



# Writing the History of Kentucky's African Americans

BY CAROL CUMMINGS

**ROBERT PENN WARREN, THE NATION'S FIRST POET LAUREATE, ONCE SAID THAT HISTORY CANNOT GIVE US A PROGRAM FOR THE FUTURE, BUT IT CAN GIVE US A FULLER UNDERSTANDING OF OURSELVES, AND OF OUR COMMON HUMANITY, SO THAT WE CAN BETTER FACE THE FUTURE.**

Western Kentucky University Associate Professor John Hardin, by serving as a general editor of the *Kentucky African American Encyclopedia: Black Life and Culture in the Commonwealth*, is spearheading a statewide project that will give Kentuckians a better understanding of their African American heritage.



John Hardin



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*Dr.* Hardin, a third generation Kentuckian and a Louisville native, has always been interested in history and in education. His parents were school teachers who graduated from Kentucky State College in the 1920s, though both found it difficult to make a living by teaching. Hardin’s heritage, as an African American educator and the son of African American educators, contributes to his love for this project. “Kentucky is an historically significant state, as it was the fifteenth state in the union,” he said as he leaned back in a chair in his comfortably cluttered office. “History is an ongoing, living, breathing thing. As an historian, you research the data and discover back stories that describe the people, culture, and events of the era. African Americans came to Kentucky with Daniel Boone, so we have to go back to the beginning.”

The *Kentucky African American Encyclopedia* will chronicle the cultural, political, social, and economic history of Kentucky’s African descendants; present this rich history as encyclopedia entries; and make this research available to a diverse audience — the general public, colleges and universities, and elementary and secondary school teachers and students.

“A project like this has never been done for any state,” he explained. “It will include biographies of famous black Kentuckians, and it will reflect different pieces of the Commonwealth’s African American heritage in all 120 counties.”



A project supported by the University Press of Kentucky, the *Kentucky African American Encyclopedia* will include approximately 1,200 entries, each of which will be reviewed at least twice. In the statement of need for the *Kentucky African American Encyclopedia*, the editors write:

“Kentucky African Americans have been a part of the Commonwealth of Kentucky from its inception. Enslaved blacks traveled with the first white pioneers and worked with them to erect Kentucky’s early settlements. Throughout the state’s history, Kentuckians of African descent have made notable contributions to all aspects of life. They have served in the military, constructed buildings, organized hospitals, established businesses, erected churches, formed benevolent societies, participated in athletic events, shaped the cultural landscape, entertained audiences, educated masses of school children, held political offices, and fought for respect and equality. Kentucky African American history is as diverse as the state.”

“The project began in 2001,” Dr. Hardin explained. “The collaborators batted around a concept and created a unique proposal for the project. The University of Kentucky has provided office space for the staff and has implemented a website. They are also providing graduate assistants and undergraduate student assistance. The project has been endorsed by twelve organizations, including WKU, Kentucky State University, the University of Kentucky, the Kentucky Historical Society, and the Kentucky African American Heritage Commission.”

**“Knowing the value of an Encyclopedia, this one will fill a gap in Kentucky history. From the Big Sandy to the Mississippi, the editors have revived the significant contributions and lives of African Americans.”**

JOHN KLEBER

An advisory committee will provide oversight for the program. “The committee will be made up of males, females, blacks, whites, Kentuckians, and a few out-of-state individuals,” he said. “The committee will advise on entries to include, and they will serve as writers, topical editors, and readers for completed entries.”

The editors will seek contributions from faculty and staff of Kentucky colleges and universities, graduate and undergraduate students, Kentucky Historical Society staff, Kentucky Heritage Council staff, local historians, and the public.

“I completed a sabbatical in the spring of 2006, during which I traveled a great deal to help promote the encyclopedia, and we are working to raise funds to support the project,” Dr. Hardin said. “This inclusive project is designed to reflect the diverse cultural and geographical nature of the state. We hope this resource will be useful as a research tool for graduate and undergraduate students, and as a useful resource to help school children understand the African American contributions to the Commonwealth of Kentucky. It will include ample historical pictures

and will have a great deal of visual appeal,” Hardin explained.

“We anticipate that the *Kentucky African American Encyclopedia* will serve as the authoritative reference for primary and secondary school teachers. It will also contribute to African American History Month statewide projects and will document the diversity of the Commonwealth. I am representing WKU through my work on this project, but the project transcends the university,” Hardin said. “It is a public endeavor that is scholarly and will assist the public. It will also support WKU’s vision to be a leading American university with international reach. This unique national project will take an in-depth look at Kentucky’s diversity and rich African American heritage.”

Dr. Hardin, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, has published two books on Kentucky African Americans, *Onward and Upward: A Centennial History of Kentucky State University 1886-1986* and *Fifty Years of Segregation: Black Higher Education in Kentucky 1904-1954*. He was also a co-editor and consultant on *Community Memories: A Glimpse of African Americans in Frankfort, Kentucky*. ■

For more information, please visit the Kentucky African American Encyclopedia website:

**[www.uky.edu/OtherOrgs/kaae](http://www.uky.edu/OtherOrgs/kaae)**