

Alexis de Tocqueville on Transportation in America

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Alexis de Tocqueville on Transportation in America

by
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Introduction

Alexis de Tocqueville is best known for *Democracy in America*, which he wrote after spending 10 months of 1831 and 1832 in the United States on a mission from France to study American prisons (then considered progressive). He also wanted to see "what a great republic is like." Tocqueville's report on American prisons is largely forgotten. But the other product of his trip, *Democracy in America*, is considered a classic—an astute picture of American life, as relevant today as when the first edition was published in France in 1835.

Just one problem. It's boring. Eight hundred pages long, but good luck getting through the first 100. Moreover, by looking up "Tocqueville" in any good book of quotes, you can pick up enough brilliant sayings to hold you. Here's a couple from *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*:

America is a land of wonders, in which everything is in constant motion and every change seems an improvement. The idea of novelty is there indissolubly connected with the idea of amelioration.

Democratic nations care but little for what has been, but they are haunted by visions of what will be; in this direction their unbounded imagination grows and dilates beyond all measure . . . Democracy, which shuts the past against the poet, opens the future before him.

If I were asked . . . to what the singular prosperity and growing strength of that people [the Americans] ought mainly to be attributed, I should reply: to the superiority of their women.

The love of wealth is therefore to be traced, as either a principal or accessory motive, at the bottom of all that the Americans do; this gives to all their passions a sort of family likeness.

You get the idea.

And don't worry, Tocqueville rarely comes up in everyday conversation. If you don't bring him up, no one else will. So don't waste time on his classic! If you even know *Democracy in America* exists, you'll be well ahead of most people you're likely to meet during the rest of your life!

On The Other Hand

At the same time he was doing some deep thinking about democracy, Tocqueville's travels in the company of his friend Gustave August de la Bonniere de Beaumont allowed him to experience all modes of transportation in 1830's America. George Wilson Pierson, in his 1932 study *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (reprinted as *Tocqueville in America* by the Johns Hopkins University Press in 1998) provided the details based on surviving journals and letters. Pierson covered all the subjects Tocqueville and Beaumont commented on, including their travels.

The question Pierson does not attempt to answer is how Tocqueville wrote such a great book even though, from a transportation standpoint, his trip through the country was a nightmare. He experienced every transportation disaster

imaginable on the roads, rivers, and canals of the time-except being seriously injured or killed. Even the trip from Havre to New York got off to an inauspicious beginning. As explained by Pierson, the ship ". . . which had been due to sail at noon on the second of April, was delayed in getting off, missed the turn of the tide, and promptly ran aground in Harve harbour." When it did finally get underway again, Tocqueville became seasick.

The Travels

In America, the pair found that travel, particularly by road, was far more primitive than in Europe. For example, of a stage journey in New York, Tocqueville noted:

Trail infernal, carriage without springs Tranquility of the Americans over all these inconveniences. They seem to bear them as necessary and passing evils.

Beaumont, while the pair traveled from Albany to Buffalo, wrote to his sister of the condition of the roads-and commented on the American attitude toward trees and forests:

If ever the taste for travelling takes you, I do not counsel you to choose the part of America where I am now. The roads are fearful, detestable, the carriages are so rough that it's enough to break the toughest bones. I told Jules in my last letter the places we passed through as far as Utica, where I finished my letter to him. At the risk of repeating the same thing, I must try to give you an idea of the country I have traversed. I was saying to Jules that I seemed, in travelling, to be passing through a forest in which there was but one single road; as a matter of fact I should not know how to convey my thought more clearly. It is certain that here the natural state of the earth is to be covered with woods Thus it's against the woods that all the energy of civilized man seems to be directed There is therefore in America a general feeling of hatred against trees They believe that the absence of woods is the sign of civilization; nothing seems uglier than a forest; on the contrary, they are charmed by a field of wheat

Tocqueville and Beaumont decided to travel to Michigan where they hoped to finally come across the untouched wilderness of North America. They met with Major John Biddle of the land office to request help planning their trip to the wilderness. To avoid arousing suspicions, they told Major Biddle that they were thinking of settling in the country. The Major showed them a section on a map of the St. Joseph River and assured them that the road to the area was so well kept that stages pass on it every day. The travelers had learned their lesson. Tocqueville recalled, "Good! say we to ourselves, we already know where we must not go, unless we want to visit the wilderness in the mail coach."

Next, they asked Major Biddle which part of the district had seen the least immigration. He suggested the district to the northwest as far as Pontiac, but discouraged them from going beyond that point. "The United States is planning to open a road there in the near future," he said, "but it's only just been begun and stops at Pontiac. He again discouraged them, but "we knew ourselves determined to go just contrary to it"

On July 23, they rented two horses for their 10-day journey. Tocqueville commented on the trip to Pontiac, which they reached after sundown:

On your way you encounter new clearings from time to time [As you approach a clearing] traces of destruction proclaim with even greater certainty [than the ringing of the axe cutting the forest trees] the presence of man. Chopped branches cover the road

Arriving in Pontiac, "We had ourselves taken to the Yellow Inn, the finest in Pontiac (for there are two)." Tocqueville and Beaumont again introduced themselves as interested in buying land. They offered this deception because, "Our travelling clothes and our guns hardly proclaimed us business men, and to travel to sightsee was something absolutely unusual."

When they told their host they wanted to go to Saginaw, he protested that it was "hardly credible" that two educated foreigners would go there. When they asked why not, their host explained, "Do you know that Saginaw is the last

inhabited place till the Pacific Ocean; that from here to Saginaw hardly anything but wilderness and pathless solitudes are to be found?"

Realizing the travelers could not be dissuaded, their host gave them directions "with admirable practical sense" for crossing the wilderness. He even "entered into the smallest details and foresaw the most fortuitous circumstances." The next day, as they prepared to depart, he again tried to discourage them, but they set off in spite of his warnings. Tocqueville recalled:

When after fifty yards I turned my head, I saw him still planted like a hay stack before his door. Shortly he went in, shaking his head. I imagine he was still saying: I understand with difficulty what two foreigners are going to do at Saginaw.

During the first part of the journey, they were frightened by an Indian who, for reasons never explained, ran along just behind them. Finally, they came to the little clearing of two or three cabins known as Flint River. On the advice of a resident, Tocqueville and Beaumont secured the services of two Indians to guide them to Saginaw along "a narrow path, scarce recognizable to the eye." Tocqueville explained what the journey was like:

Our two guides walked or rather jumped before us like wildcats across the obstacles in the path. Did a fallen tree, a stream, a marsh present itself, they pointed out the best way, crossed themselves, and did not even look back to see us get out of our difficulties.

He contrasted the experience with being on the sea, where a voyager can contemplate a vast horizon. "But in this ocean of foliage who can indicate the road?" The farther they went, the more obscure it became:

The path we were following immediately became more and more difficult to recognize. At each instant our horses had to force a passage through thick clumps or jump over the trunks of the immense trees barring the path.

Finally reaching Saginaw, they stayed longer than expected to give one of their horses time to recover from a saddle sore. By the time they were ready to leave, their guides had disappeared. Tocqueville and Beaumont decided to go anyway. "In general there is but one path in these vast solitudes; and it's only a matter of not losing the trail to reach the end of the journey." They reached Detroit on July 31.

Of course, they weren't always traveling through wilderness. After spending some time in Philadelphia, they headed for Pittsburgh with the intention of continuing on to New Orleans and then traveling through the South. Beaumont described the trip across Pennsylvania:

My journey from Philadelphia to Pittsburg [sic] is one of the most arduous that I have taken, the roads are detestable, the carriages even worse. We travelled night and day during three times twenty-four hours. At 30 leagues from Philadelphia we encountered the Allegheny mountains, where we were pounced on by a horrible cold. During almost all the remainder of the journey we proceeded in the midst of a perpetual tornado of snow such as had not been seen for a long time, especially at this season of the year.

Their journey to New Orleans was little better. In fact, it was an ordeal they could not have imagined.

They decided to travel by steamboat to Cincinnati. Pierson suggests two possible reasons.

Perhaps there was no other adequate transportation available. Quite as likely the two commissioners had begun unconsciously to absorb some of the even-tempered equanimity of fatalistic Americans.

At Cincinnati, they had intended to leave the steamboats and travel overland, but were assured that such a trip would be "horribly difficult" and that the roads were "detestable." They decided to continue by steamboat to the Mississippi

River and continue by ship to New Orleans. The first leg of the trip was to Louisville, Kentucky, a short journey on a steamboat that offered such amenities as a bed and three good meals. (Beaumont observed that, "There is, of course, the men's side and the women's side; as in the public baths. The two sexes come together only to eat. As the Americans are not chatterers it's seldom that a man speaks a word to a woman, even when they both know each other.")

By the time they neared Louisville, the Ohio River was blocked by ice. Passengers were taken ashore at Westport, about 25 miles east of Louisville, and left to find their own way to their destination. Beaumont explained that, "After much looking... we succeeded in getting a wagon, in which we put our trunks and our night bags." Tocqueville described the trip:

Our traveling companions, to the number of ten, came to the same decision, and there we were all marching, on foot, in the midst of the woods and mountains of Kentucky, where a loaded wagon had never been since the beginning of the world. It got through, however, thanks to the good shoulder shoves and the daring spirit of our driver; but we are marching in the snow, and it was up to our knees.

Having finally reached Louisville, they decided to head overland to Memphis rather than wait for the ice blocking the Ohio River to clear. Considering the alternatives, Beaumont said, "we did not hesitate." He added:

One hundred and fifty leagues, about, separate the two towns; the journey had to be made by the most abominable roads, in the most infernal carriages, and above all in the most unbelievable cold you can possibly imagine.

The climate seemed to have turned "upside down just for us," he said. "The further we advance toward the South the more bitter the cold becomes."

It was a journey to remember, as detailed by Beaumont:

Frightful roads. Perpendicular descents. Way not banked; the route is but a passage made through the forest. The trunks of badly cut trees form as it were so many guard-stones against which one is always bumping. Only ten leagues a day. "You have some very bad roads in France, haven't you?" an American said to me. "Yes, Sir, and you have some really fine ones in America, haven't you?" He doesn't understand me. American conceit.

After 2 days and 2 nights, they reached Nashville, only to discover that once again, the river they intended to travel, in this case the Cumberland, was frozen. They would have to continue to Memphis in a charabanc-a carriage with open sides. As Pierson noted, "It was a demonstration of how little prepared they were in Tennessee for zero weather."

Beaumont reported that between Nashville and Memphis, the travelers saw "not a town on the way." They passed through "a few villages, scattered here and there, all the way to Memphis." When they reached a village called Sandy Bridge, about a third of the way to Memphis, Beaumont wrote of the difficulties encountered thus far:

Tocqueville and I found ourselves with several other travelers, going night and day, and rivaling each other freezing when, to warm us up, fortune sent us three small accidents which almost caused us to get stuck on the road. First the traces, then a wheel, then the axle-tree of our carriage broke. By means of some oaks cut in the forest, which follows the whole road, we managed to repair our poor cart, which was in pieces, *limping with all four feet*, on our arrival at this place. So long as they have not repaired the limbs of our carriage we must resign ourselves to staying here.

Half the journey, he said, had been "covered on foot." He added:

We blame our bad luck. Go ahead and complain, we are told; day before yesterday two travelers on the road broke, one an arm, the other a leg.

Sandy Bridge was "nothing but a small inn, built of logs placed one on top of the other, and situated on the road" between Nashville and Memphis. Tocqueville had become ill and was unable to get warm. They stayed in a room with "three beds, on which stopping travelers throw themselves, whatever their number or sex."

On December 15, Tocqueville was well enough to travel. Beaumont's narrative continued:

The stage from Nashville to Memphis passes. What a stage! Tocqueville climbs in, not without pain. The cold is still intense. Journey of two days and two nights. New accidents, not serious but not without discomfort.

On the 17th, they reached Memphis. Not only was the Mississippi River covered with ice and navigation suspended, but Memphis was a small town. Beaumont observed, "Nothing to see, neither men nor things."

They were stranded in Memphis until December 25, when navigation resumed on the Mississippi. Tocqueville summarized his exasperation:

You know, my dear friend, that our intention was, on leaving Philadelphia, to go to New Orleans and pass two weeks there but, shipwrecked at Wheeling, stopped by the ice at Louisville, held back 10 days in Memphis, we were a hundred times on the point of giving up the trip that we had undertaken. We were going to turn back on our steps when . . . a steamboat took us on board and offered to carry us down to Louisiana

"Here we are," Tocqueville wrote to his mother on Christmas day from the steamboat *Louisville*, "the signal has been given, and here we are sailing down the Mississippi [sic] with all the speed that steam and the current united can give a vessel." Beaumont was equally happy to be on the move again, describing the *Louisville* as "a magnificent steamboat," with vast, well-decorated cabins. He promised to describe "the incidents of the voyage, if any arise." It was inevitable that an incident would, indeed, "arise."

On the clear moonlit night of December 26-27, 1831, the *Louisville* became stuck on a bar, where it remained for 2 days. Tocqueville, who attributed the incident to "the implacability of fortune," described it in a letter:

In the night of the 26-27 December, in the most beautiful moonlight that ever lit up the solitary banks of the Mississippi, our boat suddenly touched bottom and, after tottering a while like a drunken man, established herself tranquilly on the bar. To describe our despair at this affair would in truth be a difficult matter: we prayed to the heavens which said not a word, then to the captain, who sent us to the pilot. As to the latter, he received us like a potentate.

When they asked the pilot how such a blunder could occur on a moonlit night, he blew "a cloud of smoke in our faces [and] observed peacefully that the sands of the Mississippi were like the French and could not stay a year in the same place." Tocqueville took this as a slight, but had little choice but to await the freeing of the *Louisville*, which took 2 days. They reached New Orleans on January 1, 1832.

Pierson summarized the travelers' experience of steamboats:

Tocqueville and Beaumont had now seen about everything there was to see, experienced almost all the dangers, learned everything there was to learn about that extraordinary institution: the American river steamboat. They knew it could race, refuse to set passengers ashore, turn around in mid-voyage, explode, get caught in the ice, run aground, and sink. Sometimes it was the quickest way to suicide. Most generally it enabled you to cover unbelievable distances with a speed and comfort that excited admiration. But once in a while it held you like a prisoner, arrested your journey, and drove you almost crazy with impatience.

After a shortened stay of only 3 days in New Orleans, Tocqueville and Beaumont traveled by stagecoach to Mobile, Montgomery, and Fort Mitchell, Alabama, then turned toward South Carolina. At Mobile, they found the stagecoach too crowded to take them. However, two courteous passengers gave up their seats to Tocqueville and Beaumont. They made rapid progress, having crossed the South and reached Norfolk, Virginia, in just 12 days. They had little time to write or take notes during the overland journey. However, after reaching Virginia, Tocqueville wrote:

I have just made a fascinating but very fatiguing journey, accompanied each day by the thousand annoyances that have been pursuing us for the last two months; carriages broken and overturned, bridges carried away, rivers swollen, no room in the stage; these are the ordinary events of our life.

It was, he thought, amazing:

The fact is that to traverse the immense stretch of country that we have just covered, and to do it in so little time and in winter, was hardly practicable. But we were right because we succeeded: there's the moral of the story.

Beaumont, in a letter to his father, described their effort to reach Charleston, South Carolina:

Our plan was to stop at Charleston, but on the way toward that city we were held back en route by several accidents like overturned bridges, impassable roads and smashed carriages, so that our advance was slowed down, and we calculated that if we delayed any longer in getting to Washington we wouldn't reach it soon enough to listen to the interesting discussions just now taking place in Congress.

While traveling in the Carolinas, Tocqueville had an opportunity to discuss America's roads with a distinguished traveling companion, Joel Roberts Poinsett. He had represented South Carolina in the U.S. House of Representatives (1821-1825) and served as Minister to Mexico (1825-1829). Although little known today, he gave his name to a flower, the poinsettia, he discovered in Mexico. Tocqueville had met Poinsett in Philadelphia, where Poinsett explained the country's westward expansion.

Now, they met again. Pierson speculated that the meeting took place at a tavern. "An accident, a broken wheel or perhaps a washed-out bridge, had interrupted their progress." Whatever the circumstances, Tocqueville and Beaumont had another opportunity to talk with Poinsett about a variety of subjects, including roads. At the time, Congress and the States were debating what to do about the deteriorating National Road (Cumberland, Maryland, to Vandalia, Illinois). With railroads beginning to dominate surface transportation, no one wanted to pay to maintain the National Road. Ultimately the Federal Government upgraded the road from east to west before turning it over to the States to operate as toll roads:

Q. How are roads made and repaired in America?

A. It's a great constitutional question whether Congress has the right to make anything but military roads. Personally, I am convinced that the right exists; there being disagreement, however, practically no use, one might say, is made of it. It's the States that often undertake to open and keep up the roads traversing them. Most frequently these roads are at the expense of the counties. In general our roads are in very bad repair. We haven't the central authority to force the counties to do their duty. The inspection, being local, is biased and slack. Individuals, it is true, have the right to sue the communities which do not suitably repair their roads; but no one wants to have a suit with the local authority. Only the turnpike roads are passable. The turnpike system of roads seems to me very good, but time is required for it to enter into the habits of the people. It must be made to compete with the free road system. If the turnpike is much better or shorter than the other, travellers will soon feel that its use is an economy.

These exchanges are typical of how Tocqueville formed his ideas about America. As he traveled, he interviewed informed people about whatever their areas of knowledge were. One commentator explained this method by saying, "He asked questions, he observed, he travelled, in order to reason."

In Washington, Tocqueville and Beaumont met President Andrew Jackson, observed the Senate and House of Representatives, and participated in the city's social life. They were not much impressed. Beaumont described the President as "an old man of 66 years, well preserved, and appears to have retained all the vigour of his body and spirit" and said that although he was not "a man of genius," he had formerly been "celebrated as a duelist and hot-head." They considered it a positive feature of the capital that it was a "small town" where political debates could take place free of the pressures of a large city.

By this time, Tocqueville and Beaumont looked forward to their return to France. On February 3, 1832, before dawn, they took a stagecoach to Philadelphia, then to New York City. The *Havre*, which had brought them to the United States, was coincidentally the ship that would take them home. Its scheduled departure, however, was delayed 10 days, providing the last of the travel problems Tocqueville and Beaumont were to experience in America. The *Havre* set sail on February 20. This time, Pierson observed, "no mismanagement, no untoward accidents seem to have marred their passage."

Tocqueville on Transportation and Communication

While stuck in Memphis, Tocqueville had taken time to note his observations and conclusions about the United States. He noted that in the wildest American forests, he and Beaumont had observed "an astonishing circulation of letters and newspapers." This suggested a theory on how to increase public prosperity. Political ideas for this purpose were "so general, so theoretical, and so vague that it is difficult to draw from them the least profit in practice." He concluded:

I know but one single means of increasing the prosperity of a people that is infallible in practice and that I believe one can count on in all countries as in all spots. This means is naught else but to increase the ease of communication between men.

On this point the spectacle presented by America is as curious as it is informing. The roads, the canals and mails play a prodigious part in the prosperity of the Union. It is well to examine their effects, the value set on them, and the manner of obtaining them.

America, which is the country enjoying the greatest sum of prosperity ever yet accorded a nation, is also the country which, proportional to its age and means, has made the greatest efforts to procure the easy communication I was speaking of In America one of the first things done in a new State is to have the mail come. In the Michigan forests there is not a cabin so isolated, not a valley so wild, that it does not receive letters and newspapers at least once a week; we saw it ourselves.

With regard to the construction of "some immense canals" and railroads, Tocqueville observed that, "Of all the countries of the world America is the one where the movement of thought and human industry is the most continuous and swift." By contrast with other parts of the country, the States of the South, "where communication is less easy, are those that languish by comparison with the rest."

Because Americans are "entrepreneurs, who feel the need of means of communication with a vivacity, and employ them with an ardour," Tocqueville said, "The effect of a road or a canal is therefore more felt, and above all more immediate, in America than it would be in France."

Tocqueville also commented on how transportation was provided in the United States. Although governments in the United States did not attempt "to provide for and execute everything," they did take responsibility for the "great works of public utility." States built canals and the "great roads leading to distant points." He added:

Note well, however, there are no rules in this matter. The activities of companies, of communities, of individuals contribute in a thousand ways to those of the State. All the enterprises of moderate scope or limited interest are the work of communities or companies. The turnpike or toll roads often parallel the State roads. The railroads set up by companies carry on in certain sections of the country the work of the canals over the main arteries. The county roads are kept up by the districts through which they pass.

No exclusive system, then, is known here. Nowhere does America exhibit that systematic uniformity so dear to the superficial and metaphysical minds of our day.

Tocqueville did not want to imply that his thoughts on the subject of transportation and communication as a source of prosperity were original:

To come back to the roads and all the other means of carrying rapidly from place to place the produce of industry and of thought, I do not pretend to have made the discovery that they served the prosperity of a people. That's a truth universally felt and recognized. I say only that America makes you put your finger on this truth, that it throws the fact more in relief than any other country in the world, and that it is impossible to travel through the union without becoming convinced, not through argument but by the witness of all the senses, that the most powerful, infallible way of increasing the prosperity of a country is to favour by all possible means a free intercourse among its inhabitants.

Tocqueville had another thought about their travels while traveling by boat from Norfolk to Washington. In recent years, he had experienced frail health, but in a letter to his sister-in-law, he observed that "I have not been as well as during the two months just elapsed." His good health, despite the difficulties of his travels, suggested a project:

If ever I write a book of medicine, I undertake that it will not resemble those published every day. I shall argue and prove that in order to be well one must first dine on corn and pig, eat little, much, not at all, as opportunity offers; bed on the floor and sleep with one's clothes on; pass in a week from ice to heat and from heat to ice; put one's shoulder to the wheel or wakeup in a ditch; above all not *think*, that's the main point; bury oneself in nature as much as possible; resemble, if one can, an oyster.

Conclusion

These theoretical ideas were one thing. As for what Tocqueville thought of his experience of American roads, he left this observation in *Democracy in America*:

I know of no people who have established schools so numerous and efficacious, places of public worship better suited to the wants of the inhabitants, or roads kept in better repair.
