

A VISIT BY THE MARQUIS DE CHASTELLUX

APRIL, 1782

(EMN: The Marquis de Chastellux had served as a major general in Rochambeau's army during the American Revolutionary War. In the spring of 1782 he traveled from Williamsburg through the Valley of Virginia. The journal he kept records his encounter with a "Mr. Grisby." This gentleman was James Grigsby - eldest son of "Soldier John" - who was licensed to keep an inn or ordinary in the neighborhood of Fancy Hill, near the Natural Bridge.)

We set out at nine o'clock in the morning, and to say the truth, rather heedlessly; for in these mountains, where there are either too many or too few roads, people always think they have given sufficient directions to travelers, who seldom fail to go astray. This is the common fault of those who instruct others in what they themselves are well acquainted with, nor are the roads to science exempt from this inconvenience.

After riding about two miles however, we luckily met a man who had just got his horse shod, at a neighboring forge, and was returning home followed by two or three couple of hounds. We soon entered into a conversation with him, and what seldom happens in America, he was curious to know who I was, and whither I was going. My quality of a general officer in the French service, and the desire I expressed of seeing the wonders of his country, inspiring him with a kind of affection for me, he offered to be our conductor, leading us sometimes through little paths, at others through woods, but continually climbing or descending mountains, so that without a guide, nothing short of witchcraft could have enabled us to find the road.

Having thus travelled for two hours, we at last descended a steep declivity, and then mounted another; during which time he endeavoured to render the conversation more interesting. At last, pushing his horse on briskly, and stopping suddenly, he said to me, "You desire to see the Natural Bridge, don't you Sir? You are now upon it, alight and go twenty steps either to the right or left, and you will see this prodigy."

I had perceived that there was on each side a considerable deep hollow, but the trees had prevented me from forming any judgement, or paying much attention to it. Approaching the precipice, I saw at first two great masses or chains of rocks,

which formed the bottom of a ravine, or rather of an immense abyss; but placing myself, not without precaution, upon the brink of the precipice, I saw that these two buttresses were joined under my feet, forming a vault, of which I could yet form no idea, but of its height. After enjoying this magnificent but tremendous spectacle, which many persons could not bear to look at, I went to the western side, the aspect of which was not less imposing, but more picturesque. This Thebais, these ancient pines, these enormous masses of rocks, so much the more astonishing as they appear to possess a wild symmetry, and rudely to concur, as it were, in forming a certain design; all this apparatus of rude and shapeless nature, which art attempts in vain, attacks at once the senses and the thoughts, and excites a gloomy and melancholy admiration.

(EMN: U.S. highway no.11 now crosses over the top of the Natural Bridge where the Marquis once stood.)

(The Marquis then describes the appearance of the bridge from below and some of the geological aspects of the rock itself...)

Whilst I was examining on all sides, and endeavouring to take some drawings, my fellow-travelers had learned from our conductor that he kept a public-house, about seven or eight miles from the place where we were, and not more than two from the road which must be taken nextday to leave the mountains. Mr. Grisby, (the name of our guide,) had expressed his wishes to receive us, assuring us we should be as well as at the tavern recommended by Mr. Praxton; but had this been otherwise, we had too many obligations to Mr. Grisby not to give him preference.

We renewed our journey therefore, under his guidance, through the woods, which were very lofty; strong robust oaks, and immense pines sufficient for all the fleets of Europe, here grow old, and perish on their native soil; from which they have never yet been drawn even by the hand of industry...

(The Marquis comments on evidence of frequent fires within the woods.)

We arrived at Mr. Grisby's a little before five O'clock, having met with nothing on the road but a wild turkey, which rose so far off, that it was impossible to find it again. The house was not large, but neat and commodious; we found it already taken up by other travellers, to whom we assuredly owed every token of respect, if pre-eminence betwixt travellers were to be measured by the length of their respective journies.

The other guests were a healthy, good humored young man of eight and twenty, who set out from Philadelphia with a

pretty wife of twenty, and a little child in her arms, to settle five hundred miles beyond the mountains, in a country lately inhabited, bordering on the Ohio, called the country of Kentucky. His whole retinue was a horse, which carried his wife and child. We were astonished at the easy manner with which he proceeded on his expedition, and took the liberty of mentioning our surprise to him. He told us that the purchase of good land in Pennsylvania was very extravagant, that provisions were too dear, and the inhabitants too numerous, in consequence of which he thought it more beneficial to purchase for about fifty guineas the grant of a thousand acres of land in Kentucky. This territory had been formerly given to a colonel of militia, until the king of England thought proper to order the distribution of those immense countries; part of which was sold, and the other reserved to recompense the American troops who had served in Canada.

But, said I, where are the cattle? The implements of husbandry with which you must begin to clear the land you have purchased?

In the country itself, replied he. I carry nothing with me, but I have money in my pocket, and shall want for nothing.

I began to relish the resolution of this young man, who was active, vigorous, and free from care; but the pretty woman, twenty years of age only; I doubted not but she was in despair at the sacrifice she had made; and I endeavoured to discover, in her features and looks the secret sentiments of her soul. Though she had retired into a little chamber, to make room for us, she frequently came into that where we were; and I saw, not without astonishment, that her natural charms were even embellished by the serenity of her mind. She often caressed her husband, and her child, and appeared to me admirably disposed to fulfil the first object of every infant colony - "to increase and multiply."

Whilst supper was preparing, and we were talking of travels, and examining on the map the road our emigrants were to follow, I recollected that we had as yet an hour's daylight, and that it was just the time I had seen the wood-hens, of which, they assured me, there was plenty in the neighborhood, and that there is a critical moment in hunting as well as love.

I took my fowling-piece, therefore, and proceeded to the woods; but instead of wood-hens, I found only a rabbit, which I wounded, but it rolled down into a bottom, where I lost sight of it, till it was discovered by Mr. Grisby's dogs, which accustomed to the report of a gun, found it in a hollow tree, to the top of which it would have scrambled had its leg not been broken.

(The Marquis then observes that American rabbits are different from those of Europe - they do not burrow, but rather are able to climb trees, often to considerable heights. He also mentions the American Thrush, which he feels ought to be considered this country's nightingale, due to the beauty of its song.)

At my return to the house, supper was the sole object; about which Mr. and Mrs. Grisby took great pains, whilst their daughters, about sixteen or seventeen, who were perfect beauties, were laying the cloth. I asked Mr. Grisby to sup with us, but he excused himself by assuring us that he was yet employed in our service; nor was his attention useless, for we had an excellent supper; and though whiskey was our only drink, we contrived to convert it into tolerable toddy.

Breakfast was ready betimes the next morning, and corresponded with our supper. Mr. Grisby, who had nothing to do, sat down to table with us.

He had a horse saddled, that he might accompany us as a guide as far as Greenly Ferry, where we were to repass the Fluvanna; but I was informed that one of the servant's horses was so much wounded in the withers, that it was impossible to mount him. This accident was the more inconvenient, as I had already been obliged to leave one at Mr. Jefferson's, so that I had no fresh horse to substitute.

On applying to Mr. Grisby, he told me that the only horse he had which could answer my purpose, was the one he generally rode, and which he was going to make use of to conduct us, but that he would willingly oblige me with it, and take mine in its place. On my assuring him that I would give him anything he thought proper in return, he went to look at my horse, and when he came back, told me, that when cured, he thought he might be worth his own, and that he left the difference entirely to myself. As each of them might be worth ten or twelve guineas, I gave him two in exchange, and he was perfectly contented.

I had just before asked for the bill, and when he declined letting me have it, I gave him four guineas. He received them with satisfaction, assuring me it was double the sum he could have charged.

At last we were obliged to take our leave of this good house, but not of Mr. Grisby, who had taken another horse to accompany us. On the road he showed us two plantations which he had occupied successively, before he settled on the one he at present cultivates. He had left them in good condition, and sold them at the rate of twelve or thirteen

shillings, Virginia currency, an acre, about ten livres of our money. We saw several other settlements in the woods, all of which were situated on the banks of some stream whose source was not far distant...

(The Marquis soon arrived at the ferry where he parted company with "Mr. Grisby" and continued his journey.)