A Stranger in a Strange Land

Charles Joseph Latrobe and a Visit to Fort Snelling, 1833

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Charles Joseph Latrobe, a self-described wanderer and English travel writer, visited Fort Snelling in the fall of 1833 with his charge, a young Swiss nobleman. The fortification, he wrote, “has much more pretension both to regularity of design and picturesque situation than any of its fellows along the frontier.” Located on a high bluff overlooking the confluence of the St. Peters (later, Minnesota) and Mississippi Rivers, an area called Bdote by Dakota residents, the fort was constructed during the early 1820s and renamed Fort Snelling in honor of its builder and first commanding officer, Josiah Snelling. Through a diary, sketches, letters to sponsors and relatives, and a published account, Latrobe related his experiences in the north country.¹

These documents and many objects collected on this trip are held by archives and museums in the United States, Switzerland, and Australia; when reunited, they provide a multidimensional view of privileged Europeans on an adventure on the Upper Mississippi. Latrobe’s experiences also add to our understanding of Fort Snelling in the 1830s, demonstrate the beginnings of tourism in the region, and provide clues to the harm that these early visitors brought to the Dakota and other Native people.

Although the fort was located at the center of a lively and ancient civilization, its military occupants did not see it so. Earlier that year, Major John Bliss had requested the command of Fort Snelling, noting that it was “destitute of a field officer” and “not a desirable post on account of its remote location.” Bliss assumed command in May 1833 and served in that capacity for three years. Nathan S. Jarvis, the fort’s newly appointed doctor, expressed similar views: “As to news, little can occur in this distant region, secluded from the world. We pass our time something in a way of exiles, banished from the pleasures and I may add the follies of civilized life.”²

The major’s young son, John H. Bliss, did not share these misgivings; looking back years later, he remembered “dear old Fort Snelling” as a “fortified oasis of civilization in a lovely desert of barbarism.” Trained as an engineer and a lawyer, he became the successful co-owner of a major industrial firm, the Erie Iron Works Company. In 1894, nearing retirement, he sent his reminiscences of Fort Snelling to the Minnesota Historical Society for publication. In a colorful essay, he described myriad features of life at the fort, including military discipline and order, relationships with the two major Native American tribes (the Sioux or Dakota and the Chippewa or Ojibwe), the weather, his pet squirrels, early traders and fort personnel, and a host of visitors. These included the fur trader Henry Sibley; Gideon and Samuel Pond, who came to establish a mission near the Dakota village at Lake Calhoun (Bde Maka Ska); explorer and early geologist George Featherstonhaugh; and George Catlin, the artist whom Bliss described as the “born delineator of Indians.” Bliss also remembered another party of visitors:
I think it was during our first summer at the Fort that it was visited by Count Portales [Pourtales], a young Swiss some twenty years of age, accompanied by an Englishman named Latrobe, and an American named Ewing [McCuen] or something like it. They came in a fine birch-bark canoe, with a crew of Canadian voyageurs. My father invited them to dinner, and they proved to be uncommonly bright and pleasant men. The American was very ready with his pencil, and gave my mother a good sketch of the Fort.

The person “ready with his pencil” was not the American McCuen; it was Charles Joseph Latrobe, a “rambler” equipped with pen, pencil, and paper.3

These travelers were among the earliest tourists to visit the Upper Midwest. (Eight years after their visit, Catlin would promote the grandeur of the Upper Mississippi River as a new “fashionable tour”; the phrase was commonly used to describe travel to Niagara Falls and other destinations in the eastern states.) Charles Latrobe was charged with the responsibility of Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtales, a Swiss youth recently turned 21. Charles McCuen was a Philadelphian visiting his brother-in-law, a soldier stationed at Fort Crawford.4

The central figure in the trio was Charles Latrobe, a 31-year-old multitalented Englishman who traveled with Albert Pourtales for more than two years through the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Albert’s parents, who were among the wealthy nobility of the canton of Neuchâtel, financed the adventures hoping the experience abroad would foster their son’s maturation. This was in keeping with the European tradition of the Grand Tour, by which young men of prominent families were prepared for leadership roles through travel. The family knew Latrobe,
a writer who used Neuchâtel as his home base for his extensive travel through the Alps; these wanderings were told in two books featuring the geography, geology, and history of the region, together with his own search for solitude and self-awareness.

While he described the younger man as “a cheerful and accomplished travelling companion” in his two-volume account of their adventures, The Rambler in North America, 1832–1833, Latrobe confided in a letter to Countess Louise Pourtales that her son “always feel[s] tempted to indulge in unhealthy excitement of body and mind. So I tell him continually, that the disease is in his own breast and that he carries it about with him Time alone will bring the cure.” This comment hints at a darker aspect of the young count’s interests, a source of concern and friction between the travelers.5

Latrobe and Pourtales left the port of Le Havre in April 1832. On board the ship the Harve, they became friends with the famed American writer Washington Irving, who was returning home after 17 years abroad. For much of the next six months, the three traveled together. In the fall they toured New England and Niagara Falls before embarking on a steamer bound for Detroit; their fellow passenger Henry Ellsworth, a newly appointed commissioner of Indian tribes, was going to Arkansas Territory to report on intertribal relationships in the new land west of the Mississippi. This area was set aside by the Indian Removal Act of 1830 for the people of several Native nations, forced from their homelands in the eastern United States, to relocate in what would become the state of Oklahoma.

The three companions readily accepted Ellsworth’s invitation to join him. For four weeks in October and November of 1832, the Ellsworth party traveled through much of today’s Missouri, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The result was one of Irving’s best-known books, A Tour on the Prairies (1834), while Latrobe told his version of that wilderness adventure in The Rambler (1835). The books reflected their mutual admiration: Latrobe dedicated The Rambler to Irving, while Irving described Latrobe as “a citizen of the world” who has “rambled over many countries.” Further, he was “a man of a thousand occupations: a botanist, a geologist, a hunter of beetles and butterflies, a musical amateur, a sketcher of no mean pretensions, in short, a complete virtuoso.”6

In contrast to his titled ward, Latrobe was the son of a prominent Moravian bishop and the nephew of America’s first architect, Benjamin Latrobe, famed for his work on the US Capitol, the White House, and the nation’s first Catholic cathedral, the Baltimore Basilica. Charles and Albert used the Latrobe home in Baltimore as a base for their extensive adventures, which took them to all states but Alabama; the territories that would become Arkansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Wisconsin; and the provinces of Ontario and Quebec in Canada.

Latrobe’s published account of this trip was met with positive reviews. Edgar Allan Poe, editor of the Southern Literary Messenger, called The Rambler “the best book on America yet published.” John Stuart Mill called Latrobe a man of “an amiable and highly sociable disposition . . . deriving the keenest enjoyment from the sublime natural objects which he witnessed, and of which he has furnished some of the most attractive descriptions we ever read.” And the London Quarterly Review wrote that “the book of the season as far as America is concerned, is unquestionably that of Mr. Latrobe”: unlike other observers, who use harsh, contemptuous, or arrogant language, Latrobe, a vigorous writer offered this sage advice: . . . namely that a stranger in a strange land sees with strange and particular eyes, and that the difficulty of forming a correct judgment, even with close observation, and without any disposition to distort facts, is far greater than can be supposed.

These reviewers, like Latrobe himself, were unable to perceive Latrobe’s depictions of Native people as contemptuous.7 Politics, personalities, and peculiarities mattered little to Latrobe; he wrote that his attention was paid to “geological phenomena, the courses of rivers, and Indian tribes.” Latrobe traveled with the scientific predilection to produce useful knowledge that was common among European colonizers. He wanted to observe the wilderness, an experience made possible in what he knew as the New World, with its vast spaces and far-distant frontiers.8
Latrobe sketched Fort Snelling from the Minnesota River Valley and the valley from Fort Snelling.
Latrobe took a day trip to Minnehaha Falls (then known as Little Falls) and to St. Anthony Falls. The fort's sawmill is visible at left.
Latrobe’s narrative, presented as letters to his younger brother, follows a loose chronology with many detours. His descriptions of geological phenomena included the romantic scenery of the White Mountains, the spectacle of Niagara Falls, the broad prairies of Illinois, the tangled dwarf oak forests of the Cross Timbers, and the picturesque beauty of the Upper Mississippi Valley. The Mississippi River system, crucial to the expansion of the United States as it took more Native land, receives considerable attention.

Latrobe and Pourtales traveled by foot, horseback, canoe, stagecoach, steamboat, and railroad. The latter two were essential components of the transportation revolution of the early nineteenth century. Latrobe was awed by American progress in meeting the challenge of distance: “The arrangements for public convenience in travelling by steam-boat and rail-road . . . demand the admiration of every stranger,” he wrote. Solving the problem of distance was essential to American expansion and to the Industrial Revolution that accompanied and followed it. In turn, this transportation revolution heightened enthusiasm for travel, producing what one observer called “an inundation of English books of travel” and foreshadowing early modern mass tourism.

In 1829, an American travel writer told his readers that the traveler’s most important question was “what knowledge have we obtained which may be applied to some useful purpose.” Latrobe agreed with this precept as he sought educational opportunities featuring both places and peoples in his travels. He discusses “Indian tribes” in several passages in The Rambler: Latrobe and Pourtales traveled to effigy mounds in various places, they gained familiarity with the government policy of removal on the Oklahoma tour, they visited the imprisoned Sauk leader Black Hawk two times, and they spent a week in the “mushroom town” of Chicago, observing treaty negotiations with the Potawatomi while attending powwows and interacting with commissioners and military officers from Fort Dearborn in “one of the roughest dirtiest holes in the Creation.” Several weeks later, their late fall sojourn on the Mississippi meant camping out each night beside the river when not being hosted by the military at Fort Armstrong, Fort Crawford, and Fort Snelling.

These experiences and personal contacts shaped Latrobe’s perceptions of Native Americans. Strongly racist in tone, his views were also consistent with those of most Americans and other European visitors in this age of Andrew Jackson. “The Indian,” as described by Latrobe, was a “degenerate race,” “both savage and sensual”; he was a slave “to vices introduced by the whites,” who worsened his degradation “tenfold.” Alcohol, supplied by “bad men”—namely, the Indian agents and Indian traders central to the system—played a key role in the interactions between the races, “for though the land is virtually bought, and the tribe to a certain degree well remunerated, it is still expatriation.” The “war of extermination” brought on by “the superior power and intelligence of the whites” was “to be lamented.” These condescending, ethnocentric views were tempered by a more measured understanding of the complex nature of the Indian-white relations evident in his description of the Black Hawk War, the last engagement east of the Mississippi River. Latrobe wrote it was “a moral impossibility, while on the scene of these very events, to get two honest men to concur in the same account of any given event in this time of excitement. . . . A true and unvarnished one, of the war in question, would be a chronicle of shame.”

For Pourtales, the experience of living in Indian country was the highlight of his young life. At St. Louis, he began dressing in native garb and wearing moccasins he fashioned. At the trading post of Colonel Pierre Chouteau Jr. he witnessed polygamous interracial marriages. He confessed to his mother “of the constant interest in me aroused by their [Indian] customs.” Since the early years of trade, fur traders had become relatives of prominent leaders by marrying their daughters; kinship relationships then brought mutual obligations to the enterprise of trade. Latrobe kept the countess aware of her son’s personal impulses, conveying concerns shared by others; according to his biographer, Pourtales was “expressly forbidden” by his parents “to bring back a wife from the trip.”

This admonition reflects an aspect of the European Grand Tour: young noblemen were expected to gain sexual experience, especially in Italy, and they sometimes fell in love. Men traveling abroad continued the practice of what is now known as sex tourism. Commissioner Ellsworth confided to his wife that some of Pourtales’s
instances of misconduct were so unseemly that he was unwilling to “pollute” his letters with them, while telling her that Pourtales’s parents wished to send their child abroad in the company of his former tutor in order “to sow his wild oats in a foreign country.” Ellsworth underscored this observation:

his conduct cannot be justified, & he will later in life, look back upon his western follies (to say the least) with shame—I have ventured through a friend, to mention the deep mortification which may be inflicted upon his future domestic felicity . . . by the appearance of red progeny, who will rise up to call him father!13

To his parents, Albert wrote, “Give me the Osages and the wilderness. . . . I know of no more agreeable way for a young man to spend his time than to lead a solitary and adventurous life that I have had these last two months, and which I am impatient to resume next year.” In 1833, after traveling from Florida to New England, Latrobe and Pourtales headed west “for a second buffalo hunt,” as Latrobe told Countess Pourtales. But plans changed with news of strife between the Osage and the Cherokee. Latrobe told her not to worry: “We will run our noses into no trap—and if at our arrival at St. Louis we find that all is not quiet and likely to remain so, we will vary our plans, and visit a more peaceable tribe.” The tribe selected was the Dakota, and the destination, Fort Snelling.14

Since steamboat traffic had been halted with the coming of winter, they traveled by stagecoach and mud wagon from St. Louis to Prairie du Chien by way of Peoria and Galena. Despite the sleet falling on the roofs of the barracks at Fort Crawford and ice forming in shallow bayous, the party decided to continue north, hoping for “the delicious season, known by the name of the Indian Summer.” They hired a large birch bark canoe owned and built by a French Canadian named Demaret, “who plied the stern-paddle.” Seven other voyageurs were the paddlers; for the first two days, the wife and child of one of the voyageurs traveled with them on her way to visit her tribe and family. Thus, a large, thin-skinned canoe provided transportation for 12 adults and one child together with tents, blankets, bear skins, provisions, powder, shot, and trade goods including “beads, sword-blades, and tobacco.”15

They left on October 22, and Latrobe later wrote:

I had a most delightful voyage of ten days to Fort Snelling near the Falls of St. Anthony sleeping at night in our tent in the woods & charmed with the romantic scenery of this upper portion of the Mississippi which far transcends anything we have seen in the U. States. A week spent at the Fort made us quite fall in love with its picturesque situation & appearance. And with the Sioux [sic] Indians in its vicinity. Albert was half crazy & did nothing but powwow & smoke kinnikkinick the whole day long. I chatted with the officers & half breeds administered cathartic pills to the Indians sketched more than I have felt moved to do at any time since my arrival in the states—in short each enjoyed himself in his own way.16

Latrobe and Pourtales were transitional figures in the development of mass or modern tourism, which had its beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century. Travel on scheduled public conveyances was possible in parts of the country, but the excursion to Fort Snelling was decidedly different. The behavior of the travelers differed as well. Latrobe’s approach was that of the scholar pursuing active, engaged learning experiences. His books were not guidebooks but shared narratives of his wanderings in the Alps, North America, and Mexico. By contrast, Pourtales was a hedonist who sought pleasure and self-edification of a different sort. Crucial elements for him were material goods, entertainment, and licentiousness.17

Thirteen and a half pages in The Rambler describe the week spent at Bdote. The first five tell of a visit to a Dakota village downstream from the fort, “just above a range of beautiful white sandstone acclivities.” This was Kaposia, located near what is now Dayton’s Bluff. While Pourtales was engaged in trading “beads, sword-blades, and tobacco” for “Indian pipes and ornaments,” Latrobe was led to a tent where he administered pills to two sick children: for this, he told his readers, he acquired the Indian name “the Great Medicine.” Thus, one traveler engaged in acquiring souvenirs, while the other provided useful service to those in need.18

The remaining narrative describes the fort’s strategic location and the highlights of the surrounding area. In his diaries Latrobe noted their daily life as guests, including
Latrobe used his rough sketches to produce finished drawings, as with these images of the road to the fort. The stables are to the left of the road.
Latrobe traveled out, meeting with local inhabitants in their villages, where “they beat the drum and sing for us” and we “swap and buy some trifles.”

meals with the Bliss family and conversations with the officers of the three companies stationed there. Latrobe engaged in rich discussions of such matters as military strategy and tactics of the late Black Hawk War, petrified forests beyond the Yellowstone River, the origins of the mounds, and the challenge of dealing with a trader in the Red River Valley who plied the Dakota with rum and whiskey during the winter months. He observed that at Fort Snelling, in contrast to Prairie du Chien, “no whiskey [was] allowed in this neighborhood.” He described Mrs. Bliss as “polished, well-educated, and very estimable” and presented her with a pencil sketch of the fort. Latrobe reported that the fort seemed better designed “rather to keep the garrison in, than the enemy out.” While the walls of the fort were adapted for cannons, “the only piece of ordnance that I detected out of the magazine, was an old churn thrust gallantly through one of the embrasures.”

Weather permitting, Latrobe traveled extensively. He visited the Little Fall (Minnehaha Falls), some 50 feet high, and ascended Pilot Knob with its extensive views and the “tomb of a Sioux chief.” Accompanied by John Bliss on his white pony, Tommy, Latrobe walked six miles over the prairie to see the Falls of St. Anthony, which he described as having “all the monotony of a dam in bad repair,” but still on the Mississippi and therefore “grandiose.” They returned by way of Lake Calhoun and two other lakes, most likely Powderhorn and Cedar.

Under Major Bliss, the fort itself was off-limits to Indigenous people. Latrobe traveled out, meeting with local inhabitants in their villages, where “they beat the drum and sing for us” and we “swap and buy some trifles.” He drew a distinction between the Ojibwe and the Dakota, declaring some of the Dakota “were among the handsomest Indians we had seen.” He contrasted the tents of the Dakota with the “fine, large and roomy huts of the Chippewas.” In one session the old Dakota chief Little Crow (grandfather of the 1862 leader) told of his admiration for the French and English and his dislike for the Americans, his way of expressing displeasure with the changing economy brought on by the combination of tightening control from the monopoly of the American Fur Company and the shifting of the fur trade to the south up the Missouri River.

Challenging also was the emergence of a settlement, which Latrobe called a “squalid Switzerland.” This was to the north of the fort at Coldwater Spring, another sacred site for the Dakota, and the home of the “first actual settlers” in the present-day Twin Cities. This early community was comprised of a combination of persons of mixed heritage and emigrants from the Selkirk colony near Lake Winnipeg in Canada. The residents provided services and a variety of goods to the personnel at the fort. Prominent residents were Abraham and Mary Ann Perret (later Perry), who farmed, raised cattle, and performed midwife services for the women at the fort. They hailed from the village of La Sagne in the Swiss canton of Neuchâtel, a few miles distant from Pources’s home. Latrobe described Coldwater Spring as a “dirty hole.” Nonetheless, he visited twice, as he found himself entertained by the Perrets’ tales of their homeland.

Two sites sacred to the Dakota were too far distant to visit given the lateness of the year. The first was the standing stone at Castle Rock, an “isolated man of sandstone . . . 80 feet high,” considered by the Dakota as “great medicine.” The second was the Pipestone quarry, several days distant up the St. Peter’s River, the primary source for ceremonial pieces widely distributed across the mid-continent for centuries. Both Pources and Latrobe acquired pipes of the red stone in trade; Latrobe received his from one of Little Crow’s granddaughters. The visitors experienced this interaction as barter, but it fit neatly into the protocols of the fur trade and of diplomacy: an exchange of gifts preceded the actual trading. And with the decline in the trade and increasing numbers of visitors, these exchanges would become more common.

With most of the men away on the fall hunt, the Dakota nonetheless presented the customary entertainments for their visitors. They organized a lacrosse demonstration: “ball-play . . . the game precisely like our hockey—except that the ball is thrown with a stick.” In contrast to the games that might involve “several hundred on either side,” nine “maids and wives” played one session, and another featured younger men. A presentation followed, as the Dakota “danced for us a number of their dances.” The obligatory “distribution of presents” ended the evening: bacon and meal to the women, powder and shot to the men.

Through letters, diaries, and visual images, Latrobe memorialized his travel. He wrote regularly, numbering his letters to Countess Pources and keeping his host family in Baltimore current. Through his diaries, he recorded the
activities of each day spent in North America while also using his sketches as travel notes. Five finished drawings of the travel to Fort Snelling are in the Beinecke Library at Yale. In celebration of the high quality of his artistic endeavors, the State Library of Victoria published *Charles Joseph La Trobe: Landscapes and Sketches*, a truly magnificent work containing all 437 images in the collections held in Australian repositories. Included are 80 from North America, 47 of which are of the Upper Mississippi, all contained in a folio with a cover labeled “Rough Sketches.” These sketches include scenes of the three forts above St. Louis: Armstrong, Crawford, and Snelling; major scenic bluffs: Trempealeau, Cap a la Fille (Maiden Rock), and La Grange (Barn Bluff); Lake Pepin; and natural sites near Bdote: the Little Fall (Minnehaha), the Falls of St. Anthony, and Fountain Cave.25

Pourtales, strongly encouraged by his mentor, wrote letters home, but only those from the Oklahoma experience have been located. However, his passion for Native American memorabilia was realized in the large collection of materials now housed in the Bern Historical Museum in Bern, Switzerland. Latrobe told readers of *The Rambler* about this collecting zeal:

Pourtales was, as usual, in his element among them [the Dakota and Ojibwe], and almost lived in the wigwams— smoking and eating with the inmates; powwowing and grunting with the old chiefs; bartering with the young ones; winning the regard of the young s——s. by admiration and beads, and of the older ones by tobacco.

He told the countess that her son “had contrived to get together by purchase, barter, or gift a small collection of Indian bagatelles, which gives him great pleasure.” On Latrobe’s request, Pourtales’s monthly allowance of $50 was supplemented with an additional $55 as an “extra allowance to A for Indian curiosities.” When the materials were catalogued in the 1970s, the researcher seemed unaware of the travel up the Mississippi. As a result, 29 of the 48 objects in the Pourtales collection were identified as “tribe unknown”; another three are described as Sioux and two as Ojibwe, and all are dated 1832.24

Latrobe’s characterization of Pourtales as almost living with the Native people reflects his disapproval of this evinced indolence, while the older man’s private diary records details omitted from his book. Bagatelles were only one indicator of Albert’s enthusiasm. In effect, his “playing Indian” had a hidden motive: a desire to win the sexual favors of young women. Latrobe wrote of Pourtales’s night trip with one of the canoe paddlers, Guillaume, who was “the greatest rogue among us, and the one who set the roguery going and sustained it.” The night in question involved “the subsequent debauch” and “profanity unequalled of G[illaume],” terms used by Latrobe to convey lewdness and vulgarity. The next night on their way south, Latrobe wrote in his diary, “A[lbert] personally makes me feel on quitting a place as though it were an escape.”27

**On their departure,** the travelers made a brief stop at another bucket list attraction: the House of Stone, about four miles downstream from the fort. While Latrobe’s sketch is titled Carver’s Cave, descriptions from other travelers note that the opening to that cave was collapsed at that time; its interior also had a lake. The wide mouth, stark white walls, and small stream in the interior best describe Fountain Cave.28

The boatmen were able to make the return journey to Prairie du Chien in four days. On the second night out, November 9, above Lake Pepin, Latrobe wrote in his diary of Albert’s fit of sentimentality about the Indian: his pathos and philanthropy. between 8 and 9 yester night drunk as a sow between 8 and 9 tonight maudlin. sitting in a flannel nightshirt before the fire with his knees above his chin singing an Indian lament so it goes a child of injustice his tale full of banality both thin-skinned and short-lived however I still have hopes of him. How much I regret that I have not regularly journalized the phases of his character. I do not think his Indian excitement a healthy one.

Latrobe wrote the countess that he was glad to leave “Indian Country” because “the feverish excitement under which he [her son] labours [while there] is far from being healthy—and not likely to add to his moral character.”29

On the night of November 12, as they camped near the Bad Axe River, the heavens were filled with a meteor shower of epic proportions. This display was the Leonid Meteor, an annual event rarely as spectacular as that of 1833. Latrobe describes the shower in detail before confessing that the boatman watched their “beloved camp-kettle . . . with a philosophical insensibility to everything else,” ignoring the falling stars—and failing to awaken the three travelers. This anecdote is an admirable example of truth telling by the writer.30

The next night the Latrobe party reached Fort Crawford at Prairie du Chien, where they faced a new challenge: how to proceed south. Overland travel was not available, and the prospect of staying the winter not inviting. Demaret and his voyageurs were ready to continue the
• Dakota knife (steel with wood handle; 29 cm) and case (rawhide, beads, and bird quills; 26 cm). The word “FACE” is engraved on the blade.

• Dakota dolls (tanned skin stuffed with buffalo hair, beads; male, 13 cm; female, 12.5 cm).

• Feather box (wood and pigments; length 42.2 cm, width 8.2 cm, depth 3.5 cm). The box is carved from a single piece of wood, and it has a sliding lid; its interior has red paint markings.

• Mirror (painted wood with glass mirror; width 9 cm, length 69 cm). The catalogers at the Bern Historical Museum refer to this as a dance mirror.

• Dakota roach headdress (dyed deer and porcupine hair, twisted vegetable fiber thread; 17 cm).
journey, but only at outrageous charges for their services. By a stroke of good fortune, a detachment of young recruits who were traveling from New York to Jefferson Barracks, south of St. Louis, arrived November 16 on barges, and the travelers eagerly accepted an invitation to join them.31

Latrobe called himself a rambler, a wanderer, a vagabonder, and a traveler, but never a tourist. Reflecting on his role as chaperone to Pourtales, a young man with premodern tourist inclinations who was destined to become a high-ranking Prussian diplomat, Latrobe recorded an incident that occurred when they stopped at Cape Girardeau, “a pretty village” near the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers: “Albert’s way of inscribing the names of various captivators, Sophie, Syls, Winona, etc. on a potato barrel with a burnt stick—not to be forgotten.” Presumably, these inscriptions recorded the young count’s sexual interactions, hinted at in the many troubling messages Latrobe conveyed to the parents.32

Once at New Orleans, Latrobe ended his published narrative with another observation—full of condescension over the results of colonization but demonstrating his empathy—as he commented on another instance of a sale of Indigenous goods. For several days near the town’s lively new market, he observed a Choctaw family, a mother with several children, attempting to sell “coarse basket-work”:

Every thing about all their little contrivances spoke to my memory of the Forest and Prairie, of the pleasant lives we had led there, of friends we had communed with, but should probably never see again; and more than all, of the desolate fortunes of their race—now strangers in their own land—and craving food from the hands of the alien!33

Latrobe and Pourtales continued their travels in Mexico, then returned to Europe. Latrobe took a position with the British Colonial Office. He traveled to the West Indies and wrote three meticulous reports on the state of

Latrobe sketched Fountain Cave (which he misidentified). It is the earliest known depiction by a non-Native artist of a cave in what is now Minnesota.
Notes


3. John H. Bliss, “Reminiscences of Fort Snelling,” Minnesota Historical Society Collections 6 (1894): 339, 347, 353. Bliss was born at Fort Howard at Green Bay in 1823 and died in Hawaii in 1907. Major Bliss was commander of Fort Armstrong at Rock Island during the Black Hawk War in 1832, his appointment to Fort Snelling came in early 1833, and the boy’s return east with George Featherstonhaugh occurred in the fall of 1835. While Bliss indicated that Latrobe’s visit was in the summer of 1832, the pair came in the late fall of 1833. George Catlin visited in 1833.


Charles Latrobe endeavored to understand that he was a stranger to the Indigenous peoples he encountered. He and his traveling companion left a remarkable set of written records and objects, spread across three continents, that chronicle their experiences. As an author, Latrobe was writing for a popular audience, and his phrasings and stories betray the entrenched prejudice of his time. In spite of his sophistication and perception, his stories, sketches, and daily notes now tell us more about Latrobe and Pourtales than they do about Fort Snelling and the Dakota.  


14. Spaulding, On the Western Tour, 81–82; Latrobe to Countess Pourtales, Dec. 3, 1832; Latrobe to Countess Pourtales, Montreal, July 28, 1833; Latrobe to Mrs. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, Detroit, Aug. 8, 1833, box 2, folder 69, Latrobe collection, MCHC. Steamboat traffic to Fort Snelling in the early 1830s was extremely limited. Jarvis sent two letters in June 1833, one indicating that “generally but 2 steamboats arrive here in a year and . . . consequently excite considerable stir in this retir’d and isolated spot”: June 1, 1833, Jarvis Papers; the second letter, dated June 18, tells of the “extraordinary” arrival of a third boat, “There very rarely being more than 2.” In the memoir Mary and I: Forty Years with the Sioux (Chicago: W. G. Holmes, 1880), 10, missionary Stephen Riggs reported hearing in 1837 that fewer than half a dozen steamboats reached Fort Snelling each season.

15. Latrobe, Rambler, 2:265–70, 274–76, 297. In the 1830s French Canadians were the majority population of Prairie du Chien, an important depot for the fur trade on the Upper Mississippi. Many were descendants of unions between French traders and Dakota or Ojibwe women. Latrobe in jocular fashion applied the term “Craupards” to the voyageurs. The term was a derogatory name used by the English to refer to the French.

16. Latrobe to Mrs. Benjamin Henry Latrobe, St. Louis, Nov. 30, 1833, box 2, folder 71, Latrobe collection, MCHC.
17. For a discussion of this transition, see Will B. Mackintosh, “Ticketed Through: The Commodification of Travel in the Nineteenth Century,” Journal of the Early Republic 32, no. 1 (2012): 63. The contrast between an active traveler and a passive tourist was seen again in Mexico when Latrobe and Charles McCuen spent six hours underground learning about silver mining “while Poubertals, eschewing fatigue, luxuriated in his grass hammock, smoked five dozen cigarettes, and sipped pulque”: Latrobe, The Rambler in Mexico (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1836), 73.

18. Latrobe, Rambler, 2:288–92; Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 4, 1833. It is not clear just who gave him this name; as he seemed to have no translation.

19. Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 2, 4, 6, 1833; Latrobe, Rambler, 2:295. Latrobe’s observation on alcohol at the fort was erroneous, as the area was awash with it; see Hampton Smith, Confluence: A History of Fort Snelling (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2021), 100. Marcus Hansen, in his history of Old Fort Snelling, calls the ordnance comment facetious, and while he quotes Latrobe extensively in his text, he ignores Latrobe in his discussion of early travelers: Marcus Hansen, Old Fort Snelling, 1819–1858 (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1918), 76. Like Hansen, Theodore Bliegen ignored Latrobe in his essay “The ‘Fashionable Tour’ on the Upper Mississippi,” Minnesota History 20 (Dec. 1939): 377–96. Jarvis reported that 24 large guns were discharged on the Fourth of July, 1833: Jarvis to Mary (Jarvis), July 4, 1833, Jarvis Papers. This raises the question of why Latrobe reported that the churn was the only piece of ordnance that he detected. Were the large guns under repair, in storage, or just not visible to him?

20. Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 4, 6, 1833.

21. Smith, Confluence, 50–51, 100; Latrobe, Rambler, 2:297–98; Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 4, 1833.

22. Smith, Confluence, 58; Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 3, 4, 1833; Edward Duffield Neill, Neill’s History of Minnesota, From Its Earliest Explorations under the French and British Governments, to the Present Time (St. Paul: MNHS, 1858), 390. When the residents of Coldwater Spring were forced to move in the late 1830s, the Perret family crossed the river and became one of the leading families of early St. Paul.


25. Dianne Reilly does not mention the Upper Mississippi trip in her introductory essay for Charles Joseph La Trobe: Landscapes and Sketches (Yarra Glen, Victoria: Tarcoola Press, 1999). Further, she extends the chapter in her biography of Latrobe with three sites in Canada, ignoring once again the trip north to Fort Snelling: Dianne Reilly, La Trobe: The Making of a Governor (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2006), 85. Reilly provides no discussion of the large number of Upper Mississippi sketches in either account. None of these images have been published in the United States.

26. Latrobe, Rambler, 2:297; Latrobe to Countess Poubertals, New Orleans, Jan. 1, 1834. The American Fur Company provided banking services for Latrobe and Poubertals. On September 3, 1833, William B. Astor authorized Pierre Chouteau Jr. to provide $1,000 for their travel account: Chouteau-Papin Collection, Missouri History Museum Archives, St. Louis.

27. “Playing Indian” is used by Philip Deloria to illustrate the ways non-Natives, primarily whites, attempt to copy Indian traditions and practices, especially in more recent times: Philip J. Deloria, Playing Indian (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998). Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 8, 1833. On sex tourism, see John Urry and Jonas Larsen, The Tourist Gaze 3.0 (Los Angeles: Sage, 2011), 67–69. Some military officers and government officials at Fort Snelling had, like fur traders, married Dakota women “in the custom of the country.” But by the 1830s, soldiers were abusing the custom by exchanging gifts for sexual favors from women in nearby villages: see Wingert, North Country; 145–50; Smith, Confluence, 40, 91–92. As Smith notes, “it is not clear how the women understood this situation.”


29. Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 9, 1833; Latrobe to Countess Poubertals, Nov. 30, 1833.


31. Among the officers named in Latrobe’s diary is an Eastman. Foul weather at Fort Armstrong at Rock Island delayed the dragons “in spite of L. Eastman’s determination to Proceed—wind very cold—hard work sketching”: Latrobe, Diary, Nov. 21, 1833; Eastman is also mentioned on November 16 and December 1, 1833. A graduate of West Point, Lieutenant Seth Eastman served at Fort Snelling from 1830 to 1831 and became an assistant teacher of drawing at West Point in January 1833. A new department head was appointed that fall, and it seems clear that Eastman was given the opportunity to go west with the young recruits during the transition. A prolific artist and able administrator at Fort Snelling during the 1840s, Eastman achieved fame as a master painter of Native Americans and the premier watercolorist of the Upper Mississippi landscape. On Eastman, see John Francis McDermott, Seth Eastman: Pictorial Historian of the Indian (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), and John Francis McDermott, Seth Eastman’s Mississippi: A Lost Portfolio (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

32. Latrobe, Diary, Dec. 10, 1833.

33. Latrobe, Rambler, 2:334.

34. Dianne Reilly and Helen Armstrong, “The Latrobe/La Trobe Family Name,” La Trobeana 12, no. 3 (Nov. 2013): 31–32.
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