

Scientists of Kentucky

Introduction

Kentucky's contributions in the sciences were established remarkably early. Under the brilliant leadership of Horace Holley, Transylvania University in Lexington established one of the finest medical schools in America despite the frontier conditions still prevalent in the Bluegrass during his administration (1818–1825). Even beyond medicine, however, one historian concluded that Transylvania left “an enduring legacy. Having introduced quality science instruction into the curriculum of the early 19th century college, Transylvania's Academic Department had made significant contributions—ones as important as those of the more prestigious Medical Department.”^a

Although Transylvania's eminence in the sciences is over, the state's long heritage of scientific endeavor has endured into the present century and has counted individuals from all regions of the Commonwealth among its ranks. A chronicle of these men and women would seem appropriate for the *Transactions of the Kentucky Academy of Science*.

The most immediate problem with such a plan is, what constitutes a scientist of Kentucky? Is it an issue of birthplace, schooling, or subject matter? The great Bluegrass bibliophile John Wilson Townsend grappled with this issue some years ago with reference to literature. “What is a Kentucky book?,” he asked. “Surely,” he concluded, “a Kentucky book is one written by a Kentuckian about Kentucky or Kentuckians and printed in Kentucky; surely it is a book written by a Kentuckian upon any subject under the sun, and published in any clime; surely it is one written in Kentucky by a citizen of any other state or country, regardless of the subject or place of publication, for, in general, I have regarded the birthplace of a piece of literature more important than that of the author.”^b Town-

send's rather broad guidelines will be adapted and adopted for the scientists to be included in this series.

Ever since Thomas S. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962; 2nd rev. ed., 1970), it has become unfashionable to speak of the cumulative, linear march of scientific progress. Current historians of science are more apt to talk about the “paradigmatic changes” occurring within various disciplines and the gestalt perceptual transformations that have caused fundamental changes in those fields. But any given discovery in science is seldom as revolutionary as it often appears; while some paradigms may change, many others remain intact. Thus, there is still much to be said for the contributions of one's predecessors in any scientific discipline. Even Newton, a man not given to modesty, once said: “If I have seen further (than you and Descartes) it is by standing upon the shoulders of Giants.”^c

Kentucky cannot claim Newton, but in geology, biology, medicine, and many other disciplines, the Commonwealth has produced its fair share of shoulders upon which the present generation of researchers may stand. It is to the appreciation of this basic fact that this series is dedicated.

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ENDNOTES

- a. Eric Christianson, “The Conditions for Science in the Academic Department of Transylvania University, 1799–1857,” *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 79 (Autumn 1981):325.
- b. *Kentucky in American Letters, 1784–1912*, vol. 1 (Cedar Rapids, Iowa: The Torch Press, 1913), p. xi.
- c. Letter to Robert Hooke, 5 February 1675.



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