







# FLOW OF HISTORY

Site of early industry,  
Lower Howard's Creek  
now a nature preserve

By Jacalyn Carfagno / Photos by Jim Lane

About 450 million years ago ancient seas laid down limestone in an area that's in what we now call Lower Howard's Creek in Clark County. Much, much later, by the time erosion and other forces had cut a deep channel through the stone to create a stream that flowed into a larger one, buffalo traveled along the creek on their way to salt deposits upstream. About 10,000 years ago Native Americans followed the buffalo, looking for salt and water, hunting along the stream.





In 1775, a year before the United States declared its independence from Great Britain, an adventurer and surveyor named Daniel Boone established an outpost where that stream ran into the Kentucky River. A group of cabins and block houses, Fort Boonesborough gave settlers a measure of protection from Native Americans. In the fall of 1778, a British-sympathizing force — led by Chief Blackfish, of about 400 Shawnee, Cherokee, and Wyandot warriors and a few Europeans — laid siege but, after 10 days, was routed.

One of the defenders was Col. John Holder. Contemporary accounts describe him relentlessly fighting back, dousing fires ignited by torches hurled over the walls with buckets of water, throwing huge stones over the ramparts at attackers trying to tunnel under the fortifications.

Holder hadn't come out to fight, though. Like thousands of others, he had come to the unsettled land west of the Appalachians to make a fortune, or at least a living. He soon moved out of the fort to establish a pioneer station on land he'd

From left, fossils encased in limestone, a limestone cut gravestone from the early 19th century, and limestone blocks from the chimney of an old homestead offer fascinating glimpses of earlier eras.

purchased from Virginia settler John Howard in 1775. Under the enterprising Holder the area along Lower Howard's Creek, as the stream was named, became one of the first industrialized areas in Kentucky. Within a few years 80 people lived in the settlement, clearing land, planting crops, quarrying and dressing stone to build



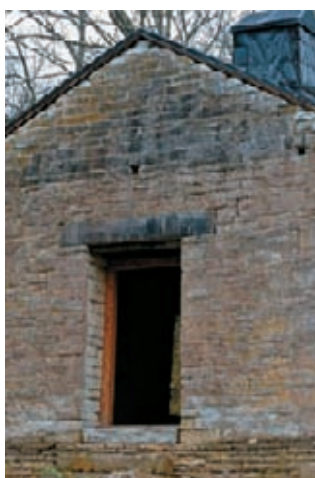


houses, outbuildings, and mills to process the lumber, corn, flour, and cloth; and a distillery to refine grain into whiskey. Holder also built a boatyard, an inspection warehouse, and a tavern.

The settlement moved quickly from growing and hunting food for subsistence to a barter economy, where specialized products and services were traded for one another, to an enterprise that produced goods that were floated down the Kentucky River to be sold in distant markets for cash.

Walking in the Lower Howard's Creek Nature and Heritage Preserve two and a quarter centuries later, it's hard to imagine all that activity. The ruins of a huge mill still stand, but there are no turning wheels or grinding stones, no mules being shod, no wagons creaking along the roads, no boats under construction. Instead, water flows in the creek bed and gurgles down falls, wind rustles the trees, a woodpecker hammers away, and birds call. Occasionally, small mammals move in the brush and larger ones crunch along trails.

Though the area continued to thrive through the first half of



This house was built about 1850 with stone quarried and dressed in the Lower Howard's Creek valley. The exterior walls are two feet thick.

the 19th century and the Civil War, railroads and steam power changed the world and with it, Lower Howard's Creek. When there was no need to wait for the spring thaw and rains to get goods to market, and power could be created anywhere, not just near running water, the economic underpinnings of Lower Howard's Creek began to crumble. The Great Depression further depopulated the valley, and by the mid-20th

century only a few residents remained in Lower Howard's Creek. The last year-round residents in what is now the preserve died there in 1970 after a life of farming the steep hillsides and living in a home much like the earliest settlers, without running water, electricity, telephone, or sewer service.



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## flow of history



Left, a swinging foot bridge was built with grant funds. Below, the remains of the Bush Mill, a three-and-a-half story structure built in the early 1800s, testify to a once-vibrant community.



For three decades not much happened along Lower Howard's Creek. Some locals hiked or rode horses there; a few people ran cattle in the area. But for the most part, nature held sway, gradually overtaking the streamside fields where crops had been grown, slowly dismantling the dozens of buildings, covering up signs of human activity.

The way Clare Sipple tells it, one day in the late 1990s Thomas Clark, the late historian whose knowledge of and passion for Kentucky history were so deep that the state's history center is named after him, spoke to some local landowners about the importance of Lower Howard's Creek. "Right here is where Kentucky's monied economy began," Clark told them.

While the history was, and is, compelling, there was money to preserve Lower Howard's because by the late 20th century the human abandonment had allowed rare plant and animal species to survive there. Those species, the limestone cliffs, and the clear water make the area an ecological and scenic gem. Plus, that wa-

ter flows into the Kentucky River, which supplies drinking water for hundreds of thousands of downstream residents. By the end of the 20th century, Lower Howard's Creek was a prime target for environmental preservation.

The Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund bought the original 228 acres and deeded it to the Clark County Fiscal Court to manage as a preserve.

Sipple, an amateur historian and a landscape architect with special interest in historic preservation and natural lands management, spent her childhood working for a family that owned land near the creek, and she often rode horses down to it. As an adult she hiked there. Around 1999, when she read a notice of a meeting about forming a preserve along Lower Howard's Creek, she wanted to know more, thinking, "Wait a minute, who's doing what with my creek."

Sipple attended a meeting where the idea was presented of creating a preserve owned by Clark County that would be managed by volunteers. Sipple had a better idea. How about she could





work part time managing the preserve if she were able to raise the money, through contributions or grants, to pay her salary.

So it was that in 2001 the Lower Howard's Creek Nature and Heritage Preserve was dedicated as a state nature preserve with Clare Sipple as its manager.

"Clare is excellent, she's very on top of things," says Zeb Weese, a biologist with the Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund, which has provided multiple grants to the non-profit Friends of Lower Howard's Creek to acquire property and protect resources in the preserve.

Walking in the preserve — now grown to 353 acres — with Sipple, it's very clear she is on top of things. She describes how the buffalo grazed out an area and moved on, points out a trillium about to emerge in the spring, stops to examine bobcat tracks, spots a kingfisher skimming the surface of the water. All the while she ticks off the grants she's written: to buy land, of course, for biological surveys to catalog the rare plant and animal species; to do work upstream to improve the quality of the water in the creek; to rebuild stone walls; to build a swinging footbridge across the creek ... the list goes on.

Sipple and some dedicated volunteers do a huge amount of the work, and, according to Weese, "have put in countless hours,"

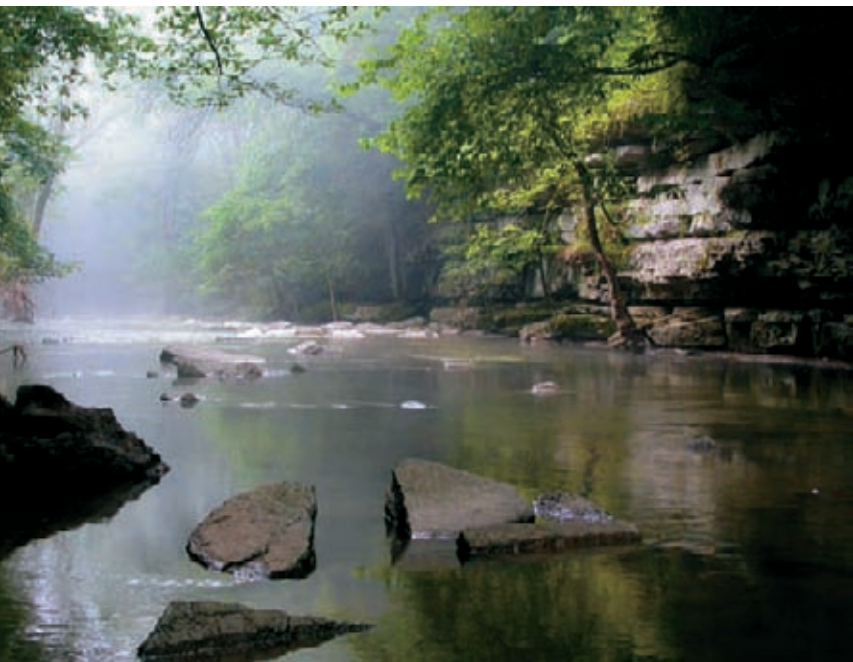
Spring brings an abundance of wildflowers to Lower Howard's Creek.

removing invasive species and building and maintaining trails. In 2011 the Heritage Land Conservation Fund board recognized that work with its annual Stewardship Award for "exemplary management of the site."

Weese says the Lower Howard's Creek valley probably looks a lot like it did when Daniel Boone, John Holder, and Chief Blackfish traveled its paths. The trees would certainly have been larger when the first Europeans arrived, and there would have been some chestnut and ash along with the species there now, but for the most part Weese says "there's been plenty of time for nature to bounce back from all that human activity."

The interlinked story of nature and people intrigues Kelli Carmean, an archaeologist who teaches at Eastern Kentucky University, where she is chair of the anthropology department. Looking for a path to tell the human stories behind archaeological work, Carmean wrote *Creekside*, a novel that links a couple who settled in Central Kentucky in the 18th century and the archaeologist who studies their homesite 200 years later as bulldozers prepare to destroy it to make way for a modern development.

## flow of history



Lower Howard's Creek is safe from bulldozers, but Car-mean sees the same richness in the stories there. "There was drama in that valley."

And tons of activity. Envisioning the creek bed without the trees, populated instead by people, work animals, fields, roads, buildings, carts, ringing with the sound of activity, it came alive for her. "There was *wealth* down there," she said. "That mill is huge; there had to be a lot going on to build that."

She's intrigued by the sense of place. "There's this spot on the landscape; people come and go through time ... then it becomes abandoned and nature comes in. All these different views, and yet it's the same creek, the same land. It's not really changing; it's our perspectives that are changing."

As is Sipple's. Recently she picked up a story, backed by early documents, that she hadn't heard before. The Civil War was a challenge along Lower Howard's Creek. Many of the landowners were slave holders, but they were principally business people and, like Kentucky itself, avoided taking sides in the war. Confederate troops came through and camped in the fields; same for Union troops.

Samuel Archer Bedford Woodford was a landowner who operated a distillery along the creek. In April, 1863 Union forces came along and asked to camp in his fields. Woodford obliged, even invited the officers for dinner and served them some of his fine, copper-distilled whiskey. "The next day they came with a wagon and took all of his whiskey, for medicinal purposes of course" He wasn't paid for the 93 barrels that rolled out of his warehouse.



Lower Howard's Creek bears silent witness to the flow of history that has unfolded along its banks.

That didn't sit well with Woodford. When the war ended, he petitioned the federal government for payment. The claim went through both houses of Congress but was denied until 1886, when a file containing letters from the commanding officer who ordered the whiskey confiscated were found. He finally received about \$9,300 for the whiskey in 1888, \$4,000 of which his lawyer wanted.

Sipple smiles. "So much neat stuff has happened along this creek." **KM**

## IF YOU GO

Guided hikes are scheduled in the preserve in the fall, winter, and spring. Private groups can also make arrangements for a guided hike. For further details and to sign up to be included in e-mail notifications of future hikes, go to [lowerhowardscreek.org](http://lowerhowardscreek.org) or call the preserve manager at (859) 744-4888.

The John Holder Trail of the Lower Howard's Creek Nature and Heritage Preserve is open to the public every day from sunrise to sundown. The trail head is near Hall's Restaurant, and a brochure describing stops along the trail can be downloaded from the website.

The non-profit Friends of Lower Howard's Creek, Inc. that manages the preserve relies on grants, membership fees, and other contributions as well as the proceeds from a small endowment. Membership information is available on the website.