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Willis Settle House  
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## Statement of Significance

The Willis Settle House in Hiseville, Kentucky, meets National Register Criterion A as a significant structure relating to the manufacturing of the Kentucky Long Rifle in Barren County within the context **Kentucky Rifle Making in Barren County, 1800-1860**. Willis Settle, a third generation Kentucky Longrifle maker and grandson of Barren County's first long rifle maker, built this hall and parlor house circa 1850. Historical records suggest that Willis Settle manufactured long rifles in a shop that once stood in the southwest corner of the yard. Willis Settle lived and manufactured long rifles on the site until approximately 1860. Now a sought after collector's item, Settle Long Rifles are cherished relics of early to mid-nineteenth century industry in Barren County. This significance is illustrated by a Kentucky Historical Society plaque located on KY Highway 252 southwest of Glasgow, Kentucky, honoring Willis, his brother Simon, his father Felix, and his grandfather William Settle for their advancements in rife making.

## A Brief History of the Kentucky Long Rifle

Despite the name, Kentucky Rifles (or Kentucky Long Rifles) were first created in the 1730s in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Several technological components can be traced further back to Switzerland and Germany<sup>1</sup>. From the 1730s until the invention of the cap and ball percussion rifle around 1840, the Kentucky Rifle was considered the supreme rifle. Kentucky Rifles are often associated with the American frontier. The first guns used by American colonists were not rifles, but flintlock muskets. In the article *Short History of the Kentucky Long Rifle*, James Clell Neace explains, "For a number of reasons these old muskets were not suitable for the American frontier. First of all, they were so heavy that to go hunting with one was like carrying a fence-rail on one's shoulders all day long." Muskets had other problems such as wasting gunpowder and lead. Kentucky Rifles wasted less gunpowder, used smaller balls (thus using less lead), had a greater range, and were far more accurate.

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The Kentucky Rifle got its name because frontiersmen, especially in Kentucky, used the rifles extensively. Daniel Boone carried a Kentucky Rifle through the Cumberland Gap. During the Revolutionary War, George Washington sought frontiersmen who owned Kentucky Rifles (he assembled a 1400 man force of frontiersmen with Kentucky Rifles). The rifles were used in combat, and were the main choice of snipers.<sup>2</sup>

The Kentucky Rifle was a staple in frontier life and fulfilled many functions. Not only was it used for hunting and protection, but it was also a social object as many communities held weekend and holiday shooting matches. While the first rifles were purely utilitarian, gunsmiths such as William Settle created highly decorative rifles with fines woods.<sup>3</sup>

In one account, Vivian Rousseau<sup>4</sup> explains how her great-great grandfather William Settle made his guns. She begins her narrative saying, "In the rough country shop, in Barren County with forge, hammer, and handmade tools, from a piece of bar iron and sugar maple, were made the straightest shooting and most deadly firearms known to man, the Kentucky Rifle." The barrel was made by welding bar iron around a small iron rod. Then the small rod was removed. The barrel was further bored with a reaming tool and then checked for accuracy running a piece of silk thread and inspecting the shadow. Further work was done on a homemade lathe, and the outside of the barrel was ground on a grindstone. The locks, triggers, and springs were forged on an anvil. The stock was made from a piece of curly maple. Rousseau describes the tasking as taking up to a month to complete.<sup>5</sup>

### **Hiseville and Barren County Kentucky**

Barren County was established on December 20, 1798, and became the thirty-seventh county of Kentucky. It was carved out of parts of Warren and Green counties. The county was named for the meadowlands that once covered half of the county. About 70% of the early settlers (such as William Settle) came from Virginia; many were veterans

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of the Revolutionary War. The nationalities of the early settlers were mostly English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish, with the greatest percentage being Scottish. Glasgow was named the county seat in 1799. Other towns include Cave City, Park City, and Hiseville. In the early years of the county, agriculture was the primary source of livelihood. Glasgow served the role as the main commercial center with such enterprises as sawmills, shoemakers, tailors, blacksmiths, wagon makers, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Hiseville is located in the northeast corner of Barren County on Highway 70. The land that is now Hiseville was originally owned by the Thompson, Walton, and Gadberry families. A man named Thompson built the first home in what is now Hiseville in 1795. One historical account says, "Hiseville has had its statesman, its doctors, its blacksmiths, and cobblers."<sup>7</sup> In 1859, Hiseville organized its own State Guard. After the post office was established, the townspeople began discussing what to name the village. Two of the early suggestions were Amity and Social Point. As a joke, one citizen proposed the name "Goosehorn," and this was the town's name from about 1869 to 1876.<sup>8</sup>

In 1876, the post office name was changed to Hiseville, and the village adopted the name. Records indicate that in 1876, Hiseville had a population of 75. The businesses of this time included two dry goods stores, two drug stores, one saddle and harness maker, one church, one hotel, one tobacco warehouse, two doctors, and one steam mill.<sup>9</sup> These records describe the village more than fifteen years after Willis Settle moved. The accounts of Cyrus Edwards indicate that the town was even smaller when Willis first built his house his house circa 1850, making Willis's role and significance in the community even larger.<sup>10</sup>

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### **The Settle Family: Three Generations of Rifle Makers in Barren County, Kentucky**

William Settle was born on February 23, 1770, in Fauquier County, Virginia. In about 1798, through the Henry Vowles military grant, he purchased land and founded the now-unincorporated community of Rocky Hill, Kentucky. In Rocky Hill, he married Elizabeth Huffman and they had ten children, most notably, Felix Settle, the father of Willis Settle. William Settle built a gun shop in Rocky Hill and is considered the first long rifle maker in Kentucky. He died on March 26, 1808, during a smallpox epidemic.<sup>11</sup> A plaque located in Rocky Hill reads:

Settles Rifles: Prized by frontiersmen, now rare collector items, they were made by three Settle generations in Barren Co. Starting in 1800 William made flintlocks at Rocky Hill. A son, Felix, had shops in Glasgow, Roseville. Felix's sons Simon and Willis made rifles in Glasgow, Hiseville and in Green and Logan Counties. Name of maker and place made on all: some dated.<sup>12</sup>

On October 25, 1968, an event was held in Rocky Hill, commemorating William Settle. A program from this event proclaims that the Settle Rifle is "Barren County's greatest contribution to the history of Kentucky." This proclamation was recognized officially by Barren County, the city of Glasgow, and the Barren County Historical Society. An article about the event, appearing in the Barren County newspaper *The Glasgow Daily Times* on October 1, 1964, reads:

Barren [County] will honor William Settle, maker of the first [Kentucky] long rifles at the historic Thomas Page home at Old Rocky Hill, now called Game. The program designated Settle Rifles Day, is part of the American Landmarks Celebration. . . the Settle rifle was first devised and manufactured in Barren Co and was widely used in pioneer [Kentucky] and went westward with the extending frontier and was the instrument upon which the early settlers were vitally dependent for protection and food and their very lives.<sup>13</sup>

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Felix Settle was born on April 21, 1801, in Rocky Hill, Kentucky. Because he was only seven when his father died, it is unlikely that he learned much about gun making from William. The great-great granddaughter of William Settle believes that Felix learned metal working from his mother's side of the family. William's wife Elizabeth was a Huffman, and many in the Huffman family were accomplished metalworkers in Virginia. In fact, she believes that William originally learned metalworking from the Huffman family while in Virginia. Members of the Huffman family also moved to Barren County, and Felix probably learned to make guns from them.<sup>14</sup>

In 1822, Felix Settle moved to Roseville, Kentucky, in Barren County and built his first gun shop. Felix built full-stock flintlock Kentucky rifles until 1832 and then started making percussion rifles. This change in his rifle-making was due to the invention of the percussion cap which was an improvement in the ignition and firing of rifles. He taught his sons Simon and Willis rifle making while in Roseville. In the 1850s, he relocated to Glasgow, Kentucky to expand his rifle making. During this time, he was often assisted by his two sons. Felix was a notable gunsmith in South Central Kentucky, and for some years, his guns were highly in demand. By 1853, south central Kentucky was flooded with rifles and business became slow.<sup>15</sup> As a result in the decline of demand for rifles, Felix and his two sons assembled approximately one-hundred rifles, hired a man to drive an ox-drawn wagon, and rode on horseback in the spring of 1853 to Arkansas to sell their guns. They made the trip safely, reportedly making a good profit, and returned in the fall of 1853.<sup>16</sup>

Felix made rifles of small, medium, and large bores. He also made double-barreled rifles and over and under guns. Later, he made sharpshooters for the Confederate Army. He used maple, walnut, and cherry woods for the stocks, and they ranged in style from plain to ornate. He marked his name using all capital letters on the top of the

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barrel. When Federal troops occupied the area, they burned his shop and destroyed his tools. He reportedly fled to the South, but at some point returned to Barren County where he died in 1870.<sup>17</sup>

Felix's oldest son, Simon, was born in Roseville, Kentucky, on October 5, 1823. As mentioned above, Simon learned gun making from his father. His descendant Vivian Rousseau writes, "In my opinion, he made the best of all the Settle rifles."<sup>18</sup> Because his father had most of the gun making business in Barren County, Simon, as a young man, moved to Greensburg in Green County, Kentucky, and opened a gun shop. In 1849, he married Mary Barnett, the daughter of a prominent Greensburg judge, and moved his shop to Judge Barnett's land and built a home. He made plain half-stock percussion rifles with no patchboxes. He used curly maple wood, and unlike his father, his guns have no ornamentation. Simon marked his rifles **S.SETTLE, GREENSBURG, KY** and numbered them either on the barrel or buttplate. After the Civil War he moved to Rowletts, Kentucky, but was put out of business by those making breechloader guns. He moved to Bowling Green, Kentucky, and died in 1871.<sup>19</sup>

Willis Settle was born in Roseville, Kentucky, in 1825. He made guns in Roseville, Glasgow, and Hiseville. One of the most descriptive accounts of Willis in relation to the Willis Settle House was told by a local resident and compiled in the book *Cyrus Edwards' Stories of Early Days and Others: In What is Now Barren, Hart, and Metcalfe Counties*. Cyrus Edwards refers to the Willis Settle Home as the "Huffaker Place." After Willis married Eliza Gadberry, he built the home sometime between 1849 and 1850. He first had a blacksmith shop down the street from his home. Edwards mentions that Willis taught two other local gun makers: John and Joe Gadberry.

This was a large shop with a steady stream of business. They did horseshoeing and repaired plows, tools, irons, and wagons. Willis Settle specialized in gun making, repairing guns, and repairing fine machinery. Edwards says that Willis eventually withdrew from his large shop and built a shop in the southwest corner of his yard where he exclusively manufactured guns.<sup>20</sup> Willis is described as being inventive; he made gain-twist rifles and over and under

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rifles, but he did not make shotguns. Depending on his location, Willis signed his guns **W.F.SETTLE, HISEVILLE, KY; W.F.SETTLE, GLASGOW, KY;** and **W.F.SETTLE, RUSSELVILLE, KY.**<sup>21</sup> As mentioned above, Willis was also helping his father Felix at his gun shop, although Cyrus does not mention this fact.

The most interesting story from Cyrus Edwards about Willis Settle concerns the Settle gunmakers' trip to Arkansas. Edwards's account differs in that he does not mention Willis's father participating in the trio. He does mention that Willis brings along his brother. Edwards tells the story as he remembers Willis's account. Cyrus Edwards describes Arkansas as "comparatively wild country" and "lawless in nature." Willis had long had the idea to gather a large number of guns and take his chances on making a profit in Arkansas. Willis gathered about one hundred rifles and several large pistols. He left in the spring of 1853 with a two-horse wagon. When Willis told the story of his trip to people in the Hiseville community, he would say if he had known beforehand about the dangers of the trip, no amount of money would have persuaded him to go.

The next part of the account of the trip to Arkansas suggests that Willis Settle was also skilled at telling tall tales, and this would have been big news in such a small village. Willis credited his surviving the trip to an anonymous man from Hiseville that accompanied the Settles. Describing this "rather remarkable man," Cyrus Edwards says:

He was a man who was always full of leisure and ready to lay off for a while—fond of company and willing to take a chance on nearly anything where pleasure or profit was promised. He was jovial and a good mixer—liked stimulants in moderation and not too seldom, but was absolutely proof against overdrink—was near six feet high and built like a gladiator. . . [he] came from one of the best families in that region.<sup>22</sup>

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According to the story, the anonymous companion could adapt to any situation. He could keep his temper under control, but came from a long line of fighters. He was diplomatic and tried to avoid trouble. But when diplomacy failed, he enjoyed being violent. Edwards says, "He was worth his weight in wildcats."<sup>23</sup> After trip, Willis vowed never to make the trip again, but the anonymous companion wanted to make the trip again. Cyrus Edwards remarks, "If a full account of this trip could be written, just as Settle used to tell it from time to time, it would equal any fictitious tale of wild adventure portrayed in the yellow-backed literature of the past decade."<sup>24</sup> Cyrus Edwards concludes his account of Willis's story by suggesting that he would someday like to write a full account of Settle's adventure to Arkansas, while presenting the many sides of the anonymous stranger.

Cyrus Edwards concludes his account of Willis Settle saying that around 1859 or 1860, he sold out and moved elsewhere. Edwards says that Willis sold his home to a man named M. Huffaker. Another account presents a different and somewhat contradictory story. In this account, Willis Settle moved to Russellville, Kentucky. Ironically, Willis ultimately returned to Arkansas (which he vowed never to do) and died there in 1892. Willis fled Hiseville when the Union army occupied the town, burned his shop, and destroyed his tools. This account also says that Willis manufactured and repaired guns for the Confederacy.<sup>25</sup> While the latter piece of information concerning Willis's allegiance to the Confederacy could be true, it is likely that Cyrus Edwards would have included the burning of Willis's shop in his account. Instead, Edwards has Willis leaving Hiseville to some unknown place shortly before the Civil War.

Although the Cyrus Edwards account is based on his memory of events happening decades earlier, research conducted at the Barren County Circuit Clerk's office in Glasgow suggests that his account is considerably accurate.<sup>26</sup> While people in Hiseville might consider it a given fact that Willis Settle lived on the property that is now 316 Park

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Street, it is necessary to provide sufficient evidence to support this idea. The deeds in Glasgow provide two disjointed pieces of history relevant to the Settle House. The Cyrus Edwards account effectively joins the two pieces.

The Willis Settle House had nine changes of ownership in the twentieth century. In 1900, Linis E. Schooler sold the home to G.B. Edwards. Schooler is listed in the grantor master index, but is absent from the grantee index. Because the original deed is handwritten and difficult to read, all potential misspellings were considered in the search for an older deed. On the other side, the dates provided by Cyrus Edwards as to when Willis Settle acquired the property to build the home and when he sold the home correspond considerably with records of Willis Settle purchasing and selling property. Willis Settle bought property from George Walton in 1847 and 1851. Cyrus Edwards mentions George as the son of Thomas Walton, who was a successful businessman who owned property around the area where Willis Settle built his house. This information does not contradict the account that Willis had a blacksmith shop and then, a few years later, built a house, where he built another shop (although Cyrus would have been slightly off with his 1849-1850 construction of the home).

Likewise, the last record of land transaction for Willis Settle occurs in 1859 when he sells the land he purchased in 1851 to Dr. Billingsby Newman (a neighbor of Settle). Cyrus Edwards describes Newman's house as joining the Settle lot on the south side, being one-story, long, with a large yard, and "well back from the street." Next to the 316 Park Street house, a house matching this description still stands, thus strengthening the case that Settle did live at the residence in question. Cyrus Edwards believed that Willis Settle sold the property to M. Huffaker. M. Huffaker could have occupied the property because the record of grantor books shows that Billingsby Newman was buying up numerous properties around this time, which suggests he was either renting or reselling the properties. When the Civil War begins, there is no more mention of Billingsby Newman. Edwards says that Newman died after the war. In fact, the records in general get sketchy during this period as land owners disappear from the record for one

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reason or another. Cyrus Edwards provides the connecting piece of evidence when he mentions Mrs. Thomas Walton, the current resident of the house. Grant records show that a T. Walton and his wife owned the house from 1914 to 1925, a time when Edwards would have been writing his accounts.

### Conclusion

The Willis Settle House in Hiseville, Kentucky, is a significant monument in the history of Barren County, the state of Kentucky, and the United States. Kentucky long rifles served an important role in frontier expansion and in the United States gaining independence. For approximately ten years in the mid-nineteenth century, this important legacy continued at what is now 316 Park Street in Hiseville, Kentucky. While the shop in the southwest corner of the yard no longer stands, the house serves as a marker for a piece of history that should not be forgotten. The Settle House thus serves as a physical embodiment of the historical significance of both the Kentucky long rifle and the legacy of Settle rifle makers. For Barren County and Hiseville, the activities that transpired at this house are among the most important in the history of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Dillin. 1924. *The Kentucky Rifle*

<sup>2</sup> James Clell Neace. 2001. "A Short History of the Kentucky Rifle."

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Vivian Rousseau. 1939. "The Kentucky Settle Rifles" page 3

<sup>5</sup> Vivian Rousseau. 1939. "The Kentucky Settle Rifles"

<sup>6</sup> Cecil E. Good. 1995. *Yesterday and Today: Historical Sketches of Barren County and Surrounding Area in Kentucky*

<sup>7</sup> Clayon Simons. 1980. "Hiseville" In *Barren County Heritage: A Pictorial History of Barren County, Kentucky*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Clayton Simmons. 1980. "Hiseville" In *A Historical Trip Through Barren County, Kentucky*

<sup>10</sup> Florence Edwards Gardiner. 1940. *Cyrus Edwards' Stories of Early Days and Others: In What is Now Barren, Hart, and Metcalfe Counties: (While Cyrus Edwards' accounts are based on childhood recollections, they are one of the only first-hand accounts of early Hiseville published. Most books and articles relating to early Hiseville cite Edwards as a primary source)*

<sup>11</sup> Vivian Rousseau. 1939. "The Kentucky Settle Rifles"

<sup>12</sup> Cecil Good and Woodford Gardner. 1980. *Barren County Heritage: A Pictorial History of Barren County, Kentucky*

<sup>13</sup> Accessed from <http://archiver.rootsweb.ancestry.com/th/read/SETTLE/1999-02/0919225013>

<sup>14</sup> Vivian Rousseau. 1939. "The Kentucky Settle Rifles"

<sup>15</sup> National Rifle Association. 1993. "A Short History of the Kentucky Gunmakers Displayed at the 1993 NRA National Convention"

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Vivian Rousseau. 1939. "The Kentucky Settle Rifles" page 4

<sup>19</sup> National Rifle Association. 1993. "A Short History of the Kentucky Gunmakers Displayed at the 1993 NRA National Convention"

<sup>20</sup> Florence Edwards Gardiner. 1940. *Cyrus Edwards' Stories of Early Days and Others: In What is Now Barren, Hart, and Metcalfe Counties*

<sup>21</sup> National Rifle Association. 1993. "A Short History of the Kentucky Gunmakers Displayed at the 1993 NRA National Convention"

<sup>22</sup> Florence Edwards Gardiner. 1940. *Cyrus Edwards' Stories of Early Days and Others: In What is Now Barren, Hart, and Metcalfe Counties: 155-156.*

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

<sup>25</sup> National Rifle Association. 1993. "A Short History of the Kentucky Gunmakers Displayed at the 1993 NRA National Convention"

<sup>26</sup> All deeds referenced are housed at the Barren County Circuit Clerk's Office in Glasgow