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The 1851 Bird's-Eye View of Lexington: Three Versions

Burton Milward and Burton Milward, Jr.

Around 1851, an artist perched on the high roof of Transylvania's Morrison Hall sketched the magnificent bird's-eye view of Lexington that preserves, in careful detail, the mid-nineteenth century skyline of Lexington. Looking south from Morrison, the drawing showcases the greensward that later became Gratz Park, surrounded by many, many residences and buildings. Most are identifiable and historically significant.

For instance, the buildings and residences include St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church (1837), the African M.E. Church (1827), the Main Street Christian Church (1842), the John Anderson house (1834), the Thomas Bodley house (1813), two Transylvania University dependencies: the "kitchen" building and a classroom building (1816), the Second Presbyterian Church (1847), Christ Episcopal Church (1845), the third Fayette County Courthouse (1806), the Hunt-Morgan house, "Hopemont" (1814), the Baptist Meeting house (1819), the First Presbyterian Church (1808), the Transylvania Medical School (1839), the John M. McCalla house, "Mount Hope" (1819, purchased by Benjamin Gratz in 1824), and the John B. Tilford house (1845), among others.

This drawing became far and away the most frequently printed pictorial view of Lexington. Its widening panorama of buildings, residences, streets and trees stretching south to Main Street, and beyond, is attractive, familiar and informative.

The drawing (on the following page) was first published in 1851, in *Western Scenery, or Land and River, Hill and Dale, in the Mississippi Valley*, published in Cincinnati, Ohio, by Otto Onken. The drawing was captioned: "LEXINGTON, KY. Taken from the Transylvania University." It was further identified as printed by "Onken's Lithography, Cin. O."; "drawn by F. v. Laer, del."; and "Copy Right secured." (Onken, 1851, p.11)

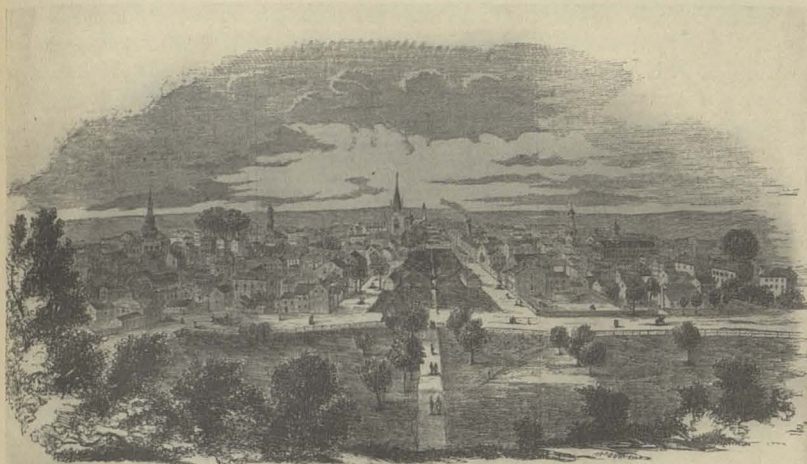
The same drawing, modified in some respects, was thereafter published in 1855, in *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, published in Boston, Massachusetts. This mid-nineteenth century magazine enjoyed a much wider distribution than the earlier Onken publication. *Ballou's* drawing was captioned: "VIEW OF LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY." It was further identified as follows:

The picture given below, drawn and engraved expressly for the Pictorial, affords an excellent general view of the city of Lexington. (*Ballou's*, April 28, 1855, p. 268)

Original Onken drawing from 1851.



copy, right secured
LEXINGTON, KY.
Taken from the Pennsylvania University



VIEW OF LEXINGTON, KENTUCKY.

Ballou's drawing.

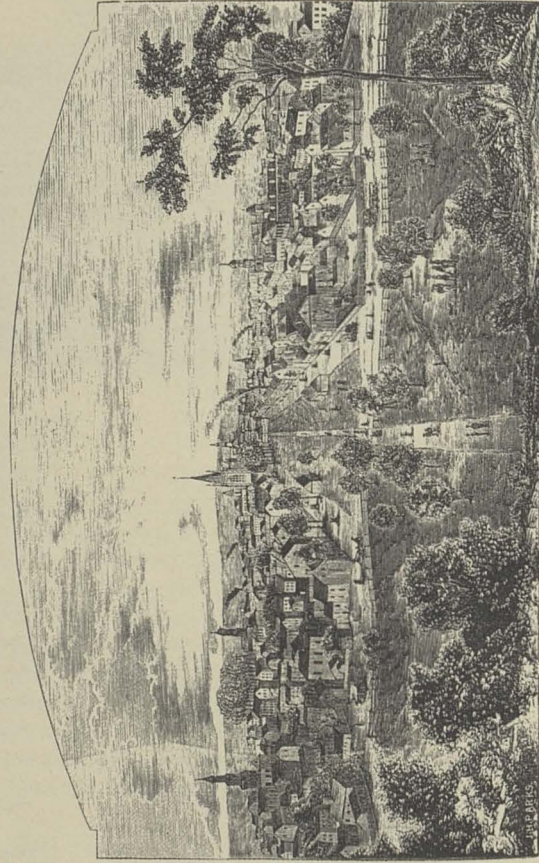
Ballou's did not identify an artist.

The same drawing, modified yet again in some respects, was published the next year, 1856, in *The Progress of the Republic, Embracing a Full and Comprehensive Review of the Progress, Present Condition, Commercial, Railroad, Manufacturing and Industrial Resources of the American Confederacy*, edited by J. C. G. Kennedy, with text by Richard S. Fisher, in Washington, D.C., by Wm. M. Morrison & Co. The drawing was captioned: "VIEW OF THE CITY OF LEXINGTON KY. - From the Dome of the Transylvania University." It was further identified as "Engraved expressly for the Progress of the Republic, and entered according to Act of Congress." The engraver was identified as "J.H. Parks." (*The Progress of the Republic*, 1856, unpagged plate immediately following p. 182)

The three variations of the drawing - Onken's, Ballou's, and *The Progress of the Republic's* - are similar, so much alike that most viewers may not have noticed the differences among the versions. The more obvious differences are the borders, the positions of the people shown walking in front of Morrison Hall, along Third Street, and in Gratz Park, the positioning of vehicles on Third Street, and the trees.

For instance, the borders differentiate the three variations. A rectangular border frames the Onken drawing. A rectangular border with an arched top frames *The Progress of the Republic* image. Ballou's picture is borderless and not framed at all.

The three versions differ in the positions of the people shown walking in front of Morrison Hall, along Third Street, and in Gratz



Engraved expressly for the Progress of the Republic, and entered according to Act of Congress.
VIEW OF THE CITY OF LEXINGTON, KY. — FROM THE DOME OF THE TRANSYLVANIA UNIVERSITY.

Progress of the Republic drawing.

Park. For instance, Onken's drawing positions the figures of men on the walk from Morrison Hall to Third Street as first, two men, then one man, then two men, and finally, another pair. In *Ballou's* version, the positioning of men on the walk from Morrison Hall to Third Street is two, two, one and two. In *The Progress of the Republic* version, the men are positioned on the walk in the same order as in *Ballou's* image, but a

group of five people standing together has been added on the grass to the right of the walk, which appears neither in Onken's nor *Ballou's* version. The positioning of pedestrians on Third Street and in Gratz Park differs in each of the versions.

The three versions differ in the positions of vehicles on Third Street. For instance, Onken's drawing positions one horse-drawn vehicle, an open carriage, far to the right on Third Street, traveling east. *Ballou's* positions a horseback rider to the right on Third Street and places a horse-drawn vehicle far to the left on Third Street, traveling east. In *The Progress of the Republic* version, a horseback rider appears to the right on Third Street, and two horse-drawn vehicles are positioned to the left on Third Street, traveling east.

The three versions differ in the treatment of trees and foliage. For instance, the trees and foliage in Onken's version very tastefully complement the neat lines of the artist's drawing. The trees and foliage in *Ballou's* version track the trees and foliage in Onken's, but have been filled in to appear darker and larger. The trees and foliage in *The Progress of the Republic* version track and enlarge the trees and foliage in Onken's and *Ballou's*, and then *The Progress of the Republic* version adds a tall tree standing by itself, from root to canopy, to the right in the drawing.

Despite these obvious, superficial differences, there can be no doubt whatsoever that the three versions derive from a single drawing. *Ballou's* statement that its version was "drawn and engraved expressly for the Pictorial" may not be completely accurate.

In 1925, when Lexingtonians celebrated the sesquicentennial of their city with weeklong festivities, a pamphlet was published, entitled *Official Souvenir Program of Lexington Sesqui-Centennial Jubilee Celebration May 31-June 6, 1925*, by Mrs. W. T. Lafferty (Maude Ward Lafferty), a prominent local historian. The sesquicentennial pamphlet contained the Onken pictorial view, without attribution to either Onken or the artist, but with the caption, "Bird's-Eye View of Lexington, Ky. (About 1850)." No doubt Judge Samuel M. Wilson, in his capacity as chairman of the sesquicentennial committee, and Mrs. Lafferty together selected the Onken lithograph for the sesquicentennial souvenir pamphlet.

Subsequently, newspapers, books, magazines, and other publications printed the bird's-eye view, variously attributing the drawing correctly, incorrectly, or not at all. Examples of subsequent appearances of the drawing follow.

On February 27, 1938, the *Lexington Sunday Herald-Leader* used *Ballou's* version to illustrate an article by Haden Kirkpatrick, entitled "Many Of Lexington's Potential Historic Shrines Have Been Obliterated By Modern Progress," but did not mention a source for the image. The caption stated: "A drawing of Lexington as it appeared in early days is

reproduced above. Most of the landmarks pictured either have bowed to time and progress or have been so altered as to be unrecognizable by the present generation." (p. 11)

In its summer 1946 issue, *In Kentucky* magazine used Onken's version to illustrate an article by C. Frank Dunn, entitled "Lexington's Gratz Park Scene Rich In Historical Lore," but did not mention a source for the image. The caption stated: "Lexington in 1855, as seen from the steps of Morrison College. The engraving vividly portrays the 'Gratz Park Scene' of that day, when there were two buildings instead of one, left of old Transylvania Seminary." (p. 15)

On January 13, 1952, the *Lexington Sunday Herald-Leader* printed the Onken version, perhaps taken from the sesquicentennial booklet, to illustrate an article by "B.P." entitled "100 Years Have Brought New Lexington Sky Line," but attributed it to *Ballou's*. The caption stated simply, "Gratz Park Area, Circa 1851." (p. B-4) The article repeatedly and erroneously referred to "the Ballou engraving" (p. B-7) as the source of the bird's-eye view drawing. The article stated, "Ballou's Pictorial from its Boston berth published circa 1851 an engraving of the view to be seen looking south from Morrison Chapel." (p. B-7)

On September 11, 1955, the *Louisville Courier-Journal Magazine* used *Ballou's* version to illustrate an article by Sue McClelland Thierman, entitled "Gratz Park, Lexington," and attributed the image correctly to *Ballou's*. The caption stated: "In 1855, Ballou's Pictorial, published in Boston, pictured Lexington in a view from the top of Morrison Chapel, Transylvania, looking across Third Street and Gratz Park toward the downtown area." (p. 18)

In 1960, Charles D. Mitchell, of the Kentucky Printing Plate Corporation in Lexington, published a handsome color print of *Ballou's* view, which was sold at Ashland, the Henry Clay Estate. The caption stated, "View of Lexington, Kentucky from Transylvania College 1855," but provided no attribution.

On May 19, 1963, the seventy-fifth anniversary edition of the *Lexington Leader* used *Ballou's* version to illustrate an article by Nell Vaughn, entitled "Gratz Park: Where History Was Made," without attributing the image to any source, but stated that it was "drawn about 1855." The caption stated: "VIEW FROM TRANSY—This view of Lexington looking south from Transylvania College was drawn about 1855. Gratz Park at this time was not a park, just some more land." (p. A-72)

On February 27, 1972, the *Lexington Sunday Herald-Leader* used *Ballou's* version to illustrate an article entitled, "A Walk Through The History Of Gratz Park," but did not mention a source for the image. The caption erroneously stated the date of the drawing: "LOOKING

SOUTH across the Park to the business area of the flourishing young City in 1842." (p. 66)

In 1975, John D. Wright, Jr. included the Onken drawing in his book, *Transylvania: Tutor to the West*, but did not mention a source for the image. The caption stated: "An 1850 magazine view of Lexington from Old Morrison." (p. 161)

In 1992, Martin F. Schmidt, former librarian and director of the Filson Club in Louisville, included the Onken version in his book, *Kentucky Illustrated, The First Hundred Years*, correctly attributing the drawing to Onken, perhaps the first work since 1851 to do so. The caption stated: "Lithograph from Onken's *Western Scenery*, 1851, from a drawing by Ferdinand von Laer, Cincinnati." (p. 201) Schmidt, a collector of prints for fifty years, not only identified Onken's drawing correctly but, in so doing, alerted historians to the fact that *Ballou's Pictorial* was not the original source of the view.

Illustrations:

"Lexington, Ky. Taken from the Transylvania University," drawing by Ferdinand von Laer, in Onken, Otto, *Western Scenery, or Land and River, Hill and Dale, in the Mississippi Valley* (Cincinnati 1851), p. 11. Onken's book is in the collection of the Cincinnati Historical Society.

"View of Lexington, Kentucky," *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* (April 28, 1855), p. 268. *Ballou's* magazine is in the collection of the University of Kentucky Libraries.

"View of the City of Lexington Ky. - From the Dome of the Transylvania University," in Kennedy, J. C. G., Ed., *The Progress of the Republic* (Wm. M. Morrison & Co., Washington 1856), unpaginated plate immediately following p. 182. *The Progress of the Republic* is in the collection of the Illinois State Historical Library.