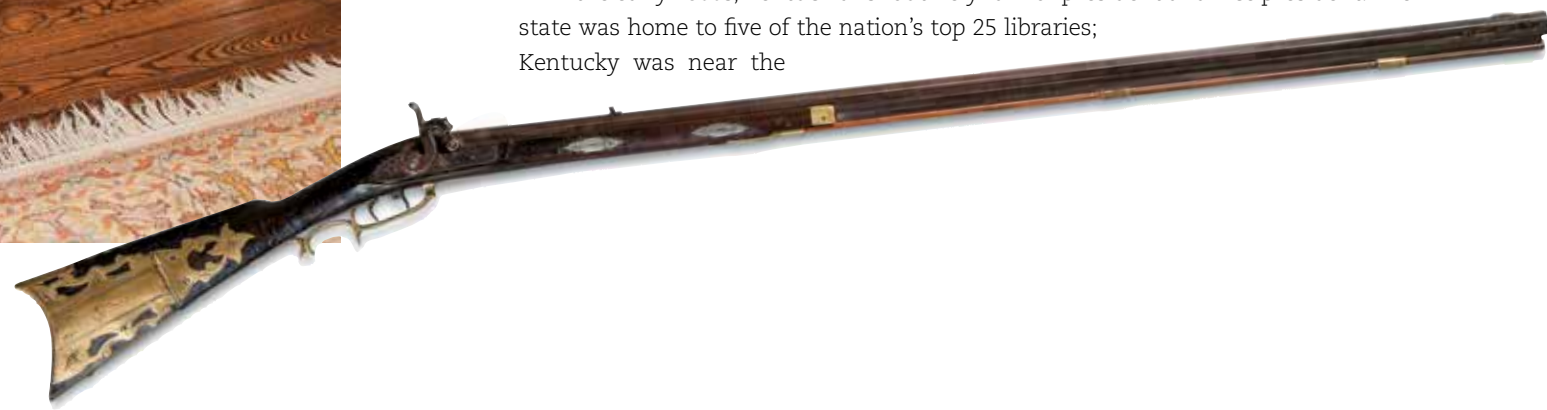




Clockwise from left, a set of 12 spoons once owned by Henrietta Morgan, the mother of John Hunt Morgan; a watercolor by the Guilford Limner; a sugar chest and an Edward Troye painting of Iola; a Kentucky long rifle



PASSION

FOR THE PAST

Book celebrates early Kentucky furniture and artifacts

By Vickie Mitchell / Photos by Bill Roughen

Collecting *Kentucky 1790-1860* tells the story of early Kentucky through sideboards and sugar chests, wooden chairs and pottery crocks, long rifles and silver spoons. Through early Kentucky antiques and artifacts, the book reminds contemporary Kentuckians of the power their state wielded when the nation was new, say its coauthors Genevieve “Gigi” Baird Lacer and Libby Turner Howard.

The early Kentucky materials pictured in their 340-page book reflect a refined aspect of frontier Kentucky that has been forgotten.

“We think of Kentucky and we think of Daniel Boone and George Rogers Clark,” said Lacer. “Well, those guys had fancy chairs. They weren’t sitting on three-legged stools. That part of the story has gotten lost.”

In the early 1800s, Kentuckians routinely ran for president and vice president. The state was home to five of the nation’s top 25 libraries; Kentucky was near the



JONATHAN PALMER PHOTOS

Authors Genevieve Baird Lacer (second from right) and Libby Turner Howard (right) examine silver at the Headley-Whitney Museum, site of an exhibit related to their book.

top of states in terms of agriculture production. Kentucky cities were growing fast, and artists and craftsmen were on the new citizens' heels, ready to supply them with sideboards and silver ladles.

Kentucky went from "rough-hewn to refined in a period of 10 years," said Howard. "By 1806, people have sideboards with inlay."

Like ensuing generations of Kentuckians that held on to their ancestors' antiques, the collectors profiled in *Collecting Kentucky* appreciate the state's material past. They have protected and preserved pieces of it.

"They held on and cherished these pieces because they reflected that very important time in which Kentucky existed on the national front," said Lacer. "It took us awhile to see six generations later that the idea has faded but the material has not."

Now, through the book and upcoming exhibit curated by Lacer and Howard at the Headley-Whitney Museum in Lexington (See sidebar, p. 64), the state's material past is being celebrated.

A shared love of writing and collecting

Lacer and Howard are writers, educators, and ardent collectors of what they and other collectors call "early Kentucky materials." That ranges from a set of gold



A mutual interest in collecting brought Lacer and Howard together and provided the impetus for their book.

spoons made from a gold nugget that Calvin Morgan sent home from California to his mother Henrietta Morgan, mother of Confederate general John Hunt Morgan, to the silver trophy awarded to the winner of the Brennan Stakes, the first named stakes race at the Kentucky Association racetrack, Keeneland's predecessor.

It also includes the Edward Troye paintings and sugar chests that Lacer and her husband, Terry, collect and enjoy at their farm in Shelby County, and the early 1800s pieces Howard and her husband, Ken, have sought for their 1840s home in Henry County.

Lacer and Howard met through collecting. Both attend meetings organized a few times a year by a group of Kentucky collectors, at which members share and discuss their collections and finds.

At one of those meetings a few years ago, the pair talked about how neighboring states had published

books that documented their early decorative arts. They agreed it was past time for Kentucky to do the same. While books have been written about Kentucky coin silver and other specific categories, "there has never really been a comprehensive book," said Howard.

Given their backgrounds in writing and publishing — Lacer is the author of two noted books on Troye; Howard is the former editor of the magazine *Kentucky Homes and Gardens* — they decided that together they could pull off such a project.



At 340 pages and with 600 color photographs, *Collecting Kentucky 1790-1860* is in its second printing and retails for \$75.

PICTURE A COLLECTOR

Genevieve “Gigi” Baird Lacer and Libby Turner Howard interviewed 50 collectors of early Kentucky decorative arts for their book. For Lacer and Howard, avid collectors themselves, it was an immersive education. Here, they answer some questions about the collectors they met.

Are the collectors you interviewed from any particular generation?

Lacer: “We have collectors from their 90s into their 50s. But rather than their age, it is the amount of time they have been collecting that is amazing. One started at 16, collecting arrowheads. So he is now getting close to 50 years of collecting. Another at age 5 sat with his great grandfather, who talked about maps, Audubons, and silver. This collector has tracked pieces down within his family and ended up with many of them because he remembered those stories. It became more of a life-style for him. He is nearing 90.”

Do they live in old houses?

Howard: “No, only one of our collectors lives in what would be classified as an old house, and it is an early 1900s home. Most do decorate in a conservative style that fits their collection. Some live very casually, with their dogs up on the furniture, and for others it is like a museum with humidity control and lockdown.”

Are they all native Kentuckians?

Howard: “Most are native Kentuckians, but not all of them. Some were gone from the state a long time and came back, like the Noes, the only named collectors in the book. They lived on the East Coast for many years and had an amazing East Coast collection before they began collecting early Kentucky materials.”

You have said that collecting comes in waves, and that it was important to capture what is currently an abundant group of private collections?

Howard: “The impetus in doing this so quickly and with such focus was to freeze those collections as they are because they will inevitably disperse.”

What is the common thread that connects these collectors?

Lacer: “All 50 of them understand Kentucky history.”

Howard: “They are all historians.”

How did seeing these collections and writing this book change the way you collect?

Howard: “Now, I just want what they have.”

Lacer: “My husband says it is the greatest thing that ever happened to me because I can’t find anything I want.”

So began more than two years of research and writing as they traveled the state to meet and interview collectors.

Support from other collectors

The pair found support and enthusiasm for their project. Jean Frazier of Louisville agreed to publish the book, the first from her Cherry Valley Publications. Frazier’s interest in early Kentucky materials made her “one that we knew early on would like to see a book done on Kentucky materials,” said Lacer.

Members of their collectors group shared their knowledge as well as names of other collectors. Before long the women had a list of some 50 collectors.

Lexington photographer Bill Roughen signed on to photograph pieces. He had photographed art and artifacts for the J.B. Speed



A Kentucky and Tennessee map by Cyrus Harris

Art Museum in Louisville and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. His full-color photographs became the book’s backbone. Cabinetmakers have emailed their thanks; many of the book’s 600 images are so detailed that they can be used to make pattern drawings for reproduction pieces.

“Bill should get a medal,” said Howard.

Writing what they know

Howard and Lacer understand collecting, and so they decided to

tell their story through collectors.

“A writer has to write about what he or she knows,” said Lacer. “Neither one of us, when we started, were experts on early Kentucky furniture, early Kentucky textiles, early Kentucky silver. But

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Charles Wilkins Short's watercolor painting of the Peyton Short Plantation in Woodford County; right, a cherry sidebar on which sits a premium pitcher by silversmith John Kitts

the one thing we did know about was collecting.”

They wanted *Collecting Kentucky* to be a resource and reference for those who collect or who simply admire early Kentucky artifacts. Its active title is meant to underscore that “collecting is a modern pursuit,” said Howard.

From the 50 collectors they met and interviewed, they chose 10 to profile. Each has a significant collection of early Kentucky materials and a distinct philosophy of collecting.

For example, one collects mainly chests, desks, and other furnishings built to store sugar at a time when the staple was an expensive commodity. Another collects antiques made in one region of the state. Another collects one-of-a-kind pieces.

Each collector’s one-page profile is followed by 25 to 30 pages of photos of his or her collection. Photo captions include the piece’s title, material, date it was built, dimensions, provenance, and history.

Nine of the 10 collectors are unnamed. Anonymity was a key, Lacer and Howard say, to gaining collectors’ cooperation.

“We made that decision before we talked to anyone,” said Lacer, “mainly because we didn’t want to stub our toe at the outset. Some of them would not have cared, but others, we know in our hearts, would not have wanted to do it.”



The named collectors, Bob and Norma Noe, gave their collection to the Speed Museum, so their collection is no longer private.

Stories that couldn’t be left out

The profiles of collectors are separated by short features.

Those sidebars are the “stories we just couldn’t bear to leave out,” said Howard, tales of particular antiques or of the people who made them. A favorite is the story of a cherry-and-poplar tambour desk, which has signatures of several couples beneath its top board. The men and women signed their names on March 3 of 1826, 1827, and 1828, but despite the inked couplings, none of the couples married one another. The desk’s story adds to its value, and it reminds that many factors influence collectors’ purchases.

“They don’t just acquire things; that is not the point,” said Lacer.

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"When they go after a piece, there is a solid reason behind it. It may be provenance. It may be the relationship with something they are already collecting or something that connects a new piece with what they already have."

"Each collector is motivated with certain viewpoint," said Howard. "The 'how', 'when,' and 'where' of a piece is culturally important. But the 'why' is personal."

The book's final section is a comparative archive, in which pieces from the collections of the 40 other collectors are displayed according to category. The archive serves as a comparative study, for example, showing many examples of sugar chests pictured side by side.

Book sales prove interest in Kentucky antiques

Lacer and Howard believed there was demand for their book, and its sales have proved they were correct.

Within nine weeks of the *Collecting Kentucky's* release in September 2013, the initial printing of 1,500 copies had sold out. Before the end of the year, a second printing of 1,500 had arrived.



Sugar chests on which are displayed a Churchill Downs trophy from 1875, left, and contemporary art glass by Stephen Powell



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Kentucky long rifles

When the coauthors lugged 36 books (each book weighs six pounds) to the Kentucky Book Fair in Frankfort late last year, they were sold in little more than an hour. At \$75, it was the priciest book at the fair.

They sold 300 leather-bound copies at a premium to a group of “subscribers,” who are listed in the front of the book. “Having subscribers is a 19th century technique to garner support,” said Lacer. “Audubon did it.”

“It also documents for the future the people who were part of this and were interested in this,” Howard.

Collectors’ cooperation was key

Howard and Lacer realize their book would not have been possible without the collectors.

Their cooperative spirit was never in evidence more than on what Lacer and Howard call Silver Day, when the state’s top silver collectors appeared at Lacer’s doorstep, some with their coin silver in a shoe box, others accompanied by a chauffeur, to have pieces of their collection photographed.

HEADLEY-WHITNEY TO EXHIBIT PIECES FROM THE BOOK

An exhibit this fall at the Headley-Whitney Museum will feature almost 200 of the Kentucky artifacts pictured in *Collecting Kentucky 1790-1860*.

For the exhibit, *Collecting Kentucky 1790-1860* (Sept. 6-Nov. 9), coauthors Genevieve Baird Lacer and Libby Turner Howard have curated representative pieces from the 10 collections profiled in their book. Pieces for the exhibition were chosen to make particular points about collecting. For example, a collector’s penchant for collecting from a geographic area is emphasized by antiques that were made in Lincoln County, Kentucky.

A speakers’ series will be held in conjunction with the exhibit. Among the planned speakers are Bob Hillenmeyer, a conservator of early Kentucky furniture; James Birchfield, an expert on Henry Clay; and Ron Vance, a silver expert.

For more information and a speakers’ schedule, visit www.collectingkentucky.com or www.headley-whitney.org. The book is available in many area bookstores and antiques shops. Gift shops at Colonial Williamsburg in Williamsburg, Va., and the Frick Collection in New York also stock *Collecting Kentucky 1790-1860*.



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More than \$1 million worth of silver was splayed on Lacer's dining room table. As Howard and Lacer carefully arranged pieces and Roughen photographed them, the collectors admired one another's collections and swapped stories. Most stayed the day, enjoying each other's company as well as the meals and wine that Lacer and Howard served.

"What Silver Day taught us is that there is a community aspect about collecting that is wonderful too," said Howard.

Unnamed and unsung, the collectors are simply happy to share their passion for Kentucky history by sharing their collections.

"I do think it speaks to all 50 we worked with, that they are not particularly interested in personally elevating themselves," said Lacer.

"They are not interested in saying 'look what I have.' They are simply passionate about this early Kentucky material." **KM**



A trophy from the first named stakes race at the Kentucky Association track



C. 1840 painting of Oakland House and Race Course, Louisville