



## PART ONE

# *The Foundations*





# **Jacob Beam and Surviving in a Harsh Land**

THE DISTILLED SPIRIT OF a nation epitomizes its people, its natural resources, and its commercial and political history. While Scotland has Scotch whisky, Ireland has Irish whiskey, France has cognac and armagnac, Russia has vodka, Italy has grappa, and Spain has brandy, the United States of America has bourbon whiskey. More than just a native beverage alcohol made from grain, yeast, and water, bourbon whiskey is presently an internationally recognized emblem of America. One bourbon, in particular, Jim Beam Bourbon, the world's leading brand, has more than any other come to symbolize the American culture. For over two centuries and seven generations, one family, the Beams, has more than any other whiskey-making clan guided not only the destiny of Jim Beam Bourbon but much of America's bourbon industry.

Launched in the 1780s by Jacob Beam, the Jim Beam Bourbon saga is based in the story of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European immigrants leaving familiar surroundings, their trades, and families for the largely unexplored New World. From England, Scotland, and Ireland, from Germany, Switzerland, and France they came, escaping religious or class persecution, starvation or famine, poverty or plague, fleeing the filth, stench, and disease of overcrowded cities or the blight of over-farmed hinterlands. With them, the immigrants brought the inherent skills of making beer, wine, and spirits learned and perfected centuries earlier by their own grandfathers and great-grandfathers. The tale of Jim Beam Bourbon can be properly told only within the context of how the bourbon whiskey industry intertwined with the building of the United States.

A century and three-quarters before Jacob Beam sold his initial barrel of bourbon whiskey in Kentucky and three and a half centuries prior to bourbon being officially cited by Congress as the native distilled spirit of the United States of America, the first colonists were acknowledged to drink substantial amounts of alcoholic beverages routinely. They did so, in part, to fortify unbalanced diets; in part, to ward off the maladies brought on by impure drinking water and cold, drafty living conditions; in part, as an act of civic unity within the amiable confines of the town taverns. Records of the period, including store ledgers, wills, and shipping invoices, prove without a doubt that drinking alcoholic beverages was ingrained in the character of the American colonists. Drinking alcohol was habitual behavior related to European heritage as much as it was relevant to issues of sustenance, commerce, manners, and health.

Fortunately, possessing the skills necessary to produce beers, wines, and spirits was commonplace in the colonial period, an expertise that went hand-in-hand with the ability to cultivate fields and orchards. Many of the colonists, especially those from Ireland, Germany, England, France, and Scotland—nations with long-standing beer, wine, and distilled spirits traditions—were accomplished brewers, cider-makers, winemakers, and distillers.

Colonists wasted no time in tilling the soil and planting grains and fruit trees. Captain John Smith, leader of England's first permanent settlement in Jamestown, Virginia, wrote of the intense "toyle" involved with planting "corne" in 1607, the very year they landed in Virginia. The brave people of Jamestown needed fresh food and robust drink in the direst way. Only 32 of the original 105 members made it through the community's first winter of 1607–1608. Obviously, beverage alcohol would not have rescued all of the 73 fatalities, but it may have helped in saving a few.

Within the first two decades of New World colonization, orchards and cultivated fields matured and the colonists were successfully fermenting the juice of pears, peaches, cherries, quinces, and apples into ciders and brewing beer from the mashes made from rye and, to a lesser degree, corn. Indeed, bourbon whiskey's North American precursor was the beer made from Indian corn. Corn, the hallmark native grain of the Americas, was initially grown domestically in what is now Central and South America. Migrating Native Americans most likely brought corn with them as they moved into Mexico and the southern tier of what is now the United States probably between A.D. 800 and 1200, centuries before the first European explorers set foot on the continent. As we will see in the next chapter, without this tall-standing, vivid green plant, bourbon whiskey, as we know it, might never have been invented in the wilds of Kentucky.

As the ramshackle, mud, stone, and stick clusters of huts gradually evolved into thriving villages by the 1630s and 1640s complete with laws, dirt streets, wood buildings, merchants, and municipal governments, alehouses sprang up like mushrooms on a forest floor after three days of rain. These low-ceiling, candlelit taverns served food cooked over open fires in addition to libations that included "cyder," the sweet, thick fortified wines from the Portuguese-controlled island of Madeira, ale imported from England, "Caribee" rum, and even colonial concoctions such as "mobby punch." Mobby was a popular drink that blended, depending on who made it, local

fruit brandies and perhaps even plantation rum imported from the English and French Caribbean colonies.

### **In Distill of the Night**

The word *distill* comes from the Latin term, *distillare*, which means “to drip apart.” This relates to the action of the vapors, or clouds of alcohol, that rise into the higher regions of the still and move through a cold copper coil, the so-called “worm,” where the vapors condense back into high-alcohol liquid form. This raw, aromatic, colorless spirit is often distilled a second time to purify it further and to elevate the alcohol level. Spirits running off a second distillation normally range in alcohol content from 60 percent to 75 percent.

Another favorite alehouse wash-down was the “Yard of Flannel,” a sturdy hot cocktail whose recipe called for rum, cider, spices, beaten eggs, and cream as ingredients. The Yard of Flannel was heated with the glowing bulb of a red-hot loggerhead, the metal bar with a ball at the end that was always kept burning in the fireplace. Interestingly, the phrase “at loggerheads,” meaning two parties who have arrived at an impasse and are likely to quarrel, comes from this period, inspired by vigorous disagreements in which combatants would brandish loggerheads.

Alehouses became unofficial town halls, the community centers for the masses of seventeenth-century America. With suckling pigs or turkeys or legs of lamb roasting on spits in the huge flagstone fireplace and rounds of rum and ale being vigorously passed around, municipal issues were debated, business deals were transacted and closed, marriages were arranged or dissolved, local politics were shaped, and religious tenets argued. Lest we forget, by the last half of eighteenth century, the walls, corner tables, and hallways of alehouses across the American colonies echoed with the

risky talk of revolution and independence from the English crown by men like Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, and others.

America's first commercial distillery was opened in the Dutch colony of New Netherland, or what is now Staten Island by Willem Kieft in 1640. Kieft was the Director General of the colony. It's likely that Kieft's fledgling distilling enterprise produced both fruit brandies and neutral grain spirits made from corn or rye. Applejack, a hearty type of apple brandy, was one of the day's most favored drinks on the northern reaches of the Atlantic seaboard. New Englanders often "frosted" their apple ciders, meaning that they would leave the cider outside unprotected on cold nights to create a frozen cap. Because the cap was mainly water from the cider, the alcohol would become very concentrated in the remaining liquid. They then drained the cider off from underneath the cap. The resulting applejack was particularly crisp, heady, and refreshing.

By 1645, the English colony of Virginia had become so active in ale and cider production that regulated price controls on the sale of beverage alcohol, termed "English strong waters," were introduced by the Virginia General Assembly. This event marked the first time that legislative action influenced the commercial side of beverage alcohol in the colonies.

New London, Connecticut, the active seaport village on the Long Island Sound, was by the 1660s a noted center of the New England rum distilling trade. Exporting their own goods in exchange for imported commodities, thirsty New Londoners imported molasses, a by-product of sugar production, from the Caribbean and distilled it into rum. In general, Caribbean rum was considered the better of the two and usually fetched a higher price. But, New England rum was certainly drinkable and every bit as ubiquitous. By the 1670s, New England boasted, with full justification, being the rum-producing capital of the New World, even though the base material of rum, sugar cane, was grown 1,500 miles to the south on the plantations that dominated the colonial islands of the West Indies.

Regrettably, the rum trade of the seventeenth century also gave rise to the slave trade—native Africans being kidnapped by ruthless European traders or captured by rival tribes then sold and shipped to the West Indies in brutal slave ships to work in the sugar cane fields, sugar refineries, and rum distilleries. While the colonists of New England were relishing their rum punches and toddies, the tribal chiefs of western Africa counted their gold fees, and the British, Spanish, and French plantation owners made fortunes selling sugar to Europe and rum to America. The transplanted native Africans, the defenseless prey of this unholy commercial trinity, were left to languish in horrific, dehumanizing, and frequently fatal conditions. Tens of thousands of slaves were stranded with no chance of returning home to Africa; left with no options but to toil in the tropical heat or be mercilessly lashed, maimed, or, worse, hanged. This repulsive blemish on the history of beverage alcohol in the New World is nothing to raise a glass to.

### **Stillhouses, Good Manners, and Houses of Worship**

Although colonial villages had expanded into towns and modest cities by the eighteenth century, the majority of the populace continued to reside on farms. In the towns, stillhouses and alehouse breweries were as common as general merchandise shops, feed suppliers, blacksmiths, and cobblers. Rum continued to be the distilled spirit of choice, especially in New England. In 1750, 63 distilleries existed in the Massachusetts colony while 30 stills flourished just in the seaside town of Newport, Rhode Island.

With the inevitable population explosion and subsequent push into the western frontiers of Pennsylvania, western Virginia, and Maryland, the agrarian culture of the colonies took root in new territories whose landscape and inland climate were more suitable for the ambitious cultivation of grains, like corn, barley, and rye. As a



matter of course, farmers distilled any grain production overrun into spirits. They sold their new spirits to alehouse proprietors or physicians who incorporated them into medicines rather than destroy the excess grain and realize no profit. Distilled spirits were likewise utilized as valid currency and as barter items. Horses were traded for barrels of whiskey; cloth, tobacco, and tools were exchanged for whiskey.

By the mid-1700s, the majority of farms of every size throughout the colonies, north to south, east to west, considered a pot still as standard equipment. The typical farm stillhouse was made of wood planks. It contained a copper kettle, probably with 25- to 50-gallon capacity, perched on a brick or stone kiln so that a wood fire could be kept lit beneath it. Copper tubing that curled like a corkscrew spiraled out of the pot still's swan-like neck. Referred to as the "worm," the water-cooled coil was used for the condensation of the alcohol vapors. No stillhouse was complete without a wood vat for the collection of the raw spirit. Stillhouses were as important to the welfare of the colonial farm as the barn, the wood shed, or the chicken coop. Distilling was more a matter of economic practicality and farm business efficiency than it was a luxury or a leisurely pursuit.

### **One Good Term Deserves Another**

Is it *whiskey* or *whisky*? America's whiskey distillers have customarily employed the letter *e* when legally describing their whiskey. There are exceptions. The producers of Maker's Mark Kentucky Straight Bourbon and George Dickel Tennessee Sour Mash do not use an *e*. Likewise, the Irish have for centuries spelled the term, *whiskey*. In Canada and Scotland, the *e* is dropped. The term *whiskey* evolved from the ancient Gaelic word *uisge beatha*, which meant "water of life." *Uisge beatha* (pronounced, OOSH-key bay-hah) developed into *usquebaugh* (OOSH-kah baw), which became anglicized around the sixteenth century A.D. into *uiskie* (OOS-kee). By

the early eighteenth century, uiskie became whiskie, which in short order was transformed into either whiskey or whisky.

The term *alcohol* is actually a derivative of the Arabic word *al-kuh'l*, which means “the antimony powder,” or the brittle black powder used as a base in eye cosmetics of the Middle Ages by the Moors. The commonly used word in Europe for “still,” *alembic*, comes from the Arabic *al-'anbik*, which translates to “the still,” meaning, of course, the boiling kettle for distillation.

The enjoyment of spirits within the farming and village communities was not considered anything but ordinary. In fact, the mores of the era dictated that it was impolite *not* to offer houseguests a spirituous libation. In his book, *Kentucky Bourbon, The Early Years of Whiskeymaking*, author Henry G. Crowgey (1971, p. 12) recounts a report by an eighteenth-century gentleman by the name of Peter Cartwright who in his autobiography wrote, “From my earliest recollection drinking drams, in family and social circles, was considered harmless and allowable society . . . and if a man would not have it in his family, his harvest, his house-raising, log-rollings, weddings, and so on, he was considered parsimonious and unsociable; and many, even professors of Christianity, would not help a man if he did not have spirits and treat the company.”

Even the clergy of the period, those mortal conduits to the ear of the eternal spirit, freely partook of liquid spirits, the terrestrial essence of grain and fruit. Is it total folly, when you ponder it, to theorize that their Sunday morning homilies perhaps became more eloquent and animated following a brief trip to the cloakroom where a jug of perry, or pear cider, might be carefully stowed among liturgical vestments? Keeping a congregation rapt on the Sabbath in colonial times couldn't have been easy when the flock, seated on hard backless benches, was either shuddering in the cold of winter or sweltering from the summer heat and humidity. Some members of the clergy, however, had to be reined in when their zeal

became misplaced and burned hotter for consumption than redemption. In an effort to curb the worst cases of clerical inebriation, the Virginia General Assembly, for example, passed rules governing pastoral behavior in 1631 and again in 1676. Ministers found guilty of drunkenness were fined up to half a year's pay in the most grievous instances.

While open and free consumption by any adult of beverage alcohol was viewed as acceptable behavior in the colonies, imbibing to excess in public was most assuredly not looked on favorably. Drunkenness simply was not tolerated in these tight, small communities that regarded self-discipline, politeness, and restraint as high-level virtues. Inebriation was considered a display of bad manners, a problem of the whole community, not just the offender and his or her family, and was usually dealt with harshly and swiftly by the community leaders. As communities grew, service regulations created for tavern owners as well as for drinkers were passed by local assemblies to punish repeat alcohol abuse offenders and their servers. Public house owners were urged to serve their patrons "by the smalls," indicating reasonable portions. Punishments for excessive drinking, including the lash, fines, and confinement in stocks in village squares, were often public and severe. Heavy-handed purveyors faced fines or, in the most serious breeches, temporary or permanent closures.

### **Drunk with Power**

In 1772, Benjamin Franklin compiled a long list of words and phrases he heard in his local tavern that were synonymous with "drunkenness." Some of the best that Franklin came across were gassed, plowed, under the table, tanked, higher than a kite, blotto, smashed, soused, stewed, pissed, tipsy, sottish, skunked, pickled, canned, dipped, soaked, in one's cups, crapped, tight, half seas over, three sheets to the wind, pie-eyed, loaded, well-oiled, squiffy, plastered.

## **Eighteenth-Century Politics and the Coming of the Boehms**

Social drinking was such a sanctioned and popular activity that by the eighteenth-century, politics and even the act of choosing candidates were directly affected by it. “Treating” was the custom of candidates supplying cider, ale, or brandy and other liquid treats like rum to voters on election day. Originally an English tradition, this dubious exercise became an acknowledged and widely practiced form of last-minute persuasion in the colonies. Politicians, or their representatives, in the 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s routinely sponsored “open houses” that were, not coincidentally, strategically located near polling stations. Some accounts report that barrels of beverage alcohol were seen *inside* some polling stations.

The purpose of this none-too-subtle concept was to “treat” the prospective voter to a wee nip of peery or brown ale or Caribbean rum before he voted (women weren’t yet allowed to vote, of course) to help oil his decision-making machinery. While proponents of treating vociferously argued that the practice actually assisted in “getting out the vote” and should be viewed as a necessary indulgence, dissenters pointed to the fistfights, loitering, and predictable raucous behavior, sometimes including intimidation of voters by partisans, at the polling stations. They contended that treating disrupted the sanctity of the electoral process. Clashes born of retribution occasionally occurred when candidates discovered that voters who eagerly guzzled their cider and chowed down with gusto on their deer jerky had turned coat and voted for their opponent. Bare knuckles met jaws and ax handles said hello to skulls after many a colonial election when jilted candidates dispatched their thugs to gather information about who voted for whom.

Even George Washington’s early political aspirations were reportedly affected, negatively at first, by treating, or more accurately, the absence of it. His initial two election bids to gain entry into Virginia’s House of Burgesses in the early 1750s ended in defeat.

Some historians postulate that maybe it was Washington's refusal to prime the voters with libations that led to his surprising disappointments. After serving as an officer in the Virginia militia in the French and Indian War, Washington returned to Mount Vernon, his grand 100,000-plus acre family estate, and ran once again for the House of Burgesses in 1758.

Having learned a bitter lesson from his previous two failed office-seeking attempts, Washington, an avid distiller himself, made sure that his deputies provided ample cider, ale, rum, and brandy for the mouths of voters—169 gallons, to be precise, at a cost of over £34, which, in its day, was a princely sum. Washington won handily by the rather safe margin of 310 to 45. That 1758 election, anointed with beverage alcohol, launched a political and military career that contributed mightily to the transformation of a straggly bunch of colonies into an independent nation. Not without more than a little irony, Washington's career famously concluded with an eloquent speech to supporters and friends in a pub in lower Manhattan by the name of Fraunces Tavern.

In 1777, another giant of early American politics, James Madison, the fourth U.S. president, fumbled and lost an election because he would not lubricate with alcohol the throats and votes of constituents. Madison later observed, as told by Henry G. Crowgey in *Kentucky Bourbon: The Early Years of Whiskeymaking* (1971, p. 17), that “the people not only tolerated, but expected and even required to be courted and treated, no candidate, who neglected those attentions could be elected. . . .” Election reforms that dealt specifically with vote-influencing issues, in particular treating, were repeatedly put forth and passed in most major colonial houses of legislation throughout the decades immediately preceding the Revolutionary War. Most politicians, however, blatantly ignored the laws and provided alcohol, one way or another, on voting day.

Beverage alcohol likewise played a central role in the rations of the colonial militias. Troops that were dispatched to the Ohio frontier in 1754 and 1755 to fight on behalf of the British Crown in the

French and Indian War were supplied with rum. In fact, according to the book, *The Social History of Bourbon: An Unhurried Account of Our Star-Spangled American Drink* (1963, p. 9) author Gerald Carson claims that rum purveyors had the temerity to follow the troop encampments, surreptitiously supplying more rum when rations ran low or money was handy. This situation caused problems of intoxication in the ranks. Offenders were flogged with 20 lashes every day until they revealed the source of the secret and highly mobile rumrunners.

In the early decades of the 1700s, two emigrations that are considered crucial to American whiskey history commenced. Both groups brought with them strong agricultural and distilling backgrounds. The initial movement dawned in 1710 when thousands of German and Swiss families began landing on North American shores from northern Europe, fleeing religious persecution, horrid living conditions, or failing crops. These travelers gravitated to Pennsylvania, the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland. Those Germans and Swiss who made southeastern Pennsylvania their new home became known as the *Pennsylvania Dutch*. The immigrants from Germany included families named Boehm (sometimes Bohm, Bohmen), a clan who would in subsequent decades change the spelling of their surname to Beam, probably to make both the spelling and pronunciation simpler. One branch of the Beams, which would multiply prodigiously over the course of two centuries, would, in time, make an indelible impression on the world of whiskey and distilled spirits.

The second key migration occurred when a quarter-million Scots-Irish immigrants, commonly referred to as *Ulstermen*, escaped the paralyzing poverty of Northern Ireland and crossed the Atlantic between 1715 and 1775. The Ulstermen were born from a shotgun marriage arranged in 1611 by King James I of England, himself a Scot of the House of Stuart, when he by Royal decree forcibly transplanted hundreds of Scots and English subjects to County Ulster for the express purpose of making the Irish a bit tamer through the miracles of interbreeding and intermingling.

The British Crown's policy backfired, doing nothing to alleviate the crippling poverty, illiteracy, and famine that permeated the northern counties of Ireland. Unrest and turmoil, fueled by hopelessness, continued on decades after this ill-conceived relocation.

One century later, King George I of the House of Hanover presided on the British throne. Little had changed, however, in the Northern Ireland counties of Armagh, Down, Derry, and Antrim, and few alternatives seemed more attractive to the Scots-Irish than escape to the New World. In 1717, a disastrous harvest in the Northern counties made the decision to venture to North America all but certain for thousands of Scots-Irish. What the Ulstermen brought with them, along with a sound work ethic, a burning desire for better living conditions, a pugnacious nature, and raw ambition, was an inherent flair for distilling whiskey.

These ruddy-faced, fair-skinned immigrants, who by most reports appear to have been more Scottish than Irish, spread the gospel of grain-based spirits in a land where fruit-based ciders, wines, and brandies had dominated for a hundred years. Not to mention the fact that rum was the 800-pound gorilla of distilled spirits due, in large measure, to the endless supply of molasses from the Caribbean and the well-established rum-distilling industry in New England. During the period from 1760 to 1775, it is estimated that up to 12 million gallons of rum per year were pumped out of distilleries located in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. Rum lust was so powerful, entrenched, and pervasive in the coastal colonies that no one really needed whiskey.

It is no mystery why prior to the Ulstermen's mass migration, whiskey was looked upon in the pre-Revolutionary War New World as, at best, a minor distilled spirit, a trifle, and a distraction that the few grain farmer-distillers on the eastern seaboard produced only in bumper crop years when extra grain was available. Saved for baking bread, farm stock feed, and brewing ale, not for distilling spirits, grain, whiskey's primary base material along with water and yeast, was difficult to grow along the North American coastline anyway. It

wasn't until the expansion of the colonies into the western frontier where grains such as rye, wheat, barley, and, of course, corn, were easier to cultivate that whiskey gained its first firm footing in North America.

The German and Swiss immigrants, as well as their Scots-Irish counterparts, not only knew how but also where to grow grain. Consequently, the overwhelming majority eventually settled in the inland flatlands and arable river valleys of Pennsylvania, Delaware, Virginia, the Carolinas and, to a lesser degree, Maryland. Ultimately, it would be from these colonies that the exploration of Kentucky, the home of bourbon whiskey, and the dynasty of the Beams would be launched.

### **Magnificent, Savage Kentucke**

*Kentucke* was Virginia's westernmost virgin territory for the majority of the eighteenth century. It was a place of mythical proportions in the minds of the colonists who were itching to venture into the western wilderness to establish new settlements. A few late-seventeenth century frontiersmen attempting to establish trade with the native tribes of the Ohio River Valley pushed into parts of *Kentucke*. Ultimately, however, it was the fabled Long Hunters of the 1750 to 1770 period, the intrepid trappers, explorers, and hunters like Thomas Walker, Christopher Gist, John Findley, James Knox, Benjamin Cutbird, Hancock Taylor, and, of course, Daniel Boone, who more thoroughly combed and charted this magnificent, savage frontier.

After returning home to the eastern seaboard colonies of Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas following their months-long hunting forays, the Long Hunters wove seductive fables that depicted *Kentucke* as an untouched land of dense, primeval forests teeming with elk, deer, and bear, of placid ponds and lakes with



pristine water that rippled with trout and beaver, of navigable river highways and rushing streams, of rolling grasslands and pastures where gigantic bison grazed. Even if in their enthusiasm while peering into the rapt faces and wide eyes of their listeners the Long Hunters magnified and colored their stories more than a little bit, their descriptions weren't far from the reality. Kentucke *was* the heart of the relatively undisturbed continent.

It isn't reaching in the least then to conjecture that perhaps the newly wedded Jacob Beam caught wind of these amazing tales before emigrating to Kentucke himself from Maryland with his wife Mary Myers. The promise and mystique of Kentucke must have been tantalizing to a young, vigorous couple who were embarking on building a life for themselves in what had become just five years prior a new, robust nation. However, the Kentucky the Beams experienced upon moving there in 1787–1788 was a far cry from the Kentucke that the Long Hunters endured just 20 to 30 years before their arrival.

With the towns of the eastern colonies from Massachusetts to the Carolinas exploding in geographical size, population, and the necessary laws of governance and social conduct, colonists who yearned for bigger skies, larger tracts of land for farming, and less rules and civilization were doubtless intrigued by the vivid stories spun by the Long Hunters. But these rugged adventurers were careful to spice their fables with frank talk about the fierce warrior-hunters of the Shawnee, Wyandot, Delaware, and Cherokee nations. The Long Hunters had had frequent contact with all of these native tribes during their trips deep into Kentucke. Sometimes that contact was cautiously amiable. Other times it proved deadly.

Kentucke was considered by the native tribes as prime hunting ground, a sort of traditional wildlife preserve that had for centuries provided meat, furs, and skins to feed and clothe their families. Surprisingly, by the time the Long Hunters began arriving, Kentucke was not viewed as a location for year-round tribal residence.

Though tribal hunting camps would be active from several weeks to a few months at a time, by 1760, no native tribes permanently resided in Kentucke.

This hallowed place's name was, in fact, derived from the tribal term, *Kentucke*, which meant meadowlands to the Iroquois, the powerful confederacy of northeastern tribes whose influence flowed from the Hudson Valley into the Ohio River Valley, and it meant land of tomorrow to the Wyandot. Even before surveying parties plotted Kentucke's precise location in relation to the eastern colonies, it was known to be valuable, fortuitously situated real estate. The land of tomorrow was bordered on the north by the mighty southwest-flowing Ohio River, to the west by the even grander Mississippi River into which the Ohio deposited its milky brown torrent, and to the east by the craggy wall of the Appalachian Mountains. Kentucke was highly prized territory by both eighteenth-century Caucasian Americans and the region's native tribes because of the immensity and diversity of its natural bounty and resources and its excellent location. As the two disparate cultures collided and clashed over the domain of one coveted spot, blood from both was spilled.

A quarter-century before Jacob Beam started cultivating the corn, rye, and barley that would be fermented and distilled into his "Old Jake Beam Sour Mash" whiskey, the landmark progenitor of Jim Beam Bourbon, the Long Hunters had blazed a route, a hunter's highway called the Wilderness Road, into Kentucke through the Cumberland Gap (originally known as the Cave Gap). The Long Hunters came in groups of 20 to 30 men. After erecting a base camp inside Kentucke, which was maintained by older or infirm members of the group, the main hunting party split into smaller teams of three or four men who would then scatter to the four winds to trap raccoon and beaver and to track and slay herding animals with firearms that provided both meat and pelts. The principal targets of the Long Hunters were deer and elk, though the occasional buffalo was highly prized as well. The typical hunt took from two to four months.

The Long Hunters, who hailed mostly from Virginia and the Carolinas, had to regularly contend with the Shawnees and the Cherokees who bitterly resented them for invading what the tribal hunters perceived to be their hunting turf. In their eyes, the white-skinned Long Hunters were poaching their game. In reprisal, tribal hunting parties routinely stole pelts and packhorses from the Long Hunters and raided and destroyed base camps. By the 1760s, the white Long Hunters, who largely just desired to hunt and explore the territory without participating in skirmishes with the native tribes, presented the tribes with a steady stream of targets for mischief.

Daniel Boone (1734–1820) was the most illustrious and remembered of the Long Hunters. More than anything else, Boone relished being in the raw Kentucke wilderness by himself or accompanied by his brother, Squire. In 1773, Boone led a party of settlers into Kentucke for the express purpose of founding a settlement. Attacks by hostile Shawnees left the group terrorized, depleted, and defeated. Boone's son James was captured by the warriors and tortured to death. In 1774, Kentucke's initial pioneer settlement was established not by Daniel Boone, but by James Harrod who entered the territory from Pennsylvania via the Ohio River. That year was likewise noteworthy for the harvest of the first crop of corn by a settler named John Harman. That initial harvest marked the true beginning of distilling and whiskey-making history in Kentucke, even though it is almost certain that spirits were not produced from that inaugural yield. The earliest settlers were more occupied with retaining their scalps than with making corn spirits. The next year, 1775, Daniel Boone broke ground for Fort Boone, which was eventually renamed Boonesborough.

Problems with the native tribes reached their zenith in the 1770s as Shawnee warriors, especially, attacked white men, women, and children indiscriminately and pilfered or burned down settlements at will. They also set upon supply parties coming from the eastern colonies, killing and looting with abandon and scant chance of reprisal. With Revolutionary War preparation gearing up

in the eastern colonies on the heels of Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" speech to the Virginia Convention in March of 1775, the influx of able-bodied men slowed on the western frontier. This left the settlements insufficiently protected and, just as important, poorly fortified. The Caucasian population of Kentucke in 1775 was only about 150, mostly male. When the Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776, in a hot and humid Philadelphia, Kentucke's population had grown only to around 200. In 1778, it was 280.

The desperate war with Great Britain radically shifted the attention away from the expansion of the western frontier and back to the "mother ship" colonies and the fight for independent standing. The pioneers of Kentucke were left to fend for themselves against the increasingly perturbed and emboldened Shawnee as well as the lurking troops of the British, who were keen on establishing a military stronghold in the western territories to squeeze and distract the colonies. Dreams and ambitions of subduing the Kentucke wilderness were fading as the gun barrels of war grew hotter.

Treaties between native tribes and pioneers from earlier years had proven to be dismal failures. Regrettably, these fragile agreements were repeatedly broken either because the white settlers brazenly reneged or were ignorant of the details, which was the case more often than not, or because the tribal elders misunderstood the terms and fine print details of the treaties. Through no fault of their own, the tribes had trouble, in particular, grasping the concept of "land ownership." The culture and traditions of the native tribes of the eastern regions of North America dictated that using and taking care of the land wasn't the same as owning it. As more treaties were signed, more were broken. Bitterness on both sides led to mutual belligerence and eventual fierce fighting.

Fearing that the British, who were building troops north of the Ohio River, would team with the agitated tribes of the western frontier against the pioneers, the decision to take the offensive in Kentucke, Indiana, and Illinois was made in Virginia in 1778. The

campaign to keep the British in check and to simultaneously quell the tribal uprisings in the west was led by George Rogers Clark, an adept negotiator and seasoned soldier.

Clark departed Virginia with a skimpy force of 150 enlistees and arrived on Corn Island near the Falls of the Ohio in June of 1778. Hoping to eventually reach and capture the British stronghold at Detroit, Clark confronted and defeated the British at Vincennes, Indiana, along the way, all the while trying to make constructive contact with native tribes whom he often dissuaded with siding with the British. During 1780 and 1781, Clark battled both the British and the native tribes in and around Kentucke. Though the tribes came to fear Clark and his troops, Shawnee hostility to the settlers, nonetheless, continued in the form of small surprise attacks rather than major confrontations. Homesteader supplies were looted, livestock was killed, crops were torched. The pioneers were hard-pressed to remain in the Kentucke wilderness. Dispirited, more than a few gave up and left, heading back across the perilous trails to the eastern colonies.

The pivotal American and French war victory at Yorktown where Washington decisively defeated General Charles Cornwallis heralded the winning of the Revolutionary War by the colonies and the dawning of a new geopolitical era. In Kentucke, a weary George Rogers Clark resigned his commission in 1783 and returned to Virginia. Disputes with the weakened but hardly disbanded Shawnee, however, continued well into the 1790s, the time when Jacob Beam was starting to sell his bourbon whiskey by the barrel.

## **The Start of the Beam Saga**

In 1772, three years prior to the first hostilities between the colonies and Great Britain, the territory of Kentucke was made part of Fincastle County, Virginia. Then in 1776, Fincastle County was trisected into Kentucky (the *e* appears to have been replaced with

the y in the spelling around this time), Montgomery and Washington Counties. In 1780, huge Kentucky County was itself divided into Jefferson, Fayette, and Lincoln Counties. Of course, after the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783, Kentucky was included as part of the new United States as a western portion of Virginia. The Commonwealth of Kentucky became the fifteenth state of the United States of America on June 1, 1792.

The rush to settle in Kentucky, which had all but ceased during the core Revolutionary War years of 1775–1781 when troop movements, both British and American, made long-range travel unappetizing and foolhardy, sprang to life again during the final months of 1784 and early 1785. Kentucky's population growth—though, *explosion* is a more appropriate word—from the conclusion of the Revolutionary War to 1800 was phenomenal. In 1778, Kentucky's population registered at 280. By 1790, astonishingly just a dozen years later, the official census recorded it as 73,077. The state census of 1800 officially logged 220,955 residents.

What makes these figures so mind-bending is the realization of how hard it was to travel long distances in the untamed, largely uncharted western wilderness. In the early Third Millennium when traveling hundreds of miles in a single day on land or through the air is commonplace, it is easy to overlook eighteenth-century difficulties. Five to eight miles a day with packhorses and wagons ferrying people, food, supplies, and household things was looked on as an outstanding day. Few trails, or *traces* as they were referred to in Kentucky, existed.

Transport by water was one way to enter Kentucky, which has more miles of navigable streams than any of the other 48 contiguous states. Lumbering flatboats and surface-knifing keelboats that originated in western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland made their deliberate way down the Ohio River, carrying families, their livestock, farming equipment, and other belongings to the frontier. Among those belongings and equipment often were copper pot stills, coiled copper worms, and wood collection vats, the fundamental

distilling equipment that would forever alter the face of the American frontier. Fort Pitt, now Pittsburgh, was considered the optimum point of embarkation for river travel to Kentucky because of its well-fixed location at the confluence of the Ohio, Monongahela, and Allegheny rivers.

Flatboats, sometimes as lengthy as 40 feet and as wide as 20 feet, were awkward rectangular vessels with flat bottoms. They were constructed of lashed timbers. Flatboats, notorious for getting stuck on sandbars, almost always had a cabin for passengers and crew as well as pens for smaller livestock. Larger versions could transport up to 70 tons of cargo, including several score sheep, pigs, cows, or goats and even wagons. Because of their low, horizontal design, flatboats traveled only one way down the turbulent Ohio River, downstream. Keelboats, the design opposite of flatboats, were wooden hull, sail-less, river-going vessels that had a shallow draft and almost always boasted a long, central cabin for shelter. Propelled by teams of burly men who rowed, towed, or poled the boats through the current, keelboats were significantly more maneuverable on the Ohio than flatboats. They likewise had the advantage of being able to venture both up- and downstream. Still, other individualistic pilgrims gritted their teeth and paddled canoes and dugouts filled with their few possessions down the Ohio.

The more popular gateway from the 1750s through the early 1800s was the overland trail that naturally cut through the narrow confines of the Cumberland Gap. The Wilderness Road led to the Cumberland Gap. Though cramped and unpaved and, therefore, forbidding to wheeled vehicles especially when sodden or iced over, the Cumberland Gap offered Virginians, Pennsylvanians, Marylanders, and Carolinians the appealing chance to enter Kentucky without having to endure the white-knuckle ride provided courtesy of the Ohio River. Wagons required at least four horses or mules to complete the journey through this well-trampled notch in the Appalachians. Aside from bad weather conditions in the mountains, the two biggest problems for pioneers, similar to their river traveling

peers, were attacks either from native war parties or from white highwaymen who could easily lie in waiting above the tight passageway.

### **Beams of Light**

According to research done in 1919 by Jacob L. Beam (a different branch of the family from the Kentucky branch), then a Princeton professor, “The name Beam is the English spelling [according to the sound] of the German Boehm. *Boehm* is German for ‘a or the Bohemian.’” Professor Beam postulates that the name is ultimately derived from a fourth-century B.C. Celtic tribe, named Boii, who resided in the north of what is now Italy. Two hundred years before the appearance of Jesus, the Boii tribe relocated northeast. Then around A.D. 600 they moved south through Bavaria and on to what is today considered Bohemia, origination point for the Czechs. Beams, then, are fundamentally Slavic in nature, though for many centuries they did live in Germany and the German sector of Switzerland, which explains why they are frequently depicted as being of German or Swiss origin. Many of the Mennonite Beams who emigrated from Switzerland came to North America searching for religious freedom after being the butt of religious oppression. They remained in southeastern Pennsylvania in what is now Lancaster County.

The Cumberland Gap was the way by virtually all accounts that Johannes Jacob Boehm, the man who represents America’s first generation of whiskey-making Beams, entered Kentucky with his copper pot still. Acknowledging that eighteenth-century American colonial record keeping was, in many instances, sketchy, at other times nonexistent or simply has in the meantime been lost, the available evidence is inconclusive as to whether Johannes Jacob Boehm was born in America or Germany or Switzerland. While several whiskey journalists and authors of the past have flatly



claimed he was a German immigrant, no open-and-shut corroborated evidence exists for such an assertion.

Confusingly, an uncorroborated account called *Distilleries of Old Kentucky* from April 1935 written by Thomas E. Basham indicates that Maryland was Jacob's place of birth. Ship records discovered in a genealogical search sponsored by a Canadian branch of Beams who published their findings on the Internet show that droves of German and Swiss immigrants named Bohm, Beem, Bome, Behm, Bohme, and Bem arrived through the port of Philadelphia via England from 1710 to 1780. Some arrived at the request of William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania, who was looking for workers with trade skills. Jacob, it turns out, was a common Christian first name of the era.

Data unearthed and pieced together for the writing of this book from county and church records, genealogical summaries, as well as from existing Beam family history and living members of the Kentucky branch points more in the direction that Johannes Jacob Boehm's birthplace was likely to have been in Pennsylvania circa 1755 to 1760 and that he was, in actuality, a first- or even second-generation American of German descent. Indeed, another separate body of genealogical research done in 1997 stipulates through records of The Lutheran Church of New Hanover of Montgomery County, Pennsylvania that Jacob and his brother Conrad P., whose pension records show fought in the Revolutionary War for the Continental Army for three years, hailed from Berks County, Pennsylvania.

At the Jim Beam American Outpost, the official visitor's center at the distillery complex in Clermont, Kentucky, the family tree depicts Jacob as being born on February 9, 1760 in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to Nicolaus Boehm and his wife, Margaretha. Lutheran Church baptismal records state that Nicolaus and Margaretha had five children, with Johannes Jacob listed as the fourth child. This record contains no mention of Johannes Jacob's brother, Conrad P., though it is altogether possible that Nicolaus and Margaretha relocated either before or after the birth of the five

children listed in the baptismal record. Another tidbit is that Conrad P. in his military records lists Bucks County, Pennsylvania, as his birthplace. Conrad P., likely Johannes Jacob's elder brother, might well have been born in a different location earlier than Johannes Jacob. One record states that a Nicolaus Bohm landed in Philadelphia on October 23, 1752. Could this be Johannes Jacob's father?

Issues and questions, whose numbers seemed to multiply as each new shred of data was collected, arose from these strands of information that now resemble a platter of cooked spaghetti. Had Nicolaus and Margaretha Boehm themselves emigrated from Germany by way of England during the massive immigrations of the middle decades of the eighteenth century, or had *their* parents accomplished that feat one or two decades earlier? If, in fact, Johannes Jacob Boehm was born in Pennsylvania, was his place of birth Berks or Bucks or Montgomery County? With so many hundreds of German and Swiss immigrants flooding North America during the 1700s, it is now beyond question that there were multiple sets of Boehm/Boem/Beam clans. Therefore, some of this unearthed data doubtless crosses over from family branch to family branch. DNA sampling is likely the only method remaining to make final determinations as to Johannes Jacob Beam's precise ancestry.

It's probable that we will never know for certain the details of Johannes Jacob Boehm's beginnings. In light of all this sometimes contradictory, almost always confounding information, one last salient question surfaces: Does the exact birthplace of Johannes Jacob Boehm, who evidently preferred to be known as Jacob Beam, or his pre-Kentucky years critically impact the grand scheme of the story of how a single family influenced the whiskey-distilling industry in America more than any other? No, absolutely not.

Three undeniable facts that *are* vitally important are:

1. Jacob Beam had been well-schooled in the arts and sciences of farming, milling, and distillation;

2. Beam married Mary Myers (1765–1830), daughter of Jost Myers, in Frederick County, Maryland, on September 20, 1786; and
3. Jacob and Mary moved from Maryland to Lincoln County, Kentucky, in either 1787 or 1788, having advanced overland through the Cumberland Gap and over the next two decades had 12 children, nine boys and three girls.

Another ironclad historical fact is that Jacob and Mary Beam are listed in the 1790 *First Census of Kentucky* as residents initially of Lincoln County. To further substantiate their presence in Lincoln County in 1790, Jacob is cited as a witness to a bill of sale that exists. Sometime after 1790, however, Jacob and Mary Beam moved to Washington County to live on Hardin Creek. Deed records from the period of 1792 to 1803 reveal a rather cockeyed inheritance of 100 acres of land by Mary Myers Beam in the late 1790s. Mary's windfall came, according to county records, courtesy of her brother Jacob Myers. The land was a parcel from a 1500-acre tract originally owned by Mary's father Jost Myers, who disbursed 800 acres of the land among his children in a will dated March 18, 1797. The official county tabulation records an indenture, or written agreement, between Jacob Myers of Lincoln County and Jacob Beam of Washington County, dated August 5, 1799, "conveying 100 acres on Pottinger Creek for 40 pounds. . . ."

This county record implies that Jacob Beam either bought the parcel for Mary from his brother-in-law for £40, or that there existed some costs involved with the transfer of ownership that Jacob Beam was willing to pick up. This odd transaction leaves one wondering, though, if in that period sons preceded daughters in the inheritance pecking order or if Mary had somehow been left out of her father's will.

Whatever the case, it is now indisputable that Jacob and Mary Beam were living in Washington County by the time that Jacob got to liking his corn whiskey enough to begin selling it by the barrel

in 1795. While no recording of this genuinely momentous event in American whiskey and business history has ever surfaced, virtually every source of information mentions that particular year as the commercial launch of the Beam family whiskey dynasty. The ripple effect of that initial business transaction, the innocent selling of a barrel of whiskey made from corn, would reverberate through seven generations of Beams over two centuries . . . and, eventually, the global marketplace.

### **Kentucky's First Bourbon Whiskeys and a Rebellion**

Claims as to who produced Kentucky's first bourbon whiskey fly as high as NOAA weather balloons. The issue of whether or not Jacob Beam distilled the first Kentucky bourbon whiskey can be put to bed at the outset. He positively, unequivocally *did not*. No members of the Beam family have ever said otherwise and nothing in all the archival material of bourbon history even hints that he did. All indications are that stills were up and percolating well before the Beams ever set foot in Kentucky in 1787–1788. With the cultivation of corn beginning in 1774, it is likely that distillation preceded 1785; maybe even 1780, when the first mentions of whiskey begin appearing in county and court records with some regularity in Kentucky County.

Some elementary deductions and assumptions regarding Jacob Beam can be put on the table without breaking much of a sweat or the elasticity of truth. With his German ancestry, it makes complete sense that he would possess the skills of a farmer-miller-distiller by the time he and Mary arrived in Kentucky. Several stories claim that the Beams brought a pot still and a worm with them from Maryland. Following that line of thought, it likewise seems correct and fitting that they established a farm with a gristmill in Lincoln County almost immediately upon their arrival. In the

decades that sandwiched the Revolutionary War years, farming, milling, and distilling were interdependent farm activities that extracted the greatest benefit from the grain crop. Farmers typically utilized excess grain in the making of spirits to use for barter or trade. Whiskey was a form of rural currency.

But whiskey made from Kentucky corn wasn't the New World's first native whiskey. Whiskey made from rye, the small grain that imparts a spicy taste to whiskey, was prevalent in the colonies that surrounded the Kentucky territory, including Virginia, the Carolinas, Maryland, and, most prominently, Pennsylvania. Distilling whiskey from rye gained momentum in the 1750s and continued well into the 1800s. Rye whiskey was America's true breakthrough whiskey and, though, it would be eclipsed in popularity by corn-based bourbon whiskey later on in the nineteenth century, it has remained a favorite selection of spirits connoisseurs.

Rye whiskey, as it turns out, was also a focal point of a post-Revolutionary War crisis that was centered mostly in western Pennsylvania. The Whiskey Rebellion, a tense and potentially disastrous situation that tested the presidency of George Washington in its first term, grew out of public disgust and disdain, especially in the grain farming communities of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Maryland, of a national tax on distilled spirits that was passed into law on March 3, 1791, and enforced starting July 1, 1791. The problem stemmed from national debt incurred mainly through the funding of the American Revolution, not by any moral decree relating to alcohol issues.

George Washington's Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton estimated the national debt of the new United States in 1790 to be \$50 million to \$54 million, a staggering total for the era. Hamilton was rightfully anxious to rid the fledgling nation of such a massive, crippling debt as quickly as possible. But why he chose to tax only distilled spirits rather than all alcoholic beverages is open for serious discussion, even skepticism. Cynics claimed that due to subtle pressure on Hamilton from the old eastern seaboard state power brokers, who produced much of the nation's fermented but not

distilled beers, ciders, and fruit wines, distilled spirits came into his sights as a plausible alternative revenue generator. Other observers cite as a possible source of Hamilton's inspiration the excessive taxation of whisky and stills in the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands by the British Parliament throughout the 1770s and 1780s when legislation was amended or introduced five times.

Kentucky wasn't nearly as populated as Pennsylvania, hence the immediate effect of the Excise Act was minimal to most Kentuckians. Jacob Beam and his peers were probably more concerned and occupied with establishing their farms and crops and fending off the remnants of the Shawnee rather than distilling grain. Distilling hadn't yet become a major factor in Kentucky in the first half of the 1790s. That is not to say, however, that federal excise agents were not on the prowl, collecting duties or hunting down scofflaws, in and around the young settlements that perched on the banks of the Ohio and Kentucky rivers. Some agents were attacked. Kentucky's chief excise collector, Thomas Marshall, had his effigy dragged and hanged in Lexington.

Other western states and territories, however, such as Pennsylvania (which attained statehood in 1787) and Maryland (declared a state in 1788) were prime grain-growing paradises and were burgeoning. Rye was the most plentiful commodity both in solid and liquid form west of the Allegheny Mountains. A packhorse could transport only four bushels of unadulterated, unprocessed rye. When rye was transformed into whiskey, that same packhorse could carry the equivalent of 24 bushels. The farmer-distiller could, in turn, realize a handsome profit. Turning rye grain into Monongahela Rye whiskey was simply good business done on the western frontier.

In Alexander Hamilton's eyes, criticism generated from the western frontier states was easier to deal with and deflect because of the sheer distances involved. The basic idea was to levy a tax on the farmer-distillers in the hinterlands on the capacity of their stills at from 54¢ to 60¢ per gallon and any spirits made in cities, towns, and villages at from 7¢ to 25¢ per gallon depending on the proof.

The farmers were to willingly pay up their tax to excise agents because they were true, uncomplaining patriots and citizens. Federal agents were to carry the funds back to the treasury. The concept when diluted and dressed-for-market probably looked feasible to all in the highest echelons of government.

Hamilton and Washington, however, grossly underestimated how loudly the western territories would bark in protest. Compared to the eastern states, these areas were still primitive territories largely settled in the mid-1770s by the mess-with-me-and-you're-dead Ulstermen. The Ulstermen lived by the words of Scotland's beloved poet, Robert Burns, who wrote "Whiskey and freedom gang thegither" (*Oxford Concise Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed., p. 81).

By the summer of 1792, antigovernment meetings were being attended by increasing numbers of disgruntled farmer-distillers who felt betrayed by the federal government. The discussions soon turned more radical in tone. People were publicly warned by the protesters not to take up employment as excise agents. To appease the protesters, the Excise Act was altered with an amendment that slightly lowered the distilling tax. No matter. The damage had been done. Citizens who paid the tax lived under the threat of having their stillhouses destroyed by antitax dissenters. Federal U.S. marshalls were deployed from Philadelphia in July of 1794 by the highly annoyed Hamilton to serve protesters with writs demanding that they appear in court in the City of Brotherly Love to explain why they weren't fulfilling their lawful obligations. This action further inflamed western Pennsylvania farmer-distillers who could not easily leave their farms for weeks at a time to appear in federal court hundreds of miles away.

Another amendment to the Act in 1794 adjusted the tax downward with little or no positive response from the inflamed farmer-distillers. The talk of insurrection accelerated to the point at which some of the more strident and persuasive rebels wanted western Pennsylvania to secede from the union. Hamilton finally lost all patience. He suggested to Washington that an army of

militia be sent to the frontier. Washington and the other members of his cabinet agreed. In haste, Washington had his military staff gather 13,000 men from four states—New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania—in the late summer of 1794.

By October, the force, led by Hamilton himself, arrived in western Pennsylvania where they were greeted by unexpected quiet and calm. One hundred seventeen of the most vehement protesters were rounded up and arrested. Only one-quarter of those taken into custody ever had their cases reach federal court. All others were quickly released with full amnesty after being detained. In the end, only two of the men whose cases advanced to trial were convicted. They were both sentenced to death, but were pardoned by President Washington himself.

Through his patient but stern dealing with the Whiskey Rebellion uprising, George Washington assured that his presidential power would never be threatened again. In 1797, Washington completed, with customary grace, his second term in office and returned home to Mount Vernon, where he once again took up being a gentleman farmer . . . and a country distiller. In 1802, the Excise Act was repealed. Distilling and distilled spirits would remain tax-free in the United States from 1802 until 1862.

## **The 1790s in Kentucky and Matters of Integrity**

A positive repercussion of the Whiskey Rebellion for the state of Kentucky was the scores of disgruntled and disenfranchised Pennsylvanian, Marylander, and Virginian farmer-distillers who packed up and relocated to Kentucky. Also, Revolutionary War veterans, many of whom had been paid with land grants in the western frontier, were gravitating to Kentucky to claim their compensation. Consequently, Kentucky's population tripled from 1790 to 1800.



The steady stream of Scots-Irish and Germans coupled with the establishment of towns and villages plus the dedication to the cultivation of corn all came together during the pivotal decade of 1791 to 1800. Top these salient factors off with Kentucky's pristine ground water that's filtered for decades through the natural limestone substrata that supports the northern stretches of the state and you have a winning formula for grain distilling. These fundamental building blocks served as the cornerstones for the founding of the whiskey industry in Kentucky.

### **Why Kentucky Whiskey Is Called Bourbon**

Present-day Bourbon County, Kentucky is minute compared to when it was instituted as part of Virginia in 1785. Many of Kentucky's earliest corn-based whiskeys were produced in Bourbon County and, consequently, were first described as "Bourbon County whiskey" to set it apart from the other types of so-called "western whiskeys" of the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, like the popular rye whiskeys of Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. That moniker was shortened to "bourbon whiskey."

Jacob Beam, meanwhile, was busy working his land and raising his family on Hardin Creek. Family lore relates how he set up a water-powered millstone to grind his corn and other grains like rye and barley. The milled grains when added to water made the mashes that were fermented and distilled. Nearby forests of chestnut, pine, hickory, maple, poplar, hemlock, ash, and beech doubtless provided the logs, bark, and planks needed to erect sturdy outbuildings, fences, barns, pens, and stillhouses. Beam, most probably, constructed a wooden collection vat for his spirits dripping fresh and perfumed off his copper pot still. The wood was likewise used to make barrels for storage of salted meats, rainwater, and whiskey.

Good water from reliable sources, like Hardin Creek, is central to founding long-lasting communities and, certainly, to producing good whiskey. Few places in North America are as blessed with pure water as Kentucky. The state, bordered by the Ohio River to the north and the Mississippi River to the west, is a web-like network of clear-running streams, creeks, and branches. Natural springs, whose aquifers are embedded deep in the limestone shelf, supply much of the state's fresh water, now as then. Limestone water, whose taste is frequently described as being sweet or smooth, is especially good for whiskey-making because it is rich in calcium carbonate. The calcium component works particularly well with yeast cells during the fermenting stage when the farmer-distiller is making his distiller's beer.

It can be deduced from available information that Beam was proactive in making a name in the distilling business by the late 1790s and early 1800s. His pride and joy was known as "Old Jake Beam Sour Mash" and was viewed by local imbibers as a fine dram. All reliable indications are that he sold his first barrel of bourbon whiskey in 1795. The modern convenience of glass bottles hadn't yet taken hold in Kentucky. As a result, the earliest bourbon whiskeys were sold directly from the barrel. Barrels would be stored in a barn or storehouse by the purchaser who, when the hankering for bourbon became too great, would simply station his pewter mug beneath the spigot and marvel at the clear to pale amber liquid as it cascaded from the barrel.

Late eighteenth-century bourbon whiskey was a raw and fiery distillate on the tongue. To the sense of smell, bourbon whiskey was flowery, prickly in the nostrils, and grain-scented. Bourbon whiskey warmed the breast in the cold months and soothed the aches and pains incurred being a farmer at any time of year. The longer it remained trapped inside the barrel, the better bourbon whiskey became as it mingled with the wood. Extended periods in wood barrels likewise encouraged the color to deepen from limpid clarity to pale amber because of oxidation and the interaction

of the spirit with the natural chemicals, like tannin and lignin, in wood.

### **Boil and Bubble**

It is widely accepted that ancient alchemists and scientists in the pre-Christ civilizations of China, India, Tibet, Greece and Egypt dabbled with the distillation of fermented mashes of rice, millet, herbs, or flowers. The advanced and inventive dynastic Egyptian culture perhaps even passed along its secrets of crude distillation to the Hebrews, Assyrians, and Babylonians. Most distilled spirits authorities agree that it was the Moors of the Middle Ages who perfected the art of distillation to the contemporary standard. These technologically and culturally sophisticated North African nomads of Berber and Arabic ancestry introduced distillation to Europe when they occupied much of the Iberian Peninsula following Tarik's invasion of Spain in A.D. 711.

Distilled spirits, such as bourbon whiskey, are the outcome of fermentation followed by distillation, or intense heating, in pot stills. Alcohol boils at a lower temperature than water, 173.1 degrees Fahrenheit versus 212 degrees Fahrenheit. Boiling generates vapors, or ethyl alcohol in gaseous form. The hot vapors condense when cooled through cold metal coils. The resultant liquid, the distilled essence of the fermented base material, is high alcohol "spirits."

Though scant profit was to be made from selling whiskey in the waning years of the eighteenth century, Beam seems to have been active and successful enough to become renowned and respected as a whiskeyman. Perhaps early on he realized that Kentucky bourbon whiskey was a harsh spirit when immature and that maybe it improved and smoothed out with some added time in the barrel. Other distillers of the 1790s were coming to the same conclusion.

Or, maybe Beam's reason for early acceptance of his bourbon whiskey was his particular choice of grains and yeast culture. Perhaps it was his recipe—the ratios of corn, rye, and barley—for Old Jake Beam Sour Mash that set it apart. Corn, a large, sweet grain, was simple to grow and was, therefore, the most widely planted grain in Kentucky. Rye, wheat, and barley, all small grains, were cultivated to lesser degrees and, as a result, have customarily been responsible for smaller percentages in bourbon whiskeys.

In terms of social conduct, Jacob Beam set the tone for the succeeding generations of Beams. The Beam family traits of being straightforward, self-effacing, industrious, and honest took seed with Jacob. *The Nelson County Record of 1896*, published about 60 years after his death, describes Jacob Beam as a “man of sterling worth and integrity . . .” Jacob and Mary had a dozen children. In order of age from oldest to youngest, they were George, Henry, Isaac, Jacob Jr., John, Margaret, Matilda, Sarah, Thomas, David, James, and Lewis, their last child, born in 1810.

From the time of the first offspring of Jacob and Mary Beam to the last, Kentucky was well on its way to becoming a whiskey culture. By 1810, tables, incomplete in nature, compiled by the U.S. marshalls of the Kentucky Federal District stated that at the minimum seven thousand pot stills were known to be operating in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. If this official accounting was acknowledged as being unfinished, just how many stills were simmering in the hollows, glens, and forests of the Bluegrass State in the first decade of the nineteenth century?

Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble . . . like crazy.