The First and Last Powdermen of Kentucky: Richard Foley and Alexander McCoy

By Gary A. O'Dell

On the Kentucky frontier, no commodity was more precious or desperately needed by the by early white settlements than gunpowder. Necessarily self-sufficient, the early settlers hunted wild game to feed their families, and their long rifles were also needed for frontier defense. The settlement era was marked by bloody conflicts with Native Americans who were resentful of white intrusion on their ancestral lands. Like many other necessities at this time, gunpowder had to be brought in from the east over a long line of supply, transported with difficulty through the Appalachian Mountains or sent down the Ohio River from Pittsburgh by canoe or flatboat, and this critical item was always in shortage. During periods of crisis, a crude but serviceable gunpowder was produced in small lots by a few persons having the necessary knowledge, allowing the fledgling communities to survive until shipments of black powder could be brought into the region.

The first commercial powder mill was established by Richard Foley in 1793 at South Elkhorn near Lexington, twenty years after the first white Kentucky settlements were founded. Native Americans continued to assert claims to the area and farmers cultivating their fields kept their weapons close at hand. The Battle of Blue Licks on August 19, 1782, remained fresh in the minds of the people, a

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shocking and demoralizing disaster in which a superior force of British troops and Native Americans ambushed and routed pursuing Kentucky militiamen, killing sixty-four. Many of the region's inhabitants lost a relative or friend in the debacle. Kentuckians retaliated by launching expeditions against Shawnee villages on the north side of the Ohio River, but not until the Battle of Fallen Timbers in northwestern Ohio on August 20, 1794, a year after Foley built his mill, could residents feel that clashes with Indigenous groups were declining.[1]

Commercial production of gunpowder in Kentucky began with Richard Foley and proliferated during the period leading up to and during the War of 1812 as tensions in the northwest increased between Americans and the British with their Native American allies. During this time, Kentucky possessed more powder mills than any other state, largely because the primary ingredient, a mineral known as saltpeter or niter, was readily available from many of the state's numerous dry caves and rock-shelters. Lexington, being central to the region of saltpeter production, became the market center for the saltpeter trade and the hub of a cluster of powder mills. After the war, the number of gunpowder producers in Kentucky declined markedly because both saltpeter and high-quality British gunpowder could be imported at less expense than it could be made in the state, and because of competition from large East Coast explosive manufacturers. Although a few large producers were able to persist for a few decades after the War of 1812, by 1850, gunpowder production was virtually extinct in the region. Alexander McCoy of Lexington was the last known commercial manufacturer of gunpowder in Kentucky, operating briefly in 1862 to supply powder to the Confederate army occupying the state.

Richard Foley and Alexander McCoy represent the starting and ending points for bulk gunpowder production that took place in

[1] *The Encyclopedia of the North American Indian Wars, 1607–1890*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker, vol. 1, A–L (Santa Barbara, Ca., 2011), 80, 269–71, 348–49; Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1997), 33–45, 70–71.

Kentucky over a period of seven decades, both operations part of the Inner Bluegrass cluster of powder mills that produced most of the gunpowder during this period. Foley was the first member of a family of powder makers, followed in the trade by his sons, and similarly, Alexander McCoy was a powderman like his father, founder Neal McCoy. The Foley family operated their mill from 1793 to 1815, and the McCoy's mill produced gunpowder from about 1810 until the early 1850s, after which the mill was shuttered until the summer of 1862 when Alexander McCoy hastily put the machinery to briefly make gunpowder during the Civil War.

During the early settlement of Kentucky, Daniel Boone, Monk Estill, Thomas and William Rogers, and John Nutt were among those who had knowledge of gunpowder manufacture. Boone is the first person of record to make powder in Kentucky, a small quantity produced at Boonesborough in the fall of 1777 prompted by a critical shortage at a time when conflicts with Indigenous groups were heightened. At this time, gunpowder needed for frontier defense had to be brought in from the east. In the fall of 1776, for example, George Rogers Clark and John Gabriel Jones traveled from Harrodsburg to Williamsburg, Virginia, to request desperately-needed gunpowder and lead. They were able to obtain five hundred pounds, which they transported to Pittsburgh and loaded into canoes for the trip down the Ohio River to white settlements. Two hundred miles downriver they were pursued by a large body of Native Americans and were forced to temporarily conceal the powder at several locations on Three Islands, near present-day Maysville, which was later retrieved.[2]

When Richard Henderson brought a party of men to settle Boonesborough on the Kentucky River, he intended to manufacture gunpowder and so loaded saltpeter and sulfur into supply wagons but had to leave these behind when he discovered that the wagons

[2] George W. Ranck, *Boonesborough: Its Founding, Pioneer Struggles, Indian Experiences, Transylvania Days, and Revolutionary Annals* (Louisville, Ky., 1901), 61; *George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771–1781*, ed. James A. James (Springfield, Ill: 1912), 3: 209–15.

could not negotiate the rough trails into Kentucky. A small quantity of these materials, however, made it and when, in late 1777, the supply of finished gunpowder that had been brought in was exhausted, "Boone and a couple of frontiersmen . . . soon manufactured enough powder, scant as that was, to tide the settlement over the emergency." Boone left a short description of the process: "Run your durt Like Ly after Lating it stand 24 hours then Boyle it one hour. Then Boyle your Brimstone till all the gaus [gas] is oute. Then Way your proportions, put them in a pott, stur thim together till the Sulphur Melts and all unites With the Niter." After Boone and ten other men were captured by the Shawnee in late 1778 and taken to Detroit, Boone astonished and alarmed the British governor, Henry Hamilton, by demonstrating his ability to manufacture gunpowder.[3]

Several authors have claimed that Daniel Boone was taught the art of making gunpowder by Monk Estill, an enslaved Black man who came from Greenbrier County, Virginia, with James Estill, founder of Estill's Station in present-day Madison County. When Estill's Station, like Boonesborough, experienced a dire shortage of gunpowder, Monk was able to mine and refine saltpeter from a nearby cave, known then as Payton Cave and today as Adams Cave, and make gunpowder for the settlements. The assertion that Monk taught powder-making to Boone, however, seems doubtful. Boone is recorded as having produced gunpowder in 1777; Monk Estill may have made a brief visit to Kentucky with his enslaver in 1776, but did not take up residence in the region until 1778, initially at Boonesborough.[4]

[3] Ranck, *Boonesborough*, 61 (first quotation), 183; Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of Ohio* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1875), 191; Daniel Boone Papers, Lyman Draper MSS 27C35 (second quotation).

[4] Harry G. Enoch and Anne Crabb, *African Americans at Fort Boonesborough 1775–1784* (Boonesborough, Ky., 2019), 14; Angelo George, "Monk Estill and the Gunpowder Crisis at Fort Boonesborough," *Journal of Spelean History* 21 (1987): 40–47. Adams Cave is located near Richmond, Kentucky. Among authors who have accepted the claim that Monk Estill taught the art of powder manufacture to Daniel Boone are John M. Faragher, *Daniel*

Around 1790 Thomas and William Rogers of Bourbon County, with their corn crop threatened by a plague of squirrels, "concluded they could make gunpowder if they could get salt peter." Thomas, having once worked in a Virginia powder mill, knew that saltpeter could accumulate in the dry earth beneath houses and chicken coops, and beneath manure piles. Working with his brother, he was able to extract a few pounds. "They made a trial and after several day's experimenting, got powder." As William's son Thomas recalled, "Father set up in the powder making business . . . . Every summer after the corn was laid by and harvest over we would make powder a month or so and attend at the courts [county court days] to sell it."[5]

Interviewed in the 1840s by Rev. John D. Shane, Martin Wymore recalled, "There was one John Nutt, who had a powder mill, and made the first powder I have heard of in Kentucky." Wymore was an early immigrant who participated in the founding of Lexington in 1779. The Wymore interview, however, is the only known reference to Nutt's powder mill, and little is known about the life of John Nutt. In 1780, he was among the colonists who settled at McConnell's Station and was killed at the Battle of Blue Licks on August 19, 1782. At this time, white settlers in Kentucky were focused upon survival, not in establishing industrial enterprises—not even gristmills or sawmills were being built at this early date. Nutt's role in making gunpowder was probably, as historian Ted Belue surmised, like Daniel Boone and Monk Estill: he had sufficient knowledge of the process to manufacture small amounts of crude powder for the immediate use of the settlement but did not actually establish a commercial mill.

Boone: The Life and Legend of an American Pioneer (New York, 1992), 152; Michael A. Lofaro, *Daniel Boone: An American Life* (Lexington, Ky., 2003), 119; and Gerald L. Smith, "Slavery and Abolition in Kentucky: 'Patter-rollers' Were Everywhere," in *Bluegrass Renaissance: The History and Culture of Central Kentucky 1792–1852*, eds. James C. Klotter and Daniel B. Rowland (Lexington, Ky., 2012), 78.

[5] Clement L. Martzolff, ed., "Reminiscences of a Pioneer," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Quarterly* 19 (July 1910): 203 (quotations).

From available evidence, it would seem that Richard Foley was, in fact, the first person to establish a gunpowder mill in Kentucky.[6]

Prior to the Revolutionary War, as tensions between Britain and its American colonies increased, colonial leaders became concerned over the means of defense, and particularly the supply of gunpowder. There was only a single, small-scale powder mill operating in the colonies, no systematic production of saltpeter, and all sulfur had to be imported from Europe. The various colonial governments, operating through "Committees of Safety" hastily organized to take control away from Royal officials, vigorously promoted the manufacture of saltpeter and establishment of gunpowder mills. Although numerous gunpowder mills were built, a shortage of the most critical element meant that the production of gunpowder was initially inadequate for wartime needs. Instead, gunpowder and saltpeter were obtained from France and brought in from the West Indies past the English blockade. Without this assistance, the British military would have quickly snuffed out the rebellion in the American colonies.[7]

Before the end of the century, America had become nearly self-sufficient in gunpowder production, even as demand for the commodity was increased by non-military requirements for explosives in canal building, mining (particularly in the anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania), and other development works. There remained the problem of developing domestic supplies of saltpeter, although this was not a priority since saltpeter imported from Britain was cheap

[6] John D. Shane interview with Martin Wymore, Lyman Draper MSS 11CC123 (quotation); John D. Shane interview with William Clinkenbeard, Lyman Draper MSS 11CC62; John D. Shane interview with Jane Stevenson, Lyman Draper MSS 13CC139; Ted Franklin Belue, *The Hunters of Kentucky: A Narrative History of America's First Far West, 1750–1792* (Mechanicsburg, Pa., 2011), 165.

[7] Peter Force, comp., *American Archives, Fourth Series*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1837), col. 881; Orlando W. Stephenson, "The Supply of Gunpowder in 1776," *American Historical Review* 30 (January 1925): 271–79; Arthur P. VanGelder and Hugo Schlatter, *History of the Explosives Industry in America* (New York, 1927), 38–40, 66–68; *Virginia Gazette*, August 4, 1775; *Boston Gazette*, October 23, 1775 and January 1, 1776; Thomas Tredwell, *Essays Upon the Making of Salt-Petre and Gun-Powder* (New York, 1776).

and plentiful. The need for domestic saltpeter again became critical during the War of 1812, when imports from abroad were curtailed by embargo and blockade.[8]

The presence on Virginia's western frontier in soon-to-be Kentucky of numerous limestone caves and sandstone rock-shelters containing saltpeter deposits became well known. Describing the region, Gilbert Imlay reported in 1792 that "nitre is made from earth which is collected from caves and other places to which the wet has not penetrated. The making of this salt, in this country, is so common, that many of the settlers manufacture their own gunpowder." Prophetically, he noted, "It is so common in every part of the country, that it might be made a considerable article for exportation." Accordingly, gunpowder production spread to the trans-Appalachian region to take advantage of proximity to the most important ingredient. One of the fastest-growing cities in the nation and centrally located with respect to the surrounding saltpeter production area, Lexington became the market hub for saltpeter exported to eastern powder mills and used in the numerous mills that sprang up in the Bluegrass region. Additional mills were located in the zone containing saltpeter caves and rock-shelters, which surrounded the Bluegrass in a broad arc at a distance of seventy-five to one hundred miles from Lexington.[9]

The disruption of international trade attendant with the approach of the War of 1812 between Britain and the United States, with reciprocal embargos followed by port blockades, stimulated domestic production of saltpeter and the establishment of numerous powder mills to provide military necessities for the country. The proliferation of small mills was also a consequence of transportation difficulties in

[8] VanGelder and Schlatter, *History of the Explosives Industry in America*, 68–71; Gary A. O'Dell, "Saltpeter Manufacturing and Marketing and its Relation to the Gunpowder Industry in Kentucky During the Nineteenth Century," in *Historical Archaeology in Kentucky*, eds. Kim A. McBride, W. Stephen McBride, and David Pollack (Frankfort, Ky., 1995), 68–69.

[9] Gilbert Imlay, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (London, 1792), 135 (quotation); O'Dell, "Saltpeter Manufacturing," 89–92; Gary A. O'Dell and Angelo I. George, "Rock-Shelter Saltpeter Mines of Eastern Kentucky," *Historical Archaeology* 48 (2014): 91–99.

a country with poor roadways and, as yet, no railroads able to ship product over great distances, with most mills being located to supply local demand. The federal census of 1810 reported 208 gunpowder mills operating in the United States, located in all seventeen states and in the two territories of Orleans and Indiana, collectively producing about 1.4 million pounds of powder annually.[10]

The greatest number of powder mills at this time were in Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee. Although the Southern states possessed 76 percent of the mills, these accounted for less than half of the total production, indicating that most of the powder mills of the region were generally smaller in their scale of operations than those of the North. The large number of powder mills can be attributed to the difficulty and expense of commodity transportation in the developing nation, so that most firms by necessity manufactured only for local use. With sixty-three mills reported, Kentucky had the greatest number of powder manufacturers, but the average annual output for individual mills amounted to less than a ton of gunpowder. Few mills in the country produced any large quantities, with one exception. The single greatest manufacturer of gunpowder in the United States was the DuPont Company, located in Delaware, which alone supplied nearly one-fifth of the total national production.[11]

The commercial manufacture of gunpowder in Kentucky began with the Foley family, who were among the earliest settlers in the region. Richard Foley and his large family set out from Frederick County, Virginia, for the western frontier in late autumn of 1779. Foley was accompanied by his wife Margaret (Wilson) and six children

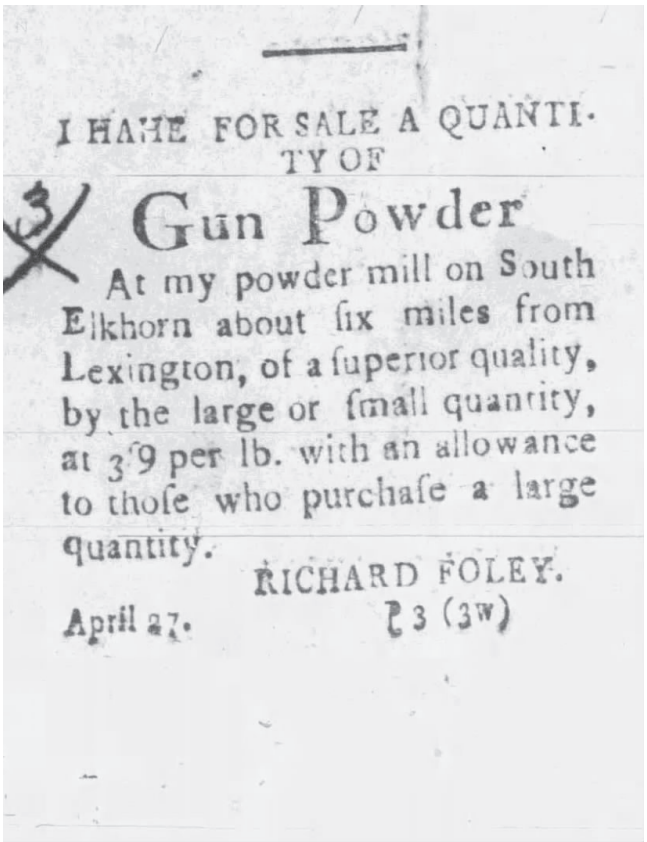
[10] Tenche Coxe, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States for the Year 1810* (Philadelphia, 1814), 3: 33, 42. The 1810 manufacturers census was badly flawed, and production of gunpowder, like other products, was probably underreported.

[11] O'Dell, "Saltpeter Manufacturing," 67–70; Coxe, *A Statement of the Arts and Manufactures of the United States for the Year 1810*, 3: 33, 42; VanGelder and Schlatter, *History of Explosives*, 72. According to the 1810 census, gunpowder production in the Southern states took place in Kentucky (63 mills), Virginia (53), Tennessee (21), Maryland (9), North Carolina (8), Georgia (2), and the Orleans Territory (2). Of the northern states, the greatest number of mills were in Pennsylvania (22), Connecticut (7), Massachusetts (6), and Ohio (6).

ranging in age from ten years to eight months. By mid-December, they reached their intended destination, the fertile uplands between the Kentucky River and the heads of the Salt and Green Rivers in present-day Mercer County, where they helped establish Bowman's Station. They left the station in 1787 to live in Fayette County near Lexington, and Foley's name first appears on the Fayette tax lists in 1779. In June 1791, he purchased about 150 acres on South Elkhorn Creek, a few miles south of Lexington, and built a house on the hill overlooking the Elkhorn. According to family tradition, soon after settling at South Elkhorn, Richard began making small quantities of gunpowder by hand with mortar and pestle, and soon erected a powder mill on his property next to the creek. By spring of 1793, he had made sufficient quantities to advertise in the *Kentucky Gazette* his "powder mill on South Elkhorn," gunpowder of "superior quality, by the large or small quantity, at 3 [shillings] 9 [pence] per lb. with an allowance to those who purchase a large quantity."[12]

In that same year, two of Richard's male children, Elijah (twenty-two years old) and John (fourteen) began to help their father in the mill. It is fortunate that they did so, because Richard died of measles the following year and the welfare of the family now depended on these two elder sons. Immediately after his father's death, Elijah assumed primary responsibility for running the powder mill, as indicated by an advertisement under his name in the *Kentucky Gazette* for June 24, 1794. By 1803, Elijah had turned mill operations over to his younger brother, John, now twenty-four years old, but resumed control sometime prior to November 1811, when the Foley mill began to advertise under his name as proprietor. The mill ceased operation by spring of 1815, when trustees for Elijah, an alcoholic, cautioned the public to avoid dealing with him "due to his insanity."

[12] Gary A. O'Dell and Nancy Foley Johnson, "The Foley Family and Their Role in Gunpowder Manufacture," in *Current Archaeological Research in Kentucky*, eds. Charles D. Hockensmith, Kenneth C. Carstens, Charles Stout, and Sara J. Rivers (Frankfort, Ky., 1998), 5: 268–69; *Kentucky Gazette*, May 18, 1793 (quotations).



I HAVE FOR SALE A QUANTITY OF

Gun Powder

At my powder mill on South Elkhorn about ſix miles from Lexington, of a ſuperior quality, by the large or ſmall quantity, at 3/9 per lb. with an allowance to thoſe who purchaſe a large quantity.

RICHARD FOLEY.

April 27. ℔3 (3w)

Newspaper ad listed by Richard Foley which noted the "superior quality, by the large or small quantity," of his gunpowder. Image courtesy *Kentucky Gazette*, May 18, 1793.

The following year, the Foley land, including the powder mill, was sold out of the family.[13]

The Foley mill was the initiator of a group of powder mill operations that sprang up in the South Elkhorn neighborhood, along with other mills in the core Bluegrass counties of Fayette, Jessamine,

[13] O'Dell and Johnson, "The Foley Family and Their Role in Gunpowder Manufacture," 269–73; *Kentucky Gazette*, June 24, 1794, November 12, 1811; *Kentucky Gazette*, April 17, 1815 (quotation).

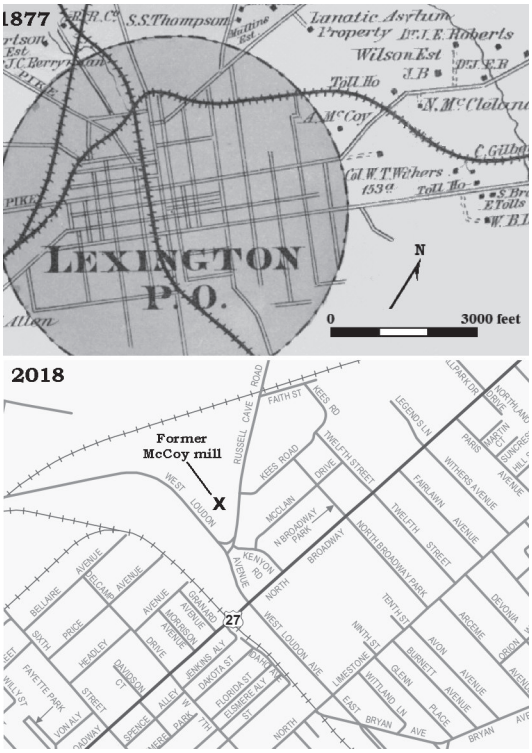
Woodford, Scott, and Bourbon, all during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Among these was the mill of Neal McCoy, whose establishment persisted for more than half a century, longer than any other gunpowder manufacturing firm in the state. McCoy was a native of County Antrim, Ireland, who emigrated to America with his wife Nancy shortly after their wedding in 1798. They settled first near Philadelphia, on a farm in the vicinity of Brandywine Creek not far from where French immigrant Eleuthère Irénée DuPont in 1802 established what would become the largest and most technologically advanced gunpowder manufacturing facility in the nation.[14]

By the time of McCoy's arrival, the lower Brandywine had long been industrialized, the banks lined with paper mills and gristmills. Scholar W. Barksdale Maynard referred to the valley as "a crucible of the Industrial Revolution." According to family history, it was along Brandywine Creek in Pennsylvania that Neal McCoy learned the gunpowder trade. The DuPont works near Wilmington was located on the Brandywine in Delaware; the company was a meticulous record-keeper, and their records do not list him as an employee. The only known powder mill of the era located on the Brandywine, other than DuPont, was the Cannon Powder Mills, situated in a great bend of the creek in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, about ten miles above Wilmington.[15]

The Cannon Mills was founded by another Irish immigrant, William Twaddell, who erected a powder mill circa 1807. This chronology, however, is problematic. According to Neal McCoy's grandson, James H. Mulligan, McCoy emigrated to Kentucky in 1805, prior to the

[14] Gary A. O'Dell, "Bluegrass Powdermen: A Sketch of the Industry," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* (hereinafter *RKHS*) 87 (Spring 1989): 99–105; Denny Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald* (Lexington, Ky.), September 29, 1901; "Estimable Woman Gone: Widow of Dennis Mulligan Passed Away," *Lexington Herald*, May 4, 1904.

[15] W. Barksdale Maynard, *The Brandywine: An Intimate Portrait* (Philadelphia, 2014), 1 (quotation), 70–81; Robert A. Howard (Hagley Museum and Library) to Gary O'Dell, March 30, 1987, in possession of author; Albert W. Twaddell, "A Brief History of the Twaddell Family," Twaddell Family File, Delaware Historical Society, Wilmington, Del.



Location of McCoy's powder mill (right of the circled area) in Lexington near present-day Russell Cave Road and West Loudon Avenue. Images enlarged from D. G. Beers & Co., *Atlas of Bourbon, Clark, Fayette, Jessamine, and Woodford Counties, Ky.*, 1877, Library of Congress (top) and Kentucky Department of Transportation, *State Primary Road System: Lexington, Fayette and Jessamine Counties*, October 2018 (bottom).

date given for establishment of the Cannon Mills. Twaddell family tradition contradicts the 1807 establishment date, asserting that William Twaddell was the first to begin manufacturing gunpowder on the Brandywine, prior to erection of the DuPont mills in 1802 and, if so, this would provide ample time for McCoy to learn the trade at the Cannon Mills. We cannot be certain, but this seems a plausible scenario. Census records show that Neal McCoy was a resident of Fayette County, Kentucky, by 1810. McCoy and his family, which in that year

included four young children, rented a parcel of land north of Lexington on the west side of Russell Cave Road about a mile and a half from the town center. This area is today within the triangular area bounded by the intersection of Russell Cave Road and West Loudon Avenue. In 1828, he purchased twenty-seven acres of this land from the heirs of James Rose for $710.62 and named it Willow Glen. During the 1830s, McCoy built a large brick house on the property to replace an earlier structure formerly used as their residence.[16]

In the years just prior to the War of 1812, as conflict with the British appeared inevitable, McCoy foresaw the likely demand for gunpowder and profit to be made, erecting a powder mill near his home. He entered into a partnership with a "practical powder maker" he had known in Pennsylvania named O'Neil and began to produce various grades of gunpowder. His operation was likely small in scale during its early years. Unlike other powdermen who were his contemporaries, he placed no advertisements seeking to purchase saltpeter, nor did he publicize gunpowder for sale until long after the war. Documents related to the War of 1812 in the northwest make no mention of a McCoy as a supplier of gunpowder to the government. McCoy may have sold gunpowder for war use, but if so, he was not a significant source.[17]

After the war, Neal McCoy's oldest son Alexander became active in the family business. In 1830, when Alexander was ten years old, his father began to advertise for the first time, now styling his firm

[16] Twaddell, "Brief History of the Twaddell Family"; "'In Kentucky' and its Author," *Lexington Leader*, April 4, 1909; *Third Manuscript Census of the United States*, (1810), Fayette County, Kentucky, available online via Ancestry.com (accessed March 15, 2025); Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901; Fayette County Deed Book 4, Rose heirs to Neal McCoy, October 8, 1828, 329; Fayette County Deed Book 5, Samuel Rose to Neal McCoy, August 8, 1829, 323; Fayette County Deed Book 8, Daniel and Sarah Davis to Neal McCoy, August 27, 1832, quit claim, 419.

[17] Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901 (quotation); William S. Webb, "Old Millstones of Kentucky," *Filson Club History Quarterly* 9 (October 1935): 218; Richard C. Knopf, *Document Transcriptions of the War of 1812 in the Northwest*, 10 vols. (Columbus, Ohio, 1957); Gary A. O'Dell, "The Trotter Family, Gunpowder, and Early Kentucky Entrepreneurship, 1784–1833," *RKHS* 88 (Autumn 1990): 400–408.

as "McCoy & Son." Various documents indicate a tight-knit family in which all of Neal's children continued to reside with him in the family home as long as they remained unmarried. His 1841 will stated his desire that "my children may continue to live together" and that the home place "be a permanent home for any of them that may remain single." The addition of Alexander apparently reenergized the company and McCoy's brand of powder became more widely known through advertising. The company placed a handful of advertisements in the Louisville *Daily Public Advertiser* in September and October 1830 extolling their product:

> McCoy's Gunpowder
>
> Consisting of F. F. and F. F. F. glazed and rough, of the most approved quality, possessing the greatest strength, quickness and purity, being manufactured with skill and attention, can be had in Louisville, or forwarded to order from the Mills. The superiority of this article, wherever it is known, has not failed to obtain for it a general preference. Those who purchase, and do not find it to be superior upon trial, can return it, and the price will be refunded.
>
> N. McCoy & Son
> Lexington

The McCoy advertisements noted that their powder could be purchased at the Louisville mercantile firms of W. G. Bakewell, Starkney & Gwathmey, T. K. Byrne, and George and Andrew Buchan.[18]

"McCoy & Son's celebrated gunpowder" was advertised by such firms both as the single focus of an advertisement or as one item in a list of merchandise offered for sale. The firm of O'Beirne & Baldwin,

[18] Fayette County Will Book P, Will of Neal McCoy, July 15, 1841, probated in September court, 92 (first and second quotations); *Daily Public Advertiser* (Louisville, Ky.), September 2 (third quotation), September 17, September 23, October 2, 1830. "F. F." and "F. F. F." in the McCoy ad refer to the grain size of black powder, in which the "F" stands for "fine." Powder classes ranged from a coarse cannon powder; F (muskets); F. F. (rifles and shotguns); F. F. F. (rifles and handguns); to F. F. F. F., the finest, used for priming flintlocks.

although not mentioned in the McCoy ad, routinely promoted McCoy gunpowder with several notices each week from December 1830 to September 1831. McCoy gunpowder was advertised exclusively in Louisville. No advertisements appeared in any papers outside of Kentucky, nor in Lexington or elsewhere in the state; likely, McCoy's brand was so well known in the vicinity of Lexington that local promotion was thought unnecessary. After 1831, McCoy's powder was not advertised again until 1837, again in Louisville, and then in 1841 was vigorously promoted by several Louisville merchants, notably the firms of Francis McKay, W. Anderson & Co., and J. N. Johnson & Co. Neal McCoy died in 1841 (preceded by his wife Nancy in 1836), and by the terms of his will, Alexander McCoy became the sole proprietor of the company. At about this time, Philip Gormley, another Irish immigrant, came to work at the McCoy mill, employed over a period of about ten years. As soon as Alexander took charge, from late March 1841 to February 1843, advertisements for McCoy's "celebrated Rifle Powder" were seldom absent from the pages of the *Louisville Daily Journal*. After 1843, however, McCoy's powder was never again advertised.[19]

Thirteen Kentucky gunpowder manufacturers responded to the 1820 US Census of Manufactures, providing information as to the nature of their business, such as raw materials used in manufacturing, number of persons employed, machinery used, wages, and the market value of articles produced. Neal McCoy did not reply to the census questionnaire, but it is still possible to describe the likely characteristics of his powder mill operation based on the reports from other regional powdermen as well as national trends in production. The

[19] *Fifth Manuscript Census of the United States* (1830), Kentucky, available online via Ancestry.com (accessed March 15, 2025); *Louisville Daily Journal*, December 1, 1830 through September 22, 1831, May 16 through June 27, 1837, March 27, 1841 through January 17, 1842, January 28 through February 27, 1843 (quotations); Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901; Fayette County Will Book P, Will of Neal McCoy, July 15, 1841, 92; "Obituary," *Observer & Reporter* (Lexington, Ky.), April 13, 1836; "Philip Gormley," *Daily Leader* (Lexington, Ky.), December 16, 1895.

processes and machinery used to make gunpowder in early America were essentially the same that had been used in Europe for centuries. During the antebellum period, large East Coast manufacturers such as the DuPont company began to adopt more advanced technology, but in Kentucky, gunpowder producers experienced financial difficulties after the War of 1812 as a consequence of increased saltpeter costs and competition from eastern firms and imported powder, and few were able to innovate. Traditional powder mill machinery was made entirely of wood, to reduce the hazard of explosion resulting from a spark struck from metal parts. Even so, making gunpowder was an extremely dangerous occupation. The presence of foreign material in the mix, such as a pebble or nail, could produce an explosion, and even friction from moving parts could generate sufficient heat to ignite the powder.[20]

Given the high probability of a devasting explosion in a powder mill operation, owners and operators established a variety of safety measures, ranging from manufacturing practice to the mill layout. Mill owners were careful to hire sober men and workers were, of course, forbidden to smoke or even to carry smoking materials. Each operation in making gunpowder was housed in a separate building, widely separated from one another so that an explosion in one building would not ignite another. The McCoy works, like other powder operations, would thus consist of several relatively small buildings rather than a single large mill structure. An 1861 visitor to the works of Laflin, Smith & Boles, near Saugerties in New York, noted that powder mills "are generally located at a distance from any village or inhabited place; and beside a stream which will afford the necessary water power to carry the machinery. The material is transported from one house to another, as the several stages of the manufacture are completed." Buildings were constructed to minimize the devastating effects of an explosion, a method pioneered in America in 1802 by the DuPont company. At some mills, as at DuPont, structures had

[20] Records of the 1820 United States Census of Manufacturers, M-279, Roll 20, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

three stout walls of stone, one of wood, and a flimsy wood roof, so that the force of an explosion would be directed through the weakest side without destroying the entire building. At other establishments, "The buildings are of wood, one story in height, and of cheap construction, it being the practice to make the frame rather stout and lightly nail a covering upon it, so that in case of an explosion the boards will be thrown off, leaving the frame standing." As one visitor to the American Powder Company, Acton, Massachusetts, in 1895 observed, "buildings have so often been blown up by powder works explosions that manufacturers do not find it advisable to go to any great expense in construction. As one man put it: 'They are made to blow up.'"[21]

Refining the raw materials was an essential first step. Saltpeter produced from the caves and rock-shelters of Kentucky often contained impurities. In fact, Lexington saltpeter broker Charles Wilkins complained that some producers attempted to cheat him by mixing sand and saltpeter in barrels brought to market, or by placing a layer of saltpeter at the top of a barrel of sand. In the refinery, purchased saltpeter was redissolved in kettles of boiling water, the "mother liquor" drained off leaving impurities behind, and then boiled again to the point of crystallization to achieve a relatively pure product. In 1909, Neal's grandson James H. Mulligan noted, "We still have two of his great saltpeter kettles, made in Pittsburg in early times." The largest of these iron kettles was of 700-gallon capacity, the smaller of 200 gallons, and an earlier account indicated that they were cast in 1805, the year in which McCoy and his family arrived at Lexington. The larger kettle was loaned out by Mulligan circa 1892 to a man named Gus Jaubert, who traveled extensively through Kentucky, Indiana, Ohio, and several Southern states using it to prepare burgoo,

[21] "Gunpowder and Gunpowder Mills," *American Railroad Journal* 17 (August 10, 1861): 569 (first quotation); "Powder Mill Explosion," *Boston Herald*, March 25, 1873 (second quotation), "How a Powder Mill is Run," *Boston Herald*, May 4, 1895 (third quotation).

Kentucky's famous stew made with beef, chicken, and vegetables for large social gatherings.[22]

Like saltpeter, sulfur also required refining to remove impurities, although the process was quite different. Purifying sulfur required the raw ore to either be melted, allowing impurities to settle out, or to be distilled. The last gunpowder ingredient, charcoal, was used in several industries during the early nineteenth century, including the smelting of iron ore. Charcoal for use in black powder production was made from a porous light wood that burns rapidly, preferably willow or poplar in the United States. The traditional, centuries-old method for making charcoal involved stacking the cut wood into a large, cone-shaped mound with a central flue, covering with soil and turf, and leaving a small vent in the top for smoke to escape. In such a mound, the wood would slowly smolder, thus carbonizing without breaking into flame. Once all the wood was properly charred, the mound was dismantled, the charcoal raked out and wet down to extinguish any remaining embers and allowed to cool. Early in the century, a new and more efficient process for making charcoal of higher quality was adopted by most powder mills, known as destructive distillation.[23]

From the refineries, sulfur and charcoal were taken to a pulverizing mill. Powder makers knew from experience that higher quality gunpowder could be made if these materials were pulverized separately rather than all the ingredients together in one operation. The best

[22] Charles Wilkins to E. I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., November 27, 1809, Longwood MSS, Group 3, Series A, Hagley Museum and Library (hereinafter Hagley), Wilmington, Del.; E. I. DuPont, "The Location and Construction Necessary for Manufacture of Gunpowder," in *Life of Eleuthère Irénée DuPont from Contemporary Correspondence 1799–1802*, trans. Bessie G. DuPont (Newark, Del., 1924), 5: 207; Stanley D. Sides, "Saltpeter Industry," in *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*, ed. John E. Kleber (Lexington, Ky., 1992), 794 (first quotation); "'In Kentucky' and its Author," *Lexington Leader*, April 4, 1909 (second quotation); "An Interesting Relic," *Hickman* (Ky.) *Courier*, June 21, 1907; "Gus Jaubert Tells Just How Kentucky Burgoo Should Be Made," *Owensboro* (Ky.) *Enquirer*, December 13, 1914.

[23] James Cutbush, *A System of Pyrotechny, Comprehending the Theory and Practice, with the Application of Chemistry* (Philadelphia, 1825), 90–95; *Ordnance Manual for the Use of the Officers of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C., 1841), 148; Thomas Webster, William Parker, and David M. Reese, *An Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy* (New York, 1845), 117–18.

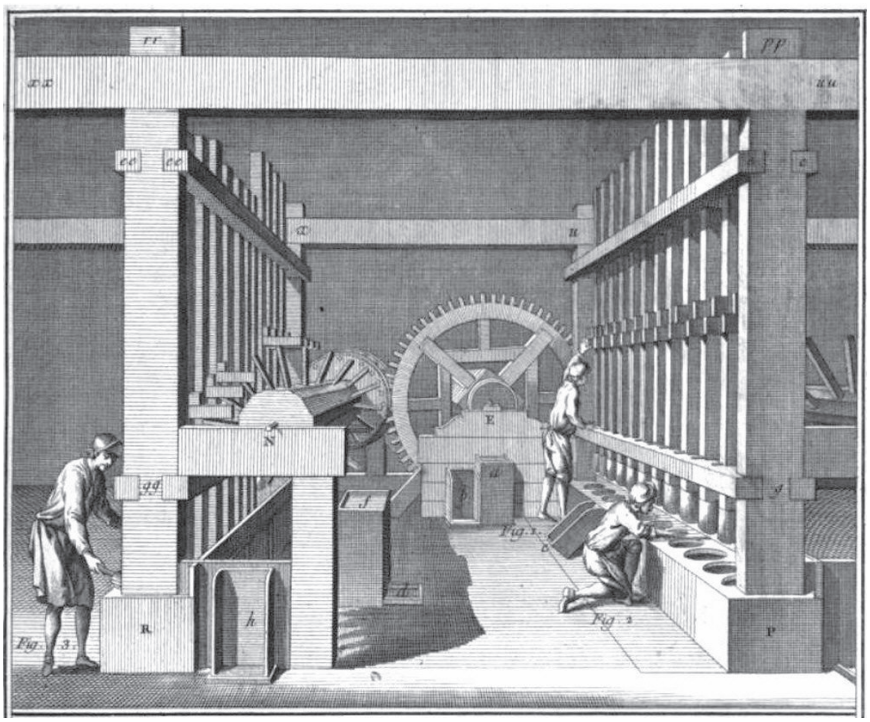
gunpowder required all of the materials to be crushed as finely as possible, and this was best accomplished on an individual basis before the incorporation step. William S. Webb reported that, early in the twentieth century, a millstone six feet in diameter had been unearthed at the site of the former McCoy mill, and he interpreted it to be of the type used for grinding ingredients prior to making gunpowder. After pulverization, all ingredients would be mixed at the composition house in the correct proportions. At this point, the mixture was not yet gunpowder; it would burn when ignited, but relatively slowly, and was not explosive. Not until the blend had been run through the incorporation process in the stamp mill and become a homogenous mass would it become true black powder.[24]

In a stamp mill, as the name suggests, the ingredients were placed into a series of containers, called mortars, and pounded or "stamped" upon by pestles— also called "pounders"—generally operated by water-powered machinery. The McCoy mill was located on the headwaters of Cane Run, which had little flow and a very gentle incline of about twenty feet per mile. Rather than building a mill dam with a water-powered wheel, McCoy's mill machinery was horse-powered, using "the old-fashioned treadmills of the day." Pounders were arranged in two parallel rows and would rise and fall sequentially into the mortars, which were hewed out of thick hardwood beams anchored to the floor of the mill.[25]

The violent action of the machinery required strong bracing and was very noisy, such that the sound of the stamp mill in operation would have been audible for miles. The rapid pounding posed a severe

[24] Oscar Guttmann, *The Manufacture of Explosives* (New York, 1895), 1: 180, 185; Webb, "Old Millstones of Kentucky," 218; *Ordnance Manual*, 149.

[25] DuPont, "Location and Construction," 209; *Ordnance Manual*, 149–50; Norman B. Wilkinson, "A Gunpowder Stamping Mill," in Norman B. Wilkinson and Roy M. Boatman, "The Manufacture of Black Powder," unpublished report, 1958, pp.1–3, MS1645_081, Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation research reports (Accession 1645), Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley; Guttmann, *Manufacture of Explosives*, 193; Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901 (quotation).



Stamp mill of the type used for incorporating gunpowder in Kentucky. Image courtesy Denis Diderot, *Recueil de Planches, sur les Sciences, le Arts Libéraux, et les Arts Mechaniques, avec Leur Explication*, vol. 6. (Paris, 1768). Fabrique des poudres, Plate IV. Published to accompany Diderot's *Encyclopedie*.

explosive danger, should any foreign material be in the mixture of ingredients that might cause a spark, so small quantities of water were added to the mix at the beginning to reduce such hazards, and as needed to keep the mix damp during pounding. Each mortar was filled with about 20 pounds of the ingredient mixture, so that a "run" of a mill with 20 pestles would produce roughly 480 pounds of finished powder. Because of the potential danger, no workers were allowed inside the building during operation, which became increasingly hazardous as the mixture reached its final condition. Workers would depart as soon as the machinery was started up and would shut down

the operation whenever they returned to check on the state of the mixture.[26]

After incorporation, the next step in powder manufacture was corning, or converting the powder mix into small grains. The smaller the grain, the more rapidly the powder burns; fine-grained powder was used for small arms and coarser grains for cannon. At this stage in the process, the damp powder was moist to the point of being a thick paste. Prior to the late eighteenth century, corning was accomplished by forcing the paste through a wire mesh screen, forming grains of a size determined by the size of the openings in the screen. Alternatively, dried powder could be sifted through a screen. This produced powder grains that were then ready for glazing. Some powder mills in Kentucky, especially the smaller operations, may have pressed powder paste through screens, but it is likely that larger mills compressed a powder with lower moisture content in a press house to produce a dense, hard, slate-like material that was then ready for the corning or graining process. Most mills probably conducted pressing and graining in the same building. Between 1780 and 1795, the hand press was introduced to gunpowder production. Compression increased the density of the powder and reduced the dust generated during handling and transport.[27]

The resulting cake was then broken into small pieces with wooden mallets and then run through a series of sieves with openings of gradually decreasing size, sifting the powder grains into an underlying wooden bin. Each sieve would receive a powder load of about thirty to thirty-six pounds, which could be screened by a worker in a few minutes. At about the time of the Civil War, American powder makers changed the corning method to use a series of pairs of rollers to grind up powder cake, which was subsequently run through a bolter

[26] Wilkinson, "Gunpowder Stamping Mill," 1.

[27] Robert A. Howard, *Mary Patton, Powder Maker of the Revolution* (Rocky Mount, N.C., 1980); Robert A. Howard, "Black Powder Manufacture," *Industrial Archaeology* 1 (Summer 1975): 21; Wilkinson, "A Gunpowder Press Mill," in Wilkinson and Boatman, "The Manufacture of Black Powder," pp.1–2, Hagley.

like those used in flour mills to separate out grain sizes. Although rollers for grinding powder cake were not used in Kentucky, powder mills having disappeared long before the war, most of the larger mills probably used bolting machines. An 1835 account of an explosion at the former Trotter mill in Lexington, for example, reported the presence of a bolter.[28]

After granulation, black powder is glazed, a process "to break off any sharp angles and points, and to stop up the outer pores of the grain, thus making the powder less sensitive to atmospheric moisture and less likely to deposit dust. The powder also obtains a greater durability by the rounding through the glazing process." Glazed powder is less likely to cake during storage; in 1830 McCoy advertised his powder to be available either glazed or "rough," the latter being unglazed gunpowder. In glazing, powder is placed in barrels which rotate and tumble the grains, powered by a water wheel. Glazing houses were very dangerous environments, not only because the process generated a considerable amount of powder dust but also because of the large quantities of gunpowder being processed at one time.[29]

The final manufacturing step was drying of the gunpowder. The older method, and one that may have been still used by some of the smaller mills in Kentucky, was air drying on long tables. This was the safer method, although more labor intensive and subject to problems with weather and wind. In air drying, powder was laid out on tables and turned over periodically until uniformly dry. Artificial drying of gunpowder took place in a dry house. More primitive, smaller-scale dry houses possessed a stove within the house that, when lit, heated up the structure, and after the fire was carefully and thor-

[28] Howard, "Black Powder Manufacture," 21; DuPont, "Location and Construction," 210; Norman B. Wilkinson, "A Gunpowder Graining Mill," in Wilkinson and Boatman, "The Manufacture of Black Powder," pp. 4–6, Hagley; *Observer and Reporter* (Lexington, Ky.), March 18, 1835.

[29] Guttmann, *Manufacture of Explosives*, 222 (quotation); Howard, "Black Powder Manufacture," 21; Norman B. Wilkinson, "A Gunpowder Glazing Mill," in Wilkinson and Boatman, "The Manufacture of Black Powder," pp. 1–2, 5–7, 9–12, Hagley; F. M. Smith, *A Handbook of the Manufacture and Proof of Gunpowder* (London, 1870), 69–70.

oughly extinguished, trays of gunpowder were brought in to dry. In larger-scale production, the heat source was located on the outside of the building and the heat conveyed inside. After drying, the finished powder was again bolted to remove dust and packaged into kegs and barrels. Retail sales of small quantities of gunpowder in the antebellum era were generally dispensed to customers in folded papers.[30]

Alexander McCoy continued to produce gunpowder until the early 1850s, when he found the business no longer profitable and turned instead to an "extensive manufacture" of cotton bagging and hempen rope. Rather than on his own property, production was carried on at a factory leased from William Ater which had long been used to manufacture these items. The bagging factory and ropewalk was located across from the present Lexington Cemetery and is now covered by the railroad yards between West Main Street and Manchester Street. A 1901 retrospective noted that, when in operation, the Ater factory ran more than a hundred looms and supplied the South with its products. On November 16, 1854, the large stone building housing the factory was destroyed, an act initially believed to have been committed by one of McCoy's enslaved workers but later attributed to sparks from a locomotive engine. McCoy's loss was reported as small, including the supplies and finished goods on hand at the time.[31]

A brief history of the family, referring specifically to Alexander's sisters, reported that the McCoys were "the owners of a considerable number of slaves, employed in the various manufactories, which for a time included that of whiskey." This suggests that enslaved persons owned by individual McCoys were employed wherever needed in the family businesses. The McCoys also may have leased slaves to work in the mills. When McCoy mortgaged the property to the Bank of Kentucky in 1841, he listed as assets two enslaved adult males, two females,

[30] Howard, *Mary Patton*; Howard, "Black Powder Manufacture, 19; *Rutland* (Vt.) *Courier*, August 30, 1861.

[31] Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901 (quotation); "More Incendiarism," *Georgetown* (Ky.) *Herald*, November 23, 1854; "Historical Section of Fayette County: William Ater," *Morning Herald*, September 15, 1901.

and a boy of about ten years of age. A decade later, the slave schedules for the 1850 census lists seventeen enslaved individuals owned by Alexander McCoy and a further three under the name of Alex McCoy. Nearly all of the McCoy slaves were male, ranging in age from eight to sixty; only two were female, one eighteen years old and the other a toddler. Enslaved workers with a white supervisor were employed in most Kentucky powder mills; for example, both the Samuel Trotter and Spencer Cooper powder mills, competitors of the McCoy mill in Fayette County, depended upon enslaved labor.[32]

As enslavers, Alexander and his sisters were ardent and outspoken supporters of the Southern cause when the Civil War came to Kentucky, and this caused them a great deal of discomfort at the hands of federal soldiers and officials. Although the Kentucky legislature declared support for the Union in September 1861, and the state supplied far more volunteers to the Union army than to the Confederacy, the border state was occupied by federal troops and by the following year had evolved into what amounted to a police state. In a state abounding with Southern sympathizers, the military government became increasingly heavy-handed in its treatment of civilians. George W. Ranck, a resident of the city and later a prominent historian, recalled the wartime occupation of Lexington that began in late September: "Federal troops were now poured into Lexington in such a rapid and constant stream that the whole city and vicinity was virtually a camp, and continued so for four years after." The result, "by the close of the year 1861, Lexington had some of the looks and ways of a garrisoned town."[33]

[32] Fayette County Deed Book 19, Alexander McCoy to Bank of Kentucky, December 13, 1841, 437; *Seventh Manuscript Census of the United States* (1850), Slave Schedules, Fayette County, Kentucky, available online via Ancestry.com (accessed March 15, 2025); O'Dell, "Trotter Family," 424–25; Gary A. O'Dell, "The Spencer Cooper Powder Mill," *Journal of Spelean History* 22 (April–June, 1988): 13.

[33] Anne E. Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky: The Lost Cause and Civil War Memory in a Border State* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010), 10–23; George W. Ranck, "Lexington: War History," in *History of Fayette County, Kentucky*, ed. William H. Perrin (Chicago, 1882), 454 (first quotation), 455 (second quotation); Christopher Phillips, *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border* (New York, 2016); Aaron

Given the openly Confederate sympathies of the McCoy family and their well-known involvement in the production of gunpowder, it is no surprise that a group of Union soldiers decided to raid the powder mill on the night of November 2, 1861. The squad consisted of several Lexington men from Captain William W. Dowden's company and three Cincinnati men from Captain Brant's company; neither of the commanders were present on the raid, which may or may not have been officially sanctioned. When they arrived at the mill, they found it locked up and banged on the door, demanding admittance. The door was opened immediately, and one of the Union soldiers lunged into the doorway, brandishing a Bowie knife, and accosted a group of armed men inside, ordering them to give up their weapons. The men in the mill building complied and denied that there was any gunpowder inside. The raiding party searched the mill and found a keg of gunpowder and a barrel that was half full. Several of the soldiers split off while the search was in progress and went to the dry house, where they discovered more powder in kegs and some powder cake that was drying.[34]

After completing their search, the raiders moved on to the nearby McCoy home. At this time, according to the 1860 census, the house was a residence for Alexander McCoy, age forty; his brothers John and James, thirty and twenty-eight years old, respectively, and both practicing attorneys in Lexington; and two of five sisters, Mary, age twenty-five; and Jane, at twenty years the youngest child. The oldest sister, forty-year-old Ellen Alice, married Dennis Mulligan in 1843 and lived with him at Maxwell Place in the city with their teenage son James; this house is today the official residence of the president of the University of Kentucky. The status of Catherine and Nancy, the remaining daughters of Neil McCoy, could not be determined,

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Astor, *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri* (Baton Rouge, La., 2012); Stanley Harrold, *Border War: Fighting Over Slavery Before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2010); Harold Tallant, *Evil Necessity: Slavery and Political Culture in Antebellum Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 2003).

[34] "A Scout Near Lexington," *Louisville Daily Journal*, November 8, 1861.

but they were both alive in 1858. When the soldiers were let into the house, only John and his wife Ann, age twenty-two, were present.[35]

The armed intruders searched the house thoroughly without discovering any contraband, then found a locked closet beneath the staircase. They demanded the key to the closet and, when told it had been lost, ordered the McCoys to search for it while they waited impatiently. After thirty minutes passed while John and Ann endured the search, one of the soldiers curtly informed them that if the door was not immediately opened, he would put a bullet in John's head; the key was instantly produced and the closet proved to be concealing five kegs of gunpowder. The powder confiscated from the mill and from the house was taken to Camp Dudley in Lexington, where, as the newspaper reported, the troops expected "one day to return it to plague the inventor." Camp Dudley was located on the old Lexington Fair Ground, which, as Ranck recalled, "was the most beautiful in the State, unfortunately became the favorite camping-place of the soldiers." The property was devastated when, as the season grew colder, the commanding officer ordered all the trees in the park-like grounds to be felled for firewood.[36]

The situation continued to deteriorate for civilians in Lexington, regardless of their loyalties. Civil liberties essentially disappeared from Kentucky; citizens could be arrested or even executed for aiding the Confederacy or even expressing sympathy for the Southern cause. Regardless of sectional loyalty, most white Kentuckians were outraged by a government that unilaterally treated the population as though it were part of the rebellion rather than part of the Union. Even so, when Confederate General Edmund Kirby Smith

[35] "A Scout Near Lexington," *Louisville Daily Journal*, November 8, 1861; *Eighth Manuscript Census of the United States* (1860), Fayette County, Kentucky, available online via Ancestry.com (accessed March 15, 2025); Fayette County Deed Book 33, Alexander McCoy to heirs of Neil McCoy, January 13, 1858, 469.

[36] "A Scout Near Lexington," *Louisville Daily Journal*, November 8, 1861 (first quotation); Ranck, "Lexington: War History," 455 (second quotation); "Maxwell Springs," *Lexington Herald*, December 19, 1915.

boldly invaded the Bluegrass in the late summer of 1862, defeating a Union force hastily assembled at Richmond and arriving to occupy Lexington on September 2, the population remained divided in their sentiments.[37]

The Richmond battle took place on Saturday, August 30, and resulted in a complete rout of the Union defenders, many of whom discarded their weapons in their haste to be clear of the battlefield. The federals did not attempt to reform their lines but continued to run through the streets of Richmond toward Lexington, twenty-five miles north. As the Union troops fled up the road to Lexington, they ran into an ambush by John Scott's cavalry, who had concealed horse artillery in the vegetation along the road. The ambush was devastating, and the panicked and demoralized Yankee troops surrendered in droves. Panic seized the remainder of the organized Union forces in Kentucky, who fell back to the Ohio River and left the rest of the state unguarded. The road to Lexington was open.[38]

George Ranck described the pandemonium that seized the city. "Sunday morning, the news of the great disaster began to spread in Lexington . . . the wildest confusion prevailed all the next day. Panic-stricken soldiers, worn out, hungry, and covered with dust, poured through the city. The streets were filled with chaotic masses of men, horses, and wagons, cursing and swearing officers who had deserted their regiments," he wrote. "The excitement reached its highest pitch when it was found that the city was to be evacuated." When Smith and the Confederate army entered the city just before noon on Tuesday, they were "welcomed with smiles and shouts and waving of handkerchiefs by the delighted Southern sympathizers of the place, who, with hosts of men, women and children from all the surrounding counties, crowded the sidewalks." Union flags disappeared and

[37] Marshall, *Creating a Confederate Kentucky,* 21–23; Astor, *Rebels on the Border*, 87–90.

[38] Paul F. Hammond, "Campaign of General E. Kirby Smith in Kentucky, in 1862," Part 2, *Southern Historical Society Papers* 9 (June 1881): 249–54; E. Kirby Smith to Samuel Cooper, September 16, 1862, *O.R.* ser. 1, vol. 16, pt. 1, 933–36; John S. Scott to E. Kirby Smith, September 11, 1862, *O.R.* ser. 1, vol. 16, pt. 1, 938–39.

the Stars and Bars took their old places. "All became gray where all was blue before." A member of Kirby Smith's staff observed, however, that the welcoming crowds were mostly women and children, the Union men prudently remaining within their houses and the Confederate men as yet unwilling to come out openly in their sympathies. The McCoys, who made no secret of their politics, would have been delighted by the arrival of the Confederate army, and may have come into town to join the others in welcoming them.[39]

General Smith made his headquarters at Lexington. Thousands of weapons had been captured from Union forces at Richmond, and these were brought into Lexington by wagon trains and stored in a stable converted into an arms depot. To these were added a large quantity of weapons seized from federal stores in the city, abandoned by retreating bluecoats, along with a variety of foodstuffs and other needed supplies. Smith "set the mills to work to supply the army with flour and meal," Ranck recalled, and "preparations were made to turn out shot and shell at the foundry on the corner of Spring and Short streets." Following the Confederate retreat from Kentucky, Union General George H. Thomas testified in December 1862 to the Buell Commission that, to his knowledge, Smith had been "very actively engaged in collecting supplies and also had been preparing ammunition at Lexington." Smith would not have overlooked the presence of an experienced powderman in the city, and an ardent sympathizer at that.[40]

Alexander McCoy was approached by Smith's officers, or may have sought them out, but he was eager to support the Confederate cause. Accordingly, he restored the long-neglected machinery of the family powder mills to working order and supplied gunpowder to Kirby Smith's forces for the duration of their occupation of Lexington.

[39] Ranck, "Lexington: War History," 459–60 (quotations); Hammond "Campaign of Kirby Smith," Part 3, *Southern Historical Society Papers* 9 (July–August 1881): 292.

[40] Ranck, "Lexington: War History," 460 (first quotation), 461 (second quotation); George H. Thomas statement, Buell Commission, December 19, 1862, *O.R.*, ser. 1, vol. 16, pt. 1, 204 (third quotation).

This was, however, a very brief span of mere weeks. The Confederate invasion of Kentucky was two-pronged; in late August, as Smith led his men toward Lexington, Confederate General Braxton Bragg marched his troops out of Chattanooga into western Kentucky, closely pursued by Union forces commanded by Don Carlos Buell. These two armies would meet in Battle at Perryville on October 8, and in preparation for the imminent conflict, Smith evacuated Lexington shortly beforehand and marched southward, although he would not be able to rendezvous with his counterpart in time for the battle. Although the outcome of the battle of Perryville was inconclusive, losses were heavy on both sides, and the demoralized Confederates were prompted to abandon Kentucky, retreating through Cumberland Gap.[41]

McCoy was now in a very difficult position. As soon as federal troops reoccupied Lexington, he was certain to be arrested for actively collaborating with the Confederates. Alexander and his brothers, John and James, loaded onto wagons as much as they could of the essential powder mill machinery and followed the retreating Confederates. He expected to set up his mill again in a safe location somewhere in the South, most likely with the assistance of Confederate soldiers, and continue to supply gunpowder for the Southern cause. In the mountains of eastern Kentucky, the heavy, slow-moving wagons were easily overtaken by pursuing federals. The captured McCoy brothers and their sisters Mary and Jane were imprisoned in the old "negro jail" on West Short Street, which was then being used as a military prison. This property, formerly the Lexington Theater,

[41] Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901; Thomas L. Connelly, *Army of the Heartland: The Army of Tennessee, 1861–1862* (Baton Rouge, La., 1967), 231–33, 241–46; Grady McWhiney, *Braxton Bragg and Confederate Defeat Vol. 1: Field Command* (New York, 1969), 293–324; Stephen D. Engle, *Don Carlos Buell: Most Promising of All* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 290–93, 302–3, 310; Kenneth W. Noe, *Perryville: This Grand Havoc of Battle* (Lexington, Ky., 2001), 72–79, 124–25; 130–33, 327–37, 344–53, 369, 373; J. Stoddard Johnston, "Bragg's Campaign: Munfordville to Frankfort" and "From Frankfort to Perryville," J. Stoddard Johnston Papers, 1850–1912, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Ky.

Undated image of the jail owned by slave trader Lewis C. Robards in Lexington, Kentucky. Image courtesy John Winston Coleman, Jr. collection on slavery in Kentucky, 1780–1940, 46M53: 33, University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center.

was leased by slave trader Lewis C. Robards in 1849, who made extensive improvements to the two-story brick structure, advertising it as "the largest and best constructed building for a jail in the West." The second floor was outfitted with comfortable and well-furnished apartments for his stock of "fancy girls," intended for sale as mistresses. The McCoy women were probably housed on this floor, the men below. Robards' jail was sold at auction in 1855 to the Lexington firm, Bolton, Dickens, & Co., also slave dealers, and continued to be used as a jail or holding pen for enslaved persons.[42]

[42] Goode, "An Historical Sketch of Pioneer Regions: M'Coy's Powder Mill," *Morning Herald*, September 29, 1901 (first quotation); "Estimable Woman Gone: Widow of Dennis

The McCoy men were held in the jail for a lengthy period until William A. Dudley and Judge Richard A. Buckner, both prominent and influential Union men, arranged for their release. Dudley began practicing law at Lexington in 1844, became president of the Louisville and Lexington Railway Company in 1850, and was appointed quartermaster general of Kentucky in 1861. During the war, Camp Dudley at the fairground was named for him. Buckner also practiced law in Lexington, served as commonwealth's attorney from 1839 to 1842, circuit judge from 1842 to 1851, and a member of the Kentucky House of Representatives from 1859 to 1863, chosen as Speaker of the House during the latter part of this period. Both men, although differing politically, were friends and neighbors to the McCoy family.[43]

Ellen Alice Mulligan died at her home, Maxwell Place, on May 3, 1904, at the age of eighty-six. She was the last child of Neil McCoy to succumb, and only her son, James H. Mulligan, remained to carry on the family line. To the end of her days, Ellen was an intense and unrepentant Confederate in her sympathies, ever bitter over the perceived mistreatment suffered by her family at the hands of Union military officials during the war: "This Mrs. Mulligan never forgot. It burnt into her memory."[44]

Among the last vestiges of an industry that once formed an important component of the Kentucky economy, the mill could not survive past the antebellum era in a more competitive national environment. The gunpowder industry in Kentucky was supported by the presence of saltpeter deposits in the state's caves and rock-shelters,

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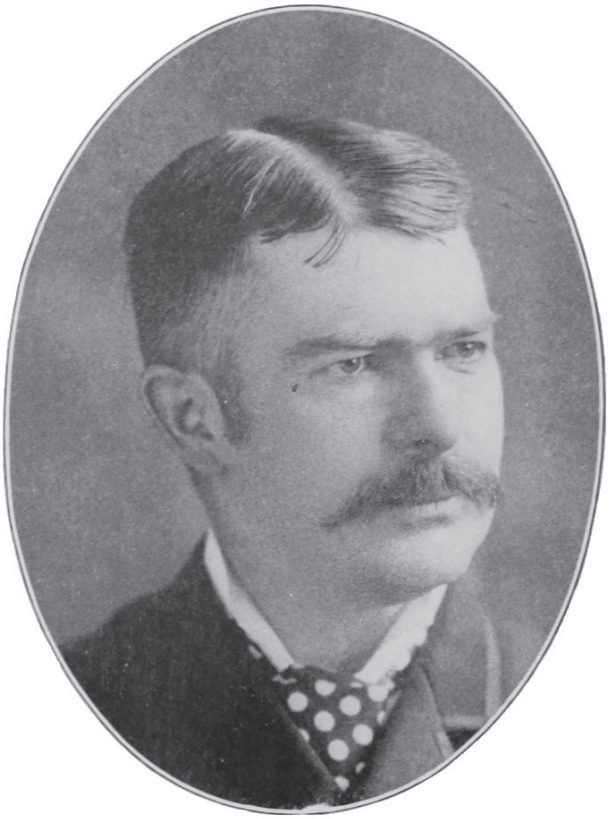
Mulligan Passed Away," *Lexington Herald*, May 4, 1904; J. Winston Coleman, *Slavery Times in Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1940), 157 (second quotation), 158, 159 (third quotation), 160–64.

[43] Richard H. Collins, *History of Kentucky* (Covington, Ky., 1878), 2: 205; *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Kentucky, of the Dead and Living Men of the Nineteenth Century* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1878), s.v. "Buckner, Hon. Richard A., Jr."

[44] "Estimable Woman Gone: Widow of Dennis Mulligan Passed Away," *Lexington Herald*, May 4, 1904 (quotation); John W. Townsend, *Kentucky in American Letters, 1784–1912* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1913), 348–51.



James H. Mulligan, grandson of Neil McCoy and nephew to Alexander McCoy. Mulligan achieved national fame in 1902 for his sentimental poem, "In Kentucky." Image courtesy Ben LaBree, *Notable Men of Kentucky at the Beginning of the 20th Century* (Louisville, Ky., 1902), 64, Library of Congress.

but saltpeter could be imported more cheaply from Britain than it could be produced domestically. Powder mills in the state thrived only when international commerce was interrupted, as during the War of 1812. In addition, high-quality British powder was now available at a lower price than Kentucky makers could afford to charge for their own product. The powder mills of the state could not compete effectively with the eastern powder factories or imported gun-

powder, and Kentucky mills struggled to survive in the following decades.[45]

Two of the largest manufacturers of Kentucky gunpowder, Samuel Trotter and Spencer Cooper, both located at Lexington, were among the last survivors. The Trotter mill closed in 1833 when Samuel died of cholera, and the Cooper mill ceased production in 1838 with the death of the Reverend Cooper. In their reports for the 1820 manufacturer's census, both men reflected rather sourly upon the condition of the market. Samuel wrote, "The sales of gunpowder at New Orleans and other ports of the Mississippi were, prior to the peace with England, considerable, but the quantity of gunpowder bro't in since and sold no doubt at considerable sacrifices has in a great measure forbid shipments to the lower country, though some few still continue to be made." Cooper echoed this sentiment: "We could make much powder annually but the proprietors do not deem it advisable in consequence of so much foreign powder been sent to this country." Alexander McCoy lasted longer in this business, but the same inability to compete effectively also forced him to shut down in the 1840s. If he had not been persuaded by Kirby Smith to resume production for the Confederate army, it seems unlikely that he would ever have made another pound of gunpowder.[46]

Today, in many of the dry caves and rock-shelters of the commonwealth can be found remnants of the saltpeter mining industry that once supported gunpowder production in the state, in the form of tool marks, drill holes, soil excavations, and even intact wooden vats used to extract the mineral from soil and sandstone rock. At the McConnell Springs Park in Lexington, traces of building foundations and remnant mill dam abutments are the residual of the Trotter gunpowder mill, once the largest in the state, and there are sure to be other such archaeological residue of powder mills elsewhere in Kentucky. One other mill may have survived as long as the McCoy

[45] O'Dell, "Saltpeter Manufacturing," 68–70, 95–96.

[46] 1820 Census of Manufacturers (Washington, D.C.), Returns for Samuel Trotter (first quotation) and Spencer Cooper (second quotation).

powder works, although the documentation is less certain: the Fountain Mills of Samuel S. Brooking of Hart County.[47]

A powder mill was erected by John Courts in 1810 on the west side of Lynn Camp Creek in Hart County, Kentucky, strategically located on a wagon road between Munfordville and Greensburg. Some years after Courts' death in 1817, the property and badly deteriorated structures were purchased by Brooking, who repaired and enlarged the works and carried out an extensive newspaper advertising campaign beginning in 1825. Brooking died in 1831, and the mills were purchased in 1833 by Thomas Gibson, who continued to advertise "Brooking's Gunpowder" until 1846, the last time this powder was mentioned. In 1980, the Hart County Historical Society published an article on local powder mills in their journal, which asserted that "powder was made here for the Civil War." No source was given for this claim, although Angelo I. George, who has written extensively on Kentucky saltpeter mining and gunpowder production, believes it may have come from one of the newspaper articles published during the early twentieth century by Cyrus Edwards of Hart County.[48]

Gibson died in 1867, so it is possible that he continued to produce gunpowder in Hart County during the Civil War. Further research may be able to refine the operational chronology and longevity of the former Brooking mill. During the war and for many years afterward, individuals may have made small batches of gunpowder by hand, just as some Kentucky colonists had done during the settlement period. In 1971 Thomas Owens of Rockcastle County, now deceased, told me of a local man he had known, a Civil War veteran named Marion Saxton, who had mined saltpeter from a cave on the Owens

[47] O'Dell and George, "Rock-Shelter Saltpeter Mines of Eastern Kentucky"; Nancy O'Malley, *McConnell Springs in Historical Perspective*, available online via https://mcconnellsprings.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/McConnellSprings_in_Historical_Perspective.pdf (accessed March 27, 2025), 21–40.

[48] Angelo I. George, "Central Kentucky Gunpowder Factories," *Journal of Spelean History* 20 (April–June, 1986): 29–31; *Louisville Journal*, October 6, 1831; "Powdermills," *Quarterly of the Hart County Historical Society* 12 (1980): 4.

property to make his own powder well into the first decade of the twentieth century. Given the abundance of saltpeter caves in Kentucky, many other persons possessing knowledge of powder-making likely did the same. Alexander McCoy—and possibly Thomas Gibson—were the last holdouts of an industry that had been essentially moribund for decades. At the present time, solid documentation supports identification of Richard Foley as the first operator of a powder mill in Kentucky and Alexander McCoy as the last.[49]

[49] Personal communication with the author from Thomas Owens, 1971. Gibson's burial place at Powder Mill, Hart County, is marked by a stone with a death date of September 5, 1867.