

## Fordham's Travels 1817

*Personal narrative of travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky ;  
and of a residence in the Illinois Territory : 1817-1818*

Elias Pym Fordham

### EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE years immediately following the close of the second war with Great Britain witnessed a remarkable increase in the population of the Mississippi Valley, particularly of the old Northwest Territory and the remoter regions of Missouri and Arkansas. Aside from the high birth-rate uniformly characteristic of American frontier communities, this increase was due to an unprecedented influx of settlers from two sources : the seaboard states and Europe, chiefly Great Britain and Germany.

Prior to about 1815 emigration from the East to the West had been large in the aggregate, but very unsteady. The westward movement had been in the nature of successive waves separated by intervals of comparative inactivity. Three important epochs of migration since the establishment of national independence can be distinguished : ( 1 ) the years of uncertainty and distress between the end of the Revolution and the adoption of the Constitution ; (2) the period including the " hard times" of 1800 and culminating in the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 ; and (3) the era of commercial depression which began with the embargo of 1807 and continued until relieved by the succeeding war. During each of these periods of unsettlement, thousands of people in the older states abandoned conditions which they found disadvantageous, or positively onerous, and yielded to the allurements of the far-famed West. As time went on, the numbers increased and the movement tended steadily to become more constant and less dependent upon prosperity or the lack of it on the seaboard.

The outbreak of war in 1812, with the accompanying Indian uprisings in the West, checked the flow of homeseekers temporarily ; but by the winter of 1814 the exodus from the East along the highways of New York and Pennsylvania and down the Ohio had come to be on such a scale as to call forth astonished comment in all sections of the country. By 1816 Ohio, which the census of 1810 showed to contain a population of 230,000, was estimated to be the home of 400,000 whites. In these six years the population of Indiana increased from 24,000 to 70,000, enabling this territory in 1816 to become a member of the federal union. From 406,000 to more than 500,000 was Kentucky's growth in the same period. And Illinois was brought from 13,000 or 14,000 almost to the attainment of statehood. The frontier—technically defined as the line of at least two settlers to the square mile, though more properly to be regarded as a belt or zone than as a line—was pushed back rapidly and given long finger-like protrusions up the larger water-courses, especially the Wabash, the Kaskaskia, the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Arkansas, and the Red.

In the Eastern states, where there was a strong disposition to lament the draining off of the sturdiest elements of the population, it was expected that the end of the war and the restoration of commercial prosperity (together with the rise of new and profitable industries) would reduce emigration across the Alleghenies to something like its earlier volume. But this anticipation was not realized. With each succeeding year after the Peace of Ghent the number of emigrants rose to a higher figure, and as a matter of fact the decade from 1815 to 1825 became the period during which the central Mississippi Valley attained its highest per cent of

increase in population in the century. Land-hunger, dislike of overcrowding, discontent with economic conditions, love of adventure and novelty—these were the great forces which impelled men to forsake New England, New York, and Virginia for the ruder but roomier prairies and river-valleys of the West. The final suppression of the Indians, by William Henry Harrison in the Northwest and by Jackson in the South, relieved many prospective emigrants of the fears which had hitherto been an insuperable obstacle ; and the development of steam navigation on the western lakes and rivers, which began with the launching of the “ New Orleans” on the Ohio in 1811, provided means of travel and trade distinctively stimulative to migration and settlement.

The peopling of the West, however, was not left entirely to be accomplished by the migrations of native Americans. The same decade which was marked by so considerable a westward movement from the seaboard states was likewise notable for the unprecedented immigration of Europeans, part of whom settled in the East and offset in a measure the depopulation caused by the westward exodus, but a very large proportion of whom pressed on across the mountains in quest of homes in the fertile and undeveloped interior. Prior to 1820 no records of immigration were kept by the United States Government, and hence we have nothing better than unofficial estimates from which to judge the extent of the settlement of Europeans in America during the six important years following the Peace of Ghent. Since the majority of immigrants in this part of the century came from Great Britain, the hostilities of 1811-1814 very naturally caused a marked cessation in the movement. But about 1817 the tide resumed with greater force than ever, and in that year the total number of immigrants arriving was estimated at over 20,000. The number the following year was probably about the same. Congress saw in these figures a necessity for legislation to regulate the transportation of immigrants and to prevent the overcrowding of ships on which they made the voyage to the United States ; and a law was enacted, March 2, 1819, containing suitable provisions in this direction and prescribing that an official count should begin to be kept the following year. The first records obtained in consequence of this legislation showed how overwhelmingly our immigrants from the United Kingdom outnumbered those from other European countries. While from September, 1819, to September, 1820, the number of Germans coming to the United States was but 948, of Frenchmen but 371, and of Spaniards but 139, that of British and Irish was 6,000.

The close of the Napoleonic wars left Great Britain in a condition, politically and economically, exceedingly favorable to heavy emigration. The nation had been engaged in a titanic conflict which had lasted with little intermission for more than twenty-two years and which had left the Government staggering under a war debt of £831,000,000. During this long period the movement for larger popular liberty, which had grown to considerable proportions during the years in which the seeds of revolution were ripening in France, had been held in abeyance ; much had been lost in this time and nothing gained by the cause of liberalism. The Tory ministry, absorbed wholly in the conflict with the ambitious Corsican, had shown itself quite indifferent to domestic well-being and in the hour of victory its proud and complacent attitude betokened the period of political reaction through which England was destined in the next decade to pass. The establishment of a lasting peace cleared the way for a revival of domestic problems, and a great mass of discontented people who had been patriotic enough to withhold their criticisms while the nation was in danger, now became more insistent than ever that numerous and far-reaching reforms in governmental and industrial conditions be speedily undertaken.

Part of the evils complained of were political. Owing to excessive property requirements for the exercise of the franchise and the lack of adjustment of representation to the distribution of population, Parliament was very far from constituting a true national assembly

and its legislation was felt to be that of a class for a class, regardless of the interests of the masses of the people. The multiplying of sinecure offices, created and maintained at heavy public expense for the benefit of do-nothing aristocrats, was regarded as another crying political abuse. Even more critical were the evils of an economic character. England was yet in the throes of the Industrial Revolution, and thousands of men were being crowded out of employment, temporarily at least, by the introduction of machinery and the establishment of the factory system. Then the return of peace reduced the foreign demand for many kinds of manufactured goods, resulting in a yet further over-supply of labor. The Com Law of 1815, enacted for the express purpose of keeping up the price of food-stuffs, in the interest of the aristocratic landlord class, bore intolerably on the poverty-stricken tenants, and indeed upon the entire laboring class of the realm. The condition of the poor, in both city and country, was worse, relatively if not absolutely, in 1815 than it had been thirty years before. Wages which fell below the cost of bare subsistence coupled with rising rents and famine prices for bread could but stir up the spirit of insurrection ; for economic distress will frequently provoke men to action when political disabilities call forth only harmless complaint.

The result was a period of incessant agitation for reform—for the liberalizing of the Government so that laws might be made according to the desires of the majority of the people, for the immediate repeal of obnoxious class legislation like the Corn Law, and for the cutting off of aristocratic sinecures and every other excrescence which made the burdens of the ordinary people harder to be borne. Led by William Cobbett, editor of the *Weekly Political Register*, Major John Cartwright, and others, the liberal element (organized into the Radical Party in 1819) entered upon a campaign which soon stirred the whole population and caused the Government to take stern measures to prevent the growth of the disaffection. Riots and popular demonstrations of every character became common and on several occasions—notably the gathering at Spa Fields, London, in 1816, and the Manchester Massacre (or “battle of Peterloo”) in 1819—the assemblies of the people to protest and organize against the existing state of things were forcibly broken up.

Success was destined to reward the agitators, but not until after many years and in many cases in ways quite different from those they had mapped out. In the meantime, during the period from about 1815 to 1820, while the movement was yet young and far from promising, many men became discouraged or impatient and sought the relief in emigration which they could see little reason to hope for if they remained in their old homes. “A nation,” declared one of these, “with half its population supported by alms, or poor-rates, and one fourth of its income derived from taxes, many of which are dried up in their sources, or speedily becoming so, must teem with emigrants from one end to the other : and, for such as myself, who have had ‘nothing to do with the laws but to obey them,’ it is quite reasonable and just to secure a timely retreat from the approaching crisis—either of anarchy or despotism.” About 1817-18 the desire to emigrate spread over the entire country and affected all classes of people except the privileged aristocrats. The land to which men looked for a new home, one which would be free from the oppressions of an aristocratic government and the distress occasioned by its economic policies, was quite naturally the United States. In the first place its population was made up predominantly of English-speaking people, bound to English people everywhere by numerous ties of sentiment and interest. In the next place it had at its disposal a superabundance of the choicest of land, which it was ready to bestow at inconsiderable cost. Even in the Eastern states land could be had at reasonable rates, and beyond the Alleghenies, especially in Indiana, Illinois, and to the westward, it need only be entered according to legal process and paid for within four years at the rate of two dollars an acre. Finally, the rapidly expanding manufactures of the United States, created largely during the war period, called for thousands of skilled laborers, so that English mechanics and artisans could expect to find profitable employment without being compelled to resort to the

unaccustomed occupation of agriculture.

As a consequence of discouraging conditions at home and liberal advertising of the opportunities offered in America, emigration became easily the most discussed subject of the times, aside from the transcendent question of reform. That the actual migration in the years after 1815 was large is abundantly attested, not only by fragmentary evidences in contemporary American records, but also by the files of all the important English newspapers and magazines of the period. On the one hand, accounts of popular meetings in the interest of emigration to America are abundant, and on the other innumerable editorials and articles bewail the departure of the tillers of the soil, and also of not a few capitalists, for an alien country. The press made a united demand upon Parliament to stop the “ruinous drain of the most useful part of the population of the United Kingdom,” and all manner of arguments, including many palpable falsehoods, were brought forth to dissuade men from migrating. But it was to no avail. People came from all parts of the kingdom, both country and city, to the ports to take passage. We are told that 229 English immigrants landed at New York in a single week, and that in the week ending August 23, 1817, 1500 arrived at the five ports of New York, New London, Perth Amboy, Philadelphia, and Boston. Nor were the immigrants all, or even generally, of the poorest class, English law forbade vessels to carry more than two passengers for each ton, and this restriction was in itself sufficient to keep passenger rates at a high figure and to preclude the pauper class from taking passage. This fact only increased the indignation of the English press, since the people who migrated were almost exclusively the fairly well-to-do who could most ill be spared. In his *Sketches of America*, published in London in 1819, Henry Bradshaw Fearon tells us that by 1817, when he was deputed by thirty-nine English families to visit the United States and ascertain what portions of the country were best adapted to settlement by Englishmen, “Emigration had . . . assumed a totally new character : it was no longer merely the poor, the idle, the profligate, or the wildly speculative, who were proposing to quit their native country ; but men also of capital, of industry, of sober habits and regular pursuits, men of reflection who apprehended approaching evils ; men of upright and conscientious minds, to whose happiness civil and religious liberty were essential ; and men of domestic feelings, who wished to provide for the future support and prosperity of their offspring.”

While the controversy regarding the expediency of the settlement of Englishmen in America was raging, an enterprise of large moment was undertaken by two gentlemen of wealth and influence living in the vicinity of London—Messrs. Morris Birkbeck and George Flower. This was the establishment of an agricultural colony in southeastern Illinois, in the portion of Edwards County which afterwards came to be known as the English Prairie. Morris Birkbeck (1763-1825) was a successful practical farmer of Quaker origin who very well represents the type of well-to-do middle class Englishmen in this period who were dissatisfied with conditions in England and saw little prospect of an early improvement. Happening, in 1816, to meet the American diplomat, Edward Coles, who was returning from a mission to Russia, he first got from him an authoritative idea of the vast extent of unoccupied lands in the Illinois country. After some reflection he determined to sell his estate near London, migrate to Illinois with his family, and there prepare the way for the establishment of a colony of discontented English country laborers. Doubtless he expected to better his own fortunes, but his project seems to have been shaped in no small degree by philanthropic considerations. Another English farmer of similar station, George Flower, was attracted by the scheme and decided to join his old friend in it. In the summer of 1816 Flower came out to America in advance to get a personal knowledge of the land and its people. He visited various sections of the country, including the West, and, returning to Virginia in the autumn, spent most of the winter with Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. The following spring Birkbeck, with his family, landed at City Point, Virginia, and with Flower

proceeded to the Illinois. A tract of 16,000 acres of unbroken prairie was in part purchased outright and in part designated to be taken up later, and on this it was planned to locate the prospective colonists. The purchase lay in Edwards County, which at that time embraced an immense area, extending almost from the Ohio to Upper Canada and including a portion of the present state of Wisconsin. The two promoters then began to build log huts, import furniture, and make other preparations for the influx of settlers. Reports of the most optimistic character were sent back to England, with the result that a new stimulus was given to emigration, though many of the persons thus attracted found land that suited them without going so far west as to the English Prairie.

In the same year in which the settlement was begun Birkbeck published a book under the title *Notes on a Journey in America from the Coast of Virginia to the Territory of Illinois, with Proposals for the Establishment of a Colony of English* (Philadelphia, 1817). The next year another book, *Letters from Illinois* (London, 1818), appeared from the same author. Both attracted widespread attention in England, and the English Prairie settlement became the center about which was waged the whole controversy over the expediency of emigration of English people to America. Birkbeck's writings represented emigration, particularly if directed to his section of Illinois, as an enviable escape from political oppression and economic ruin and a sure road to good fortune and happiness. Some of those, however, whom he induced to settle in the western country were keenly disappointed, and, embittered by ill-luck or the hardships of frontier life, sent back reports denouncing Birkbeck in no uncertain terms and asserting that, having been himself deceived in the character of the American interior, he was seeking to recoup himself by selling his lands to unsuspecting emigrants. The letters of the malcontents were seized upon and made use of with avidity by those who were laboring to restrain emigration, while on the other hand men who were satisfied with the Western settlement or who had interests involved in its prosperity, as warmly defended Birkbeck's project. The result was a veritable war of the newspaper writers and pamphleteers—a war in the first instance between two groups of English writers attacking and defending, respectively, the policy of emigration ; and in its later phase between the English who satirized American conditions and the Americans who resented this procedure and declaimed vehemently against it. While the literary belligerents talked and wrote, the people continued to migrate. Adlard Welby, a conservative Englishman who made a tour of inspection in the West in 1819, very fairly summed up the situation when he said : “ These favorable accounts [the writings of Birkbeck], aided by a period of real privation and discontent in Europe, caused emigration to increase ten-fold ; and though various reports of unfavorable nature soon circulated, and many who had emigrated actually returned to their native land in disgust, yet still the trading vessels were filled with passengers of all ages and descriptions, full of hope, looking forward to the West as to a land of liberty and delight—a land flowing with milk and honey—a second land of Canaan.”

The ablest attack upon the English Prairie scheme was made by William Cobbett, the noted Radical leader and pamphleteer, who, in 1818, published his *Year's Residence in the United States of America* (New York, 1818), by way of a reply to Mr. Birkbeck's books. Cobbett was not opposed to emigration from England in itself, but he savagely denounced Birkbeck and all others who sought to induce the emigrant to go beyond the Alleghenies in search of a home. His writing upon this subject was done at a farm in Long Island where he was living in virtual exile, with prosecution for political offenses hanging over him if he returned to British jurisdiction. It cannot be known definitely whether, as Birkbeck declared, he was practically bought up by Eastern capitalists to advocate the settling of immigrants in the seaboard states rather than on the western prairies, but in any case this was the policy he urged with uncompromising fervor. For information as to what really were the conditions at the English Prairie Cobbett made use of Thomas Hulme's *Journal made during a Tour in the*

*Western Countries of America : Sept. 30, 1818 — August 7, 1819.* Hulme was an honest English farmer, strongly Radical in principles and a follower of Cobbett. On the whole his Journal, however, exhibits a favorable attitude toward the Birkbeck enterprise, and it was only by twisting its statements and utterly ignoring their real import that the vilifying pamphleteer could adapt them to his ends. Cobbett's attack, which was renewed in successive editions of his book and in other writings, brought the English Prairie settlement its highest measure of notoriety, though scarcely to its profit. Birkbeck kept up his side of the controversy in similar new editions and incidental effusions, and was not lacking in out-spoken supporters. Chief among these was Richard Flower, father of George Flower, who in 1818 sold his estate in Hertfordshire and joined his relatives and former neighbors in Illinois. In 1819 he published *Letters from Lexington and the Illinois, containing a Brief Account of the English Settlement in the Latter Territory, and a Refutation of the Misrepresentations of Mr. Cobbett* (London, 1819) ; and somewhat later *Letters from the Illinois, 1820, 1821. Containing an Account of the English Settlement at Albion and its Vicinity, and a Refutation of Various Misrepresentations, Those more particularly of Mr. Cobbett* (London, 1822). In 1821 John Woods, a well-to-do, practical, and observant English farmer who had but lately established a home in the West, published *Two Years' Residence in the Settlement on the English Prairie, in the Illinois Country, United States.* This, like Flower's books, was a sane, honest description of the settlement, which contrasted markedly in these qualities with the glib criticisms of writers like Cobbett, and showed that if conditions and prospects were not quite so roseate as Birkbeck pictured them they were at least immeasurably better than the detractors would have people believe.

Other books of this period, written by English travelers and settlers and containing noteworthy descriptions of the English Prairie in particular or of the Illinois country in general, are : (1) Henry Bradshaw Fearon's *Sketches of America. A Narratvve of a Journey of five thousand miles through the Eastern and Western States of America; with Remarks on Mr. Birkbeck's " Notes " and " Letters "* (London, 1819); (2) Adlard Welby's *Visit to North America and the English Settlements in Illinois, with a Winter Residence at Philadelphia* (London, 1821) ; (3) William Tell Harris's *Remarks made during a Tour through the United States of America during the years 1817, 1818, and 1819* (London, 1821); (4) James Flint's *Letters from America* (Edinburgh, 1822) ; (5) George W. Ogden's *Letters from the West, comprising a Tour through the Western Country, and a Residence of two summers in the States of Ohio and Kentucky* (New Bedford, 1823) ; and (6) William Faux's *Memorable Days in America : being a Journal of a Tour to the United States, principally undertaken to ascertain, by positive evidence, the condition and probable prospects of British Emigrants ; including accounts of Mr. Birkbeck's settlement in the Illinois* (London, 1823). Of these six writers it may be added simply that Fearon was an agent sent out by thirty-nine English families to ascertain what parts of the United States were best adapted to settlement ; Welby was a conservative farmer of the upper middle class, prone to display in his writings a degree of insularity and prejudice even beyond that displayed by the average English traveler of the time ; Harris was a fair-minded student of agrarian questions who came to America " with a view to estimating the advantages the United States were represented to afford ;" Flint was a Scotch economist who emigrated primarily to study prices, wages, land questions, and labor problems, but who found pleasure in observing and recording his impressions of all sorts of things having little connection with economics ; Ogden was an agriculturist and traveler of much the same type as Harris ; and Faux was another farmer whose object in visiting the United States was to investigate the advisability of English migration thither—a writer who, though of inferior grade, yet in his characteristic blunt and inelegant manner supplies much valuable information.

One of the party of nine which accompanied Birkbeck to America in the spring of 1817 was a young Englishman by the name of Elias Pym Fordham, author of the letters and journal herewith published. The family to which Fordham belonged is among the oldest in Eastern England. The claim is made that its line of descent can be traced back with ease as far as the time of King Stephen. For eight centuries its ancestral estates in Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire have passed from generation to generation, and they are today in the possession of a branch of its vigorous descendants. Elias Fordham, father of Elias Pym, was born in 1763, and at the age of twenty-one married Mary Clapton, one of the last descendants of an honorable old family which, among other distinctions, had furnished Elizabeth a lord Chancellor. The elder Fordham is described as a lively, bright, and happy man, whose admirable character and gracious manner won for him a multitude of friends. He was educated to be a Trinitarian minister and for some years had charge of a congregation of that faith ; but, suffering an attack of throat trouble, he decided after a time to abandon the ministry and to become a brewer. In the new occupation he was doing well, until one night while riding near his home his horse stumbled over a tipsy man who, when aroused, managed to mumble that “ it was all along of Fordham’s fine ale.” The incident troubled the conscientious brewer and the upshot was that he gave over the business, retired to Gannock where he had some property and, renting a tract of land of his brother, spent the rest of his life as a farmer. During his later years he occupied much of his time with occasional preaching, though diligent study of his Bible had led him to reject the Trinitarian and to adopt the hitherto despised Unitarian creed. In those days Unitarianism was looked upon by people generally with horror ; yet so exemplary and sincere a man was Fordham that, rank dissenter though he had become, the bishop of his diocese licensed the kitchen of the worthy farmer’s residence as a place for public worship.

In 1808 Mrs. Fordham died, leaving two sons, Elias Pym and Charles, and five daughters, Anne, Maria, Catherine, Harriet, and Sophia. Elias Pym became a pupil of George Stephenson and while yet a young man developed into a capable and promising engineer. Despite his enviable prospects, however, he was seized with the fever for migration to America which spread over England about 1816 and instead of settling in the practice of his profession at home began to cast about for a chance to try his fortunes in the New World. The opportunity was speedily forthcoming. George Flower was an uncle of his by marriage, and when Flower decided to take part in Birkbeck’s projected settlement in the Illinois, Fordham, who was then twenty-nine years of age, resolved to be one of the first members of the new colony. As has already been related. Flower came to America in 1816, in advance of the rest of the party. Fordham came with Birkbeck and his family early the next year. The vessel on which they took passage from Gravesend brought them to the James River, in Virginia, whence the Birkbecks continued their journey westward over the mountains to Pittsburg, traveling in a phaeton and a light Jersey wagon, and thence went on horseback across southern Ohio to Cincinnati. Fordham took charge of the equipment which was being transported to the new settlement, consisting mainly of farming implements and household furniture, and arranged for its transportation by water from Norfolk to Baltimore, thence overland to Pittsburg and down the Ohio River to Cincinnati, where the party was reunited and from whence it proceeded across southern Indiana to the site of the prospective colony. One of the ladies who accompanied the expedition was Fordham’s sister Maria, who, being in ill-health, had been sent to America in the hope that the change would prove beneficial. In the Wabash country she soon became acquainted with a Frenchman, Charles de la Serre, who was descended from a Huguenot family which had fled from France at the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and settled in Guernsey. La Serre had abandoned his English home for a life of travel and sport in the American wilderness and, when discovered by Flower, was spending his time with a band of Indians in the vicinity of the English Prairie. In a short time he and Maria Fordham were married ; but the young wife was still an invalid and died a few

years later. A daughter, born in July, 1823, was the mother of Dr. Hubert de Laserre Spence of Cleveland, through whose good offices it has been made possible to publish the documents contained in this book.

Elias Pym Fordham made an entry of land in the English Prairie, and, from the outset found abundant labors to occupy his time in surveying, investigating the quality of lands to be purchased, and assisting in the preparation of buildings, mills, etc., for the use of prospective settlers. William Faux, who visited the Prairie in November, 1819, tells us in his *Memorable Days in America* that he met Fordham and that the young emigrant “ never means to return to England, except rich, or to be rich. If he fails here, he will turn hunter and live by his rifle on the frontiers.” Concerning his actual fortunes in the new home we know little, but in any event his residence in America was comparatively brief. We hear of him while not yet a middle-aged man once more in England following his favored occupation of civil engineering. That he enjoyed a high reputation for skill and integrity is evidenced by his appointment as Engineer to the Cinque Ports—a position in those days of no small trust and responsibility. He is known also to have been employed by Stephenson in various technical undertakings of national importance.

Late in 1818 a member of the family in England made a transcript of portions of the letters and journals which Fordham had sent home during the past eighteen months' from Illinois. The collection (which in recent years has come into the hands of Dr. Spence) was given the title. *Extracts from Letters written on a Journey to the Western parts of the United States, and during a residence in the Illinois Territory, By an English Farmer.* Its authorship has been positively identified and though it does not appear in all cases to whom the individual letters were addressed this is not a matter of much importance ; the names of the addressees were omitted by the transcriber because they were regarded as of no consequence to the reading public, and because the persons in question were still living and did not desire the notoriety of appearing by name if the letters were printed. As a matter of fact, though it was evidently in the mind of the transcriber to publish the manuscript thus prepared, no further steps, so far as we know, were ever taken toward this end.

In adding another to the already long list of published records of western travel in the early part of the nineteenth century it may not be amiss to call attention briefly to the character of the new material and the degree of value it possesses for the student of western history. The manuscript falls naturally into three parts : (1) a series of seven letters, written between May 18 and November 15, 1817, from as many different places in the West and on the way thither ; (2) a journal of daily happenings on and about the English Prairie from December 7, 1817, to February 26, 1818 ; and (3) another series of ten letters, written between February 3 and October 30, 1818, chiefly from Kentucky, Cincinnati, English Prairie, and the Indiana settlements at Princeton and New Harmony. Following roughly the chronology of Fordham's experiences during the first eighteen months of his sojourn in America, the movements which he recounts and the topics which he discusses, may be indicated somewhat as follows : the land and people of Virginia, a voyage up the Chesapeake, a trip on the Pennsylvania Road from Baltimore to Pittsburg, the people of western Pennsylvania, the city of Pittsburg, the descent of the Ohio to Cincinnati by flat-boat, the land and people of southern Indiana, establishing the settlement at the English Prairie, hardships of the first winter, the surveying and entering of public land, prices, wages, and labor in the West, the classes of people on the frontiers, a trip through Kentucky to Cincinnati, the character of the Kentuckians, the city of Cincinnati, the Rappite settlement at New Harmony, and the prospects for English emigrants in the American interior.



As is explained in the Preface prepared by the transcriber of the letters, the author wrote under all the disadvantages incident to the life of the frontier settler and explorer. He made no attempt to relate his experiences or to describe the Western people and country in a systematic and thorough-going fashion. He probably had not the slightest idea that the hurried letters which he despatched to relatives and inquiring friends and the fragmentary journals which he kept for their amusement and instruction would ever be put in print—at least without having undergone considerable revision. What we have in his writings is not a formal compendium of information, like Fearon's *Sketches* or Melish's *Travels* of an earlier date, but simply a personal narrative of life as an English immigrant found it, and learned to share it, in a favored region of the growing West. The claim of the manuscript to the dignity of source material for the study of Western history arises from its author's superior intelligence and training, his candor and utter artlessness, and his rather unusual opportunities for observation. The scientific trend of mind which his professional study had developed saved him from numerous errors of other writers and led him to a wholesome comprehension of the difficulty of describing a frontier people with entire fairness and accuracy. "I find it no easy task," he acknowledges frankly, "to write descriptions of manners and opinions. If individual pictures only be drawn, the inferences must be in part erroneous; and sketches of a more comprehensive nature are either loose and incorrect, or tame and unreadable." In the main, Fordham wrote cautiously and conservatively, confining himself pretty closely to what he had himself seen and giving the reader due notice when speaking merely from hearsay. His only object was to keep his relatives and friends informed concerning his novel experiences and to give them such facts as he felt to be of interest regarding the country and its people. He had no ambition to be known in London as the author of the latest book on America.

As much cannot be affirmed of most English visitors to the United States in this period, whose writings we possess. For, as Dr. Thwaites has well said, "Every English traveler hither, whether his journey was that of a serious investigator or merely of a tourist eager to behold strange lands and new conditions, felt impelled to give his personal impressions in volumes of varying merit, evincing every shade of admiration and dislike." Many of these books were mere collections of letters or diaries; only a very small number were in the nature of systematic treatises. This was inevitable; but the unfortunate thing, from the standpoint of the historical student at least, is that most of these publications were composed with a definite purpose either to promote or to discourage emigration. In the one case, America was pictured in the most extravagant manner as a land possessing every desirable physical resource and condition, inhabited by a people of rare enlightenment, and offering to every newcomer all the delights of material prosperity, free institutions, and opportunity for unlimited advancement; in the other, the country was represented to be an unhealthy wilderness, defying the substantial advance of civilization, and the people to be the off-scourings of Europe, now retrograded almost to the level of savages.

Fordham represents the type of English emigrant, all too rare, who appreciated to the full the manifold inconveniences and deprivations of life in a new country but yet had the faith to believe that the difficulties were only temporary and that incessant industry was all that was needed to transform the crude backwoods settlements into flourishing and enlightened commonwealths. Like other travelers, he saw many things—slavery, intemperance, ignorance, lack of manners—of which he could not but heartily disapprove, but he did not allow these to blind him to the fundamental facts of American opportunity and achievement. Without in any sense posing as a seer, he was able to forecast with remarkable success the main lines along which the development of the country took place during the two formative decades after he wrote. A sane optimism, a clear insight, an honest purpose—these were the young engineer's best qualifications as a portrayer of conditions and a chronicler of events in the Middle West of his day. F. A. O.

## ORIGINAL PREFACE

The following pages contain extracts from letters written by a young man to his friends in England. They were composed under every disadvantage : sometimes when the writer was surrounded by the noisy inhabitants of a smoky cabin, in his blanket tent, or in the bar room or no less public dormitory of a tavern. As he wrote to intimate and dear friends, and without any thought of their being presented to the world, the writer requests it may be remembered that what was meant for the eye of friendship alone is not a fair subject of criticism.

Nov. 2r 1818.

### Fordham's Personal Narrative

1817-1818

The ocean voyage—Ascent of the James—A Virginia landscape—Petersburg—The Virginia fanners—Voyage from Norfolk to Baltimore—The coasts of the Chesapeake.

*On board the Schooner George Whythe  
Chesapeak Bay May 18th 1817.*

OUR voyage was remarkably quick and, to those who were in health, agreeable. [1] We were only 30 days from Land to Land and 32 from the Downs to Cape Henry, the entrance to the Chesapeak. In the Gulf Stream we had stormy weather, but I think it rather added to the spirits of the party, than otherwise, for it afforded continual subject for conversation and admiration. I suppose you know that the Gulf Stream is a current of water which flows from the Gulf of Mexico round the point of Florida, up the coast of the United States; then spreading and turning gradually to the westward; less perceptibly as it leaves the coast, deposits the mud of the West Indies on the banks of Newfoundland, then passes Eastward; and ultimately, flowing Southward down the coast of Africa, is again carried by the trade winds into the Gulf of Mexico. It becomes so feeble and indistinct after it reaches the Azores that it loses its name. But westward of the Banks it runs at one or two miles per hour or even faster. Bad weather is always expected within its current which varies from 200 to 60 miles in width. If fear was felt at any time, no person in the cabin expressed it, and I believe none felt it. Indeed, a gale of wind comes on so gradually that it is not nearly so formidable as one would suppose it would be to a landsman. The wind rises—studding sails are taken in—the waves roughen—top gallant sails are struck, and top-sails are reefed—the sky looks dark and darker yet—the waves climb the ship's sides and the spray rattles against the cabin windows—the dead lights or shutters are put in—the Captain and the officers are looking out to windward—a squall is seen in the distance, upturning the billows and covering their crests with foam ;— Brail up the Mizzen quick ; bear up the helm a weather ;”—it comes—we are prepared ;—the vessel stoops before it, *snorts* through the waves, rises again and bounds onward like a stag. One day while we were at dinner Mr. B. observed that the ship *snorted* more than usual, when the first mate came in and said “ Captain, a heavy squall is coming.” The Captain left his knife and fork sticking in the ham he was carving, and went out to give the necessary orders. The ladies at the cabin door, the gentlemen wrapped in boat cloaks and holding by the shrouds, awaited its coming. It did come—the waves dashed over us—the leeward ports sunk deep into the water ; “ Man the yards”—but, before a man had reached a shroud, in one instant, the fore-sail was split, rent from its yard, and carried in tatters over the ship's side. After this we lay under stormstay sails for 24 hours, but the heavy swell that followed the gale sprung the bowsprit and foretopmast.

We all liked our Captain exceedingly; next to the safety of the ship and the interest of the owners, the comforts of his passengers was the object of his attention. Mr. B. drew up a letter of thanks for his kindness to us, which we all signed, and presented to him the day before we left the ship ; he was so affected by it that he could not restrain his tears.

We cast anchor in Hampton Roads on Saturday night, [2] and the next morning proceeded up James River with a fair wind and a clear sky. The banks of this noble stream are beautiful, but not very healthy. Land is worth from 10 to 16 \$ per acre. After running up 90 miles in about 10 hours, we arrived at a mud-bank, called Harrison's Bar. A consultation took place between the Captain and Pilot about crossing it ; at high tide it was filled with about 12 feet of water ; our ship drew about 15. After searching for the softest places, the ship was steered into it with all sails set ; but the wind at that moment died away and of course we all got stuck fast. [3]

The next morning the Jolly boat was sent ashore with part of the passengers, and the pinnace, decorated and manned with eight of the smartest sailors, took Mr. B., the ladies, and the Captain to Mr. H——'s, who is an acquaintance of the Captain's. Mr. H. was not at home, but Mrs. H. received the party with politeness. There was a great deal of company there and everything in and about the house was most elegant. After staying some time, sweetmeats were handed round by a train of black servants and the party received pressing invitations to return the next day.

I landed with the boys and young men on the opposite shore, on a most beautiful and picturesque bank which was covered with acacias in full blossom, almond trees covered with flowers of snowy whiteness, cedars, weeping willows, mountain ashes, laurestinas, [4] wild grape-vines, and almost every Shrub that is to be seen in the Green house or Pleasure grounds of an English gentleman. After penetrating this thicket, which edged the winding bank for many a mile, we found ourselves among fields of wheat and Indian corn, just springing out of the ground. The landscape was composed of dark forests crowning every hill, the sides partially cleared and cultivated, and narrow vallies or rather ravines, clothed with shrubs which were beautiful beyond description scented the air with delightful perfumes, conducted streams of fresh water which were oftener heard than seen in the dark recesses of the thickets. Here, while a fervid sun rendered walking in the open fields painful, we enjoyed the most refreshing coolness, and birds of most beautiful plumage or of sweetest notes seemed to invite us to stay. The Mocking-bird which is here, as the Robin is in England, esteemed sacred, would scarcely avoid us, and partridges, turtle-doves, and hares started up at every step.

These delightful regions are cultivated by lazy Slaves, who are fat and comfortable enough in their general appearance, but who are never trusted out of the sight of the Overseers ; nor are they, I am told, trustworthy.

After two days of excessive exertion, our ship was dragged through 300 yards of mud, into which she had sunk 3 feet. A few hours carried us to City point, [5] a poor village, situated on a beautiful, but unhealthy, spot. From City point the gentlemen went in gigs to Petersburg, [6] about 12 miles off, to get Cleared of the Custom house. These gigs were not quite equal to English ones. Having been for some time an invalid, I was afraid of being jolted, and tried to get a saddle-horse; but that was not to be obtained. The saddle hurt the horse — or, I should hurt the horse — or, ride too fast; — at last a light sulky was found for me, which, when the horse trotted, shook my poor bones unmercifully. Our road was through forests of pine, live oak, acacias, and many ornamental trees. Spaces of cleared land occurred at intervals, with

shabby farm houses, and now and then fields worn out, and abandoned to the growth of young pines and weeds. The land is not very good here, but the scenery beautiful.

[1] The “America” ( Captain Heth), on which Fordham took passage, sailed from Gravesend, March 30, 1817, bound for Richmond, Virginia. For a fuller account of the voyage than that here given see Morris Birkbeck, *Notes* (London, 1817), pp. 5-11. Some other interesting journals of voyages of Englishmen across the Atlantic in this period are : John Woods, *Two Year ' Residence* (EARLY WESTERN TRAVELS, x, pp. 179-184) ; Adlard Welby, *Visit to North America* (EARLY WESTERN TRAVELS, xii, pp. 151-163) ; and William Faux, *Memorable Days* (EARLY WESTERN TRAVELS, xi, pp. 33-53).

[2] May 2, 1817.

[3] “ May 6. Harrison’s Bar.— This is a shoal of mud, which greatly impedes the navigation, and in which we must be contented to lie until the next tide, and we may easily content ourselves, as it is a bend of the river, which is surrounded by all that is beautiful in woodland scenery, in the gayest dress of spring. We are fixed about the middle of the stream, which is four miles wide. Several rich plantations and substantial dwellings are in view.” —Morris Birkbeck, *Notes*, p. 14. In more recent times Harrison’s Bar has been known as Harrison's Landing. It is about twenty miles up the James from the mouth of the Chickahominy.

[4] The laurestina (*Viburnum tinus*) is an evergreen shrub which blooms during the winter months. It is a native of southern Europe.

[5] City Point is located at the mouth of the Appomattox, about thirty miles below Richmond and ten northeast of Petersburg. It has never grown to be a place of importance.

[6] Petersburg is situated on the Appomattox River, about twenty-two miles south of Richmond. Its site, as well as that of Richmond, was selected by Colonel William Byrd, one of the most eminent Virginians of the early eighteenth century. The town was incorporated by the legislature of Virginia in 1748. During the closing campaigns of the Revolution, Petersburg was brought into prominence by being captured by the British from Baron Steuben in 1781, and by serving as an important stopping-point of Cornwallis in the movement which culminated at Yorktown. When the Birkbeck-Fordham party visited the place in 1817 to attest to the contents of their baggage they found it the most flourishing in that section of the state. “ Petersburg,” writes Birkbeck (*Notes*, pp. 15-16), “ is growing into a place of importance, being the emporium of export and import to a large district. Tobacco is the staple produce ; and every article of British or German manufacture, the return. It is not quite two years since half the town was destroyed by a fire, occasioned by some negroes playing at cards in a stable, and it is already nearly rebuilt in the most substantial manner. Two hundred capital brick houses were built last year. This vigorous revival under a calamity so general is a strong proof of general prosperity.”

Personal narrative of travels in Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky; and of a residence in the Illinois Territory: 1817-1818 (1906)

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