
SARATOGA! FIDDLESTICKS!

Mineral Springs and Picturesque Scenery

In New York City, Andrew Goodrich was known as a capable publisher. Early in his career, he had found moderate success publishing novels and operating a circulating library from his office on the corner of Broadway and Cedar Street. By the late 1830s, Goodrich had done well enough that he moved his firm to the tonier Astor House in midtown Manhattan. Part of his success lay in his new emphasis on travel guides, cheap little books whose literary claims were weak but whose profitability was solid.¹

Among the many guides Goodrich published was *The North American Tourist* that came out in 1839. At first glance, it looked like Goodrich's typical guidebook fare. Wrapped in dull brown leather, the pocket-sized book provided the usual bland recitation of standard tourist information: transportation routes and timetables, detailed maps and small engravings, with descriptions of major cities and scenic attractions. The difference, though, lay in its scope. *The North American Tourist* was the first comprehensive guidebook of the United States, a guide that covered not just the Northeast but the entire eastern seaboard including the South, a region that heretofore had been ignored by mainstream travel guide writers.²

The North American Tourist, however, did not lavish attention on the South. Goodrich set aside a paltry eighty-five pages out of four hundred for the region and though he had numerous prints of northern sites, he did not include a single engraving of a southern attraction. On one level, Goodrich was being reasonable. He had focused on the North because, unlike the South, it had a growing tourist market and had all the requirements necessary for large-scale tourism, most critically a growing urban population, a decent transportation network, and a developed tourist infrastructure. What does appear odd on Goodrich's part, though, was that he didn't try to build on the South's potential as a new market by peddling

the distinctiveness of the region. Travel guides typically relied on distinctiveness as a major way to market areas, but Goodrich did not sell the South as “The South.” Instead, he reinforced common characteristics by ignoring any regional dissimilarity between the North and the South. This was despite the fact that by the late 1830s most Americans accepted that there were striking differences between the states above and below the Mason-Dixon Line. Differences could be found in the culture, the economy, politics, literature, and other public arenas where both southerners and northerners increasingly, and often in uncomplimentary fashion, emphasized sectional characteristics. But *The North American Tourist* was silent.³

Instead, *The North American Tourist* and almost all antebellum guidebooks because they were trying to lure potential tourists offered readers a different public perception of the South by touting the region as strictly American—a curious blend of European sensibilities and patriotic patois. The difference between the regions lay in emphasis. Northern writers offered the South as an alternative to the crowded mineral spas and mountain resorts of the Northeast, particularly upstate New York. For these authors as long as southern sites were “as good as” those in the North, they were satisfied. Southerners, though, possessed a different notion of the American identity of the South. Balking at the idea of having attractions as good as those in the North, southerners claimed that their sites were better. In promotional articles and guides written by southerners, it was the South not the North that had the best American scenery because Southern writers wanted to stake their claim to national identity through their own fine landscape and resorts. Thus, at least in tourism, the idea that the South was, in the words of W. J. Cash, another land “sharply differentiated from the rest of the American nation” was not a conviction embraced by southerners in the antebellum era. Differentiated from the North, yes, but un-American, never.⁴

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The American images claimed by southerners began in the North, specifically in travel guides to upstate New York. Although tourists could be found both in the North and the South after the War of 1812, New York has the best claim to being the first developed tourist region in the United States because it had the necessary requirements for modern tourism. First, New York had natural attractions, such as Niagara Falls, and fine

resorts, such as Saratoga Springs. New York also had the best transportation network in the antebellum era. By the 1830s, this travel infrastructure included turnpikes, regular steamers up the Hudson, established railroad routes, and the 350-mile-long Erie Canal. Travel was not only faster than in the South but offered a level of comfort the South could not match. Finally, tourism was greatly aided by the large population of potential tourists living in New York City who were in comfortable reach of worthy attractions.⁵

By the 1820s and 1830s, a good many of these New Yorkers became regular travelers to the upstate attractions, typically following what critics and admirers alike deemed “The Fashionable Tour.” The tour began in New York City where travelers would board a steamer up the Hudson to Albany. After a day or two exploring the state capital, tourists generally headed west along the Erie Canal stopping at Saratoga Springs for an extended week or two to take the waters. And then if they desired, and most did, the tourists could get back on a barge and head even farther west along the canal until reaching Niagara Falls where they were sure to be astounded by the sublimity of the enormous waterfall. After Niagara, they would either head back to New York City or take a side trip to Quebec before winding their way home.⁶

Not surprisingly, as more tourists steamed up the Hudson River, summered at Saratoga Springs, and swooned at the power that was Niagara a guidebook industry developed. Actually, it is difficult to determine which came first, the tourists or the guidebooks. The first guide was published a good three years before the Erie Canal was completed. *The Fashionable Tour: A Trip to the Springs, Niagara, Quebeck, and Boston, in the Summer of 1821*, despite its name, was not a travel diary but a pocket-sized guidebook for tourists. Published in 1822 by Gideon Minor Davison, a resident of Saratoga, the little book offered all the information an antebellum tourist would want. There were maps, timetables, lodging information, and descriptions of tourist attractions. In tone, Davison’s guide was informative and didactic. It set about establishing the proper behavior for the supposedly refined upper-middle class tourist who wanted to partake of an activity that was physically invigorating, morally instructive, and eminently fashionable. Davison’s book proved a huge success, eventually going through some twelve editions, including two in French.⁷

Davison’s success spurred other authors, and more guides soon followed. Theodore Dwight’s *The Northern Traveller* (1825), for example,

offered variations on “the fashionable tour” as did James Kirke Paulding’s *The New Mirror for Travellers*. Connected to this development was the guidebook industry spawned by Niagara Falls where many books instructed a tourist exactly where to stand to get the best effect. To meet with an expanding market, entrepreneurs moved on to New England, trying to make it the next fashionable stop for tourists. In 1831 Davison revised his first guidebook to include New England and the Mid-Atlantic States, though the latter region not from a personal view but from published reports. Theodore Dwight also wandered a bit south by adding the coal mines of Pennsylvania as the latest attraction on his northern tour.⁸

Although the coal mines might have enticed some adventurous souls, the major attractions were Saratoga Springs and Niagara Falls. In travel writers’ hands and in the reading public’s mind, Saratoga Springs quickly emerged as the model of the posh American resort. Roughly forty miles west of Albany, Saratoga’s water had long been valued for its specific mix of minerals and its supposedly curative powers. As early as 1810, water from Saratoga was bottled and sold commercially across the northeast. As a resort, Saratoga was planned around two mineral springs and several large hotels, the most popular being Congress Hall and the United States Hotel. These hotels and other public spaces of Saratoga reflected the tastes of its elite visitors. A founding father of Saratoga, Gideon Putnam built Congress Hall to impress, including massive colonnades, piazzas, cupolas, and verandas surrounded by cultivated gardens. Congress Spring was covered by a large Greek temple with ten massive Doric columns, a copy of the famous Roman springs in Bath, England. The main attraction of Saratoga, however, was not the water or the beautiful hotels but the fashionable society. Saratoga had garnered a well-deserved reputation for attracting prominent visitors. Names such as Daniel Webster, Martin Van Buren, Washington Irving, Andrew Jackson, and Franklin Pierce appeared on hotel registers. Weekly dress balls where champagne flowed and elegant ladies and well-dressed gentlemen strutted, socialized, and waltzed away the night in the massive ballrooms of Saratoga’s hotels further solidified its reputation as a center of high society.⁹

By 1840, Saratoga was attracting thousands of visitors because it offered what people wanted. On the one hand, it had the mineral water that antebellum Americans believed had curative powers, a position endorsed by physicians who recommended drinking or bathing in sulfur-saturated water as the cure for a host of diseases. On the other hand, Saratoga offered a

fashionable crowd, which translated into an opportunity to hobnob with the elite, and at the same time parade one's own elevated status, which became elevated often for the simple fact that one could afford a spa vacation. Not everyone passed muster as one commentator noted dryly how "a good portion of the pleasure of traveling consists in passing for a person of consequence." Nonetheless, spring attendance offered a coveted badge of gentility for the rising middle classes.¹⁰

It was with health, gentility, and Saratoga on their minds that promotional writers approached the southern mineral springs in the 1830s and 1840s. To this point, the southern states had attracted visitors but lacked a true tourist market. Not that the region lacked attractions. There were cities such as Richmond, Charleston, and New Orleans, and natural wonders like Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, Hot Springs in Arkansas, and Natural Bridge in Virginia, and there were certainly mineral springs numbering in the hundreds. But the quite literal roadblock to tourism was transportation. Southern roads were crude and undeveloped in the 1820s, far below the standards set in New York or even New England. As a result, visitors who frequented southern resorts were overwhelmingly southerners, most living less than a hundred fifty miles away. Before infrastructure improvements, Americans and visiting Europeans did travel to see the South and often wrote about their travels, but their journeys were arduous as most roads outside cities were primitive rutted affairs often hacked out from Indian trails, like the 600-mile-long Natchez Trace. Indeed, complaints were the hallmark of travelers visiting the South. George Washington, who went to take the waters in western Virginia, complained about his trip to Warm Springs particularly the last twenty-five miles which in his opinion were "almost impassible for carriages, not so much from mountainous county (but this in fact is very rugged) as from trees that have fallen across the road and rendered the way intolerable." Years later English visitor Frances Trollope echoed the president's sentiments as she described her ride in a stage through the Virginia mountains as rough, "being tossed around like a few potatoes in a wheel-barrow," though she found the scenery exhilarating, stupendous, and bewitching.¹¹

The trip to the Virginia highlands had improved greatly by mid-century. In 1839, the National Road finally connected the headwaters of the Potomac to the Ohio River at Vandalia, Illinois, to help ease passage. The road was 20-foot wide covered with 18 inches of crushed stone that tapered off to a foot, providing drainage to keep mud at bay. The National

Road proved an important gateway to western settlement but also funneled tourists to strategic spots near mineral springs in present-day West Virginia. Besides road improvements, the increased use of steamboats in the 1840s provided another transportation option for the well-to-do leisure traveler. While regular ferries up and down the Hudson helped make upstate New York a tourist destination, smaller steamship routes in the South also helped bring visitors to prominent spots in the Shenandoah Valley. By the 1850s, steamships were on every major waterway on the eastern seaboard, a fact that helped make the southern resorts an attractive option to visitors from outside the region.

Canals and railroads were the other critical transportation development for southern tourism. Particularly important for the development of southern springs was the James River and Kanawha Canal. Chartered in 1832, the canal was a 147-mile thoroughfare that connected Richmond and Lynchburg by water in 1840 and sixteen years later added another 50 miles of canal to arrive at Buchanan, Virginia, almost two hundred miles west of Richmond. This second leg of the canal would be instrumental in bringing tourists to the mountain resorts of Virginia making most springs a fairly short stagecoach ride from the canal. Railroads would also spur tourist movement. Major lines, like the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, drastically shortened the distance in the upper South, and shorter railroad spurs eased the trip to places such as White Sulphur Springs and made the stagecoach ride from the train to the resort only two miles.¹²

Ease of transportation, however, did not a tourist market make. A critical ingredient was people; people who had the time, money, and motivation to travel for leisure. In the antebellum South, it is difficult to determine exactly how many people traveled for leisure or pinpoint the range of their wealth. Reasonable estimates are that at least 6,000 people a year were visiting the Virginia Springs by the mid-1830s and that these visitors were the elite of society, comprised mainly of the planter class. By the 1840s, though, transportation had improved just enough to make the trip attractive to elite northerners.¹³

The attraction for many of these northerners and indeed southerners appeared to be in the fact that by mid-century the northern resorts were crowded. Guidebooks had done their job well, and the complaint was that too many upstarts had descended on the once exclusive terrain of Saratoga. "Saratoga has lately been losing class," complained English visitor Alexander Mackay. "For a time the 'select' had it all to themselves," he

lamented, “but by-and-by ‘everybody’ began to resort to it, and on ‘everybody’ making his appearance the ‘select’ began to drop off, and what was once very genteel is now running the risk of becoming exceedingly vulgar.” *The Democratic Review* stated that Saratoga’s “glory has departed” after being inundated with “crowds that ruin, not those which make a watering place.” In a promoter’s hands the South became the place to enjoy a more exclusive society away from the perceived riff-raff and vulgarity of Saratoga, a marketing ploy that gained resorts, particularly in Virginia, a national rather than just local prominence.¹⁴

National writers focused their attention on the roughly seventy resorts known as the Virginia Springs located along a seventy-five mile stretch of the Shenandoah Valley in western Virginia. Bordered on the west by the Allegheny Mountains and to the east by the Blue Ridge Range, the Virginia Springs area offered dozens of resorts in which to relax while taking the water. The most popular was the White Sulphur Springs on the Greenbrier River, reputed to have the best accommodations and the most elegant surroundings in the region and dubbed the “Queen of the Virginia Springs.” Other well-known springs included the two oldest, Warm Springs and Hot Springs, and three others with relatively nice accommodations, the Sweet, the Red Sulphur, and the Grey Sulphur springs. The other significant but not as well known group of springs was in western North Carolina located within a thirty-mile radius of Asheville, the most popular of which was Warm Springs, located on the French Broad about halfway between Asheville and Chattanooga.¹⁵

Whether dealing with Virginia or North Carolina, in northern writers’ hands the trick was to make a spa appear at least as good as Saratoga. Writers accomplished this with a relatively simple formula: Emphasize the curative power of the waters, stress the elegant accommodations, build up the fashionable spa society of the South, and totally ignore slavery. Reality in the form of enslaved African Americans was a major thorn in the side of northern promotional writers when the goal was make to these resorts into national not regional attractions.¹⁶

In this spirit, guidebooks enticed tourists and potential patients with the medicinal qualities of the southern waters. Most offered a detailed analysis of their mineral content. In *The Illustrated Handbook* the water at Hot Springs in Virginia, according to author and New York mapmaker John Calvin Smith, was a therapeutic mix of “nitrogen and carbonic acid, carbonate of lime, sulphate of soda, sulphate of magnesium, muriate of