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# Our Rich History: Benjamin Van Cleve, child of the Revolution, Kentucky Settler, Father of Dayton, Ohio

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By **Steve Preston**  
*Special to NKyTribune*

It is very exciting in historical research to find figures who touch the early history of more than one place. Finding someone who was an original settler in two places and a citizen of a third is truly remarkable. Even more remarkable is how these figures fade from the historical records, their stories forgotten. One such figure in Northern Kentucky and Cincinnati history is Benjamin Van Cleve.

Benjamin Van Cleve was born in Freehold, Monmouth, New Jersey in 1773. He was the oldest of nine children born to John and Catharine Benham Van Cleve. The 1778 Battle of Monmouth literally took place at his house, among other areas. The Van Cleve family's home was destroyed by British troops as the battle was coming to a close.

His father, John, was in the local militia and fought at the Battle of Germantown. In 1785, several years after the conclusion of the war, the elder Van Cleve led his family west to Pittsburgh. When John Cleves Symmes and settlers descended the Ohio River to settle his land in the Miami Valley, John Van Cleve endeavored to join his fellow New Jersey immigrants.



On Christmas Day in 1789, the Van Cleves, along with the family of his uncle, Robert Benham, and other passengers, began the perilous journey to "Losantiville" (as Cincinnati was then known) in three flatboats. The journey was perilous for several reasons. American Indians, especially the Shawnee, were known to attack these "immigrant boats" as they floated between Marietta and Losantiville. Stories abound of flatboats riddled with musket balls washing up downstream with no survivors.

If settlers avoided Indian ambushes, they were still at the mercy of the Ohio River itself. Numerous sandbars, submerged logs, and rocks awaited to damage or sink the boat of the unsuspecting or careless navigator. In fact, one of the three boats in the Van Cleve party ran aground on a sandbar and was stranded for about 20 hours.

Nine days after leaving Crawford's ferry near Pittsburgh, the little group arrived in Losantiville, none the worse for wear. The military presence was much more in view than the civilian presence. Several companies of soldiers were busy finishing the construction of Fort Washington. According to Benjamin Van Cleve, only "two small hewed log houses had been erected and several cabins."

Soon after arriving, on January 2, 1790, Territorial Governor Arthur St. Clair, changed the name from Losantiville to Cincinnati. The governor also created Hamilton County in the same proclamation.

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Benjamin turned 18, and with his father's permission, purchased land across the Ohio River in Kentucky from Major David Leitch. This made Benjamin one of the first settlers of *Leitch's Station in present-day Wilder, Kentucky*. He was one of the four single men, along with families, who built the "station" for their protection from the Indians.

Conflicts between settlers and Native Americans greatly increased during 1790 and 1791. Several smaller settlements further up the Miami Valley were attacked by warriors hoping to drive the settlers back across the Ohio River. Benjamin was one of a group of men who responded to one such attack, when Dunlap's Station, near present-day Colerain, was attacked. Unfortunately for Benjamin and his family, they would feel the tragedy of losing a loved one. His father was cultivating one of his out-lots with several other men. The party came under attack and sprinted for the fort. John Van Cleve proved to be the swiftest of the group, but this proved fatal. The elder Van Cleve was some distance ahead of the fleeing group when a warrior attacked from behind a tree, stabbing and scalping him before any help could arrive.

With the death of his father, Benjamin now had the unenviable task of maintaining two properties. Benjamin had to work his own fields across the river at Leitch's Station and run the household of his father in Cincinnati. Benjamin helped the family pay off the remaining debts of his father, even finishing a house he had started for a customer prior to his death. Van Cleve also began work with his uncle, Robert Benham, for the Quartermaster General. He was paid \$15 a month. His work sent him to Kentucky for horses and to wherever the army was located.

Benjamin Van Cleve was in the employ of the army when he witnessed firsthand the defeat of St. Clair and his forces by the Indians at present-day Fort Recovery. Van Cleve was busy leading packhorse trains to the army on the move. He was helping shuttle supplies between Cincinnati and the army as it proceeded north. He reached the army with his last packhorse train and was instructed to return to Cincinnati.

Before he could begin the return trip, the confederated tribes of Ohio Valley Indians attacked the encamped army. Benjamin Van Cleve fought for his life and escaped the general slaughter. In his hasty retreat, he threw his shoes off and made his way back to Cincinnati shoeless.

When Benjamin Van Cleve returned with the ragged survivors of the battle, he was discharged by the Quartermaster and took a civilian job with Elliot and Williams doing the exact same job. He sold his property at Leitch's Station and traveled the country for his work. Van Cleve traveled through the Illinois Country, to Tennessee, and to Philadelphia. He even delivered a horse to Chief Joseph Brant of the Mohawks in New York City. He later worked for the Recorder's Office in Cincinnati.

In 1795, Israel Ludlow, then the surveyor for Hamilton County, went north to survey land that would become Dayton, Ohio. On April 1, 1796, Benjamin Van Cleve became the first settler of another town. This was the day that Van Cleve arrived in Dayton, Ohio to live out his days.

Originally intending to marry Reverend James Kemper's daughter, Sarah Lawson Kemper, Van Cleve found himself too poor to keep her in a manner she was accustomed. It wouldn't be until 1800 that he would wed. In another first, he wed Mary Whitten on August 28, 1800 — the first marriage recorded in Dayton, Ohio. He survived his first wife, who died in 1810, to marry again in 1812. He continued to be a man of firsts.

In Dayton, he was the first postmaster and first Clerk of the Court of Dayton, to name but a few of the roles he played there. He died on November 29, 1821, at the age of 48.

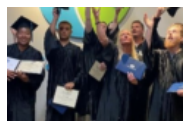
*Steve Preston is the Education Director and a Curator of History at Heritage Village Museum. He received his MA in Public History from Northern Kentucky University.*

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