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2023

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Repository Citation

Jones, Reinette F. and Stephens, Charlotte, "Looking Back: Kentucky and Children's Book Publishers" (2023). *Library Faculty and Staff Publications*. 330.

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/libraries_facpub/330

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Notes/Citation Information

Kentucky Libraries, vol. #87, Fall 2023, pp.19-20

LOOKING BACK

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LOOKING BACK: KENTUCKY AND CHILDREN'S BOOK PUBLISHERS

The state of Kentucky was not a leader when it came to the publishing of children's books. Kentucky became a participant in the industry starting in 1804, which was about a century and a half after the first children's book was published in the United States in 1656. That title was *Spiritual Milk for Boston Babes* by John Cotton. The term "babes" referred to children back then and it should not be confused with the present-day use of the term on social media. John Cotton's book was a religious text for the teaching of the Puritan and Reformed Protestant faith. During this period, religious instruction was the accepted content for books written and published for children.

Often the titles of the books were long and drawn out. That same train of thought still existed in 1804 when the first children's book titles were published in Kentucky. John Macgowan's book, *Infernal Conference; or Dialogues of Devils*, is considered the first juvenile title published in Kentucky. John Macgowan, 1726–1780, was a Baptist minister and an author in Scotland. The first edition of his book was published in London, England in 1772. The reprint of his book in Kentucky was a two-volume set that was published/printed by Joseph Charless (1772–1834) in Lexington. In 1804, there was not a clearly defined distinction between a printer and a publisher.

The Joseph Charless reprint was the 5th American edition from the 13th London edition of Macgowan's book. The title was well received, and it is still considered Macgowan's best known work. The book contains dialogues between demons in an attempt to address the division between human responsibility and demonic manipu-

lation. Macgowan's works were sometimes viewed as controversial, yet they sold well in Europe and the United States. The title can be found today in both state and private colleges in Kentucky.

Another children's book published in Kentucky by Joseph Charless in 1804 was *Two Short Catechisms Mutually Connected...*

by John Brown (1722–1787), and James Fisher (1697–1775). This is the abbreviated version of the title; there are more than 75 words in the full title. In Kentucky, the book was a reprint with a preface written by James Fisher. The first edition was by John Brown, printed in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1764 by John Gray and Gavin Alston. John Brown of Haddington was a Scottish minister and author, *Two Short Catechisms* was his second book.

When John Brown and John Macgowan's books were printed by Joseph Charless, they were new publications for Kentucky. Charless, an Irish immigrant, had only recently come to the state. Working as a printer, publisher, and editor, he founded two newspapers while in Kentucky, the *Independent Gazetteer* (1803) and the *Louisville Gazette* (1807). He later founded the *Missouri Gazette* (1808) in St. Louis. When Charless arrived in Kentucky, he had changed the spelling of his last name from Charles to Charless. He was the husband of Sarah Jordan McCloud and

the couple had a total of eight children. In 1800, the family moved from Philadelphia, PA, to Lexington, KY, and Charless was hired as a printer in a partnership with Francis Peniston. The Charless family remained in Lexington until 1807 when they moved to Louisville, KY, later relocating to St. Louis, MO.



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Gradually, publishing for children became more popular both in Kentucky and the wider United States. To explain this growing trend, it's important to understand the broader historical context of the time. A huge factor was the evolution of how childhood was viewed through the eighteenth century. Children at this time were initially seen as inadequate creatures who needed to become full adults as quickly as possible (Calvert 67). It was up to adults to mold children to be pious individuals with useful skills. Additionally, a high child mortality rate and the strict religious views of the time impressed upon children that often their destiny was to die young—leaving them to prepare for death over the course of childhood (Kiefer 1).

New views of childhood helped children's books become focused on entertainment as much as education or the salvation of children's souls. Philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacque Rousseau helped to reframe childhood as an important developmental stage and encouraged the use of play as a form of learning (Calvert 68). This deeper understanding of child development helped to dispel the idea that children were just mini adults, a trend that helped reframe children's books to involve more enjoyable premises. Though still centered around religious or moral principles, these books taught their lessons in a more accessible way.

Meanwhile, growing literacy rates served to make the distinction between children and adults as readers. As the average adult became more literate and better educated, they wanted more complex literature (Morgenstern 16). Children, therefore, became a separate literary audience, needing books tailored to their reading needs and interests.

In this vein, publisher John Newbery (namesake of the prestigious Newbery Medal) proved that producing books specifically for children was profitable. Beginning with his release of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, Newbery's work was significant in the establishment of the children's literature genre (Stevenson 188-9). This book is a notable example as it prioritizes the amusement of the

reader, with its lessons on the alphabet and morality becoming a secondary focus. Additionally, Newbery demonstrated his marketing savvy with its release, selling each copy with a toy—a rubber ball for boys or a pincushion for girls. Aided by growing literacy rates and the shifting views of childhood, Newbery's publications demonstrated that children's books were both profitable and in demand.

There were many pioneers in children's publishing who followed Newbery as the genre became established. One was Jacob Johnson of Philadelphia, whose specialty as a printer and bookseller was children's books (Brown 285). Of his works, he published a number of books from the growing population of female authors such as Maria Edgeworth (Welch 516-17). Johnson committed to his focus on children's books in order to stand out in the publishing industry, and he began to offer a subscription service to secure committed buyers for his work (Index of Virginia Printing). To reach a wider market, he opened shops in Richmond, VA, and Lexington, KY, in the early 1800s. Improvements to infrastructure and technology in the United States helped to boost the development and readership of children's literature (Stevenson 181). After Kentucky achieved statehood, the governor turned to improving roads within the Commonwealth (Hammond 29). This inadvertently allowed for the increased spread of children's literature in Kentucky and made it possible for publishers from other states—such as Johnson—to set up shop.

Though Kentucky was not a leader in the early publishing industry for children, it was an active participant. Printers within the state, as in the rest of the country, saw the potential in producing literature for young readers. Through the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, this literature became more established. Slowly, children's books started to step away from solemn moral instruction toward the playful stories we know and love today.



Meet *Kentucky Libraries* new columnist, Reinette Jones. Reinette Jones is a research and reference librarian at the University of Kentucky Special Collections Research Center. She is the author of *Library Service to African Americans in Kentucky* and has many other publications. She is the co-creator and manager of the Notable Kentucky African Americans Database (NKAA). She is also a regular contributor of highlights from Kentucky historical newspapers converted into brief posts on the Kentucky Digital Newspaper Program (KDNP) Facebook site. Reinette Jones may be reached at rjones@uky.edu.

meet Charlotte Stephens

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