Bowling Green, Kentucky: Searching for an Explanation of Its Name

Bowling Green, the industrial, commercial, and cultural "capital" of south central Kentucky, has slightly more than 40,000 residents. It is presently Kentucky's fifth largest city, the seat of Warren County and Western Kentucky University, at the head of navigation on the Barren River, and eighty eight air miles south south west of downtown Louisville. While its history has been well documented, the derivation and historic significance of its name has long been disputed. Local authorities have been divided in their opinion of whether it was named for a pioneer bowling ground or for Bowling Green, Virginia, whence many early Warren County settlers are believed to have come.

The town was established in early 1798 on some thirty acres deeded the year before by Robert Moore for the seat of the newly created county. Moore and his brother George are said to have arrived sometime after 1790 and built a log house by a big spring in the heart of the present city where, in April 1797, the first county court was convened. At the March 1798 term of the court the name "Bolin Green" (sic) was selected for the new town, though in some early records it was also spelled as one word. On April 1, 1802 the post office was established as Bowling Green in George Moore's tavern and stage coach stop with George as the first postmaster, and in this name the town was incorporated in 1810.
In attempting to account for the name, some local historians, notably the late Judge John B. Rodes, in his manuscript history of the city, referred to old records in which mention is made of Robert Moore's "ball alley". Every morning, on a level patch of green near his home, Moore and his neighbors are said to have gathered for their favorite recreation, rolling wooden balls. It may be significant to note that these records refer to Moore's "ball alley", not actually to a "bowling alley". And while "rolling wooden balls" suggests "bowling", as we know it, it does not actually say so. So what evidence there might be for this derivation of the town's name is inconclusive.

Even less conclusive evidence exists for the contention that the Kentucky city was named for Bowling Green, Virginia, a small town of fewer than 700 persons on US 301, some forty miles north of Richmond. This town was established on the site of the older community of New Hope and became the seat of Caroline County when Col. John Waller Hoomes donated a part of his estate, called "The Bowling Green", on condition that the town be named for it.

The estate was founded by an ancestor, Major Thomas Hoomes, on a 3000 acre tract granted in 1667 by Governor Berkeley. By 1675 he had erected the family residence, a large brick mansion still standing and occupied, just
south of the town's limits, which for years has been known simply as "The Old Mansion." It is not known when the Bowling Green name was applied to the estate. We're told that it was only first officially recorded in 1765 and thereafter often spelled "Bolling", which modern historians presume to have been an orthographic error. While the tradition has been that the estate was named for a large lawn between the mansion and the present court house and that the lawn may have been used as a bowling ground, historians agree that it was actually named for the seat of the Hoomes family in England.

It is not known for a fact that the pioneer settlers of Bowling Green, Kentucky came from this section of Virginia; nor do we know why they would have commemo-rated the name of the Virginia community or the Hoomes estate. Though the Virginia community informally bore the Bowling Green name at least from 1765 and its post office was established in this name sometime in 1786, it was still publicly known as New Hope and was not officially called Bowling Green until 1803.

In our attempt to track down the name of Kentucky's Bowling Green, we now proceed from the plausible to two highly improbable explanations.
It was once suggested that the Kentucky city was named for the village of Bowling Green in Holmes County, Mississippi. According to tradition, this place, some twelve miles northeast of the county seat at Lexington, was named for its first settlers, a Mr. Bowling who ran the brick kiln there and a Mr. Green who operated the local tannery. But this could not have been before 1840.

Sometime before the turn of the twentieth century, a Lodi, Missouri resident, James Lewis Bowling, claimed that the Kentucky city was named by and for his father, also James Bowling. In an article in the Lodi Sentinel and later confirmed in a letter to a Warren County man, James E. Younglove, Bowling stated that his father was born in Orange County, Virginia, in 1775 and moved to Kentucky in 1791 where he lived at or near the town of Bowling Green until 1816 when he moved to St. Charles, Missouri. This was merely a family tradition, he wrote, and admitted he could offer no evidence for it.

Judge Rodes, a major proponent of the "bowling on Moore's green" theory, took strong exception to this claim for in searching the early town records he could find no evidence of a Mr. Bowling living in the Bowling Green area before it received this name.
We certainly can not rule out the possibility that Bowling Green, Kentucky was named for the original American Bowling Green, the public park at the lower end of Manhattan Island where, for awhile in the 1730s, fashionable New Yorkers actually did "bowl on the green." Much as Lexington, Kentucky, commemorated the first act of defiance of free Americans against the tyranny of George III, Bowling Green, a generation later, might have recalled a similar incitement for it was at New York's Bowling Green that George's statue was toppled by the rebels and its lead components melted into bullets. We know that this kind of rashness appealed to many early Kentuckians.

In short, we really do not know how Bowling Green, Kentucky got its name. Our search continues, especially for the hometown of the Moore brothers, of whom nothing seems to be known before their arrival in Kentucky. If we could trace them back to the environs of Caroline County, Virginia, we could dispose of the rather tenuous notion of a local "ball alley."

As have most of Kentucky's older towns, Bowling Green has had a fairly long standing nickname. It has been called "The Park City" for its downtown Fountain Square Park, the site of Moore's alleged "ball alley", in which a fountain was erected in 1881. Until recently Bowling Green's newspaper was called The Park City Daily News.
FOOTNOTES

1. Jesse J. Runner, "Historical Sketch of Warren County" manuscript in Warren County Vertical Files, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University

2. Warren County Order Book A, P. 64, March 6, 1798


5. Mrs. W.C. Sumpter, "Warren County and Bowling Green" manuscript in Warren County Vertical Files, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University

6. Rodes, op. cit.

7. Ibid., and Sumpter, op. cit.


9. Campbell, op. cit., P. 294; and Ralph E. Falis, "Historical Record of Bowling Green" in Mary Tod Haley, Caroline County, 1985, P. 1


11. Data furnished the writer by Nancy Medley, Bowling Green, Virginia, Town Clerk, May 15, 1987
12. According to postal records in the National Archives, the Bowling Green, Virginia post office was established, as such, some time before Oct. 5, 1786 which is the date of the first financial return of the first postmaster William Elliott to the Postmaster General's Office.

13. Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 171, 393


15. Ibid., and *Holmes County Herald*, July 1, 1976, p. 19

16. J.E. Younglove, Scrapbook Number 3, in Warren County Vertical Files, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University

17. Rodes, *op. cit.*


19. Sallie Carr Drake, "History of Bowling Green", manuscript (ca. 1903) in Warren County Vertical Files, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University