

Oldham was the 74<sup>th</sup> county created by the Kentucky Legislature. Our birthday is February 1, 1824. Oldham County was formed from portions of Jefferson, Shelby and Henry Counties.

The county is named for Colonel William Oldham, a Revolutionary War patriot and early pioneer. He was a son of an old Virginia family and second cousin to George Washington. Oldham's grandmother and George Washington's mother were half-sisters.

When the first battles of the Revolutionary War broke out in Massachusetts, at Concord and Lexington in 1775, William Oldham was a young man of 22, living near Berkley, in western Virginia. He and his younger brother, Conway, immediately enlisted to fight.

Many years later, Oldham's wife Penelope related to their oldest son that his father was among a group of 120 from Western Virginia led by Captain Daniel Morgan – later of some Revolutionary War fame – who marched from Western Virginia to Boston to support General Washington's siege of the city, covering 600 miles in only 23 days. By January 1776, he was commissioned as an ensign (junior officer) in the Continental Regulars.

Later, Oldham fought at Lake Champlain and may have been among those who helped Henry Knox move cannons from Fort Ticonderoga to Bunker Hill.

As the Revolution progressed, Oldham joined the 5<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania in March 1777 and was one of the regiment's company commanders who spent the bitter winter of 1777-78 with Washington at Valley Forge. After six months at Valley Forge, he was among those who fought at Monmouth Courthouse and Brandywine Creek.

His enlistment over, William Oldham left the army in 1779 and joined his older brother, Samuel, who had

come to the Falls of the Ohio. His younger brother, Conway, remained in the army and was killed at Eutaw Springs.

William Oldham rose rapidly in the frontier community of Louisville and by the fall of 1786 had been appointed Sheriff of Jefferson County (Virginia), which included present day Oldham County.

*Collins History of Kentucky*, written in 1848 by Judge Lewis Collins, reports Will Oldham ***“was a chivalrous and enterprising man, brave and experienced officer, and very efficient in defending the country against the incursion of the Indians. He was one of the first magistrates of Jefferson County, an active, useful and public-spirited citizen”***.

Likely because he was Sheriff of Jefferson County, Oldham was appointed in the fall of 1791 to lead the Kentucky militia as part of an expedition into the Northwest Territory.

President Washington ordered a military expedition because the British and their Indian allies refused to recognize American sovereignty in the Northwest Territory and were attacking and killing settlers.

The expedition, under the command of a retired Revolutionary War general, Arthur St. Clair, consisted of approximately 2000 people, including women, children and civilians. The civilians were working as wagon drivers and managing a large herd of cattle which moved with the army. Army regulars and militia from several states made up the 1700 soldiers in the expedition. The Kentucky militia was made up of approximately 260 men.

From the beginning, the effort was plagued by a series of unfortunate events, including bad weather, lack of supplies, poor equipment and misjudgments by General

St. Clair. As the group moved north, its size shrunk. Some people dropped out and others stayed behind at camps made along the way. Of the 2000 who started out from Fort Washington on the Ohio River (present day Cincinnati), only 1200 were left by the time they eventually came into contact with an unexpectedly large alliance of Indians. Along the Wabash River, south of present day Fort Wayne, Indiana, an estimated 1400 Indians from various tribes were waiting.

The Indians attacked at dawn on November 4, 1791. The Kentucky militia had been ordered to camp on the north side of the Wabash River, away from the main body of the army. The Kentucky group was attacked first and immediately overrun by hundreds of Miami Indians, who came out of the woods with ferocious-sounding war yelps, swinging tomahawks and firing muskets. Most of the Kentucky militia were inexperienced fighters who had never witnessed such a sight. They were terrified. Many froze in place and died without even trying to fight.

When he became aware of the attack, Colonel Oldham - who had been making a pre-dawn report to General St. Clair – dashed back to the river and his men, but was soon cut down. Within three hours, 600 soldiers had been killed. The army was trapped by Indians on three sides. General St. Clair sensing death awaited everyone if the fight continued, ordered a retreat. The army and civilians – pursued by Indians, ran for their lives back down the narrow trail they had made coming northward. Over the next several days, they struggled back to Fort Washington.

In the 1700's, casualties could not be moved from the battle sight and were left where they lay. The fate of Colonel Oldham's body is unknown. The only belongings returned to his wife and children were his watch and chain. Will Oldham was 39 years old.

A family cemetery plot on the Kentucky State Fairgrounds includes a marker with his name, but it is not known if there are remains in the grave. The most likely result of his death is that his body was ravaged by animals.

Will Oldham was prepared to die. On September 3, 1791, as the Kentucky militia was being formed, he created a will which left ***“To my wife Penelope a tract of land on Chenoweth run, house, furniture and third of stock forever, ...and residue of estate during widowhood, this to be divided equally between children John, Richard, Abigail and William Oldham, except pre-emption of 400 acres near Bullitt’s Lick to Elizabeth Homes.....”***

Penelope Oldham was pregnant when William Oldham died and a fifth child was born after his death.

The ‘Battle of the Wabash’ stands as one of the worst defeats, in percentage of casualties, ever suffered by the American Army. It is also the largest victory ever won by American Indians.

After the full scope of what happened became known, Kentuckians were very angry. As a new county was formed more than 30 years later, bitterness lingered and the memory of Colonel William Oldham and other men of the Kentucky militia who lost their lives on the Wabash River was still present. A final salute was made to their leader, Will Oldham, with the naming of a new county.

Unfortunately, as decades have passed, the history of how Oldham County received its name has slipped into obscurity. As the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our county draws near in 2024, it is important to remember our frontier heritage by bringing back the valor and bravery of Colonel William Oldham to the attention of our community.

I am suggesting we remember our heritage by placing a memorial statue of Colonel Oldham on the courthouse square. It will be the first piece of public art in Oldham County.

The statue of Colonel William Oldham will be made of bronze and be approximately 7’ tall. It will stand on a partially completed Doric column of white Indiana limestone – partial completion representing the life of a public-spirited individual not lived to full completion.

The sculptor of this statue will be Matt Weir, a rising young Louisville artist with many significant credits. The anticipated cost of this project is \$135,000. Thus far, donations of \$75,000 have been received or pledged. Additional donations are welcome from individuals and groups in the community who wish to participate.

Appropriate recognition will be given to donors.

David Voegelé  
Judge Executive

Donations are tax deductible.

Please make donations payable to:

**Oldham County Fiscal Court**

100 W. Jefferson Street, Ste. 4  
LaGrange, Kentucky 40031

Or by using a credit card at:

[www.oldhamcountyky.gov/colonel-william-oldham-statue](http://www.oldhamcountyky.gov/colonel-william-oldham-statue)

\*Historic Shepherdstown

## Remembering Colonel William Oldham 1753 – 1791

***“He was a man of spotless reputation and great bravery”***

Danske Dandridge, 1910\*  
Historian



**Oldham County  
Founded  
February 1, 1824**