

THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN TOURISM:

New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790-1830.

Richard H. Gassan,
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This is a slim, tightly structured, well researched book that may appear from its title to be only a footnote to the larger topic of tourism. It is more than a footnote, however; it is, instead, a necessary but often neglected chapter to an understanding of the beginnings to one of our most important service industries in the United States. The author, Richard H. Gassan, places the origins of American tourism in upstate New York during the early 19th century, a time of which “there was a definite shift in how Americans sought our goods and experiences”. It was a time, in fact, for “the beginnings of a profound societal shift, as America firmly embarked on the road to a modern consumer society”. Tourism took hold in the Upper Hudson Valley, and due to its initial success, spread out, in time, throughout the nation. Some may argue that the origins of tourism began much later in our history than is presented in this book. However, Gassan explains

I am pushing back the first emergence of American tourism decades earlier than has generally been thought. Although the kind of tourism . . . is not the mass tourism of later eras, it was in fact the model for everything that followed.

As such, it is instructive to include a historical background for an understanding of the importance that early tourism made to its development in the United States, and the role it played in producing an American consumer society.

Richard Gassan, a historian, wrote the original text as a doctoral dissertation at the University of Massachusetts – Amherst. In the present book under discussion, (undoubtedly revised for the general reader) he identifies three elements that came together simultaneously in one location at one time documenting America’s earliest tourism experience. Each element relied on the other two to make it happen. The setting, Gassan’s first element, is the “compelling destination” of Ballston Spa, in Saratoga county, located in upstate N.Y. It was here that America’s “first major hotel outside a city” was built, in 1804. As such, its “isolated location” was a major factor why those that went there did so: for non-business reasons — in other words, as tourists. The “wild” beauty of the natural landscape along the shores of the Hudson River, and that found at the destination itself, attracted members of the upper class mainly from New York City and Boston. The curative powers associated with the waters of Ballston Spa, and the possibilities of meeting potential marital partners were two additional motivating factors for choosing to make

the journey. The sparsely populated Upper Hudson Valley, at that time, was an escape from the hustle and bustle of the big cities especially, indeed exclusively, to those who could afford the time and cost of travel, and, of course, the expenses incurred at the destination itself. The author builds his thesis convincingly, drawing upon archival records and diaries written by early visitors to Ballston Spa, (and, shortly, to nearby Saratoga Springs and the surrounding area). By the 1820s, “the region had the largest non-urban concentration of hotels in the country,” often, as it turned out, filled to capacity during what became the summer tourist season.

The second element crucial for the success of this (and any future) tourist destination was the transportation infrastructure. Travel by steamboat on the scenic Hudson River for most of the trip (and coaches on non-river portions of the journey) made possible arrivals and departures relatively easy, and fast. Thus, in telling the history of American tourism, Gassan pays due attention to its geographical aspects — namely, the spatial dimension of the early tourists origins and destinations, and the travel connections between them. The final element, what Gassan refers to as “cultural infrastructure”, can be argued, as geographical, too, although not usually taken into account. Its manifestations came primarily from the widely read regional literary writings of Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper, and the regional paintings of Thomas Cole and others of the Hudson River School (a half dozen reproduced in Gassan’s book). The aforementioned were tourists, themselves, to the Upper Hudson Valley and the soon-to-be tourist sites beyond including Niagara Falls, and the Catskills. Somewhat later, the White Mountains of New Hampshire, and Newport, Rhode Island were to expand the tourist region, as well. As before, members of the upper class were the first to seek out these locations only to be followed, beginning in the 1830s, of mass tourism. Improvements in transportation and the growing popularity of artistic renderings of the region along with the publication of America’s first guidebooks, contributed to the growing number of pleasure seekers — much to the chagrin of the upper class who initially sought solitude, and exclusivity.

Although the publishing of *The Birth of American Tourism* came shortly after Theodore Corbett’s *The Making of American Resorts: Saratoga Springs, Ballston Spa, Lake George* (2001), Gassan provides a fresh approach (one that may appeal especially to geographers) to understanding why upstate New York became the first, highly successful tourist destination, and later, its expansion beyond to what he identifies as part of “The Fashionable Tour” of nearly two centuries ago.

I believe Gassan’s contribution to be a valuable addition to the bookshelf of those teaching tourism. Its modest cost (in soft cover) makes possible its use as a supplement to tourism courses, especially appropriate for those taught in the Northeast quadrant of America.