



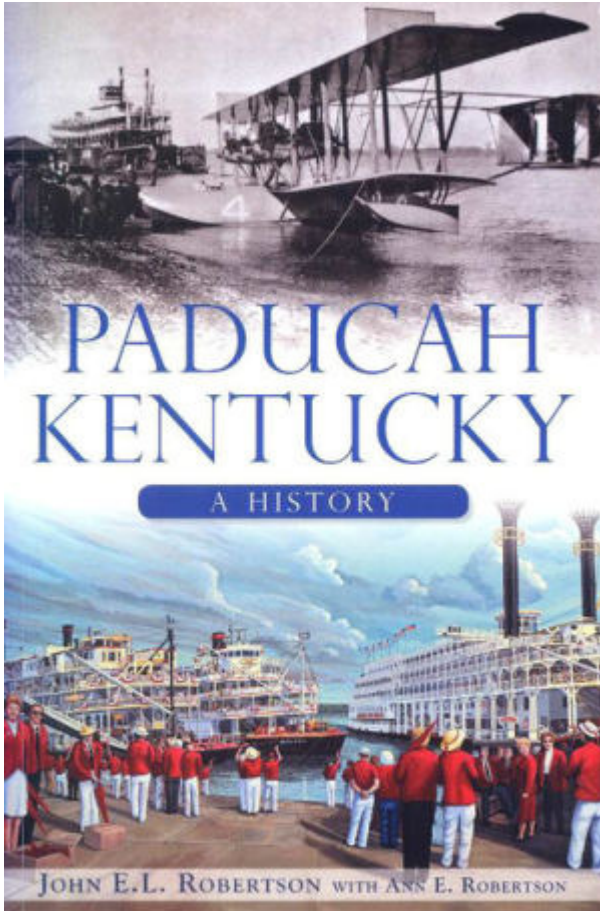
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# DAILY NEWS

## 'Paducah' an entertaining read

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*"Paducah, Kentucky: A History" by John E.L. Robertson with Ann E. Robertson. Charleston, S.C.: The History Press, 2014. 192 pages, \$19.99.*



“Between the founding of Paducah in 1830 and the start of the Civil War, criticism of slavery became more violent,” John E.L. Robertson explains near the beginning of *“Paducah, Kentucky: A History,”* the new book he wrote with Ann E. Robertson detailing the rich and complicated history of the 15th-largest city in the commonwealth.

“In Kentucky, there were those who opposed the institution of slavery,” the author continues. “Initially, it was hoped that slaves could be freed by purchase and returned to Africa. Henry Clay was among the founders of the colonization movement that contributed to the creation of Liberia in Africa; however, expense made this approach impractical. The end of the Civil War found Paducah, like many other cities in Kentucky, facing the problem of reabsorbing that part of its population that had fought for either the South or the North and creating a place within the society for that part of the population that had been chattel.”

Kentucky’s complicated stance on slavery is only one of several issues the author tackles intelligently and with a balanced approach in his latest book.

To be completely forthcoming, I did not know much about Paducah before reading this book. I had been through the city a few times on my way to other destinations over the years, and even attended a family reunion there once, but other than the occasional news story, I did not have much of a feel for the community Robertson describes so eloquently. Fortunately, this is no longer the case. Thanks in large measure to the author’s exceptional storytelling ability, I now have a rather vivid and detailed portrait of the evolution of an interesting region of the state in which I reside.

Robertson is professor emeritus of the University of Kentucky Community College system and was recognized as historian of the year by the Kentucky Historical Society in 2008. *“Paducah, Kentucky”* is extensively researched, with 20 pages of source notes and a six-page bibliography at the conclusion of the 19 relatively short chapters that comprise the main narrative. A leading authority on this particular region, his previous books include *“Paducah: Images of America,”* and *“Paducah: Frontier to the Atomic Age.”*

It is evident on every page that Robertson has a passion for his subject matter; he is obviously in love with Paducah. When he talks about the many trials the city has endured over the years, it is almost as if he is talking about a member of his family.

“The horrific flood of 1937 nearly destroyed Paducah; however, the resulting floodwall has proved its ability to safeguard residents on more than one occasion since, including the rise in 2011 that brought the river to its highest point since 1937,” he explains. “This time, the floodwall and pumps held the raging Ohio and Tennessee Rivers at bay.”

For those outside Kentucky, Paducah is perhaps best known as one of the places uranium was enriched for the first atomic bombs. In fact, the relatively recent decision to close the facility made national news and was a big part of the political debate on both sides of the aisle. For those interested in Paducah’s contribution to the outcome of World War II, Robertson does not disappoint:

“During the early days of the Second World War, the Kentucky Ordnance Plant was built near Paducah,” he writes. “The Kentucky Dam on the Tennessee River was completed in 1944. These two events helped trigger a series of decisions that led to the Atomic Energy Commission’s enriched uranium plant in Paducah. Within a short time, the population of the city doubled. Business boomed; bank clearings in Paducah showed the greatest increase of any in the nation. Changes induced during the period still determine the character of the community.”

“Paducah, Kentucky” has been well received by those interested in knowing more about this community, as evidenced by the following comments by Bill A. Belt, a Vine Voice reviewer for Amazon.com. Incidentally, Vine Voice reviewers are a group of invitation-only reviewers who are given access to not-yet-released books for the purpose of soliciting opinions that will appear on the Amazon.com website.

“I gave this book a four-star rating primarily due to the fact there are not a lot of old pictures available for Paducah, Kentucky,” Belt notes. “The City of Paducah has in recent years destroyed many of the old commercial buildings and houses. At the rate the city is going there will be a lot of vacant lots in Paducah with only memories of what stood there.”

Personally, I found the photographs Robertson scatters liberally throughout the volume to be particularly interesting and insightful. Any book that deals primarily with a specific location is always best served by the inclusion of these kinds of visual aids. To be sure, the quality of some of the pictures left something to be desired, but that tends to be the case with most communities. The people who took the photographs typically did not see their role as capturing images for future generations – they were simply documenting a moment in time for their own purposes. We should all be grateful to these amateur photographers for the record they left us. In any event, most of the people depicted in these pictures appear as though they could have been from my hometown in rural Tennessee. Many of the scenes speak to our collective history and culture in the rural South.

I found “Paducah, Kentucky” to be a highly enlightening and entertaining read. I learned a lot about a fascinating place that I knew existed, but not much beyond that acknowledgement. My sense is that you would have the same experience, regardless of whether you are from the area.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*