

Oldham was the 74th county created by the Kentucky Legislature. Our birthday is February 1, 1824. Oldham County was formed from portions of Jefferson, Shelby and Trimble Counties.

The county is named for Colonel William Oldham, a Revolutionary War patriot and early pioneer. Although Colonel Oldham had been deceased for more than 30 years when the county was formed, he was still well-remembered and was given a final honor by having a county named in his memory.

When the first battles of the Revolutionary War broke out in Massachusetts, at Concord and Lexington, William Oldham was a young man of 22, living near Berkley, in western Virginia. He immediately joined a militia and was made a junior officer. Many years later, his wife Penelope related to their oldest son that William Oldham was among a group of 120 frontiersmen led by Captain Daniel Morgan (later of some Revolutionary War fame) who marched from Western Virginia to Boston to support General Washington's siege of the city, covering 600 miles in only 23 days..

Though I have not been able to do the original research myself, sources located have also placed Oldham in battles at Brandywine and Monmouth Courthouse. Another source says he was with Washington when Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown.

At some point after serving in the Revolution, William Oldham joined an older brother, Samuel, who had come to the Falls of the Ohio. It was not uncommon for soldiers to receive land grants in the far west and Oldham may have held one of these. He rose rapidly in the frontier community of Louisville and by the fall of 1786 had been appointed Sheriff of Jefferson County (Virginia) which included present day Oldham County.

Oldham was known to his friends as, 'Will'.

Collins History of Kentucky, written in 1848 by Judge Lewis Collins says Oldham ***“was a chivalrous and enterprising man, brave and experienced officer, and very efficient in defending the country against the incursion of the Indians. He was one of the first magistrates of Jefferson County, an active, useful and public-spirited citizen”***.

Likely because he was Sheriff of Jefferson County, Oldham was appointed in the fall of 1791 to lead the Kentucky militia as part of an expedition into the Northwest Territory.

President Washington ordered a military expedition because the British and their Indian allies refused to recognize American sovereignty in the Northwest Territory and were attacking and killing settlers.

The expedition, under the command of a retired Revolutionary War general, Arthur St. Clair, consisted of approximately 2000 people, including women, children and civilians. The civilians were working as wagon divers and managing a large herd of cattle which moved with the army and was used for food. A combination of army regulars and militia from several states made up the 1700 soldiers in the expedition. The Kentucky militia was made up of approximately 260 men.

From the beginning, the effort was plagued by a series of unfortunate events, including bad weather, lack of supplies, poor equipment and (what turned out to be) misjudgments by General St. Clair. As the group moved north, its size shrunk. Some people dropped out and others stayed behind at camps made along the way. Of the 2000 who started out from Fort Washington on the Ohio River (present day Cincinnati), only 1200 were left by the time they eventually came into contact with an

unexpectedly large alliance of Indians. Along the Wabash River, south of present day Fort Wayne, Indiana, an estimated 1400 Indians from various tribes and were waiting.

The Indians attacked at dawn on November 4, 1791. The Kentucky militia had been ordered to camp on the north side of the Wabash River, away from the main body of the arm. The Kentucky group was attacked first and immediately overrun by hundreds of Miami Indians, who came out of the woods with ferocious-sounding war yelps, swinging tomahawks and firing muskets. Most of the Kentucky militia were inexperienced fighters who had never witnessed such a sight. They were terrified. Many froze in place and died without even trying to fight.

When he became aware of the attack, Colonel Oldham - who had been making a pre-dawn report to General St. Clair - dashed back to the river and his men, but was soon cut down. Within three hours, 600 soldiers had been killed. The army was trapped by Indians on three sides. General St. Clair sensed death awaited everyone if the fight continued. He ordered a retreat and the army and several hundred camp followers - pursued by Indians, ran for their lives back down the narrow trail they had made coming northward. Over the next several days, surviving soldiers struggled back to Fort Washington.

Today injured and dead soldiers are removed from the battle site. In the 1700's, casualties could not be moved and were left where they lay. During the battle, there was much scalping, including women and children.

The fate of Colonel Oldham's body is unknown. Colonel Oldham is memorialized today at the site of the battle, Fort Recovery, Indiana. The only belongings returned to his wife and children were his watch and chain. Will Oldham was 39 years old.

There is also a family cemetery plot on the Kentucky State Fairgrounds which includes a marker with his name. It is not known if there are remains in the grave. The most likely result of his death is that his body was ravaged by animals.

Will Oldham may have had a premonition of his death. On September 3, 1791, as the Kentucky militia was being formed, he created a will which left ***"To my wife Penelope a tract of land on Chenoweth run, house, furniture and third of stock forever, certain Negroes and residue of estate during widowhood, this to be divided equally between children John, Richard, Abigail and William Oldham, except pre-emption of 400 acres near Bullitt's Lick to Elizabeth Homes".....***

Penelope Oldham was pregnant when William Oldham died and a fifth child was born after his death.

The 'Battle of the Wabash' stands as one of the worst defeats, in percentage of casualties, ever suffered by the American Army. It is also the largest victory ever won by American Indians.

After the full scope of what happened became known, Kentuckians were very angry. As a new county was formed more than 30 years later, bitterness lingered and the memory of Colonel William Oldham and other men of the Kentucky militia who lost their lives on the Wabash River was still present. A final, but permanent, salute was made to a respected and beloved pioneer with naming of a new county.

Unfortunately, the history of Oldham County receiving its name has slipped into obscurity. As the 200th anniversary of Oldham County draws near, most of the students and adults living here do not know this story. Many have said to me, "I've lived here all my life and no one told me how Oldham County was named."

It is appropriate to bring back into focus the story of Colonel William Oldham by placing a statue of Colonel Oldham, along with bronze plates conveying his heroism, in the center of the new courthouse plaza. This would be the first piece of public art in Oldham County.

The statue of Colonel William Oldham, to be placed in the center of the new plaza on the courthouse square, will be made of bronze and be approximately 7' tall. It will stand on a partially completed Doric column of white Indiana limestone – partial completion representing the life of a public-spirited individual cut short.

The sculptor of this statute will be Matt Weir, a rising young Louisville artist with many significant credits. The anticipated cost of this project is \$135,000. Thus far, donations of \$75,000 have been received or pledged. Appropriate recognition will be given to donors.

David Voegle
Judge Executive

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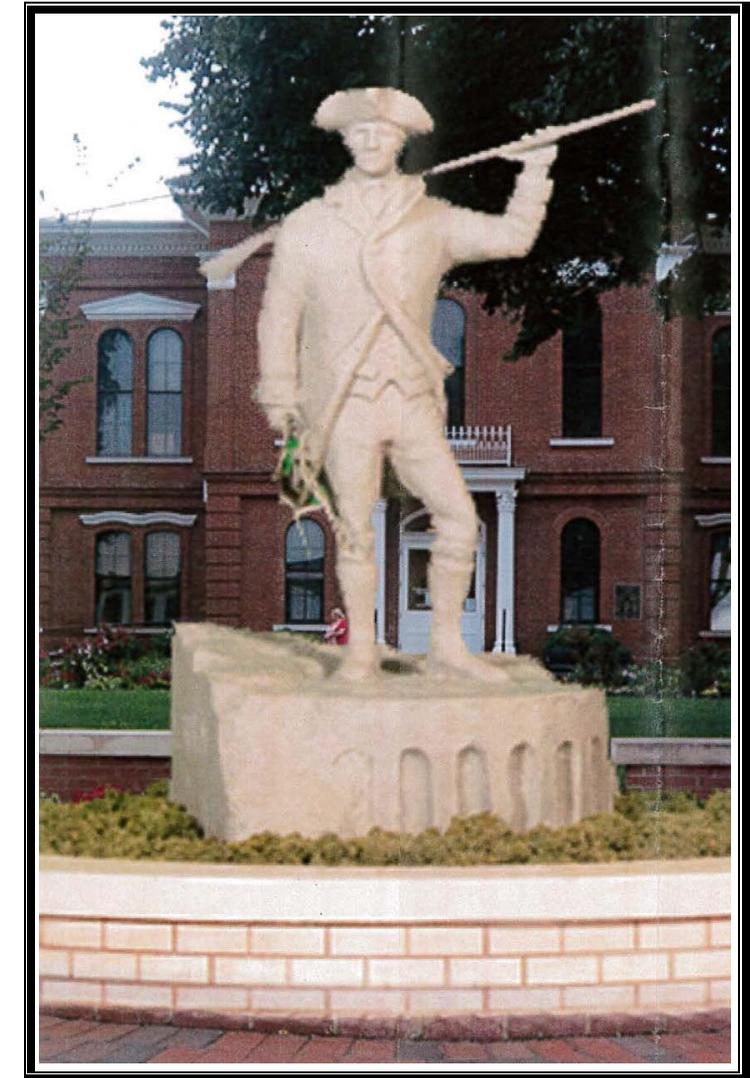
Oldham County Fiscal Court

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Remembering Colonel William Oldham 1753 – 1791



**Oldham County
Founded
February 1, 1824**

