

BOOK REVIEW: BLUEGRASS PARADISE ROYAL SPRING AND THE BIRTH OF GEORGETOWN, KENTUCKY

BY PATRICIA KAMBESIS

The opening line in Gary O'Dell's new book is, "This is the story of a spring that grew a city." However, there is so much more to the story than this simple sentence conveys. The spring site, first documented in 1774, became Fort McClelland in 1775, one of the first fortified settlements of the Inner Bluegrass region. The location was chosen for settlement and for the future city of Georgetown because of its proximity to a large karst spring. It became known as Royal Spring or Big Spring and is the largest karst spring in this region of Kentucky. It is currently the primary source of water for Georgetown, is a state park and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The story of Royal Spring and Georgetown is a part of the greater pioneer migration and settlement story. The "paradise" alluded to in the book's title is the word used by early explorers and land speculators in the eighteenth century, who described the area as a virtual Eden. These reports became marketing tools used to lure pioneers looking for their own piece of land far away from the eastern colonies where the soil was spent and wildlife depleted. The descriptions were accurate in that the land was fertile, game abundant, with rivers and many springs, woodlands, forests and cane. What wasn't mentioned were the hardships associated with agricultural life, Native American raids, harsh weather and manipulative speculators who preyed on the pioneers' desire for a new life and independence. Despite this, immigrants poured into the region to try and stake claims for their future.

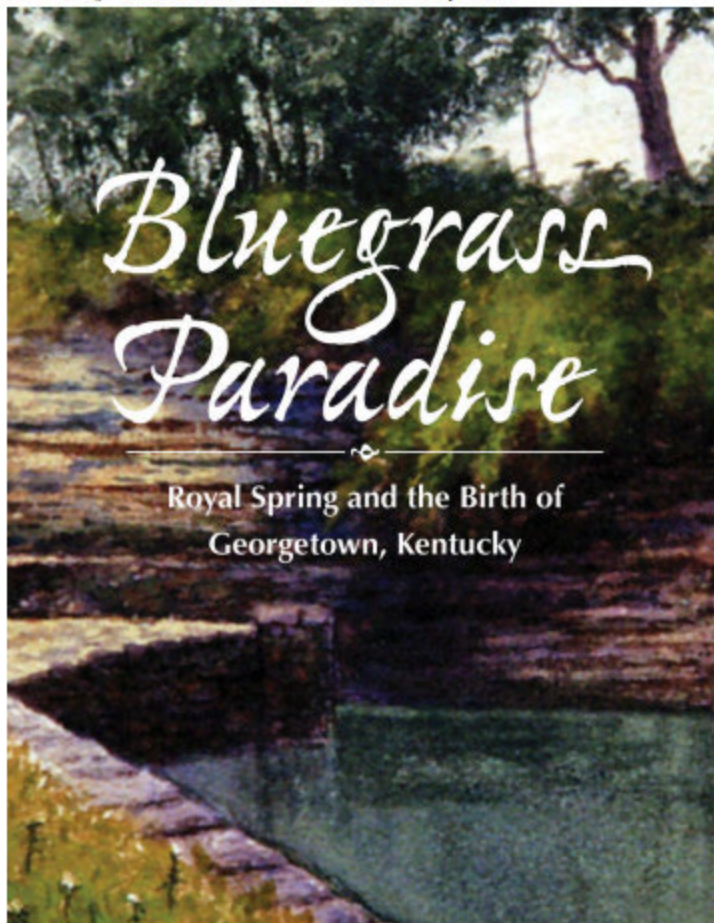
Two hundred and fifty years of history is the backdrop of the Royal Spring story and the establishment of Georgetown (named after George Washington). The author provides a meticulously researched history of the Bluegrass from the time Native Americans had sole access and use of the land, through pioneer migration and settlement from the 13 colonies, through the American Revolution, the Civil War, and beyond. In the 1980s, the arrival of a Toyota manufacturing

plant completely changed the demographics and social fabric of the area.

From a historical perspective, having Royal Spring in Georgetown brought in business and industry including various mills, rope manufacturing, ice making and water and electric utilities. Loosely associated with the spring was a thoroughbred breeding farm with race a track, which is no longer present. It was also alleged that Bourbon whiskey was first made with Royal Spring water.

As Georgetown's population increased and business and industry developed and evolved in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so did the function and use of the waters issuing from the spring. In the early days of the city, local people got their water by visiting the spring and taking what they needed. As the city grew, a water utility was established.

With more infrastructure, water for fire-fighting became necessary. With a growing population came the need for water treated against pathogens and other pollutants. The water utility that distributed the spring water eventually realized this and provided clean water to the citizenry of Georgetown. By the later part of the nineteenth century, people had made tangible impacts on the aesthetics of Royal Spring. The author notes that the spring site "was transformed into an industrial wasteland and dumping ground for rubbish." The citizenry of Georgetown, offended by what the spring site had become, have for the past century fought to make it a green space and a park. There has been some degree of success for this vision. Royal Spring became a state park and is listed as having historical significance. However, there are still bigger dreams to some day develop Royal Spring as an historic park.



History is not the only perspective the author uses to tell the Royal Spring story. Using the geographic theme of place, the author describes the physical attributes of the Bluegrass including land forms, elevation, water, soil, climate, vegetation and animal life.

The geology and karst hydro-geology are important physical cornerstones of the region and are beautifully described in easily understandable terms. With the themes of human and environmental interaction and movement, he described the connectivity of Georgetown to other places and resources. The author brings in demographics and urban geography concepts that explain the

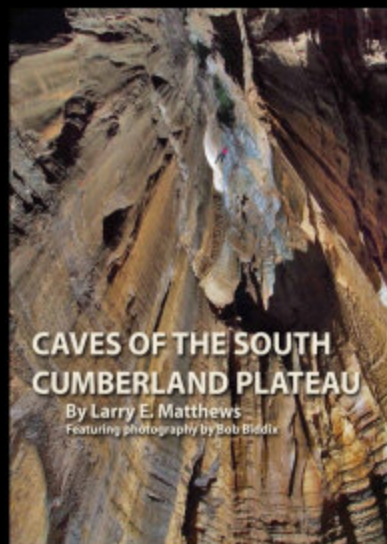
historical growth from a settlement to a city. All of these themes are presented as vignettes scattered throughout the greater story that highlight the attributes characteristic of the region and Georgetown in time and space. The author masterfully melds 250 years of history with geography, geology and karst hydrology to provide the full context of how Royal Spring helped grow the city of Georgetown, Kentucky.

Gary O'Dell is a Kentucky native with a great love of history, as evidenced by this book, and by his extensive list of publications on Kentucky history and caves and karst, historical archaeology, environmental issues, regional history

and Appalachian studies. He has been a cave explorer and active member of the Bluegrass Grotto. He worked for the Groundwater Branch in the Kentucky Division of Water from 1991 to 2001 where he helped set up the Kentucky Groundwater Network. He received a PhD in Geography from University of Kentucky and joined the faculty of Moorehead State University, where he currently serves as a professor of geography.

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