

# **“The Paradise of America”: Visions of Land Use on the Southwestern Frontier**

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The frontier of the American Southwest was a wonderfully diverse and tumultuous place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In those years, the southwestern frontier—a swath running west from what is now Georgia and Alabama into Texas—was home to a wide variety of people pursuing livelihoods based on the tremendous natural resources of the Gulf Coast region. American, French, and Spanish planters were busy transforming the indigenous landscape by growing cotton, rice, tobacco, and indigo, alongside the occasional farmer engaged in growing food crops such as corn. Under these planters worked their African slaves, whether second or third generation slaves of local ancestry or imported from the West African coast, the slave markets of New Orleans, Richmond, and Charleston, or the sugar islands of the Caribbean. Hovering on the perimeter of this society, Indian nations—such as the Creek and Choctaw in the east and the Caddo and Comanche in the west—offered the prospect of profitable commerce to the merchants of frontier towns such as Natchez, Mobile, and Natchitoches. Other tribes, the Osage especially, posed an element of danger to those traders intrepid enough to brave both Indian attack and the Spanish provincial authorities while seeking to tap into the mustang trade of the Texas plains. Men from Ohio, Kentucky, and Ten-

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nessee traveling down the Mississippi to deposit their farm produce along the wharves of New Orleans completed this mosaic of vibrant humanity.

For all their color, variation, and romantic appeal, the societies of those living on the southwestern frontier offer a few commonalities worth describing. One, often noted by historians and investigated in detail, is the prevalence of the institution of slavery in all its cruel and inhumane incarnations. A second commonality, also taken for granted by the people of that era but much less visible to latter day researchers, is the way those people viewed the natural world that surrounded them. Virtually everyone derived their income and sustenance from the fruits of the earth, either directly as farmers or indirectly as merchants shipping cotton or other commodities to the mills and markets of New England and Great Britain. As a result, an examination of what people wrote concerning the natural world around them is vital to understanding why these individuals used the land the way they did. The writings of traders, naturalists, explorers, and early residents of the Old Southwest enable today's reader to understand what they considered acceptable and unacceptable use of the natural environment.

Each of these observers had an agenda. Naturalists such as William Bartram or Peter Custis clearly had different audiences in mind than traders such as Anthony Glass. However, the particular audience the author thought they were writing for may be less important than who actually read each account. The writer's intent determines what ends up on the page, but not how readers interpret the words and give them meaning. Therefore, when considering how a text influences future events, we must remember that the audience will read it with their personal values in mind, not necessarily those of the author. In our particular case, describing how the accounts of early travelers sought to promote certain types of land use, a few passages can have a disproportionate effect, regardless of the author's original intent. While it is not always possible to categorize and quantify this effect precisely, identifying instances when travelers in the Old Southwest promoted a certain philosophy regarding the purpose of natural resources provides some clues to how these men might have influenced future settlement and activity in the region.

The authors of nineteenth century travel journals did not see the world in anything like the way we do in the twenty-first century. Efforts to detect a latent environmental consciousness or conservation ethic are likely doomed to failure. Likewise, writing in the enlightenment tradition, they were more likely to see their actions as the path of progress, rather than driving the natural world to destruction to feed the engines of some emerging behemoth called capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the twenty-first century observer, fully aware of later environmental critiques of capitalism, has the luxury of applying them to the people of the early nineteenth century in order to determine how certain passages in their writings might influence future settlers. Because of our focus on how texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries promoted some approaches to land use and not others, we can zero in on these passages to examine exactly how they emphasized acceptable ways of harnessing nature to human needs. The sources selected here, coming from many of the most prominent travelers, explorers, traders, and promoters of the era, offer the opinions of several different members of society. Establishing connections between the representatives of these several groups reinforces the idea of a common outlook concerning land and resource use on the nineteenth-century frontier.

Soon after the United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from the French in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson turned to an account of the area by a French soldier and planter, Antoine Simon Le Page Du Pratz, to understand what the nation had bought. Du Pratz had served in Louisiana from 1718 until 1734, but his account of the area's geography, natural history, products, and peoples, *The History of Louisiana*, did not appear in English until 1774. Many of the subsequent traders and explorers to the area had read Du Pratz's ac-

<sup>1</sup>Here, progress is defined as the belief that land in its original state is a sign of barbarism, while land that has been "improved" by felling trees, planting crops, and displacing any unwanted plants and animals equates to civilization. Though American Indians modified the environment of the Old Southwest in a myriad of ways for centuries before the observers of our time period arrived, these Europeans and Americans did not consider these modifications as progress because they did not observe fenced fields with orderly rows of crops, domesticated grazing animals other than the horse, and the like. For more on this, see, e.g., Timothy Silver, *A New Face on the Countryside: Indians, Colonists, and Slaves in the South Atlantic Forests, 1500-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1983); and Dan Flores, *Horizontal Yellow: Nature and History in the Near Southwest*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

count before their travels, and at least one, Peter Custis, carried a copy with him.<sup>2</sup>

*The History of Louisiana* had a dual purpose. Partly, Du Pratz wrote to inform French readers about Louisiana in an effort to enlighten and provide reliable information. However, given the chronic shortage of French settlers throughout Louisiana's history, he no doubt hoped his glowing accounts of resources there for the taking would convince some of his compatriots to join him in the New World. Du Pratz's descriptions of nature were often practical in style. In his section on the natural history of Louisiana, his opening paragraph stated, "I shall now present the industrious planter with an account of the trees and plants which may be cultivated to advantage in those lands with which he is now made acquainted." Du Pratz proceeded to do so in this chapter and in many others. At one point, he devoted an entire paragraph to each major article Louisiana could furnish to the markets of Europe. This list included furs, bison robes, deerskins, wax, timber, pitch, tar, oak and cypress for shipbuilding, hemp, iron, saltpeter, silk, saffron, cotton, indigo, tobacco, rice, medicinal drugs, and dyes. Du Pratz claimed to have personally sent the French West India Company more than 300 botanical specimens believed to have medicinal value.<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the portion of the book dedicated to natural history begins not with the plant or animal species most prevalent in Louisiana or even those most unusual or interesting, but with those most profitable. This simple fact offers a view into the *mentalité* of at least one French resident of early Louisiana.

A close examination of some of the entries dedicated to commercial uses for Louisiana's natural resources also reveal some interesting insights regarding what Du Pratz considered proper use of the land. He lamented that cypress trees appeared only occasionally in Louisiana due to wasteful cutting. However, he did not regret the loss of the trees for their own sake, but rather for the fact that their scarcity had resulted in a tripling in the price of cypress wood.<sup>4</sup> Similarly revealing is a brief description of the mangrove. Unlike the magnolia, whose

<sup>2</sup>Antoine Simon Le Page Du Pratz, *The History of Louisiana, or of the Western Parts of Virginia, and Carolina* (New Orleans: Pelican Press, 1947), 201; Dan Flores, ed., *Southern Counterpart to Lewis & Clark: The Freeman & Custis Expedition of 1806* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 14, 65.

<sup>3</sup>Du Pratz, *History of Louisiana*, 201

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 217.

description covers parts of four pages (because it was believed to be a remedy against fevers), the mangrove was dismissed briefly after noting that, "it is more prejudicial than useful, inasmuch as it occupies a great deal of good land, prevents sailors from landing, and affords shelter to the fish from the fisherman."<sup>5</sup> While we can forgive Du Pratz for failing to realize the benefits of the mangrove in terms of preventing shoreline erosion and protecting coastal areas from high surf, we note his quick dismissal of the mangrove is based on the fact that it has no immediate monetary value compared to Louisiana's other floral resources. To note one more similar incident, during a 1718 excursion near Biloxi, Du Pratz searched a plain for items worth his attention. The only discoveries meriting mention were a pair of copper mines.

Winding forward the clock from Du Pratz's day to the year 1777, we next examine accounts of naturalist William Bartram's journeys throughout the American Southwest. Bartram was a member of the Atlantic scientific community of the late eighteenth century that, in accordance with the values of the Enlightenment, sought to describe and categorize the natural world. He communicated frequently with his fellow natural scientists in Europe concerning his travels and discoveries throughout the American landscape. The accounts given here are from his work in what is now Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. Much of this area had been part of France's claim to the whole Mississippi River Valley but had been ceded to the British in the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which ended the French and Indian War. The United States would take over the British claims to land east of the Mississippi River following the Treaty of Paris of 1783, which ended the Revolutionary War.

Bartram's descriptions of native plants and animals are much more complete and detailed than those of Du Pratz. While this is quite understandable, given Bartram's training and intent of providing useful knowledge to the trans-Atlantic scientific community, at times he too indicates a bias towards envisioning the landscape for its practical, i.e. commercial, value. For example, when journeying between the Oakmulge (today Okmulgee) River and the Great and Little Tobosochte Rivers in what is now southern Georgia, he wrote, "The territory through which we passed . . . exhibited a delightful ru-

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 223-224.

ral scene, and promises a happy, fruitful and salubrious region, when cultivated by industrious inhabitants, generally ridges of low swelling hills and plains supporting grand forests, vast Cane (native long grasses) meadows, savannahs, and verdant lawns.”<sup>6</sup> Bartram equated happiness and industrious cultivation, meaning that people could not realize the land’s full benefits as long as it remains in a state of nature, unfenced and untamed. He also used terms such as grand, vast, and verdant to describe the bounty of nature that this cultivation would produce. Bartram also saw the Indian inhabitants (members of the Creek Confederation) as not using the land to its fullest economic potential. Similarly, he later suggested that the lands inhabited by the Creeks, “present a magnificent and pleasing sylvan landscape of primitive, uncultivated nature.”<sup>7</sup>

Bartram struck a similar note when recounting his travels to Mobile in present-day Alabama:

The territory lying upon this creek and the space between it and the river, present every appearance of a delightful and fruitful region in some future day, it being a rich soil and exceedingly well situated for every branch of agriculture and grazing, diversified with hills and dales, savannahs and vast Cane meadows, and watered by innumerable rivulets and brooks, all contiguous to the Flint river, and arm of the great Chata Uche (Chattahoochee) or Apalachucla offers an uninterrupted navigation to the bay of Mexico and Atlantic ocean, and thence to the West India islands and over the whole world.<sup>8</sup>

Along the way to Mobile, he lodged with a family known for its hunting prowess. “The man and his three sons are famous hunters. I was assured from good authority that the old gentleman, for his own part, kills three hundred deer annually, besides bears, tygers and wolves.”<sup>9</sup> It is difficult to imagine a better example of how people saw their environment as a resource there for the taking. Although he was

<sup>6</sup>Francis Harper, ed., *The Travels of William Bartram* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 241.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 242-243.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

a naturalist by profession, Bartram apparently saw nothing incongruous in studying nature and observing this type of behavior. At least, if he did, his written records omit mention of the fact.

To be fair, we should recognize that in all of Bartram's narrative of his travels through the Old Southwest, there are only a few instances such as those already described. His overriding goal was the promotion of scientific knowledge rather than providing a road map to the most naturally advantageous locations for settlement. There are several passages of a purely descriptive nature, such as this when he reaches the banks of the Mississippi:

It is not the expansion of the surface alone that strikes us with ideas of magnificence, the altitude, and theatrical ascents of its pensile banks, the steady course of the mighty flood, the trees, high forests, even every perpendicular object, as well as societies, bear the stamp of superiority and excellence; all unite or combine in exhibiting a prospect of the grand sublime.<sup>10</sup>

Another piece of evidence showing that Bartram was not just interested in seeing nature converted into a cash commodity comes from his description of the *oenothera grandiflora* (largeflower evening primrose), which receives nineteen lines of text, but is praiseworthy only for its novelty, beauty, and pleasant scent.<sup>11</sup> However, while encouraging commerce was not Bartram's central mission, he believed in the importance and promotion of the correct use of the land under European and American settlement.

By the turn of the nineteenth century, most of the accounts of Lower Louisiana and the Old Southwest come from Americans active in the region. One such American was Philip Nolan. A Mississippian, Nolan spent the better part of the 1790s exploring and trading in Texas, sometimes with Spanish permission, other times not. His travels, documented in a series of letters, took him from the mouth of the Colorado River and San Antonio in southern Texas, to the Llano Estacado of western Texas, and on to the Taovaya-Wichita villages along the Red

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 271. To call something sublime was considered the highest complement of natural beauty and magnificence at this time; William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 73.

<sup>11</sup>Harper, *Travels of William Bartram*, 257-258.

River, near what is now the border with Oklahoma. In Nolan, we find many of the traits common to frontier traders of his day, as he mixed Indian trading, mustanging, and, on his final expedition (where he perished in a firefight with Spanish authorities in 1801 near the Brazos River), possibly mining. Over the course of these travels, he accumulated unparalleled geographic knowledge of the Texas frontier.

While first and foremost a trader in search of profit, Nolan's writings are not wholly destitute of broader observations. His knowledge of the wild mustangs of the southern plains brought him to the attention of Thomas Jefferson, who requested one in order to study the animal in its wild state. Though Nolan set out for Virginia in order to deliver a stallion to the future president, he made it only as far as Kentucky.<sup>12</sup>

Nolan's 1797 expedition helped map the region for U.S. officials. Before departing for the Texas plains in July, Nolan wrote James Wilkinson, the highest ranking officer in the U.S. Army, that

I have instruments to enable me to make a more correct map than the one you saw, Ellicott assisted me in acquiring a more perfect knowledge of astronomy and glasses; and Gayoso himself made me a present of a portable sextant. My timepiece is good. I shall pay every attention, and take an assistant with me, who is a tolerable mathematician.<sup>13</sup>

Nolan's expedition, besides acquiring roughly 2500 mustangs, provided the basis for a series of maps drawn for General Wilkinson, subsequently known as the "Burr maps" for their role in the Aaron Burr-Wilkinson conspiracy. Based on circumstantial evidence, however, it is entirely possible that mapmaking was merely a front for Nolan's trading activities, though both actions aroused the curiosity and suspicion of the Spanish authorities in Texas seeking to maintain a trading monopoly with the Indian nations of the upper Red River. The Spanish took this threat seriously enough to dispatch a force of 120 men, under the command of Lieutenant Miguel Musquiz, to go after Nolan. This resulted in the violent encounter with Nolan's 1801 trading expedition,

<sup>12</sup>Dan Flores, ed., *Journal of an Indian Trader: Anthony Glass and the Texas Trading Frontier, 1790-1810* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 13.

<sup>13</sup>Nolan to Wilkinson, April 24, 1797, cited in Flores, *Journal of an Indian Trader*, 12.



where the Spanish killed Nolan and imprisoned the rest of his party.<sup>14</sup> In any case, knowledge of geography and the natural terrain was clearly secondary to Nolan's primary purpose of making substantial money trading for horses with the Indians of Texas. He is an unambiguous example of those who desired to transform nature's bounty into a cash commodity, and his legacy to the future is the maps created with his knowledge, which allowed others to follow in his footsteps and do the same.

One of the most prominent figures on the southwestern frontier at the turn of the nineteenth century was Natchez resident William Dunbar, a Scotsman by birth and a member of the American Philosophical Society. President Thomas Jefferson turned to Dunbar first when planning an expedition in the newly-acquired Louisiana Territory, an undefined area broadly encompassing the western portion of the Mississippi River watershed. This area had been claimed by the French in the late seventeenth century but was ceded to the Spanish at the end of the French and Indian War. The French bought back the territory in 1800 and sold it to the United States three years later. In order to find out what their nation had bought, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn and Jefferson asked Dunbar to locate well-qualified local men to lead an exploration of the Red and Arkansas Rivers. Dunbar's response is interesting:

It is perhaps only a just diffidence to entertain doubts of the requisite qualifications of any persons to be chosen here whose circumstances render this employment desirable: for (unclear) this quarter there is a great dearth (unclear), the adventurers who come among us being (unclear) whose minds are already distracted with the making of fortunes at all hazards. Law Physic and (unclear) are the money making employments, and all tho' two of them are stiled Learned professions, yet rare are the examples here where their Votaries have devoted themselves to the study of Science, but just so far as it may be subservient to this all devouring passion of gain.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Flores, ed., *Journal of an Indian Trader*, 14-15.

<sup>15</sup>Dunbar to Dearborn, May 13, 1804, in *Life, Letters, and Papers of William Dunbar*, ed. Eron Rowland, (Jackson: Press of the Mississippi Historical Society, 1930), 128-129.

While most of Dunbar's letters to Jefferson discussed geography and natural science, even Dunbar occasionally described nature as a resource waiting for cultivation, extraction, or exploitation in the name of development and progress. At one point, he remarked, "plants useful for food in medicine, dying, & other arts are said to be in profusion along the known parts of the red river . . . . Salt is to be found in several forms."<sup>16</sup>

Unable to find suitable men to lead the exploration of the Red and Arkansas Rivers, Dunbar volunteered to join fellow Scotsman George Hunter, a Philadelphia chemist and apothecary, on the expedition. After trouble with the Osages along the Arkansas and disputes with the Spanish along the Red delayed the expedition, the pair proposed something of a trial run, an excursion up the Ouachita River, which flowed from what is now western Arkansas into present-day Louisiana. This operation took place in territory that was indisputably American and successfully mapped one of the waterways acquired in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Though primarily scientific in their outlook and observations, both Dunbar and Hunter had the tendency at times to see world around them in terms of commodities and its potential for economic exploitation. For example, on October 23, 1804, Hunter wrote, "The ground here is very rich & if it were to be defended by a dike or Bank would be inexhaustibly fertile."<sup>17</sup> Eleven days later, Dunbar described a stand of trees:

Thus the foliage of the hickory & the oak yielding the quercitron bark is changed before its fall to a beautiful yellow; other oaks assume a fawn color, a liver or blood colour, and are also known to yield dyes of the same complexion . . . and may therefore serve as an excellent guide to the Naturalist who directs his researches to the discovery of new objects for the use of the Dyer.<sup>18</sup>

On November 6, Hunter wrote in his journal an entry eerily reminiscent of William Bartram's description of the relationship between

<sup>16</sup>Dunbar to Jefferson, June 9, 1804, *ibid.*, 133-135.

<sup>17</sup>Trey Berry, Pam Beasley, and Jeanne Clements, eds., *The Forgotten Expedition 1804-1805: The Louisiana Purchase Journals of Dunbar and Hunter* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

industry and proper usage of the land. Near the military post at Miro (present-day Monroe, Louisiana), he stated,

The old settlers chiefly Canadian French appear to have little ambition, few wants, & as little industry. They live from hand to mouth & let tomorrow provide for itself . . . Their houses are cabbins, afford but little protection against the Winter . . . They are supplied from the woods during the hunting season . . . But at other times they are often very badly off for provisions, both Animal and Vegetable; for altho the earth would produce very well, yet their want of forethought & industry leaves them in want of almost every comfort.<sup>19</sup>

Dunbar, writing on November 11, sounds almost identical in his description of Fort Miro:

It is reported that here is a great deal of excellent land . . . a great part of the inhabitants still continue the old practice of hunting during the winter season, in the summer these people content themselves with making corn barely sufficient for bread during the year; in this manner they always remain extremely poor; some few who have conquered their habits of indolence (which are always a consequence of the indian mode of life) and addicted themselves to agriculture, live more comfortably & taste a little the sweets of civilized life.<sup>20</sup>

As good Jeffersonians, Dunbar and Hunter may have made this critique out of a conviction in the superiority of agriculture as the only true source of independence. Promoting Jefferson's ideal of the yeoman farmer was, after all, a prime justification for making the Louisiana Purchase that the two men were engaged in exploring. However, this does not contradict the explanation that they believed proper land use encouraged settlement and an advance towards a higher level of civilization. The commentary about Fort Miro, and the other relevant descriptions in their journals, typically frames the discussion as one of want and lack of civilization, not dependence and independence.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 49.

Towards the end of November, as the expedition made its way into what is now southern Arkansas, the party began to encounter deposits of low-grade coal, possibly lignite, which both Dunbar and Hunter noted. This was not unusual, as they carefully listed most mineral deposits, including iron ore, they found along their travels, but their journal entries here are noteworthy in that they spent a great deal of time describing this coal and their experiments on it, in an attempt to determine its value. Few other curiosities unearthed along the way received such careful attention in the journals. This holds true even for some food items like grapes, of which Dunbar wrote on December 1, "it is probable that a skillful Vigneron, who shall undertake the establishment of a Vineyard in a well-chosen position in this neighborhood, will find his labors amply compensated."<sup>21</sup> The next day, Dunbar observed, "salt-licks exist which may be rendered very productive; when this river comes to be settled, so necessary an article as marine salt will therefore be in sufficient abundance for the consumption of a full population."<sup>22</sup>

What is remarkable about these journal entries is not so much the fact that they identify potential commercial opportunities, but rather that they so clearly correlated the only valuable use of the land with work, industry, and increasing population. Based on their commentary, only a complete utilization of the available resources will suffice in their vision of a happy and prosperous society. The corollary to this is that those not conforming to this blueprint, whether slothful settlers or the Indians whose seasonal hunting way of life many of the settlers were mimicking, were not employing the land to its full potential.

Dunbar and Hunter never made the planned expedition up the Red River. They turned those duties over to younger men, Thomas Freeman and Peter Custis, who started their "Grand Excursion" in 1806. The journals of Freeman and Custis differ little from those of Dunbar and Hunter when it comes to connecting industriousness in agriculture with civilization. Approaching the frontier town of Natchitoches, Custis, who was the expedition's naturalist, wrote, "most of the Red River lands are either of a clayey or marlaceous soil and appear to be not worth cultivating, but far from it they are found to be more productive than the best Mississippi lands." The same day, Freeman described how the local Indian population, the Appalaches (a Creek group originating

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 91.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 93.

in Florida but displaced by the advance of white settlement), took advantage of their fertile surroundings: "These Indians appear to be rapidly advancing towards civilization; they possess horses, cattle and hogs; dress better than Indians generally do, and seem to derive a considerable portion of their support from the cultivation of the earth."<sup>23</sup> In essence, these native people were "advancing" by adopting the ways of their white neighbors and conforming to the prototype of success advocated by Bartram, Dunbar, and others.

Following the grueling but successful attempt to bypass the Great Raft on the Red River, Custis suggested that "one who has not passed through them cannot form an Idea of the great difficulty attending it, but when effected you are more than compensated by the beauty of the country." However, he quickly recovered from this rhapsodic outburst a few lines later when he suggested "were the Rafts removed so as to admit of navigation this country in a very short time would create the Paradise of America.—It stretches forth independence to every person who may please to settle in it."<sup>24</sup> Once again, the removal of natural obstacles would lead to progress in the form of white American settlement and industrious farmers who would bring paradise on earth. The native Caddo Indians, a largely sedentary farming people whose territory encompassed the Great Raft, apparently did not qualify for this paradise because of insufficient population and an incomplete notion of how to employ their land. Thus, they were invisible in Custis's vision of the future.

Freeman and Custis intended to establish official contacts with the Indian nations of the upper Red River, such as the Taovaya-Wichita and Comanche, but failed to do so when a superior force of Spaniards met them 615 miles up the Red River at Nanatsoho Bluff, which was quickly renamed Spanish Bluff because of the confrontation. The Spanish, disputing the U.S. claim to the entire of western drainage of the Mississippi Valley, barred them from further exploration.<sup>25</sup> This critical setback, while ending the explorations of Freeman and

<sup>23</sup>Flores, *Southern Counterpart to Lewis & Clark*, 112.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 154. The Great Raft was the enormous tangle of logs and debris, probably formed between 1100 and 1200, that built up over time when logs became snagged on the frequent sandbars in this section of the Red River. It had grown to about 100 miles in length when Freeman and Custis arrived in 1806.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

Custis, did not prevent individual traders from following in the footsteps of Philip Nolan onto the plains of central Texas.

In 1806, one such mustang trader, an American named John Lewis, reported to Indian Agent John Sibley of Natchitoches that the area would not only support large, populous settlements, but that quantities of silver ore existed as well. That news, along with the favorable prices offered for wild mustangs, set the stage for the Anthony Glass expedition of 1808. Glass, a merchant from Vicksburg residing in Natchez, undertook an expedition up the Red River to trade with the Indians and possibly smelt silver as well. Despite the misgivings of a few officials, Glass's travels and journal would provide the United States with the information and Indian contacts its official explorations were unable to produce.<sup>26</sup>

Glass's journal itself is hardly a work of literature. It contains frequent descriptions of commercially valuable animals and the quality of the land, while mentioning little or nothing of items that lacked any kind of practical use. Glass recorded nothing about weather, temperature, or even his companions. There are a few ethnographic descriptions of the Indians with whom Glass lived and traded with from August to October 1808, but even those entries largely pertained to those natural resources such as salt and bison to which the Indians had access. The entry from December 30 serves as a typical, though somewhat longer, example. On that day, Glass recorded, "we have now left the waters of the Colorado and are now on the Brassos a broken hilly country no wood but Musquette except in the river or creek bottoms—the country is excellent Pasturage but good for little else."<sup>27</sup> The implication is that the lack of wood limited the possibility of settlement and that land fit only for grazing cattle did not conform to notions of industrious progress.

The larger implication of the activities of traders like Glass, Nolan, Lewis, and their ilk was the commodification of nature on the Texas plains. To them, mustangs were just like the beaver of the Rocky Mountains, the bison of the Great Plains, or the whales chased

<sup>26</sup>Flores, *Journal of an Indian Trader*, 26-29. What Lewis took to be silver was most likely an iron-nickel meteorite, according to Dan Flores. Rumors of silver in the area, though, persisted over several generations; *ibid.*, 88-89.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 76.

by sea captains all around the world's oceans. As historian Dan Flores tells it,

Masses of metal—like mustangs or beaver pelts—were only objects of booty to men who sought to divert the wealth of the wilderness into their pockets. Fired by the most speculative of capitalist drives, the packtrain traders of the Texas wilderness . . . represented the cutting edge of American culture . . . in that part of the world.<sup>28</sup>

General James Wilkinson termed them “adventurous desperadoes . . . like the ancient Goths and Vandals” who sacked Rome.<sup>29</sup> This indicates that to Wilkinson, these frontier traders represented the opposite of civilization and progress. In any case, these rough characters (or advance agents of civilization, in Frederick Jackson Turner's scheme), however barbarous they appeared to more cultured observers such as Wilkinson, were merely putting into practice the values articulated by men such as Dunbar and Bartram, though trade, rather than agriculture, was their chosen medium. If progress consisted of a growing population and the exploitation of natural resources, these frontier men truly were the thin edge of the wedge.

Retreating eastward from the Texas hill country to the lower Mississippi River Valley once again, the writings of a few more individuals serve to reinforce these conclusions. In 1807, a Philadelphian named Fortescue Cuming began a journey that took him over the Appalachian Mountains and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers before returning to his native city in 1809. His description of the land between the St. Francis and White Rivers in what is now eastern Arkansas offered a prescription for total use of the natural resources. During the dry season, the owner should take advantage of the nutritious prairie grasses to graze sheep or cows, as the local landscape can feed “innumerable cattle.” When the waters of the great rivers inundate the land, fish abound. As the water recedes, that is the time for planting rice.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, a short time later Cuming arrived at the

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>29</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, 99, the quote originates from James Wilkinson, “Reflections on Louisiana,” March 1804, quoted in *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785-1807*, ed. James Robertson (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clarke Co., 1911), 2: 347.

mouth of White River where, because of an unfortunate decision from Governor Wilkinson, economic progress was at a standstill. Wilkinson had evicted French, Spanish, and American settlers, along with their slaves, prompting Cuming to conclude, "This was bad policy, as the White River lands were in such repute, that a great settlement would have been formed there ere now."<sup>31</sup>

In the course of Cuming's narrative, he constantly mentioned how beautifully situated some locations were for settlement. He also related that the people of Palmyra, in Mississippi Territory, were successfully engaged in cotton farming and clamoring for more land. Presumably, they also wanted more slaves to grow the cotton for them. Virtually everyone he lodged with during his travels tried to convince him to settle in the Mississippi Territory in hopes of adding one more productive cotton plantation. All this is in marked contrast to Cuming's descriptions of non-domesticated animals and native flora, because both are rare. Additionally, there is little or no speculation on how or why the landscape appears as it does, with the lone exception of the possible impact of disease.

A short time after Cuming's expedition, Major Amos Stoddard offered his *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* to the reading public. In this 1812 work, the author devoted chapters to commerce and manufactures, land titles, boundaries, and mineral riches. There were no corresponding discussion of natural flora or non-commercial fauna, though the concluding chapter offered up speculation on the existence of a Welsh Nation of Indians in America.<sup>32</sup> His book, as much or more than any considered thus far, offered the most frequent and explicit statements tying land use to human progress. At one point, he stated, "Among civilized nations the right derived from discovery is as conclusive & indisputable as that derived from purchase, especially if succeeded by possession."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Stoddard followed this statement with the assertion, "Agriculture, commerce &

<sup>30</sup>Fortescue Cuming, *Sketches of a Tour to the Western Country through the States of Ohio and Kentucky; a Voyage down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and a Trip through the Mississippi Territory, and part of West Florida, Commenced at Philadelphia in the Winter of 1807, and concluded in 1809, with a Notice of an Expedition through Louisiana* (Pittsburgh: Cramer, Spear, and Eichbaum, 1810), 271.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>32</sup>Presumably, Stoddard is referring to the Mandan Indians of the upper Missouri River Valley, who were the occasional object of speculation of this nature.

<sup>33</sup>Amos Stoddard, *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia: Matthew Carey, 1812), 131.



manufactures, are hardly known in the province of Texas; and without them no country can expect to flourish.”<sup>34</sup> Left unsaid, but surely understood by his American readers, was the notion that the Spanish (soon to be Mexicans) in possession of Texas were not taking full advantage of that area’s natural endowments. In between resounding affirmations of the sanctity of land possession and improvement, Stoddard provided lists and descriptions of the commercial agricultural opportunities in Louisiana, including sugar cane, cotton, tobacco, indigo, corn, and rice. Conversely, local animals did not merit similar mention, with the exception of domesticated species and those animals that people could hunt.<sup>35</sup>

To close out the examination of how writers and travelers of the early nineteenth century viewed the natural world, we turn to William Darby, a member of the New York Historic Society and author of *The Emigrant’s Guide to the Western and Southwestern States and Territories*, which appeared in 1818. His book was just as pro-settlement and pro-development as Stoddard’s, only considerably more quotable. It offered up the usual paeans to the salubrious climate and land of the Old Southwest. However, it began with statistical information on the settled counties of the southwestern frontier, offering information on acreage, population, descriptions of types of land, and average crop values. There follows a listing of trees suitable for timber cutting; the Gulf Coast states offer thirty-seven species with which to tempt potential immigrants. In Darby’s opinion, “only a few years have elapsed since this region was opened to the inspection of civilized man.” Yet in that short time, “the great natural meadows of Louisiana and Texas, have at length arrested the attention of mankind; and will, no doubt, in a few revolving years, exhibit, on an immense surface, cultivated society, where, from countless ages, the wild beasts of the plain and forest were pursued by the prowling savage.”<sup>36</sup>

Though certain of the eventual outcome, Darby realized that much work remained if Americans were to spread the benefits of civilization over the frontier. “The journey from New Orleans to the mouth of the Sabine, exhibits man in every stage of his progress, from the palace to

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 194.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 180-183.

<sup>36</sup>William Darby, *The Emigrant’s Guide to the Western and Southwestern States and Territories* (New York: Kirk and Mercein, 1818), 49-50.

the hut.”<sup>37</sup> Because the American Indians, dwelling in “huts,” were at the earliest stages of progress and making no use of the land in Darby’s eyes, they forfeited their claims to legitimate possession of their lands. “When the Indian claims are extinguished, this state will possess 28,480,000 acres of land; some part of which equals any soil in the world, and most of it capable of becoming the residence of an active race of human beings.”<sup>38</sup> Beginning the preceding quotation with the word “when” rather than “if” suggests that Darby saw this transfer of lands as inevitable. Men such as Darby and Stoddard simply had no tolerance for anyone who did not conform to their ideal of active use of the landscape.

Observers of the old American Southwest frequently described the natural landscape in terms of its economic value. Some writers had a less blatantly commercial outlook than others, but the fact remains that the desire to commodify nature is present in the writings of each. This is not unique to the southwestern frontier in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, by any means. In fact, the ubiquity of this outlook, from the forests of Maine to the mangrove swamps of Louisiana, testifies favorably to extending the conclusion offered earlier by historian Dan Flores concerning the grizzled traders of the Texas borderlands.<sup>39</sup> He believes that the prime motive of these frontier traders was to convert the animal resources of the Texas plains into a cash commodity, and the evidence presented here indicates that these rugged frontiersmen shared many of the same beliefs as their social betters in terms of how to make use of their environment. While it is proper to temper the severity of this judgment in regards to naturalists such as Bartram and Dunbar, who wrote mainly for the scientific community, their writings offer glimpses of the themes developed fully by the likes of Darby and Stoddard. It would be unfair to excoriate these individuals for not measuring up to our present ideals concerning land use and preservation. Such concepts were not on their ideological radar. Regardless, we cannot ignore the fact that their ideology of commodification was the same one that would result in the extermination of nearly every bison herd south of the Canadian border and nearly every mus-

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>39</sup>For an example of this phenomenon in the northern colonies, see the chapter entitled “Taking the Forest” in Cronon, *Changes in the Land*.

tang on the southern plains by the end of the nineteenth century. Regardless of what they actually intended to portray, these travelers saw nature as there for the taking.

We can extend this idea of judging nature by its commercial value to include a description of the proper method to develop the land. The authors in this study explicitly identified industrious cultivation with progress, and the lack thereof with sloth, backwardness, and barbarism. This vision of how to develop the landscape completely, achieved through resource development and population growth, indicates that many observers in the lower Mississippi Valley, and the societies they represented, were ideologically prepared for active participation in the market economy of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Though they themselves regarded this system of land exploitation as the natural workings of progress and civilization, after this attitude took root, it was simple enough to go from developing the natural world to overexploiting its wildlife and landscape in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fueled by increasingly complex technologies. Recognition of this is important not to specifically condemn the settlers of two centuries ago for failing to realize an environmental consciousness acceptable to the reader of today. Rather, this knowledge is critical in order to understand how the settlers of two hundred years ago envisioned productive land use and how their outlook contributed to the society of succeeding generations in the Old Southwest.