

Travel Accounts to Kentucky

Kentucky is a fascinating land. It is filled with some of nature's most glorious creations. Hills, mountains, rushing streams flowing into broad rivers, magnificent forests, and rich grasslands, are all part of the Kentucky landscape. The first humans to see this rich, and inviting land called it a "Land of great meadows" and the "Land of Tomorrow."

While the American Indians gave a poetical, as well as descriptive name for the bountiful lands they observed, it would be left up to Europeans to broadcast their descriptions of Kentucky to the world. When the first settlers came across the mountains, or down the Ohio River, they felt the same thrill that their Indian predecessors did upon viewing the natural wonders of Kentucky. Within a few years of settlement, pioneers had related what they had seen of "Kaintuck" to anyone who would listen.

As word spread to the eastern states of the region's bounty, individuals began to write about the new land west of the mountains. Word soon crossed the Atlantic about the beauty of Kentucky, and European travelers began to make their way to what some people called another Eden. Throughout the late eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth century, travel accounts about Kentucky had a wide circulation. Most of these accounts came from overall descriptions of European travelers who toured the United States. Kentucky ranked high on the list of places to see in America.

The descriptions of the commonwealth left by European travelers, consists of a plethora of subjects. The land, the people, the towns, agriculture, slavery, travel conditions, the violent nature of some of the state's inhabitants, all made their way into print. Often, the commonwealth did not seem as Eden-like as early explorers had made it out to be. In fact, the state received a number of negative reviews. Nevertheless, most European visitors wrote favorably of Kentucky and its inhabitants.

Getting around in Kentucky during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries could be an adventure in itself. In 1795, Thomas Cooper wrote that no part of Kentucky could be deemed "perfectly safe" from Indian attacks, except the area around Lexington. Both the Pittsburgh and Wilderness Roads are "Liable to perpetual molestations by savages." Cooper goes on to assure his readers that not long before he wrote his account of the state, that Indians had attacked Frankfort, "the present seat of Kentucky government."

Cooper quickly became aware of the litigious nature of some Kentuckians when he wrote that the purchase of Kentucky land "brings a lawsuit with every plot of unoccupied land." Most travel accounts agree, however, that Kentucky land consisted of some of the finest soil in the world. Most visitors to the state commented favorably about the richness of the soil, and the magnificent stands of timber.

In 1796, William Winterbotham published an account of his visit to Kentucky. He said that the state is well timbered, and few soils yielded better tobacco. One British traveler said the land around Lexington reminded him of England, but he had a problem with the name of the grass grown in this section of Kentucky, why is bluegrass called blue?

Other travelers commented on the wide variety of agriculture in the state. Wheat fields, corn, tobacco, hemp, fine livestock, and bountiful orchards, all received favorable notice from visitors to the commonwealth.

Changes came swiftly to parts of the state. In 1824, Arthur Singleton described Frankfort as “city-like, and thriving.” He also commented that much wealth and gentility could be found there. Singleton was thoroughly impressed that inside the Frankfort State House, he found a vanity covered with “little ruddy, chubby cherubs.”

Travel to Kentucky could be a challenge to those with even the strongest constitutions. In 1822, Adlard Welby wrote that travel to the state had “some risk, little comfort,” and feelings of insecurity, in short, a “total be-blue-devilment.” River travel posed the easiest route to the commonwealth, but it, too, was fraught with dangers. J.C. Murray wrote that the Ohio River was a “noble and majestic stream.” However riverboat travel on the Ohio could be described as anything but noble or majestic. He related that a “rough looking” Kentucky fellow had told him of a steamboat recently exploding. The man nonchalantly told Murray, “It was only damn lucky it was only a passel of these Dutch” (German immigrants who perished).

Some of Kentucky’s roadways consisted of no more than packed or “natural soil.” Road tended to follow streambeds and according to Timothy Flint, “crossed the same creek four or five times.” Travel by coach could be very uncomfortable. Passengers packed the coach to such an extent that J.S. Buckingham wrote in 1842 that one of the coaches had sixteen people on the inside, and eighteen people on the outside. Buckingham told his readers that his coach was “drawn by two horses over imperfect roads” and did not exceed six miles per hour. To travel 24 miles, he reported, cost \$1.25, and took four hours. He estimated that a ten-hour journey might cover 54 miles and cost \$4.00. The coach could easily overturn on poor roads. Flint reported that one night his coach overturned on the road between Lexington and Limestone (Maysville). No one suffered injuries, but the passengers would go no further in the dark.

One of the modes of travel to Kentucky was by way of flatboat. Some of these boats weighed as much as 15 to 500 tons. Constructed of oak planks 12 to 40 feet in length, they could carry large amounts of goods, as well as settlers. In 1792, Gilbert Imlay described these flatboats as being “built as cheaply as possible.”

The people of Kentucky impressed those who met them. In 1842, James Silk Buckingham from Great Britain declared, “Men of Kentucky are taller and stouter than men of the Atlantic states.” He noted that the women of Louisville were, “tall, and of good figure.” But, “Not as handsome as those in New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore.” Buckingham went on to say that the majority of the people in Louisville did not seem to be religious, and had a greater interest in the “pursuit of gain.” Timothy Flint of Boston recorded that Kentuckians had a “ruddy, healthy complexion.” They also possessed a “genteel and gay appearance.”

While Kentuckians could be charming, many of them could be violent. Nineteenth century Kentucky remained a “rough and tumble” society. Buckingham noted how some Kentuckians had their own view of the law. He wrote, that “Kentucky instinct” is above all other laws. He cautioned his readers never to go out after ten in the evening in Louisville. The ruffians who occupied the city’s streets could be too dangerous. If more proof was needed to convince the skeptical, he advised them to simply look at the bullet holes in the walls of the famous Galt House Hotel.

Accounts of street fights were not uncommon in European travel books. In 1842, Buckingham related that two Louisville printers engaged in a bloody quarrel. One combatant cut open the head of his opponent with a mallet. Buckingham also recorded that three or four fights occurred on the streets of Louisville within the space of a few days. One fight broke out over the proper fit of a coat.

Another observer wrote, “The inhabitants [of Kentucky] show demonstrations of civilization, but at peculiar times, Sundays and market days, give loose to their dispositions, and exhibit many traits that should exclusively belong to untutored savages.” Indeed, the numbers of fights resulting in the deaths of many of the participants prompted one Kentucky judge to publicly state that killing a person was excusable when committed by an accident or misfortune; in the heat of passion; upon sudden attack or combat; without any undue advantages be taken; without any dangerous weapons being used, and not in a cruel or unusual manner.

Travelers to the commonwealth related how Kentuckians seemed obsessed with violence and weapons. Timothy Flint told his readers that young Kentucky males purchased a dirk (a dagger) in some of the local jewelry stores. The dirk’s blade had a small pointed blade four or five inches long. The weapon was worn within the vest or hidden in the owners boot. Flint noted that when an assailant attacked the sheriff of Fayette County, the sheriff drew his dirk and wounded the attacker.

Quarrels could occur without much provocation. Adlard Welby reported that to object to a man’s company would cause a “rough and tumble.” The loss of an eye or an ear was all too common a result of these encounters. One man who had been badly mauled in a fight evoked pity from a bystander. The concerned individual asked the wounded man if he had “come off badly” in his struggle. “Have I,” he said as he drew out of his pocket the eye of his opponent that he kept as a trophy of his recent fight.

Politics was one of the most dangerous of social interactions. Men wore their political feelings on their sleeves. A chance remark might offend someone and cause a fight. A British observer recorded an incident in Covington where a Whig sat reading the newspaper. He remarked that a member of his party had been murdered in Baltimore. A Democrat upon hearing the news declared, that two or three hundred Whigs should have been killed. When the Whig rebuked the Democrat, the latter attacked him with a knife. Whereupon, the Whig broke a chair over the Democrat’s head, “and bruised him so that his life was despaired of.”

Religion (or the lack thereof) in Kentucky often impressed travelers to the state. Buckingham attended a Methodist meeting that intrigued him. He reported that those in attendance “sighed and groaned” at certain portions of the minister’s sermon. “This according to Buckingham signified whether they approved of the address. “The Methodists,” he observed made up the most extensive religious body in the commonwealth in 1842. To support this claim, he recorded that the Methodists had 100 preachers and 40,000 members. The Baptists had 300 preachers, with 30,000 adherents. The Presbyterians numbered 80,000, with 80 ministers, and the Catholics had between 7,000 and 8,000 members, along with some 60 priests. The Episcopal Church had between 1,500 and 2,000 members with 10 ministers. Timothy Flint of Boston witnessed what he considered a novelty, the immersion of seven Baptists in a pool of water.

Immersion in baptism fascinated many of the British visitors to Kentucky. One eyewitness to an immersion stated, that the baptismal candidate and the minister go down into the water fully clothed. Another observer witnessed a baptism in a river where, “women, as well as the men are immersed in a “blushing and unhallowed mode.” The women’s garments “opened like an umbrella” when the candidate entered the water.

According to some travelers, Kentuckians had a peculiar view of religion. One author stated that in Kentucky “churches are never finished, and their windows [are] struck out by boys during the day.” At night, “the structures are frequented by rogues and prostitutes.”

J.E. Alexander told of attending a Kentucky camp meeting where he observed “psalms singing, energetic prayers, and wild declamatory discourses to which the people howled and cried.” He also reported that at night, on the outskirts of the meeting, some people engaged in “drinking and debauchery.” Alexander judged, “The idle and licentious of both sexes flocked” to these meetings. Another account tells of about 2,000 “well dressed, attentive people attending a camp meeting in Lexington to hear a sermon on temperance”.

Arthur Singleton wrote that the sermons of some Kentucky preachers “made you laugh when you should have cried.” Sir Charles Lyell, the eminent British geologist, told of listening completely aghast to a sermon by a Kentucky Episcopal minister who said that the Reformation should not have occurred.

Religion aside, most travelers to Kentucky found much with which to be impressed. The towns of the commonwealth found favor with many European visitors. Most travelers to the state made Lexington and Louisville two of their destinations. The majority of travelers said Lexington was well situated, and pleasant. In 1821, Adlard Welby described the town having “wide streets, handsome houses, and foot walks of brick.” Arthur Singleton said, “Lexington is very city-like and thriving. There is much wealth and gentility there.” As early as 1817, one traveler said that the community’s inhabitants “are polished and refined.” Timothy Flint reported that the city “is still considered the fashion capital” of Kentucky.

C.A. Murray said Lexington presented a “neat and pleasant town” and boasts of “trees and gardens.” He went on to say that the town could be “called the garden spot of Kentucky. Fortescue Cuming viewed the community as “progressing with unexampled rapidity.” He also observed that the town had a “good police [force] and nightly watch.”

Louisville also received ample notice. Welby called the city a “handsome town.” Charles Dickens described the Galt House Hotel as good as any hotel in Paris. The houses were mostly built of brick, and the commercial section of the city “thrived” with activity.

Due to its proximity to the Ohio River, some travelers thought the land too damp, and therefore unhealthy. Fevers raged in the town, wrote one observer. “Most common, a bilious, remitting fever.” The air stagnated around the numerous ponds, and low marshy ground. These “foul airs” spread “pestilence and death.”

By 1819, one writer reported that Louisville still used wood as a heating source, but coal was coming into use. The city as a whole was growing rapidly, and with the Ohio River trade seemed destined to become a major economic and cultural force. Most travelers remarked on the wide streets, and impressive buildings of the city.

One sight that disturbed the majority of travelers to Kentucky was that of African slaves. Most travelers condemned the institution of slavery as barbaric. In 1818, Henry Fearon wrote, “Kentucky is a likely place to settle, even though it is a slave state.” When one visitor to Kentucky tried to rebuke the slave system, he had to endure the outrage of the institution’s defenders.

Whipping slaves horrified many people who toured Kentucky. Fearon noted that a group of men who had witnessed the whipping of a slave vigorously defended the custom. “I guess he (the slave) deserved what he got. It would have been of small account if he had been beat to death.” Corporal punishment was justified. One Kentuckian remarked, “They (the slaves) always deserved it.”

In 1833, Thomas Hamilton, after observing Kentucky slavery, wrote, “In God’s name let this unhallowed traffic be put a stop to.” The British novelist Anthony Trollope noted, “Every Englishman looks forward to the abolition of slavery at some future day. I feel as sure of it as I do the final judgment.” He went on to say, “Kentucky has over a quarter a million slaves. Those slaves must be emancipated or removed.”

Travelers had recorded much about Kentucky during the first sixty years of its existence. They recorded their observations of the land and its people. Through their not always unbiased eyes, we have a picture of what life was like during the first decades of Kentucky statehood. This is just a small portion, a mere look at the travel accounts written on the commonwealth. Due to their desire to share what they had seen in Kentucky, the travelers to this state have left us a treasure of information on everyday life in our state during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.