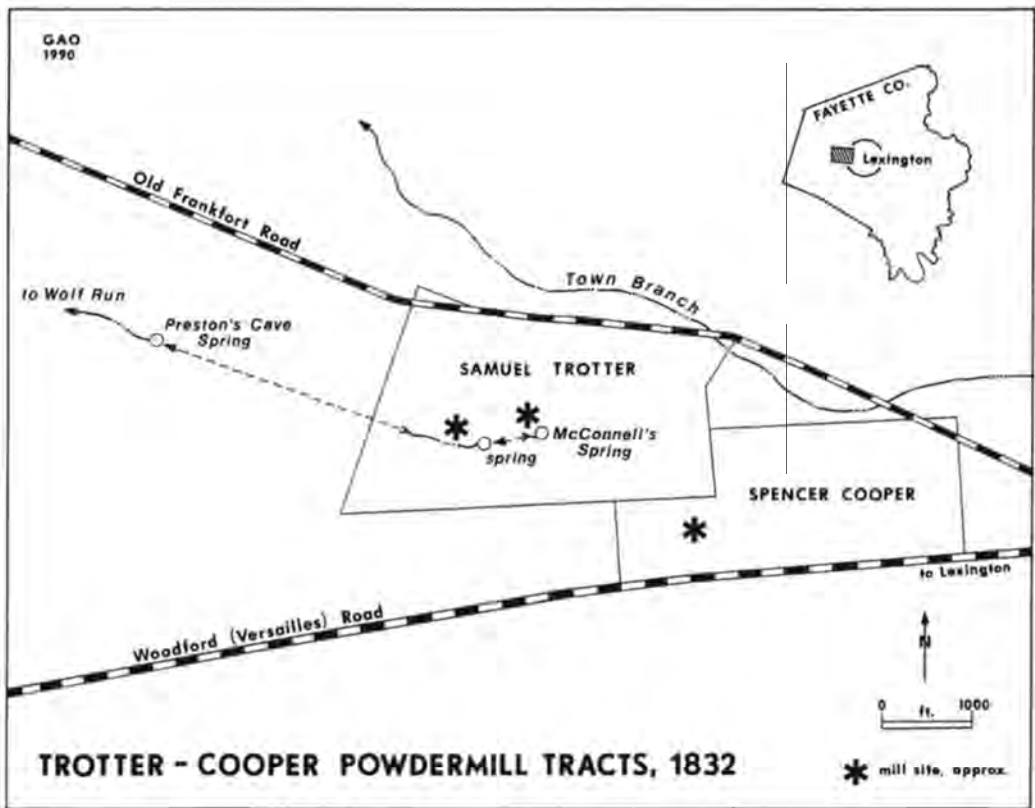
tracts. Samuel worked a small number of his farm slaves at the mill; the men cut wood and performed the other necessary unskilled tasks at the powder operation. There were also a few women used for cooking and washing. In addition to these, the Trotter mill employed ten to fifteen hired slave men in the actual manufacture and, presumably, a white supervisor. Total wages for these workers came to about twenty-five hundred dollars for the year 1820. By contrast the Eagle mill had at maximum four male slave workers and one woman, while the Reverend Cooper employed about nine.⁷⁵

Samuel Trotter had greatly expanded his fledgling operation during the boom time of the war years, so that in 1820 he grumbled that his mill could produce as much as three hundred thousand pounds of gunpowder annually, but “. . . the quantity of Europe gunpowder [brought] in since [the war] and sold no doubt at considerable sacrifice has in great measure forbid shipments to the lower Country, though some few continue to be made.” This was a sentiment echoed by other Kentucky powdermen. After the war, cheap powder of good quality, primarily from Great Britain, had flooded the nation and sharply curtailed sales of domestic gunpowder. Samuel almost had lost his market at New Orleans and on the Mississippi.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, the powder mills of Samuel Trotter and of Roman, Trotter & Co. continued to flourish as the second decade of the nineteenth century began — despite the postwar economy of the nation, despite the dreadful financial derangement which saw the chartering of forty-six independent banks in Kentucky and a flood of worthless paper, despite the competition from English powder and from other local powder mills, and despite an explosion at the Eagle mill on 12 December 1820, in which the superintendent James R. Duerson was killed. The *Gazette* noted that it was the second time the mill had blown up in the past year. Even so, in spring of the following year Roman, Trotter & Co.’s powder was advertised in Louisville, and in Lexington Tilford & Trotter touted “. . . a constant supply of Roman &

⁷⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁶*Ibid.*



Co.'s Superior Glazed RIFLE GUN-POWDER by the Keg or Canisters."⁷⁷

After 1821, there were few advertisements for Lexington-made powder in the newspapers, though in 1826 a few were placed by Louisville merchants who offered Spencer Cooper's powder for sale as well as that of Trotter. The remainder of the decade passed quietly, and few details are available on the powder mill operations. Samuel was still in the powder business in late 1827, for in a letter to Fountain Perry of Campbell County he requested payment for two hundred one-pound canisters of gunpowder that had been packed and shipped within barrels. At twenty-nine cents per pound, the selling price of finished powder was then substantially less than it had been just a few years before during the 1820 census, when it had brought forty-five cents. The Trotter facilities possibly supplemented the lagging sales of rifle powder by making blasting powder, since advertisements establish that this commodity was being produced a decade later at the adjacent Cooper mill.⁷⁸

Samuel's life was full of personal tragedy, as he attended one funeral after another within the Trotter family. James A. Trotter, a son of Samuel, died in 1822. The following year George, Jr., son of George Trotter, Sr., died. In 1826, Samuel attended the funeral of his only other brother, James Gabriel. Samuel's father James died in 1827, his wife Kitty (Catherine Gatewood) in 1830, and two years later, his uncle George Trotter (at the age of seventy-three).⁷⁹

The year 1833 sounded the death knell for the large-scale manufacture of gunpowder in Fayette County. Death was in the air for the population as well, death from pestilence. Cholera came to Lexington.

The pathogenic origin of the disease was unknown as yet, and sanitation was virtually nonexistent. In the spring of that

⁷⁷Collins, *History of Kentucky*, 87-89; *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 12 December 1820; *Louisville Public Advertiser*, 21 June 1821; *Lexington Reporter*, 2 April 1821.

⁷⁸*Louisville Public Advertiser*, 18 February, 6 December 1826; Samuel Trotter to Fountain Perry, October 26, 1827, Fountain Perry Collection, Special Collections, University of Kentucky Library; *Louisville Public Advertiser*, 6 November 1839.

⁷⁹*Lexington Reporter*, 24 June 1822; *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 7 April 1825; Linda Ramsey Ashley and Elizabeth Tapp Wills, *Funeral Notices of Lexington, Kentucky, 1806-1887* (Rochester, Mich., 1980), 87; *Lexington Kentucky Gazette*, 10 August 1827, 27 July 1832; *Lexington Reporter*, 17 November 1830.

year, throughout the cities and towns of Kentucky, people began to sicken and die. A few cases occurred at first, then an epidemic. In Lexington a large part of the population fled to the countryside and to the spas and resorts. Death followed them there. Of those who remained, hundreds died. Cannons were fired into the air to break up the dreaded miasma thought to cause cholera. Suffering victims were dosed with every possible form of medication by both the well-meaning, desperate physicians and the opportunistic quacks. The dead were buried in mass graves. The death lists in the *Kentucky Gazette* filled columns.⁸⁰

In the 6 July edition of the weekly *Kentucky Gazette* appeared the latest death list with the blunt preface: "The following persons have died since our last. . . ." Here appeared the name of Samuel Trotter. In August, his daughter Sarah died on the fourteenth, and her sister Margaret ten days later. By then the disease had run its course. Yet the deaths were not confined to humans. The Trotter powder mill ceased operation; its pestles no longer rose and fell; the buildings began to deteriorate.⁸¹

In March 1835, two prominent citizens of Lexington, Benjamin Bosworth and James Champlin, were at work in the former dry house of Samuel Trotter, engaged in converting the structure into a grist mill. Samuel's heirs had sold the property to Thomas Smith, who was agreeable to a plan to turn the buildings into a less-hazardous but still-profitable occupation. The two men were well aware of the danger of explosion in the gunpowder-permeated structure, and had expended great effort to prevent any accident. The floors were pulled up board by board, all the gunpowder dust swept up, the machinery of the house taken away. A small quantity of powder remained atop a bolting chest that they had been warned also to clear away, but the dust was neglected too long. There was the flash of explosion, and the building was consumed. In the explosion the two men were

⁸⁰Nancy D. Baird, "Asiatic Cholera: Kentucky's First Public Health Instructor," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 48 (1974): 327-41.

⁸¹Lexington *Kentucky Gazette*, 6 July, 14, 24 August 1833. Samuel's nephew, son of his brother George Trotter, Jr., was George James Trotter, who at the time of the cholera epidemic was editor of the *Kentucky Gazette*. In 1829, George J. Trotter shot and killed Charles Wickliffe of Lexington in a duel; Trotter was destined to spend his final years in a "lunatic asylum."

severely burned and maimed. Bosworth died a few days later.⁸²

The Trotter family burial crypt was at the residence of Colonel James Trotter, Jr., a fine estate then called "Woodlands" that today in part forms Woodland Park. It was in this vault, twenty feet square and sturdily constructed of brick, that Samuel was buried, along with his parents and brothers. The vault was covered by a large mound of earth, save for the entrance. During the Civil War, some Federal soldiers camped nearby in the woods, and entered the tomb out of morbid curiosity. On a raised dais within were the coffins. On one they read "GENERAL GEORGE TROTTER JR." Out of respect for the deeds of one of their own, they left quietly, the vault undisturbed. Shortly afterward, the entrance was sealed by Trotter descendants.⁸³

In 1879, a Lexington paper recalled that there was once a "large powder mill" near the Wilson's Spring (McConnell's Spring) along Old Frankfort Pike. Traces of the old foundations could still be seen.⁸⁴

Years passed. Remaining descendants of the Trotters moved away from Lexington and Kentucky. Trees took root upon the hill over the Trotter vault. Its origin was forgotten, the rising regarded as an Indian mound. In 1898, a youngster of the neighborhood in this belief dug a hole into the top of the hill, struck the brick roof, and opened a hole into it. Several other children entered the vault the next day and carried away the skull and coffin plate of General Trotter. When this indignity was discovered, the parents immediately forced the return of the items and the resealing of the hole. More time passed. Not knowing the history of the Trotters' tomb, Professor William D. Funkhauser, archaeological researcher at the University of Kentucky during the 1920s, brought several of his students to investigate the site. Thus, the eminent scholar, who did not excavate the "mound," inadvertently renewed the story of the Indian antecedents.⁸⁵

In 1953, the absentee heirs of the Trotters sought removal of the vault so that the cemetery could be declared abandoned

⁸²Lexington *Observer and Reporter*, 18 March 1835.

⁸³"Trotter's Tomb," 23-24.

⁸⁴Lexington *Daily Transcript*, 15 July 1879; "Water Notes," *Kentucky Gazette*, 16 July 1879.

⁸⁵"Trotter's Tomb," 24; Janet Anderson, "Trotter Tomb Gives Up Its Dead," Lexington *Herald*, 23 May 1953.

and the property, then a vacant lot between 318 and 326 Lafayette Avenue, sold and developed. It was believed that all that would remain of the burials would be dust. A permit was obtained and a man was hired to remove the dust. However, the remains of six bodies were found. The bones were collected in cardboard boxes and taken to the Millersburg Cemetery to be buried with the Trotters of Bourbon County.⁸⁶

In this way, the last of the Trotters departed Lexington.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*