

TRAVELERS' ACCOUNTS AS A SOURCE OF KENTUCKY HISTORY

BY THOMAS D. CLARK

Associate Professor of History, University of Kentucky, Lexington

Read before The Filson Club, May 1, 1939

The historian has turned to the travelers' accounts hundreds of times for information relating to the early years of Kentucky before and after it became a state. In this vast mountain of material he has found references to every institution which has existed in the region, descriptions of its geography, and dozens of other leading facts. The historian has frequent need for information which cannot be found in official and statistical records. He often desires a photographic knowledge of what the people whom he is describing or studying were like. There are two fairly satisfactory sources from which such information can be obtained: the travelers' journals and the memoirs and personal diaries. The Kentucky newspapers of that earlier day are not thoroughly satisfactory sources for some types of information, because they were less interested in commonplace local news than are those of the present time.

It goes without saying that the historian must use with care the materials which he finds in the descriptions of the travelers in Kentucky. He must have a seventh sense which will tell him when an account is distorted or utterly untrue. He should, by all means, have a background which reaches down by experience or careful study to the common everyday affairs of rural or simple urban human life. These are some of the factors which attracted the attention of the early travelers in Kentucky and these are the factors which interest, to a great extent, the social historian.

The first question which the research student using travel accounts must answer is: what was the motivating factor back of each traveler's visit? Perhaps, a second question should be asked: what was the nationality of the traveler? Each traveler came for a purpose, and this purpose is certain to show up as color in his Journal.

If the early visitor happened to be an Englishman, usually nothing suited him. He turned up his nose at the natives, at

their food, at their land, at their beds, and at the western hemisphere in general. He came to Kentucky expecting to find degenerates, and these he found, to his own satisfaction, in abundance.

This was likewise true of other nationalities. For instance, the haughty Irishman, Thomas Ashe, claimed, in 1806, that there were four churches, Transylvania University, a market house, a public hall, a bank, and a courthouse at Lexington.

"The inhabitants," said this disgruntled visitor, "shew demonstrations of civilization; but at particular times on Sundays and market days, they give loose to their dispositions, and exhibit many traits that should exclusively belong to untutored savages. Their churches have never been finished, and they have all the glass struck out by boys in the day, and the inside torn up by rogues and prostitutes who frequent them by night."

Ashe was not to go unchallenged in these damaging charges. Fortunately for the historians, native sons rushed to the rescue of their town's reputation in the *Kentucky Gazette*. Ashe traveled through the country for the purpose of adventurous exploration in a savage country, and, possibly, in search of archeological remains.¹

Travelers who came in search of social institutions, especially slavery, gave badly perverted pictures of what they saw. Gilbert Imlay was guilty of this, and, to a certain extent, Francois A. Michaux. Land speculators who held claims in Kentucky always overstated the case. Preachers who traveled through the country as missionaries were always prejudiced by the existence of other denominations, and their criticisms have to be taken at far below their apparent face value. Frenchmen were always the choicest citizens in the eyes of French travelers.² The Gallic visitor, in all of his nationalistic prejudice, however, performed for the historian a noble kindness: he often took the trouble to locate most of the French settlers living in the communities which he visited. New Englanders and Scotch and German travelers were likewise prejudiced in favor of people from their sections or countries.

Nearly every traveler of any consequence who came to America passed through Kentucky. Kentucky from 1775 to 1850 was really the major outpost of civilization—at least in the

¹ Thomas Ashe, *Travels in North America, Performed in the Year 1806*, London, 1809, pages 191-200. Also *Kentucky Gazette*, October 31, 1809.

² Andre Michaux, *Journal of Travels into Kentucky, 1793-1796*, and Francois A. Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Alleghany Mountains, 1802*, in Reuben Gold Thwaites, *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, Cleveland, 1904, Volume 3.

eyes of most of the travelers. Too, the State was located directly in the bottle-neck of the western river system, and any tourist following the rivers westward, of necessity touched Kentucky. Likewise most of the important highways and stage roads westward led through the State. Perhaps another influence which brought about the numerous visits of foreigners to the State were the Kentuckians themselves. They never passed up an opportunity to proclaim the splendors and fertility of their land, the daring of their pioneers, and the sagacity of their statesmen, the potency of their liquor and the beauty of their women-folks.*

Of necessity the number of travelers considered in this paper must be limited. Those selected have been chosen because of the completeness of their journals, and because these journals, as a collection, spread over a scope of Kentucky history from 1775 to 1850.

In 1784 Kentucky entertained a distinguished visitor in the personage of John Ferinand Dalziel Smythe. This gentleman came from England to America apparently to serve in the British Army, but, when the war was over, he set out to explore America. Smythe, in his preface, wrote:

"Having very lately arrived in England from America, where he had made many extensive journies, and fatiguing, perilous expeditions, prompted by unbounded curiosity, and an insatiable and enthusiastic desire of knowledge, during a residence in that country for a considerable length of time, in which he had become perfectly reconciled and habituated to the manners, customs, dispositions, and sentiments of the inhabitants, he eagerly fought out, and pursued with a degree of avidity rarely felt, every treatise and publication relative to America, from the first discovery by the immortal Columbus down to Carver's late travels therein. . . ."

Later Smythe admonishes his British readers to indulge him:

"As several matters related in the course of the following pages are perfectly novel, uncommon, and strange to an European reader, especially to a Briton, who may thereby be induced to decide against the veracity and probability of the whole, from the apparent incredibility, to him, of such singular phenomena, and in his opinion, marvellous, surprising relations; on these occasions, he entreats the man of candour only to suspend his censure and judgement, in such instances, either until he meets with some intelligent person with whom he can confide, and on

* Timothy Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, Boston, 1826, pages 62-65.

* John Ferinand Dalziel Smythe, *A Tour in the United States of America*, London, 1784, Volume 1, pages 2-3.

whose decision he may rely, who has made a considerable residence in, and progress through that extraordinary country; or until he communicates his doubts and difficulties through the channel of the public, and ballances in his mind the weight of the explanation and defense he may observe in reply, supported by such authority as may be adduced."⁶

Even at this late date I must confess some doubt of the validity of his descriptions of Kentucky. He entered the State through the headwaters of the Kentucky River and followed its course to Boonesborough where he visited with Richard Henderson, and where he says he pointed out the mistake of locating the fort on the site by the side of the River. When Smythe decided to visit Kentucky, it was with something of fear that he recorded that five hundred miles separated him from Carolina and the Transylvania settlement. Since this traveler had read some of the hair-raising accounts of America written by his fellow Englishman, Jonathan Carver, he was ready to expect the worst from whites, Indians and varmints.

With the same gullibility displayed by Captain Carver, Smythe accepted the story of the horn snake in the West. A young boy had killed one, but when they went to examine it, the snake was gone. The snake was gone, but the natives supplied their visitor with a complete account of the activities of this deadly monster. It was described as resembling a black snake, but thicker, shorter, and of a color more inclining to a dark brown. The snake never bit its adversary, but carried in its tail a stinger as sharp as a cock's spur which it could thrust into its victim. The natives then repeated the old story of having seen a horn snake sting a tree and that "within a few hours [it] swell[ed,] burst and peel[ed] off, and the tree itself will perish." This serpentine terror, unlike its lowly brethren who, in obedience to the curse of the garden, had to crawl on their bellies, could catch its tail in its mouth and travel around in the shape of a hoop. Smythe was convinced, and immediately hired a guide to direct him to Kentucky.⁷

One of the first major travelers to Kentucky was Gilbert Imlay.⁷ Imlay was in the truest sense of the word a land speculator, or a representative of a Philadelphia land agent. Thomas

⁶ John Ferinand Dalziel Smythe, *op. cit.*, Volume 1, pages 2-5.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, pages 209-212, 263-266.

⁷ Gilbert Imlay, *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America*, London, 1793.

Ashe accused him of being a florid mouthpiece for the first explorer of Kentucky. Ashe said:

"The first explorer of Kentucky hired an author residing in Philadelphia, to write an animated and embellished description of that country. The narrative was in a florid, beautiful, and almost poetical style; in short, the work possessed every merit except truth. However, the land speculator succeeded; in the course of seven years, the book drew forty thousand inhabitants into the State; but this instrument of their delusion is now read as a romance."¹

Imlay was an American, born in the state of New Jersey, about 1755. He served as a soldier in the Revolutionary Army, and, after the war ended, came west in 1784. He spent most of his time in Kentucky, and wrote his reports on Kentucky in the form of letters to a friend in London. The edition quoted here is that of 1792. Imlay's letters have one distinct fault: they are not dated, and, at times, the materials contained in his epistles would be far more useful if the exact date of the writing of each section were known. This writer, however, had only one intent, and that was to sell Kentucky lands. On one occasion he lets go with his pen:

"Everything here assumes a dignity and splendor I have never seen in any other part of the world. You ascend a considerable distance from the shore of the Ohio, and when you would suppose you had arrived at the summit of a mountain, you find yourself upon an extensive level. Here an eternal verdure reigns, and the brilliant sun of lat. 39°, piercing through the azure heavens, produces, in this prolific soil, an early maturity which is truly astonishing. Flowers full and perfect, as if they had been cultivated by the hand of a florist, with all their captivating odours, and with all the variegated charms which colour and nature can produce, here, in the lap of elegance and beauty, decorate the smiling groves. Soft zepthers gently breathe on sweets, and the inhaled air gives a voluptuous glow of health and vigour, that seems to ravish the intoxicated senses. The sweet songsters of the forests appear to feel the influence of this genial clime, and, in that mild effulgence which beams around us, we feel the glow of gratitude for the elevation which our all bountiful creator has bestowed upon us. Far from being disgusted with man for his turpitude or depravity, we feel that dignity which nature bestowed upon us at creation. . . ."

Such writing adds little to knowledge of the history of Kentucky, but, like a flagman waving a danger signal, it warns the re-

¹ Thomas Ashe, *op. cit.*, pages 170, 188.

² Imlay, *op. cit.*, pages 42, 43.

search student to approach Imlay with considerable care and discrimination.

The Michauxs, father and son, Andre and Francois, were born in France in the years 1746 and 1770. The elder came to America on a dual mission: botany and intrigue. He visited Kentucky as an agent of the French Republic, and more directly as an emissary of the blustering Citizen Charles Edmund Genet. He reached Charleston, South Carolina, April, 1793. He came under the guise of botany, and truly his scientific interest almost overpowered his mission of intrigue. This interest in the State and the reports of his mission were obviously colored by politics and plants. His journal has a distinct value in that it makes reports on his political progress and locates many French inhabitants of the State.

Many volumes could be written on this period of Kentucky history in both condemnation and in defense of many prominent Kentuckians, but both sides would have to reckon with the direct implications found in Andre Michaux's journal. This Frenchman called on Benjamin Logan, George Nicholas, Isaac Shelby, the Marquis de Calmes, the Mentelles, George Rogers Clark, and many others whose names he refrained from giving.¹⁰

Francois A. Michaux came on a less ticklish mission than his father. He had inherited his father's interest in botany and natural science, and in the year 1802 he toured the State from Limestone to Cumberland Gap, and from the State line near Scottsville to Louisville. Of all the travelers' journals Francois A. Michaux' is perhaps the most reliable. No more sympathetic nor closer observer ever came to Kentucky. Michaux found nothing sensational, but he has left a splendid human record.¹¹

Following Michaux were Thomas Ashe and Fortescue Cumming. Ashe was born in 1770, and became an adventurer and writer. After a series of social and financial irregularities on the continent, he visited America, and for a time was in the civil service of the country. He visited the West in search of adventure and sensational travel material. His journal was published in London, in 1809, under the title *Travels in America, Performed in the Year 1806, for the purpose of Exploring the Rivers Alleghany, Monongahela, Ohio and Mississippi and ascertaining the Produce and Conditions of Their Banks and Vicinity*. Ashe was haughty,

¹⁰ Andre Michaux, *op. cit.*, pages 36-44.

¹¹ See, for instance, Francois A. Michaux, *op. cit.*, pages 247-250.

and at times downright sour. He looked upon the natives of Kentucky as so much barbaric trash underfoot. However, he, like Imlay, did not curb his imaginative style when it came to describing natural phenomena. He descended the Ohio Falls, and his act lost nothing in his description. Said the bold braggart:

"I accordingly sent for the head pilot. He informed me that he feared a thundergust was collecting. The late violent heats, and the prognostics declared by the noise of the falls, and the vapour suspended over them, were strong portentions of a storm, and made the passage too hazardous to be undertaken at the pilot's risks."

When Ashe's boat, after an exciting start, descended into the Falls, he declared:

"The water soon rushed with a more horrid fury, and seemed to threaten destruction even to the solid rock which opposed its passage in the center of the river, and the terrific and incessant din with which this was accompanied, almost overcame and unnerved the heart. At the distance of half a mile thick mist, like volumes of smoke, rose to the skies, and as we advanced we heard a more sullen noise, which soon after almost stunned our ears. Making as we proceeded the north side, we were struck with the most terrific event and awful scene. The expected thunder burst at once in heavy peals over our heads, and the gust with which it was accompanied raged up the river, and held our boat in agitated suspense on the verge of the precipitating flood. The lightning, too, glanced and flashed on the furious cataract, which rushed down with tremendous fury within sight of the eye. We doubled the most fatal rock, and though the storm increased to a dreadful degree, we held the boat in the channel, took the *chute*, and following with skilful helm its narrow and winding bed, filled with rocks, and confined by a vortex which appears the residence of death, we floated in uninterrupted water of one calm continued sheet."¹²

Christian Schultz came to Kentucky in 1809 by way of the Ohio River. His first intimations of Kentucky is his description of Kentucky boats. He began seeing these bearers of Kentucky trade as far up the River as Pittsburgh. Schultz apparently wrote for an American audience, since his journal was published in two volumes in New York, in 1810. The modern historian finds in Schultz's *Travels on an Inland Voyage* a fairly satisfactory source of information for early western life. He apparently was not in search of adventure as was Ashe, nor was he as gullible as Smythe. His comments on Kentucky and its people bear the

¹² Ashe, *op. cit.*, pages 238, 239.

earmarks of common sense. He did not venture far away from the River, and obviously his account is of river life and river trade.¹³

Fortescue Cuming, like Christian Schultz, came to the West with a seasoned and Americanized point of view. His observations are reasonably sane, and the information which he has preserved for the historian is definitely valuable. Cuming left the River at Maysville and traveled over land to Louisville by way of Lexington and Frankfort. He had the eye of a reporter, and, in some cases, showed more timidity than was usual with travelers. He was fairly well satisfied with the fare and beds which he received, and was especially impressed with the hospitality of the people living along the road.¹⁴

No Kentucky historian can ignore the life and journal of Alexander G. Wilson, by George Ord.¹⁵ Wilson was in Kentucky in April, 1810. He floated down the River to the mouth of Bear Grass Creek, where he sold his boat, and made his way over land from Louisville to Lexington. Nine-tenths of the country he said was in woods. On his way through the forest he was impressed with the animal life which hovered about him. "The woods," said the ornithologist, "were swarming with pigs, pigeons, squirrels and woodpeckers." Nowhere else, except possibly in Audubon's writings, can the modern historian secure any notion of the numerous flocks of wild pigeons which foraged in Kentucky. Between Shelbyville and Frankfort, Wilson turned out of the road to visit a pigeon roost, of which he said, "By the by, it is the greatest curiosity I have seen since leaving home."¹⁶

On approaching Lexington he proclaimed it a town of some beauty. Here the scientist saw houses of brick, frame, and many nondescript hovels. The main street was paved with limestone flags, but the other walks and streets were ankle deep in mud. There were "many well-dressed females in the streets; the sound of social industry, and the gay scenery of the 'lusty haunts of men,' had a most exhilarating effect" on the spirits of the visitor who had just come in from the forest. One of the first institutions of the town to be honored with a visit from the observant

¹³ Christian Schultz, *Travels on an Inland Voyage*, New York, 1810, Volume 2, pages 132-146.

¹⁴ Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country Through the States of Ohio and Kentucky, etc.*, Pittsburgh, 1810, pages 134-185.

¹⁵ George Ord, *Supplement to the American Ornithology of Alexander G. Wilson*, Philadelphia, 1825.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, cxxix, April 4, 1810.

Wilson was the market house on Cheapside. Here he saw for sale black maple sugar in greasy saddle bags, cabbage in a wilted state, chewing tobacco, catmint, turnip tops, a few bags of meal, sassafras roots, and skinned squirrels cut into quarters.

The fact that Wilson described the courthouse as a somewhat disheveled building, and the courtroom as a dark dungeon in which the judges sat back in the corner, giving the appearance of spiders, and that he said mud in the market house was more than ankle deep, riled the native sons. But the thing that hurt local pride most of all was the fact that he said he saw squirrels cut into quarters in the market house. Writing from Nashville, Wilson apologized for this slip-up in his notes. He said that he did not see the squirrels cut in quarters, and that he was so sorry that he had blundered; they were cut in halves.¹⁷

Leaving Kentucky by the southern route toward Glasgow and Scottsville, the ornithologist has left a fine description of the commerce which passed through the Curd's Ferry landing on the Dick's River. He also saw a family on the road moving southward from Kentucky to the Cumberland River Valley. This description is of genuine historical value. The caravan was of the family type. There were three four-horse wagons, loaded with implements and household goods, and driven by negroes. Following the wagons were numerous members of the family. The father and the older boys were equipped with ropes on their saddles which they used when the wagons were traversing sidling roads to prevent their overturning. A negro woman rode a horse with a white child mounted behind her; the mother of the family was mounted with a child behind, and one at breast. There were numerous young whites and blacks doublemounted. The road swarmed with pigs, sheep, cows and calves, and following this procession were at least a dozen colts. None of the travelers has left a more human account of his journey than this one.¹⁸

During the second period in which travelers appeared yearly, the first of major significance to visit Kentucky was Henry Bradshaw Fearon. He was an Englishman, born in 1770, and was sent to America in 1817 by thirty-nine English families who were seeking homes in the New World. Fearon spent a year in the West, and entered Kentucky by way of Louisville and traveled through the State to Maysville. This traveler came

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, cxxxii, April 28, 1810; cxxxiii, July 16, 1811.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, cxxvii.

with an open mind, and except for his general opposition to the institution of slavery in the State, his views of Kentucky and Kentuckians are on the whole temperate in nature. Were it not for his book, *Sketches of America*, published in London in 1818, the local historian would be without a useful source of practical information.¹⁹

Following Fearon, Timothy Flint came to Kentucky in 1824. This traveler was a native New Englander who came West as a missionary. He entered Kentucky through the mouth of the Kentucky River and traveled through the State from Carrollton to Frankfort, to Lexington, and thence back to the Ohio in the neighborhood of Cincinnati.

After 1820 there were dozens of travelers in Kentucky. Among these were Mrs. Trollope, Captain Thomas Hamilton, Captain Frederick Marryat, Basil Hall, James Hall, the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, William Faux, Mrs. Amelia Anne Andrews, Madame Emmeline Stuart Wortley, Harriett Martineau, J. S. Buckingham, Count Arese, and Charles A. Murray. All of them published interesting journals which contain sections on the State.

Dickens found little of interest in Louisville, but he proclaimed the Galt House a good hotel. He was a bit critical of what he saw on his visit to Portland, immediately below Louisville: "Here as elsewhere, in these parts," said he, "the road is perfectly alive with pigs of all ages; lying about in every direction, fast asleep; or grunting along in quest of hidden dainties."

After paying tribute to the amusing antics of the pigs, he concluded by saying:

"One young gentleman (a very delicate porker with several straws sticking about his nose, betokening recent investigations in a dunghill), was walking deliberately on, profoundly thinking, when suddenly his brother, who was lying in a miry hole unseen by him, rose up immediately before his startled eyes, ghostly with damp mud—never was a pig's whole mass of blood so turned."

There was more Dickensian nonsense about the muddy pig, but his attention was turned to a magistrate's parlor:

"It looked far more like a Dame school than a police establishment; for this awful institution was nothing but a lazy-good-for-nothing-front parlor, open to the street, wherein two or three figures, (I presume the magistrate and his myrmidons) were basking in the sunshine, the very effigies of languor and repose."

¹⁹ Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America*, London, 1819, pages 234-251; Flint, *op. cit.*, 54-79.

James Porter, the Kentucky Giant who "went bobbing down the steamboat cabin, among men of six feet high and upwards, like a light-house walking among lamp-posts," fascinated the distinguished visitor. In recording his conversation with Porter, the creator of *David Copperfield* becomes quite paternal in his attitude. He felt a friendly attachment for Porter.¹⁰

Following on the heels of her literary countryman, Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley visited Louisville. Where Dickens said he saw nothing of interest, Lady Wortley found a fine city, which, in her opinion, was the best lighted in the United States. She found the people up and at work at four in the morning. Unlike Dickens, Lady Wortley went to some trouble to secure notes on Kentucky history, and some statistics on the State's commerce.¹¹

From Louisville Madame Wortley went to the Mammoth Cave. Her description of this natural wonder is fascinating even today. She spoke especially of the "Fat Man's Misery" and the eyeless fish. So impressed was this English lady with the beauties of the cave that she composed a romantic and gushing poem of seventy-six lines as a dulcet and poetic tribute. This traveler had a keen sense of humor coupled with an eye for human detail. She has left a delightful account of an argument which took place between an Indiana mechanic returning to Kentucky to see a favorite brother and the old homestead, and a pompous windbag over the making of a gentleman. The mechanic maintained honesty, hard labor, and standing in the community made a gentleman, while the windbag declared possession of goods, and a prosperous appearance really constituted gentility. She returned her attention to Louisville for a moment and delivered a brief dissertation on the pigs in the streets:

"I have already said what a very nice town Louisville is—city, I ought to say—for all large towns have that rank here: yet one thing a little detracts from its general appearance, and that is the preponderating population of pigs that in all directions perambulate its handsome streets. I had observed this with surprise, and was amused at a corroborative paragraph in one of their papers here lately, saying that really the pigs are becoming masters of the place; they push the two-legged citizens into the streets, occupying the sidewalks, and taking the wall from them.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, New York (no date), pages 403-407.

¹¹ Emmeline Stuart Wortley, *Travels in the United States During 1848-1850*, New York, 1851, pages 88-94.

So things begin to look serious here, and we are prepared any day for a *pronunciamiento* of the pigs, they carry their snouts so high already, and seem so bristling with importance.

"In crossing the Alleghanies it was quite a curious sight to see armies of these animals driven along—a perfect stream of swine, rejoicing in all the fat of the land, certainly. It is said to be a wonderful spectacle to see them slaughtered, and almost as magically turned into lard and lard-oil, as if the latter article had been ordered for Aladdin's lamp by his first genie gentleman-in-waiting and equerry."²²

Madame Wortley's comments on the piggish streets of Louisville are free from caustic criticism. She saw the pigs, and in her naive way she recorded what she saw. There seems not to be the sting in the Wortleyian pigs that there is in the Dickensian porkers.

From the pigs in the streets Madame Wortley turns abruptly to the babel on board the steamboat in which she left Louisville. There were slaves, children, chattels, cattle, and "domestic Atlases carrying their own little world on their shoulders—farther *west* of course—which is quite the way of the world hereabouts." Families were restless, and youngsters punched, pounded and scratched papas and mammas to pieces. The gentle British lady recorded that this was the roughest company she had encountered in the country.

One poor harassed soul confided in the strange woman. She said she was "worrited pretty considerable." "Wal, them children of ourn," said the bedraggled, pipe-smoking native woman, "are bad children—mighty bad, mighty bad; it wears and worrits a body, I guess, properly: and, my! I feel so skeary-like too, for I've never been aboard one of these steaming boats, nor never seen one afore." Madame Wortley hinted that she supposed everybody in the United States had seen a steam-boat since they were so common on the rivers. "No," said the drawling Kentucky woman, "I hain't; where I live to home, there don't come none on 'em; and they're mighty queer boats, I guess, and I don't like them, and feel proper skeary, too, aboard on 'em."

It is indeed fortunate that there are so many journals because one can be checked against another until some degree of truth and accuracy can be established. The prejudices of individual travelers can be determined, and the grain of solid fact can be easily separated from the chaff of ill-feelings and prejudices.

²² Emmeline Stuart Wortley, *op. cit.*, page 105.

Four factors in Kentucky's development attracted the attention of every traveler who visited the State. These were geography or the country side of the State; the people; trade; and the inn and tavern accommodations.

Smythe saw the land as one of potential plenty. The soil was fertile and highly productive. Kentucky woods produced an abundance of timber, such as walnut, poplar—yellow and white—redbud, hickory, sassafras, wild cherry, oaks of many kinds—such as red oak, Spanish oak, white oak, black oak, scrubby oak, or black jack, chestnut oak, willow oak, and live oak—maple, black gum, sweet gum, sycamore, horn beam, dogwood, pine, chestnut, beech, holly, maple, cedar, and many other kinds peculiar to the country.

Imlay and the Michauxs have amplified this list with more exact descriptions. Andre Michaux, especially, devotes more space to the fauna of Kentucky than he does to political intrigue and the people. At every stop Andre records a complete list of trees and plants which he found. His lists of plants are given in Latin, while those of his son are in the anglicized form and according to local names.

From Shelbyville to Frankfort the settled part of the country underwent a change. There was a higher degree of improvement, and Kentucky civilization was forcing its roots deeper into the soil. Nearly every traveler who advanced from the west eastward toward the Blue Grass remarked on the rapid change which took place after crossing the Kentucky River.

Timothy Flint has left a good account of his movement eastward from the river palisades at Frankfort. He saw neat villages and prosperous farmsteads, and when he reached Lexington, he was enthusiastic over the fertile appearance of the soil.

Even the disgruntled Faux, whose initial knowledge of western lands was gained largely from sad experiences with land sharks, was favorably impressed with the Blue Grass. Faux came in 1822, when Kentucky was suffering from a panic, and land prices were depressed. After crossing the Licking River at the Blue Licks he found that:

"The land is rich, cultivated, cleared, and well settled or located; and, with the exception of the wooden worm fences, looks much like the best districts of Old England, only that the soil of Kentucky is better." Continuing, he says: "Here are fair green pastures for cattle, and could green hawthorn fences be by

magic thrown around them, while I slept an hour, I should, on awaking, fancy myself in Leicestershire."²²

Although Thomas Ashe was successfully condemned as a prevaricator by a native son, his descriptions of the country are not without merit. He has left at least one provocative note on the question of immigrant enthusiasm. He approached Kentucky from Maysville, and his first impressions of the State were good because of the fertile strip of land which crowns the river bluff, above that place, but after he passed Washington, near Maysville, he became sadly disappointed with what he saw in the poor lands. Ashe said that there was just enough fertile land in the Ohio rim to get the hopes of the immigrant up, but that they were completely demoralized by the knob barrens.

Travelers who left Kentucky over the Wilderness Road, or went south from the Blue Grass over the road to Nashville have left long descriptions of barren stretches. This was true of Francois Michaux, who traveled this way. This French tourist said:

"The barrens, or Kentucky meadows, comprise an extent from sixty to seventy miles in length, by sixty miles in breadth. According to the signification of this word, I conceived I should have had to cross over a naked space, sown here and there with a few plants. I was confirmed in my opinion by that which some of the country people had given me of these meadows before I reached them. They told me that in this season I should perish with heat and thirst, and that I should not find the least shade the whole of the way, as the major part of the Americans who live in the woods have not the least idea that there is any part of the country entirely open, and still less that they could inhabit it. Instead of finding a country as it has been depicted to me, I was agreeably surprised to see a beautiful meadow, where the grass was two and three feet high."²³

Alexander G. Wilson, eight years later, left this same general description, and so have other and later travelers. However, the later accounts describe the rapid process of settlement which was taking place in western Kentucky.

The greatest curiosity of all to the travelers were the people, and here we have a long story, and, perhaps, the heart of the really valuable information which is to be gleaned from hundreds of pages of journals. One of the earliest, and certainly one of the most perverted, descriptions of the Kentuckian was that

²² William Faux, *Memorable Days in America: Being a Journal of a Tour*, London, 1823, page 190.

²³ F. A. Michaux, *op. cit.*, pages 217-218.

which made him out a biological wonder in the form of half-horse-half-alligator. Christian Schultz has left a long description of boasting Kentucky river men whom he saw before Nat'chez who declared they were men, horses, teams, alligators, half-men, half-horses, snapping turtles and had the best horse, best dog, best gun, and handsomest wife in all Kentucky.²⁵ Of course, this was no more of an accurate description of the Kentuckian of this period than the description of two lusty truck drivers would be representative of modern Kentucky society.

Yet the Kentuckians of these early years were vigorous people. They made profound impressions on their visitors. Even Schultz, who had heard the two Kentucky cyclones bantering each other, declared the people of this state to be hospitable. Earlier, travelers had been impressed with the courtesy which travelers were shown. "They are accommodated," said one visitor, "with bread, Indian corn, dried ham, milk and butter, but seldom anything else; at the same time the price of provisions is very moderate in this part of the United States, and all through the western country."²⁶

A traveler was taken in for the night, or invited to stop and eat a meal, but at the same time he was pumped dry of all the news he could supply. "The Kentuckians are so hospitable," said Elias Fordham, "that they will stop you in the road and oblige you to go to their houses, if they have ever seen you in respectable society."²⁷

Charles Fenno Hoffman was riding with a native son who inquired of a slave if her master had any apples, and when she answered in the affirmative, the Kentuckian demanded some, and the two travelers were supplied with a full basket of the choicest fruit. The natives presented a curious spectacle to the foreigner. To him they were gentle at times—sometimes, it is true, they were unforgivably boastful—but many of them went armed with dirks and pistols. They were hot-tempered, and frequently the travelers saw noses that were bitten off, or ears that were cropped, and, in some cases, eyes that were gouged out.

One narrative recites the fact that the Kentuckians considered the rifle as a weapon of honor among themselves, and that they would scorn "to shoot a squirrel, or even a swallow, unless

²⁵ Christian Schultz, *op. cit.*, Volume 2, page 145.

²⁶ For a good description of frontier foods see Ashe, *op. cit.*, pages 189, 241.

²⁷ Elias Pym Fordham, *Personal Narrative of Travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and of a Residence in Illinois Territory, 1817-1818* (Frederick A. Ogg, ed.), Cleveland, 1906, page 215.

with a rifle; in the choice of which they are even more particular than in selecting a wife."¹⁸

In the travelers' accounts, the historian is able, by rejecting certain sour accounts, to reconstruct the growth of refinement among the Kentucky people by each successive crop of travelers into the state. The later travelers began to see that there were several gradations in local society.

The Italian Count Francesco Arese described the scene created by six hundred and forty passengers on a steamboat as a veritable tower of babel consisting of many well-bred people, and considerable off-scouring of "a horrible mixture of Irish, Germans and Kentuckians or something resembling them." The Count was quick to see that he could easily err in his judgment of the people whom he saw in Kentucky. He declared the inhabitants of the West to be the reverse of the medal of those whom he had seen in Virginia:

"Out of love for the truth I must say that as for the people I had introduction to, I found them very nice; but the crowd travelling by steamboat or stage, the individuals encountered in the hotels (and that takes in all classes, for in America and especially in the West everybody travels) were crude."

Timothy Flint saw in the Kentuckians some real virtues. He declared that:

"You will nowhere see fairer and fresher complexions, or fuller and finer forms than you see in young men and women, who are generally exempted from the necessity of labor. The people live easily and plentifully on the 'finest of the wheat.' The circumstances under which they are born, tend to give them perfect development of person and form. It struck me, that the young native Kentuckians were, in general, the largest race that I had seen."¹⁹

Captain Hamilton believed that the Kentuckians could be called "the Irish of America":

"They have all the levity of character, that subjection of the moral to the convivial, that buoyancy of spirit, that jocular ferocity, that ardour, both of attachment and of hatred, which distinguish the natives of the Emerald Isle. The Kentuckians are the only Americans who can understand a joke. There is a kind of native humor about them which is very pleasant; and I must say, that several Kentucky gentlemen were among the most agreeable companions, with whom I had the good fortune to become acquainted during my tour."

¹⁸ *The Spirit of the Times*, April 25, 1846, Volume xvi, page 102; Fordham, *op. cit.*, pages 177-181.

¹⁹ Flint, *op. cit.*, page 61.

The Kentuckians made one mistake in dealing with visitors to the State. In their anxiety to show the stranger every courtesy, and to create the most favorable impression upon him, many of them overdid things. Time and again their State and its people had suffered at the hands of the observers who wrote accounts of their travels. Sometimes these chronicles were quite caustic when they described their visit to Kentucky. One visitor was interested by the anxious way in which the natives asked him if he did not admire the country, and if he did not think it unusual the respect the people had for law and order. This attitude was antagonizing to visitors, and some of them were often influenced adversely by it in their writings.¹⁰

Timothy Flint gives the historian a really sound estimate of the people. He appreciated the instability of the State's population because of the large annual turnover caused by the inhabitants moving on with the advancing frontier. Churches, for instance, had never reached the point where they could stabilize their organization because their membership remained in a state of flux, owing to a constant moving out and a constant moving in of members. In Lexington, which at an early date was denominated "the Athens of the West" by proud natives, Flint found an interesting people, who talked intelligently about matters of the day, or about learning and the classics. There was, however, some unpleasantness because "smatterers, who mixed in these circles, without reading and without reflection, caught from conversation a few loose ideas of the systems and discussions of the day." These smatterers dealt with finality upon such subjects as chemistry, geology and religion.¹¹ The churches in Kentucky were growing. At Lexington they were large, and the audiences were attentive, and the congregations were demanding dignified preaching from their ministers.

Most sympathetic, and most understanding of the fundamental background of the Kentucky character and people, is this brief resume of Robert Baird in his *View of the Valley of the Mississippi*:

"The Kentucky character is a very peculiar one. It is a compound of high-mindedness, self-confidence bordering on boastfulness, enthusiastic ardour, courage, frankness, sincerity, and unbounded hospitality. Honor is everything. Their admiration of their noble country, and all its productions, is ex-

¹⁰ Flint, *op. cit.*, pages 62-65; F. A. Michaux, *op. cit.*, pages 243-250.

¹¹ Flint, *op. cit.*, page 68.

cessive. No man is more fascinating than a well-bred, and noble-minded virtuous Kentuckian."¹¹

Sometimes accounts appear in the travel literature which sound pretty "tall," and, evidently, is the result of "stuffing" on the part of practical joking natives. One traveler, in all sincerity, says that he saw a jaybird which "had arrived at the art of speaking better than any other bird I perceived among them." He even hinted that he saw a woodpecker which was rapidly becoming a fluent speaker.¹² There seems to be no really reliable account of the number of turkeys which inhabited the woods. One visitor says that natives told him that in the early days there were flocks of wild turkeys which darkened the sun. Another claimed that some of the flocks had as many as five and six thousand birds in them.

If a traveler ever once let it be known that he was intentionally seeking materials for a sensational account, the natives were quick to satisfy his wants. Such a case is the clever ruse which the blades of Louisville put off on the snobbish British sea captain Marryat, C. B. Captain Marryat had heard tall tales of the ferocious Kentuckians, and that they were the supreme gougers and gamblers. These things he wished to witness, and a party was arranged in his behalf and a holocaust resulted. Marryat's description is as follows:

"While I was in Louisville I had an opportunity of witnessing the coolness of American gambling, and of justly estimating their characteristic recklessness of temper. At the same time the utter barbarity of some of their habits was fully displayed. I was invited by a friend to look in upon the proceedings of a party engaged in a game of cards much played in the South and West called 'Poker.' To my utter astonishment I found them stripped almost to the skin, like a gang of savages. Nor was this all. On each corner of the table they had deposited their various weapons—dirks, pistols and bowie-knives—ready, as it appeared, for a bloody fight, should any dispute or mere difference arise. My friend informed me that affrays were very common in these *social parties*, as he fancifully termed them, and that he fully expected while we were present to see the brains of some one of the party scattered by a pistol, or a hole or two drilled through the body with a bowie-knife.

"In less than an hour after this party met, one of them (a young man about twenty-two years old), lost thirty thousand dollars. Carelessly observing that his last dollar was gone, he

¹¹ Robert Baird, *View of the Valley of the Mississippi, or the Immigrants' and Travelers' Guide to the West*, Philadelphia, 1834, page 199.

¹² Ashe, *op. cit.*, page 176.

got up from the table and coolly asked his companions to go to the bar and take a drink with him! I afterward learned the history of this hopeful youth from the gentleman who was with me on the occasion I have described. A year before he had come into possession of an estate worth one hundred thousand dollars. Two beautiful and accomplished sisters were dependent on him, but, scorning their affectionate entreaties, he plunged into vice, and in twelve months was left pennyless! Did the wretch hang himself? Oh, no!—the very next morning after the scene I have mentioned, I saw him on the levee, with a book in his hand, superintending the unlading of a steam boat! He had already obtained a place, and betaken himself to the subordinate occupation of a steam boat clerk.”

Said a native son:

“It is a pity to spoil this capital story of the gallant Captain—but the truth must be told. The young man whose history is so graphically described was for years the clerk of the steamer, and never possessed over one hundred dollars of his own during his lifetime.”“

¹⁴ *The Spirit of the Times*, quoting the *New Orleans Picayune*, April 18, 1846, Volume xvi, page 88.