



*Aristocracy  
on the  
Saginaw Trail:*

ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE  
IN MICHIGAN

Written By: John Fierst

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who inspired this exhibit  
and whose support  
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Thanks also to Larry Wyckoff  
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of Tocqueville's journey  
for Judge Cohn

Image of Tocqueville's *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*  
Manuscript, Title Page

# Quinze Jours dans le désert.

Écrit sur le Steamboat the Superior  
Commencé le 1<sup>er</sup> août 1831.

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Une des choses qui jusqu'<sup>alors</sup> le plus vivement notre curiosité en venant en Amérique c'était de parcourir les extrêmes limites de la civilisation européenne et même, si le temps nous le permettait, de visiter quelques unes de ces Tribus indiennes qui ont mieux aimé fuir dans la solitude la plus sauvage que de se plier à ce que les blancs appellent les délices de la vie sociale mais il est plus difficile qu'on ne croit d'en rencontrer aujourd'hui dans le désert. à partir de New York et à mesure que nous avançons vers le Nord ouest le but de notre voyage semblait fuir devant nous nous parcourions des lieux célèbres dans l'histoire des Indiens; nous rencontrions des vallées qu'ils ont nommées; nous traversions des fleuves qui portent encore le nom de leur Tribu; mais partout, la hute du sauvage avait fait place à la maison de l'homme.

Portrait of Alexis de Tocqueville



Sketch of Alexis de Tocqueville on Horseback



*Two Weeks in the Wilderness*, “Quinze jours dans le désert,” written by Alexis de Tocqueville and published after his death by Gustave de Beaumont, his friend and traveling companion in America, describes the journey on horseback the two men took from Detroit to Saginaw in 1831, a journey that actually occurred over a period of nine days, from July 23 to July 31. Tocqueville began to write *Two Weeks in the Wilderness* right after their return to Detroit, on board the steamboat *Superior* heading toward Lake Huron. At the heart of this poetic essay lies Tocqueville’s reverent response to the vast forested wilderness of North America.

“*In this ocean of foliage, who can point the way? Where should one direct one’s eyes? In vain you climb the tallest trees, only to find yourself surrounded by others still taller. To no avail you climb the hills, for the forest climbs with you everywhere, and this same forest stretches from where you stand all the way to the North Pole and the Pacific Ocean.*”

*Two Weeks in the Wilderness* (also translated from the French as *A Fortnight in the Wilds*) first appeared in print in the year after Tocqueville died, 1860. Beaumont had it published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The Chateau de Tocqueville, located on the Cotentin peninsula in Normandy, France, donated an autographed copy of the final manuscript, along with the entire family-owned archival collection, to the Archives de la Manche in Saint-Lo, where it is available to researchers.

Tocqueville’s travels in Michigan were part of an extended sojourn he and Beaumont made through the United States. They left France on April 2, 1831, and returned in March, 1832. They came to the United States to examine the American prison system. That was their commission. Tocqueville’s true aim was to study the young American democracy itself and to compare it to that of France. He had written a friend before leaving,



Chateau de Tocqueville

“*We are going with the intention of examining in detail and as scientifically as possible the entire scope of that vast American society which everybody talks about and nobody knows.*”

His efforts to understand the transformations taking place in this era of democratic revolutions would result in his classic work *Democracy in America*, published in two volumes, the first in 1835 and the second in 1840. A brilliant, if subtle, visionary, Tocqueville saw great merit in the American system but also recognized its vulnerabilities. He accepted the spread of democracy as inevitable—

“*I am firmly convinced that the democratic revolution which we are now beholding is an irresistible fact, against which it would be neither desirable nor prudent to contend*”

—but, given his aristocratic background and the experiences of his family in revolutionary France, he was not democracy’s unquestioning advocate.

# Tocqueville's Background



Alexis de Tocqueville

Alexis-Henri-Charles Clérel, Comte de Tocqueville, was born in Paris in 1805 to French nobility. Hervé de Tocqueville, his father, descended from Normandy's rural aristocracy. His mother, Louise de Rosambo, was the grand-daughter of Guillaume-Chrétien Lamoignon de Malesherbes, who served during the French Revolution as chief counselor to Louis the XVI at his trial. Later, during the Reign of Terror, Malesherbes, like the king he had defended, was guillotined, along with both of Louise de Rosambo's parents, her sister, and her sister's husband (the older brother of the writer François-René de Chateaubriand). Louise de Rosambo and Hervé Tocqueville themselves were imprisoned at Port-Libre, where they waited in fear of their own day on the scaffold, which never came.

The French Revolution led to the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte, whose defeat at Waterloo in 1815 led in turn to the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. Under the Bourbons, Hervé Tocqueville prospered. In 1826 Hervé was appointed prefect of the Seine-et-Oise and the following year was made a member of the Chamber of Peers. Hervé had his son Alexis, who had studied law, appointed *juge-auditeur* at the Versailles prefecture, a minor magistrate's office where he could further his career. There Tocqueville met and made friends with Gustave de Beaumont, who also came from a noble background. Beaumont, three years older than Tocqueville, was friendly, intelligent, and honest, and had advanced rapidly in his legal career. When they met, he was a deputy prosecutor at the Versailles prefecture and Tocqueville's immediate supervisor.

Biographer Hugh Brogan sees in their friendship an attraction of opposites: Tocqueville drawn to Beaumont's "sunny solidity," Beaumont finding in Tocqueville "an intellectual brilliance" which he could not match, though their intellects were alike and they shared interests, concerns, tastes, and ambitions. After their journey to the United States, it was out of friendship for Beaumont that Tocqueville decided not to publish *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*. Beaumont in 1835 had published *Marie or, Slavery in the United States: A Novel of Jacksonian America* that employed many of the same settings and events found in *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*. Beaumont felt *Two Weeks* would outshine his novel, and Tocqueville out of concern for his friend put aside the idea of including it as an appendix in volume two of *Democracy*.

In 1830 the political climate in France shifted again with the July Revolution and the overthrow of Charles X. Charles was replaced by his liberal cousin Louis-Philippe. The House of Bourbon was replaced by the House of Orléans; and in the administration *Legitimists* were replaced by *Orléanists*. Tocqueville and Beaumont were *Legitimists*, and out of favor. After much anguish, Tocqueville reluctantly took an oath in support of the Orléanist regime. But given his background he remained under government suspicion.



Gustave de Beaumont

# Journey to America

Tocqueville concluded it would be better to leave France until the political situation sorted itself out, and at the end of August he and Beaumont agreed on a journey together to North America. The two men were able to persuade the minister of the interior, Camille de Montalivet, to grant them permission to undertake the journey. Montalivet allowed them eighteen months leave of absence. The official reason for their leave was to study the prisons of the United States, considered at the time the most advanced in the world. They would bear the cost of the journey themselves.

On May 9, 1831, they arrived in Newport, Rhode Island, after thirty-seven days crossing the Atlantic. The next day they took a steamboat, the *President*, down to Manhattan and remained in New York City until the end of June. By that time they had accomplished what they had needed to there. They had toured the city's prisons and asylums, and they had spent hours reading books and reports at the public library. All the while they had been sought after by New York's "smart society"—"like hares with a pack of hounds at their heels," according to Tocqueville.

Auburn Prison

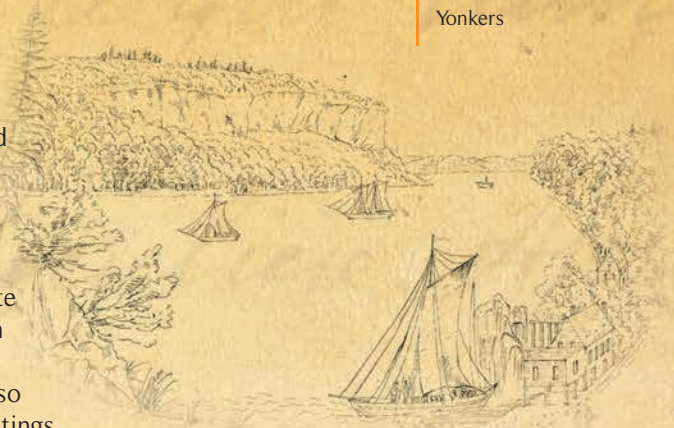


New York City was the gateway to the interior. Their plan now was to visit Niagara Falls, stopping at Auburn prison along the way, and returning to the United States by way of Canada. When they left the city on June 30, they had never heard of the Saginaw Trail and had no intention of setting foot in Michigan Territory, though Tocqueville already had sensed the importance of the movement of Anglo-Americans westward. As he stated at the beginning of *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*, they had "the idea of exploring the outer limits of European civilization and even, if time allowed, visiting some of the Indian tribes that had fled into the vast open spaces of the continent rather than submit to what the whites called the pleasure of life in society."

## Chateaubriand

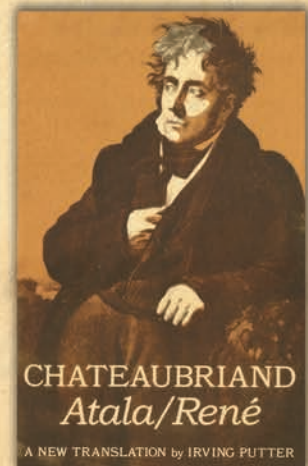
On the way to Albany, they stopped at Yonkers to shoot birds for Beaumont to sketch and then boarded a steamboat, the *North America*, at Colwells. They would have known they were following the same route from the Hudson River to Niagara Falls that Tocqueville's celebrated relative François-René Chateaubriand had followed in 1791. They were familiar with Chateaubriand's writing on America, especially his "Indian" novellas. *Atala*, the story of two young Indian lovers in the wilds of North America, had brought Chateaubriand overnight fame when published in 1801. A second novella, *René*, followed, the story of a disconsolate young Frenchman who runs off to live with the Natchez Indians in Louisiana. Chateaubriand's epic of the New World, *Les Natches*, was belatedly published in 1826-27, and his *Travels in America* also in 1827. Chateaubriand's sublime descriptions in his "Indian" writings had popularized in France a lavish, romantic, vision of North America's native inhabitants.

Yonkers



It comes as no surprise that he had a formative influence on Tocqueville. Chateaubriand's powerful writing, his exuberant embrace of the emotions and the imagination, which inspired the Romantic movement, would influence generations of readers in Europe. Chateaubriand was thirty-seven years older than Tocqueville, yet their lives followed similar paths. The French Revolution had interrupted Chateaubriand's career just as the July Revolution interrupted Tocqueville's. They were both liberal aristocrats living through the fall of traditional monarchies. Both escaped the political turmoil of their times by journeying to America and turning to writing afterwards.

Chateaubriand  
*Atala/René*



Chateaubriand felt an affinity toward Native Americans. In their bold spirit and love of freedom, he saw his own spirit and love of freedom, in their oppression, his oppression. European elites had experienced their own persecution and exile and had fought to preserve their way of life, their ideals, in the face of revolutionary change. Chateaubriand's fictive Indians were not Rousseau's noble savages, virtuous icons of a peaceful primitive past. His fictive Indians were passionate hunter-warriors, proud, courageous, independent, and free—natural aristocrats. Tocqueville in his time would extend this aristocratic ideal. "No one more pointedly made the analogy of Indian and European aristocratic ethos than Tocqueville," wrote Harry Liebersohn, "no one more effectively linked the condition of native people to a critique of Anglo-American conquest."

## Trip across New York

Tocqueville and Beaumont reached Albany on July 2. There they gathered a "multitude" of documents; attended a meeting of the Shakers, who Beaumont decided must be mad; and walked with the city's dignitaries as honored guests in a Fourth of July parade. Two days later they set out for Utica by stagecoach.

"These are carriages with suspensions made entirely of leather, which proceed at a good clip along roads as dreadful as those of Lower Brittany," Tocqueville wrote to his mother. "Within a few miles your bones are shattered." But he was quite taken by forests he was encountering. "It was our first trip inland," he continued. "In one of my letters I think I lamented that there was virtually no more wood to be found in America. Here I must confess that I was wrong. Not only is there wood, and woods, in America, but the entire country is still nothing but one vast forest in which a few small areas have been cleared. When you climb to the top of a steeple, you see nothing but treetops undulating in the wind like ocean waves, as far as the eye can see."

Tocqueville was a romantic. He had read James Fenimore Cooper. The bad roads they were traveling on led them up the Mohawk River Valley, the setting for *The Last of the Mohicans*. He was anxious to meet Cooper's Iroquois or Chateaubriand's aristocrats of the forest. The first Native Americans they saw, they met near Oneida Castle, a small Indian village. These were two Indian women, barefoot, wrapped in woolen blankets in the middle of July. "They begged for handouts," wrote Tocqueville, "and were as inoffensive as their fathers had been fearsome." A similar encounter would occur later in Buffalo. Tocqueville was quick to blame their fallen condition on the attitudes of the whites, their "almost impenetrable insensitivity."

The two friends traveled all of July 6 to reach Syracuse that evening. The next day, July 7, they had two interviews with Mr. Elam Lynds, who had spent ten years as a prison administrator and was regarded as the father of the American penitentiary system. Before leaving Syracuse for Auburn, they made a side excursion of twelve miles to Lake Oneida. As a boy Tocqueville had read *Voyage d'un Allemand au Lac Onéida*, the story of Louis des Watines, a nobleman driven from France by the "violent upheavals" of the revolution. Watines had moved his family in 1792 to an island, now called Frenchman's Island, in the middle of Lake Oneida. The story captivated Tocqueville, speaking perhaps to his own desire to escape the tempests of Europe.

He and Beaumont rowed out to Frenchman's Island. Tocqueville partly believed he might find the Frenchman and his wife still living on the island. "Domestic happiness, the charms of marriage, and love itself mingled in my mind with the image of the lonely isle, on which my imagination had created a new Eden." The reality behind the story was not as romantic as he imagined. Watines had stayed on the island for only a year. Tocqueville would later write *The Journey to Oneida Lake*, a companion piece to *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*. Oliver Zunz in an introduction to Tocqueville's companion narratives remarked on Tocqueville's style:



Lake Oneida

“One discovers in these two texts that the austere classicism of much of *Democracy in America* was far from Tocqueville's only stylistic register. We see instead the full impact of Romanticism on the young Tocqueville, who was capable of a lush, descriptive lyricism reminiscent of Chateaubriand.”





# Map 1

## Journey from New York to Michigan.

They reached Auburn on July 9 and studied the prison for a week until July 16 when they traveled on to Canandaigua and spent two days in the home of John Spencer, a lawyer active in New York politics whom they had met in Syracuse. Spencer was to become a great resource for Tocqueville in discussing the American system of government. He would arrange for the publication of the American edition of *Democracy in America*, in 1838 and 1840, for which he would prepare an introduction and notes. He later would serve in the cabinet of President Tyler. Beaumont quickly became enamored of Spencer's daughter, writing to his mother of Mary Spencer's "pink and white complexion that you sometimes see in Englishwomen and that is almost unknown in France." Given this attraction, he and Tocqueville decided that it would be better if they hurried off to Buffalo.



John Canfield Spencer

Their route across New York had followed roughly that of the Erie Canal. But they had chosen to go by stagecoach rather than be confined by canal boat. Tocqueville had expected to find in America as he traveled westward representative communities of all the stages through which American society had evolved, each link in the chain, from eastern urban cities down to hunters' settlements on the edge of civilization.

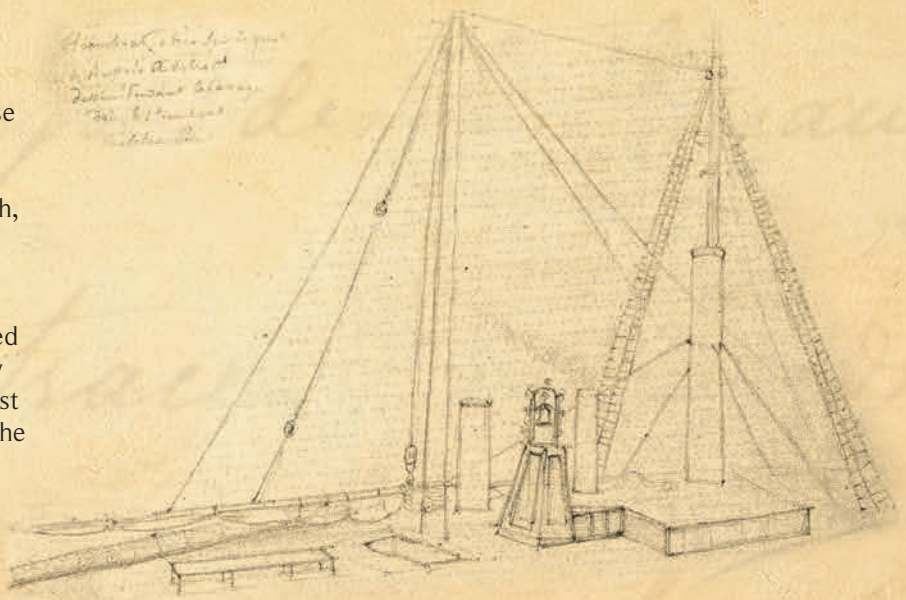
## Transformation

Instead he found a single society. "The man you left on the streets of New York is likely to turn up again in the depths of an almost impenetrable wilderness: the same clothes, the same mind, the same language, the same habits, the same pleasures." He and Beaumont were witnessing the speed of American expansionism, the spread of the American settler empire, and were finding it hard to locate untouched wilderness, much less, unspoiled Indians. Their frustration explains in part their abrupt decision to visit Michigan Territory. Tocqueville would have been aware of the flow of New Yorkers in Buffalo who were headed to Michigan. Had he and Beaumont traveled by canal packet the gravity of this "settler movement" would have been apparent earlier.

At the close of the War of 1812, several factors discouraged emigrants from venturing to Michigan Territory. For one thing, it was difficult to get there. The Black Swamp along the southern shore of Lake Erie made traveling by land impractical, and sailing across Lake Erie, assuming one could get to Lake Erie, was an unpredictable, often hazardous, adventure. Most of the tribes in Michigan had allied themselves with Great Britain in the late war, and although an armistice between former enemies had been signed, hostile feelings still smoldered, and that hostility made it difficult for the U.S. to survey the country it now governed. It was also rumored that the land in the interior of Michigan was unhealthy and unproductive.

Tocqueville and Beaumont entered Michigan at an early stage in its great transformation. By the time of their visit, most obstacles to emigration had been removed. The fear of a return to war with Great Britain and her Indian allies had dissipated. Millions of acres of land had been taken in treaty from the Indians, including most of the Saginaw Basin in the 1819 treaty. The opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, connecting east and west by water, made large scale emigration to Michigan possible, which guidebooks promoted. Steamships crossed Lake Erie regularly from Buffalo to Detroit, the main port of entry, where the newcomers were temporarily accommodated. An estimated 5,000 emigrants arrived in muddy Detroit between May and July the year of Tocqueville's visit, 1831. Most of southern Michigan had been surveyed and described, and many unimproved roads into the interior now existed. These newcomers transformed the forests and oak savannas of southern Michigan into a land of small farms, expanding a once simple fur-trading economy into one based on commercial agriculture. All these changes, led Michigan's population to rise from less than 9,000 in 1820 to nearly 400,000 by 1850.

It was in the middle of this transformation that Tocqueville and Beaumont on July 19 boarded the *Ohio* at Buffalo and steamed onto the agitated waters of Lake Erie, hugging its southern coastline, the immense forests forming "a thick and virtually continuous girdle around the lake." They reached Erie, Pennsylvania on the twentieth, Cleveland on the twenty-first. The next morning they passed Middle Sister Island. "Near the place," Tocqueville jotted in his notebook, "where the English were defeated in a naval battle." Not long afterwards they reached the Straits: "the flat Canadian coast seemed to hasten toward us, while ahead the Detroit River beckoned and the houses of Fort Malden loomed in the distance." At three o'clock they arrived at Detroit. "We had crossed the entire state of New York and traveled a hundred miles on Lake Erie and had by now reached the limits of civilization. But we had absolutely no idea where we ought to go next."



Sketch of a steamboat from Buffalo to Detroit

They had traveled those many miles, “in search of savages and wilderness,” to use Tocqueville’s words. In his writing Tocqueville used the rhetoric of “civilization and savagery” typical of his time. *Savage*, generally taken to mean, cruel, fierce, inhuman, has its roots in the Latin *silvaticus*, belonging to a wood, pertaining to the forest. In the rhetoric of the early nineteenth century the term was often used to denigrate, and this is true in places in Tocqueville’s writing, but Tocqueville primarily used the term to distinguish between European and non-European. Tocqueville expected to find Native Americans “on whom nature had left traces of the proud virtues that the spirit of liberty fosters,” but what will impress him most on this journey into Michigan will be the immensity of the forests and the force of the settler empire beginning to be established. Instead of confirming his ideals, his passage through Michigan Territory will temper his romanticism. He will leave Chateaubriand behind in the forests of Saginaw. *Two Weeks in the Wilderness* was transitional, pointing toward the mature reasoning of *Democracy in America*.

## Detroit at the Time

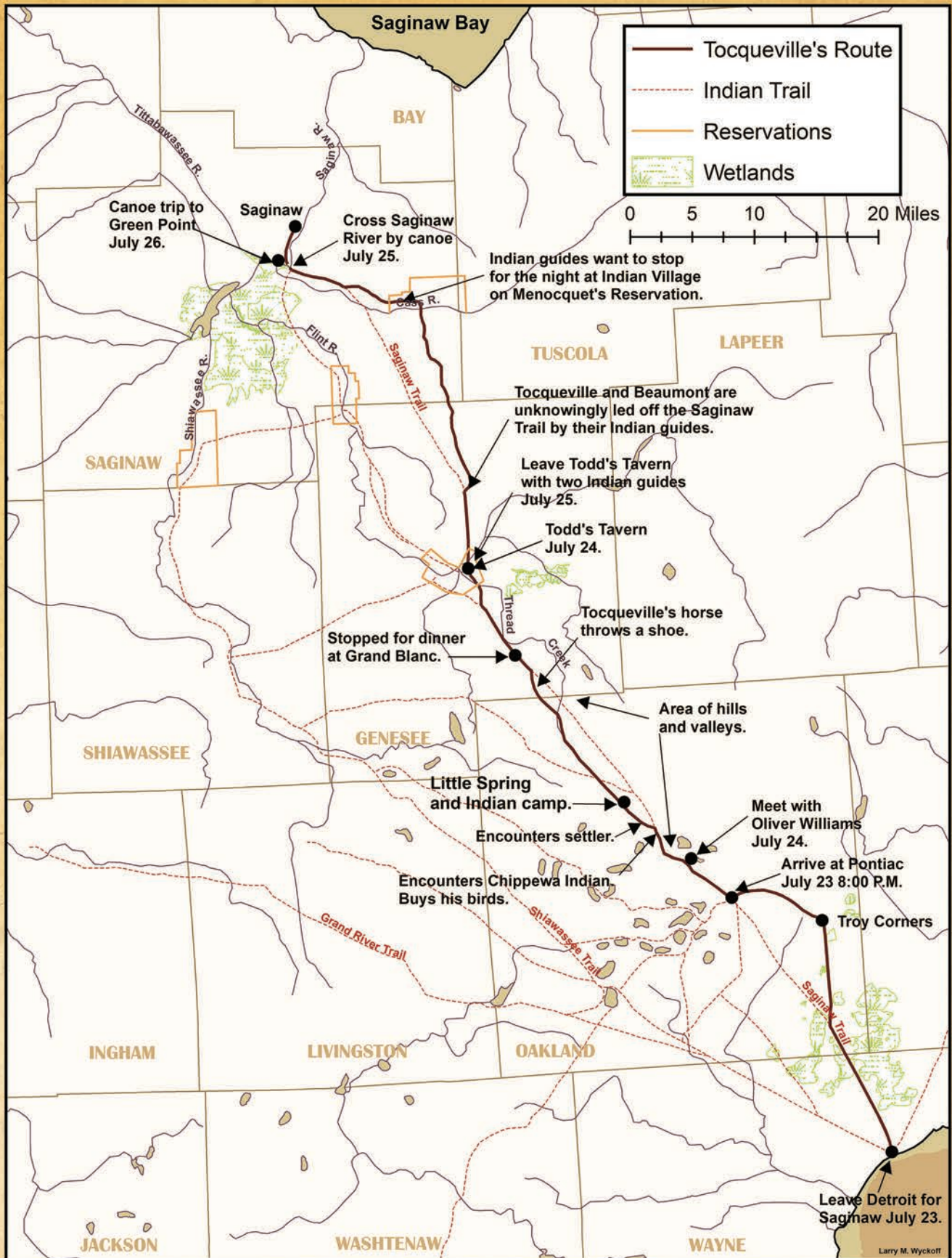
When he arrived in Detroit, he, of course, knew none of this. Instead he and Beaumont faced much discouragement. They found it impossible to explain their purpose to the hardheaded Yankees they met and were thwarted in their attempts to get information. “An American,” Tocqueville complained, “thinks nothing of hacking his way through a nearly impenetrable forest, crossing a swift river, braving a pestilential swamp, or sleeping in the damp forest if there is a chance of making a dollar . . . . But the urge to gaze upon huge trees and commune in solitude with nature utterly surpasses his understanding.” “‘If it’s woods you want to see,’ our smiling hosts advised us, ‘just follow your noses and you’ll find all the woods you could possibly want.’” At St. Anne’s Church they called on father Gabriel Richard and found him in his presbytery teaching a small class of children. He had left France when the Revolution began persecuting the Catholic clergy. He spoke their language, yes, but his rambling conversation about converts left their questions unanswered.

They did better when they disguised their purposes. The next morning they made their way to the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Randolph Street to the U.S. Land Office and presented themselves as land seekers to the register, John Biddle. “Major Biddle, as this official called himself,” wrote Tocqueville, “had no trouble grasping what we were after and immediately offered up a wealth of details, to which we listened avidly.” Biddle was not the gullible bureaucrat Tocqueville presented in *Two Weeks in the Wilderness* but one of Detroit’s leading citizens. He was born into the prominent Biddle family of Philadelphia, the brother of Nicholas Biddle who would war with President Jackson over the Bank of the United States. He had graduated from Princeton, had served under General Scott on the Niagara Frontier, had been the Mayor of Detroit, and at the time of the interview with Tocqueville and Beaumont was Michigan’s Territorial Delegate to Congress. He showed them a map and advised them to consider the St. Joseph River area in southwestern Michigan, where “some fine villages had already gone up.” From his advice, Tocqueville now knew “which way not to go, unless we want to travel to the wilderness by postal coach.” Feigning a casual indifference, they asked Biddle about the area that had drawn the fewest emigrants. “Over this way,” he said, pointing to the northwest, the country surrounding Saginaw Bay.



John Biddle

“Recently some fine settlements have sprung up as far out as Pontiac and thereabouts, but you mustn’t think of settling any farther out than that. The territory is blanketed by virtually impenetrable forest, which runs off interminably to the northwest, and out that way you’ll find nothing but wild animals and Indians. The federal government is planning to build a road up that way any day now. But the work has only just begun and goes no farther than Pontiac, as I was saying. You’d best cross that district off your list.”



## Map 2

Journey of Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont from Detroit to Saginaw, 1831.

Beside themselves with joy “finally to have learned of a place that had not yet been inundated by the flood of European civilization,” they went off to purchase supplies for the journey: cushions, a compass, brandy, sugar, ammunition, mosquito nets, and straw hats. They then hired two horses and left Detroit at eleven o’clock. They traveled a mile to where the cultivated fields behind the city reached the edge of the forest. Rifles and game bags slung over their shoulders, they entered the woods headed in the direction of Troy Corners (Troy today) on the way to Saginaw.

Tocqueville interrupted his narrative at this point to describe a typical settlement, a typical settler, a typical settler’s wife, and the inside of a typical settler’s cabin. The original draft of the manuscript did not include these insertions. Personal reflections break up the narrative line in many places. *Two Weeks* was not simply jotted down. Tocqueville had time afterwards to reflect on his experience and to shape the narrative. He set the image of the stoical but greedy axe-wielding American settler against almost mystical descriptions of the forest. The essay is a despairing salute to a world under assault. The tone is humorous but accusatory in places and in others, especially in his descriptions of the doomed forests, dark and melancholic, but heartfelt, not elegiac.

## La Pontiac

The goal that first day was to reach the Flint River by way of Pontiac. Tocqueville wrote that the terrain was “perfectly flat and frequently swampy.” It must have been hot and dry that day crossing the stretch of the trail between what is now Highland Park and Royal Oak, for they didn’t complain about the condition of the road, unlike so many other travelers. Sherman Stevens remembered the mud being so deep there “that every few rods the wagons had to be pried up, and it was night before we reached Royal Oak.” “The country lying between Detroit and Royal Oak was called the swamp in those days,” wrote William McCormick. Another traveler claimed it was the worst section between Detroit and Pontiac —“the mud was so deep one span of horses could not draw the wagon through.”

Tocqueville was interested in the clearings Americans were making along the way, noting in particular the destruction done to the forest.

A clearing



“From the clang of the bells that the pioneers fasten about the necks of their livestock so that they can find them in the dense forest, you know well before reaching it that a clearing lies ahead. Soon you hear the sound of an axe striking a tree, and as you draw near, signs of destruction herald the presence of man still more unmistakably. Tree trunks scorched by fire or mutilated by axes line your route. You continue on and come eventually to a patch of wood where all the trees seem to have been struck dead at one fell swoop. It is the middle of summer, yet their withered branches give the impression of winter. On closer examination it emerges that a deep cut has been made in the bark to stop the flow of sap, causing the trees to perish soon thereafter.”

Near Troy, before they stopped for dinner, they passed a family taking tea at the door of a log cabin. Tocqueville observed in the settlers he was encountering a “strange mixture of comfort and poverty.” “Americans in their log cabins,” to him, looked “like rich people who have decided to spend a season in a hunting lodge.” After Troy, they entered the forest again, traveling “through delightful swampland, like English gardens.” They reached Pontiac at eight o’clock that evening. Pontiac was not the edge of civilization. It was a growing community with a gristmill and a sawmill on the banks of the Clinton River, a newspaper, a school, and two inns, in one of which Tocqueville and Beaumont stayed. The village was founded by the Pontiac Company made up of several principle men in Detroit, among them Solomon Sibley, William Woodbridge, Austin Wing, and Major General Alexander Macomb. Tocqueville described the town as “Twenty very neat and quite pretty houses, enclosing an equal number of well-stocked stores, a clear stream, a square clearing a quarter of a league on a side, and the eternal forest all around.”

avec peine ce que de ces étrangers sont  
saint à Saginaw.

28.

ou nous avait recommandé de nous  
adresser à un M<sup>r</sup> Williams, qui  
avait fait long temps le commerce  
avec les Indiens Chipeway et avait  
un fils établi à Saginaw pour lui  
nous fournir des renseignements  
utiles. après avoir fait quelques mille  
dans les bois, et comme nous craignons  
de ne pas avoir manqué la maison  
de notre homme, nous rencontrâmes  
un vieillard occupé à travailler à un  
petit jardin. nous l'abordâmes. c'était  
M<sup>r</sup> Williams lui-même. il nous  
reçut avec une grande bienveillance  
et nous donna une lettre pour son  
fils. nous lui demandâmes si nous  
n'avions rien à craindre des peuplades  
indiennes dont nous allions traverser  
le chemin. M<sup>r</sup> Williams nous dit  
avec une sorte d'indifférence  
non! non! dit-il vous pouvez  
marcher sans crainte. pour ma part  
je dormis plus tranquille que  
onzième de l'indien que des blancs.  
Je note ici parce que je ne disais  
comme la première fois une  
favorable que j'ai reçue des  
<sup>Indiens</sup> Indiens d'un de nos amis en  
Amérique. Dans les pays très habités  
on ne parle d'un quaker ou meluz



He and Beaumont kept up their charade about an interest in buying land and got into a lengthy conversation with the inn's landlord, who probably had land to sell them nearby and could not fathom why they wanted to go to Saginaw. He was patient with their many questions: explaining how the thousands who enter the wilds of America go about finding a place to live; how it is a few itinerant preachers set up camp meetings and bring to the area what little religion one finds there; why it is American emigrants who travel to the area and not Europeans—the answer, Americans alone “have the courage to subject themselves to such misery and pay such a price for prosperity”; how the forest fever, ague, strikes everyone in the autumn of their first year and how there is no doctor to help them. “Often the nearest doctor is sixty miles away. They [settlers] do as the Indians do: die or recover as God wills.” Battling “ague” or “chills and fever”—the landlord was referring to what is now identified as malaria. The new environment required *seasoning*, a period of sickness for the body to adjust to the area's native ailments, a crucial and perilous process.

The landlord after a while grew impatient with Tocqueville and Beaumont's insistence on going to Saginaw: “You want to go to Saginaw” he exclaimed at last, “To Saginaw Bay!” Two rational men, two well-bred foreigners, want to go to Saginaw Bay? He could scarcely believe such a thing. . . .

“*Do you have any idea what you're in for? . . . Do you know that Saginaw is the last inhabited place between here and the Pacific Ocean? That between here and Saginaw there's nothing but wilderness and trackless waste? Have you given any thought to forests rife with Indians and mosquitoes? Do you realize that you'll have to spend at least one night sleeping on the damp ground? Have you thought about the fever? Can you find your way in the wilderness, or will you lose yourselves in the labyrinth of our forests?*”

“At the conclusion of this tirade,” wrote Tocqueville, “he paused to gauge the impression he had made. Undaunted, we continued: ‘All that may be true. But we're leaving tomorrow morning for Saginaw Bay.’”

In the morning they set off again on the Saginaw Trail which continued northwest out of Pontiac. “We'd been advised,” wrote Tocqueville, “to look up a Mr. Williams, who had long traded with the Chippewa and had a son living in Saginaw, in the hope that he might provide us with useful information.” They rode through forest for less than four miles to where the trail skirted the south shore of Silver Lake and where they “spotted an old man at work in a small garden,” Oliver Williams. Like John Biddle, Major Oliver Williams figured importantly in the early history of Michigan Territory. He came to Detroit in 1808, from Roxbury, Massachusetts, to start a mercantile business. At the River Rouge he built a large sloop for his business that was captured by the British in the War of 1812, renamed “The Little Belt,” and then captured again by Commodore Perry on Lake Erie. In 1819 he and his brother Alpheus Williams settled in Waterford Township, he on “three hundred and twenty acres of land” near “a beautiful lake, which he afterwards named Silver Lake” and where, according to his son, he “commenced to make a farm among the Indians, flies, mosquitoes, snakes, wild game, and fever and ague.”

“He received us warmly,” wrote Tocqueville, “and gave us a letter for his son.” He had two sons in the Saginaw region, Ephraim S. Williams and Gardner D. Williams, both traders operating under the auspices of the American Fur Company.

Oliver Williams told Tocqueville and Beaumont that they had nothing to fear from the Chippewa on their journey. “Mr. Williams dismissed the suggestion almost indignantly. ‘No, no!’ he shouted, ‘you can travel freely. As far as I'm concerned, I sleep more easily among Indians than among whites.’” It was the first favorable opinion of Indians Tocqueville had heard since reaching the United States. Later in life Ephraim Williams wrote a wonderful “Personal Reminiscence,” published in the *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, relating both his own and his father's histories, and confirming what his father had said about Native Americans. “The Indians were kind and very friendly during our sickness, bringing us many luxuries in the shape of wild meat and berries of the choicest kind.” At this point in the text, Tocqueville promised his readers—read on and “your idea of America's first inhabitants will change . . . you will come to see them in a more honorable as well as more accurate light.”

Leaving Silver Lake, they continued along the wooded trail. The American wilderness impressed Tocqueville, just as profoundly as had the Alpine regions in Europe, but differently.



“From time to time a small lake (this region is full of them) would appear in the form of a silvery patch of water visible through the foliage. It is hard to imagine the charm of these beautiful places, where no man has yet settled and profound peace and uninterrupted silence still reign. I have visited hideous Alpine wastes where nature . . . displays midst all her horrors a grandeur that moves the soul and stirs the passions. Here the solitude is no less profound, yet the impression it makes is not the same. While exploring this flourishing wilderness, . . . you feel only quiet admiration, a gentle, melancholy emotion, and a vague disgust with civilized life. With a sort of savage instinct, it pains you to think that soon this delightful solitude will have been utterly transformed. Indeed, the white race is already pushing its way through the surrounding woods, and within a few years Europeans will have cut down the trees whose image shimmer in the limpid waters of the lake and will have forced the animals that inhabit its shores to flee to new homes in some other wilderness.”

## The Ideal Indian

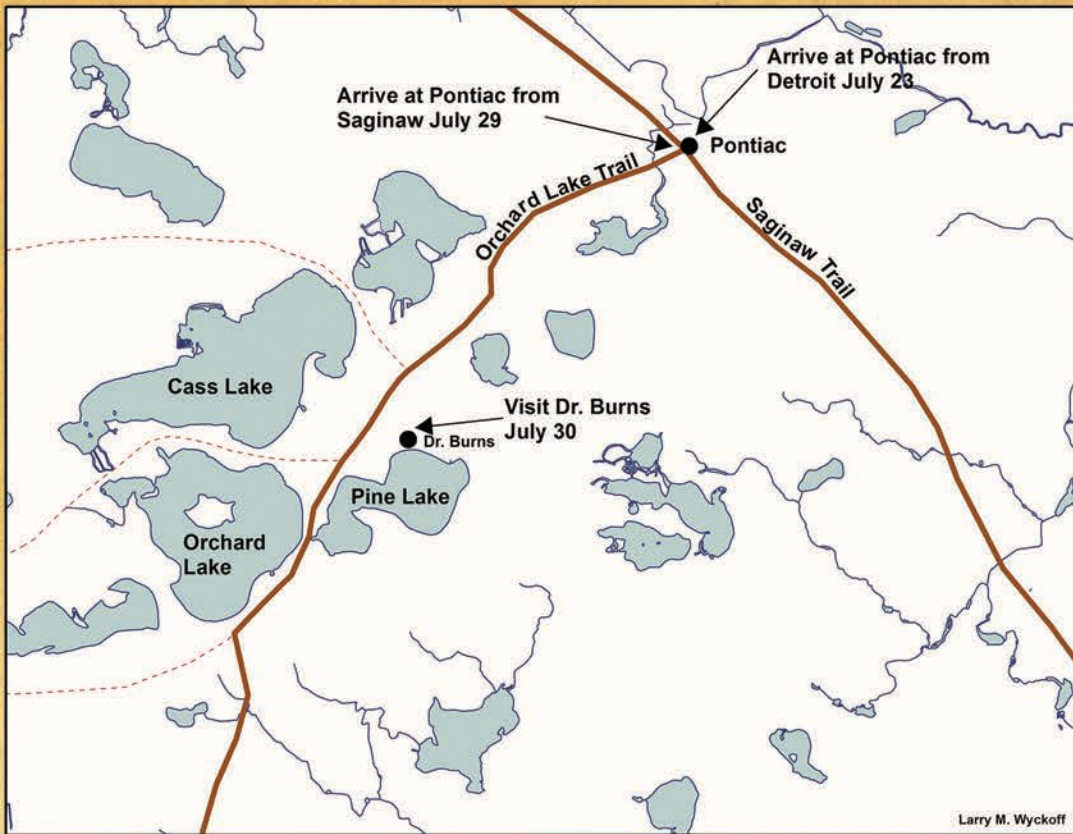
In northwestern Oakland County the ground was marked by picturesque hills and valleys. The cultivated fields came to an end. Log cabins appeared less often. About four miles from Silver Lake, they encountered for the first time Tocqueville's ideal Indian.

“He was ‘hard on our horses’ tail. He was a man of about thirty, tall and admirably proportioned, as nearly all of them are. His shiny black hair hung down to his shoulders, except for two braids fastened atop his head. His face was painted black and red, and a very short blue tunic covered his upper body. He wore red mittas, a kind of trowsers that ends above the knee, and moccasins on his feet. A knife hung at his side. In his right hand he held a long carbine, and in his left two birds he had just killed.”

Surprised, threatened, they grabbed their rifles and turned to face him. He stopped. They faced each other. Then he smiled. “A serious Indian and a smiling Indian are two completely different people,” wrote Tocqueville. “A savage majesty predominates in the stillness of the former to which one reacts with an involuntary feeling of terror. Let the same man smile and his whole face takes on a simple, kindly expression that lends it real charm.” He did not speak English. They offered him some brandy, bought his birds from him, and waved farewell. He kept up with them, jogging right behind Tocqueville's horse, buzzing around them like a fly. They rode at full gallop; he doubled his pace. “I spotted him now to the right, now to the left of my horse,” wrote Tocqueville, “hurdlng bushes and landing without a sound. He reminded me of the wolves of northern Europe, who will follow a rider in case he falls from his horse and becomes ready prey.” In his notebook Tocqueville wrote, “We slow down, he slows down. We go faster, so does he, without the slightest sound. What a striking impression this silent and mysterious being makes as he flutters about us. A mile later, we spot a second carbine in the woods.”



Painting of an Indian



### Map 3

### Pontiac and Orchard Lake Area

Fearing an ambush, they stopped short. The trail was full of surprises this day. The carbine belonged to a white man dressed almost like an Indian. "A type of man," Tocqueville wrote, "we subsequently encountered quite often on the fringe of inhabited territories: Europeans who, despite their upbringing, have discovered ineffable charms in the freedom of the wilderness." The white stranger told them, when asked, that he lived alone and hunted, and no he was not afraid of Indians. "I would rather live among them than in white society . . . They're better than we are, except when we reduce them to a stupor with our liquor." He spoke in Ojibwe to their Indian companion, about the fine rifle he had received from the British "That's a fine carbine," he told Tocqueville, "The English no doubt gave it to him to use against us. And he won't hesitate to do so when the next war breaks out." Asked about their ability to use such a heavy rifle, he replied "Nobody can shoot like an Indian. Take a good look at those birds he sold you, sir. You'll find only one bullet in each, and I'm quite sure he fired no more than two shots to get them."

Five miles up the road they came to a temporary Indian camp at the Little Spring (now Springfield in Oakland County) where men, women, and children sat around a fire "eating apples and half-baked corn." Tocqueville and Beaumont stopped and, it appears, shared lunch. Here their mysterious companion left them. He had trailed after them for six miles. Mystified, Tocqueville never understood why.

# The Flint River

The thin forest they now traveled through had been burnt over, and the ground beneath its canopy was covered with tall grasses and especially ferns as far as one could see. Occasionally Indians passed along the trail. Cabins were few. They traveled about nine miles when Tocqueville's horse threw a shoe, which would have ended the journey then and there had they not run into a farmer down the road at Grand Blanc who replaced it. After dinner, the same man encouraged them to pick up their pace for "the day was drawing to a close," and they had six miles to go to reach the Flint River.

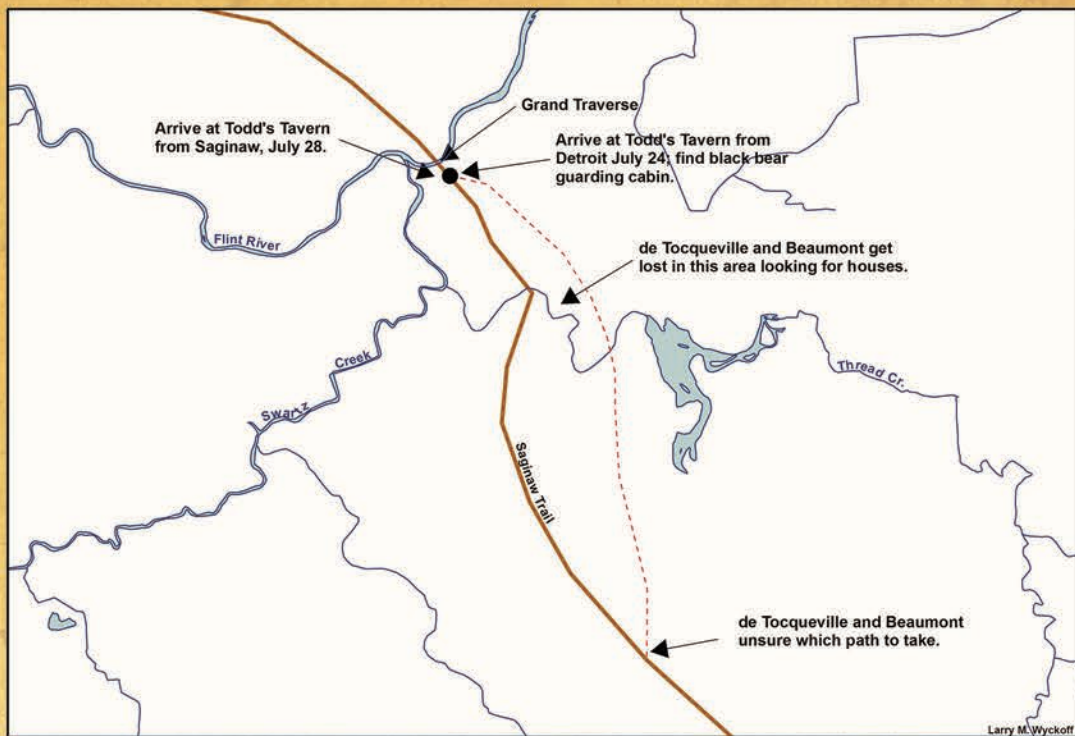
"Indeed, a thick darkness soon began to envelop us," wrote Tocqueville. The wind died down. "The night was peaceful but quite cold. In the depths of these forests the silence is so profound and the stillness so complete that all the forces of nature seem paralyzed." In his notebook he described how the moon turned the grass on the forest floor silver and the thick trunks of the oak trees into tall columns of white marble. "All we could hear was the annoying buzz of mosquitoes and the sound of our horses' hooves. Every now and then we would glimpse an Indian fire in the distance, and through the smoke we could make out an austere and immobile profile. After an hour we came to a fork in the trail. . . . One path led to a stream of unknown depth, the other to a clearing. By the light of the rising moon we could see ahead of us a valley littered with fallen trees. A little farther on we saw two houses." They had come upon an unfinished settlement on Thread Creek. "It was so important not to go astray at such a place and such an hour that we decided to make inquiries before proceeding on."

While Beaumont stayed with the horses, Tocqueville "slinging my rifle over my shoulder, clambered down into the draw." The ground, recently cleared, was covered with huge trees unstripped of their branches. These he managed to negotiate, and the stream also, as it was bridged by huge oaks, "no doubt felled by the pioneer's axe." But the doors to the houses were wide open and no voice answered his.

*I returned to the bank of the stream, where I could not resist spending a few minutes admiring the sublime horror of this place. The valley seemed to form a vast arena, enclosed on all sides by a black curtain of foliage. A few rays of moonlight illuminated the center of this arena, casting a thousand fantastic shadows, which played in silence over the fallen trees. Otherwise, not a single sound or other sign of life emerged from the emptiness.*

This moment of romantic horror on the banks of Thread Creek grew longer when he realized he had lost his friend.

*My voice echoed for quite some time in the surrounding emptiness, but there was no response. I gave another shout and listened again. The same deathly silence reigned over the forest. Grippled by anxiety, I raced along the bank in search of the trail that I knew crossed the water farther downstream. Upon reaching it, I heard hooves in the distance and soon caught sight of Beaumont himself. Concerned by my long absence, he had decided to move down toward the stream. He had already descended into the valley when I called to him, so he had not heard me. He told me that he, too, had tried to hail me and, like me, had become frightened when he heard no response.*



## Map 4 Flint River Area

They continued on, promising to stay together for the rest of the journey, and in less than an hour they came to a clearing with cabins, and to their relief, a light, and a river. “A violet ribbon of water stretching across the far end of the valley signaled that we had reached Flint River.”

In the spring of 1830, John and Polly Todd bought a cabin and seven hundred and eighty-five acres of land from Edouard Campau and moved their family, along with four cows, several cattle, some hogs and chickens, from Pontiac to Flint. Their dwelling now consisted of a bar room, a dining room, two bed rooms, and the old log portion of the house which served as a kitchen. It was to “Todd’s Tavern,” also known as the “Flint Tavern,” that Tocqueville and Beaumont made their way that night.

“*Before long the woods resounded with the barking of dogs, and we found ourselves in front of a log cabin, from which we were separated by no more than a fence. As we were about to pass through the gate, the moonlight revealed a large black bear standing on its hind legs and tugging on its chain to indicate as clearly as it could that it intended to greet us with a friendly hug. ‘What the devil kind of country is this,’ I said, ‘where they use bears as watchdogs?’*”

They didn’t dare step through the gate. Their calling out brought John Todd to the window. He got Trinc, the bear, back to his kennel. They asked for oats for their exhausted horses, and, Tocqueville wrote, “with the usual American equanimity [Todd] immediately took a sickle to the nearest field, as readily as if it had been the middle of the day,” where he harvested the oats by moonlight. Beaumont got the only bed available in the house. Tocqueville wrapped himself in his cloak and lay on the floor, “whereupon I fell into a deep sleep, as befits a man who has just traveled fifteen leagues on horseback.”

# The Primeval Forest

In the morning Todd found two young Chippewas to guide the Frenchmen to Saginaw for two dollars, which he kept and gave the Indians instead a pair of moccasins and a handkerchief worth half as much. They went away satisfied, while Tocqueville moralized to himself about the inordinate greed of the pioneers.

“*What is more, it was not only Indians whom the American pioneers took for dupes. We were daily victims of their inordinate greed. To be sure, they do not steal. They are too enlightened to take such risks, but I've yet to see an innkeeper in a big city more shameless about overcharging than these denizens of the wild, in whom I had expected to find the primitive honesty and simplicity of ancestral ways. Everything was ready. We mounted our horses, and, fording the river that marks the outermost boundary of civilization, we entered the solitude of true wilderness at last.*”

It wasn't that—the outermost boundary of civilization—but it might as well have been once they had entered the Saginaw wilderness. Unfavorable perceptions had discouraged settlement in the Saginaw Bay region. Its lowlands were considered miasmatic, and it was the country of the Chippewas, enemies of the U.S. in the War of 1812. In the Saginaw Treaty of 1819 the U.S. extinguished Indian claim to approximately six million acres of land, including almost all the Saginaw Basin. To assert that claim the government in 1822 sent the two companies of the Third Infantry from Fort Howard, Green Bay, to the Saginaw region, where they erected Fort Saginaw. Sickness, native hostility, and mosquitoes, forced an evacuation of the post the following year. The American Fur Company occupied the post afterwards during their destructive rivalry with the independent traders in the region, which brought about the depletion of fur-bearing animals and in turn led many Indian families to leave the area.

Tocqueville's guides could not speak English and remained aloof. They leapt ahead, pointing out obstacles as well as game that he and Beaumont would have missed. It led Tocqueville to reflect, in a less than Chateaubriandesque manner, on the distance between Indians and Europeans, even aristocratic Europeans.

“*We felt we were completely in their power. Here the tables were turned. Plunged into darkness and forced to rely on his own strength, the civilized man proceeds blindly, incapable of negotiating the labyrinth or even preserving his own life. Faced with the same challenges, the savage triumphs. For him the forest holds no mysteries. He is at home there. He walks with his head held high, guided by an instinct more trustworthy than the navigator's compass. Hidden in the treetops or in the densest of foliage, prey that the European would have passed by reveals itself time and time again to his unerring eye. Occasionally our Indians would stop, put a finger across their lips to warn us to be silent, and signal us to get down from our horses. With their guidance we would then proceed to a spot where at last we were able to see the game they had spotted long before. As they led us by the hand, like children, their smiles seemed almost contemptuous.*”

Tocqueville went on, “The further we went, the fewer traces of man we saw. Before long even signs of the savage's presence disappeared, and we beheld what we had been seeking for so long: the virgin forest.”

Trying to capture the profound impression left on him by his encounter with the primeval forest, Tocqueville, once they had entered the great woods, interrupted his narrative with two lengthy reflections, the first an extended metaphor about the passage of time recorded in the generations of trees.

# A generation of trees

“

Through a rather sparse patch of woods it was possible to see a fairly considerable distance, and what we glimpsed ahead was a cluster of tall trees, nearly all pines and oaks, shooting skyward. Confined to a fairly limited area and almost entirely deprived of sunlight, these trees had taken the shortest path to air and light. They rose as straight as a ship's mast, high above the surrounding vegetation, and not until they reached a substantial height did they serenely extend their branches and bask in the shade of their own foliage. Each tree that reached this lofty height was quickly joined by others, which wove their limbs together to form a huge dais high above the forest floor. Beneath this damp motionless canopy everything changes; an utterly different scene confronts the eye. High aloft, a majestic order reigns. Nearer the ground, all is confusion and chaos. Some trunks have collapsed under the weight of their branches and split down the middle, leaving only a sharp and jagged tip. Others, buffeted by the wind, have been hurled to the ground in one piece. Ripped from the earth their roots form a kind of natural rampart large enough to shield several men. Huge trees, held up by surrounding branches, remain suspended in the air as they turn to dust. In France there is no region so unpopulated that a forest can remain untouched long enough for trees to grow unmolested to maturity and eventually fall and decay. Man cuts them down in their prime and rids the forest of their debris. In the emptiness of America, by contrast, all-powerful nature is the only destructive agent as well as the only reproductive force. As in forests under man's dominion, death here strikes repeated blows, but no one is responsible for removing the remains. Day after day their number grows; trees fall, one upon another, and there isn't time enough to reduce them all to dust and make room for new ones. Generations of the dead lie side by side. Some, in the final stages of decay, are little more than long streaks of red dust in the grass. Others, though half consumed by time, still retain their shape. Still others have fallen only yesterday, and their long branches still sprawl across the trail, confronting the traveler with unanticipated obstacles. In the midst of all this debris, grasses of many varieties surmount all obstacles to reach the light of day. They slither along fallen trunks, creep amid the dusty residue, and lift and crack the bark that still remains. Life and death here look each other in the face, seemingly keen to mingle and confound their works. ”

Background image of Tocqueville's Manuscript: Reflections

# *A long sigh in the depths of the woods*

The second reflection was on the deep silence of the forest, the existential solitude that affected Tocqueville, it seems, more than anything else on this journey to Saginaw. This was what he found, not the romantic ideals he sought at first, but the unexpected oceanic immensity of the silent forest.

“  
*While sailing on the Atlantic, we often enjoyed evenings of serene calm, when the sails flapping tranquilly on their masts hid from the sailors the direction of the breeze. Nature's repose is no less impressive in the emptiness of the New World than on the immensity of the sea. In the middle of the day, as the sun beams down on the forest, one can frequently hear what sounds like a long sigh in the depths of the woods, a plaintive cry echoing in the distance. This is the last gasp of the dying wind. All around the forest then subsides into a silence so deep, a stillness so complete, that a kind of religious terror grips the soul. The traveler stops; he looks. The trees pressed one against the other, their branches intertwined, seem to form but a single being, an immense and indestructible edifice, beneath whose vaults an eternal darkness reigns. Whichever way the traveler looks, he sees nothing but a field of violence and destruction. Broken trees, torn trunks, and countless other signs indicate that here the elements are perpetually at war. But the struggle is suspended, the restless energy comes suddenly to a halt at the instigation of some unknown power. Half-broken branches still hang from a trunk that seems no longer to offer them any support. Up-rooted trees, arrested in their fall, hang suspended in midair.*

*The traveler listens. Trembling, he holds his breath, the better to hear the least sound of life, but not a whisper, not a murmur can be detected. In Europe I have lost my way in a forest more than once, but inevitably some sound of life reached my ears. Perhaps it was the peal of a nearby village bell, the footsteps of a traveler, the sound of a woodsman's axe, the sharp report of a firearm, the barking of a dog, or simply the vague buzz of a civilized land. Here, not only is man absent, but even the animals are silent. The smaller ones have left the deep woods to be closer to where people live, while the larger ones have headed in the opposite direction. Those that remain lie hidden, safe from the rays of the sun. Thus in the woods everything is still, everything silent beneath the forest canopy. It is almost as if the Creator has for a moment turned his face away from this place, paralyzing the forces of nature.*”

Beaumont provided a good description of the trail beyond Flint River.

“*After Flint River . . . there is one narrow path, which those who make this journey customarily follow. Thousands of fallen trees block the way, and the horses must pass over them or else detour through the underbrush. On the 27th we traveled this way all day long. From time to time we saw a few Indians scavenging the forest for fruit.*”

## Saginaw, Saginaw

They followed this narrow path for hours, hunting birds and picking wildflowers along the way. They couldn't find water. They stopped for lunch, but their food had spoiled, and they had to go after their horses which the mosquitoes had driven into the woods. They were not traveling fast enough for their Indian guides. “Saginaw, Saginaw,” the guides urged pointing toward the descending sun. “The trail became harder and harder to see.” Beaumont mentioned the change to Tocqueville. Unbeknownst to them the guides had led them off the trail through thick forest to a village site on the elevated banks of the Cass River, where the guides wanted to camp for the evening. This displeased them. They should have been able to reach Saginaw easily in a day but were only two-thirds of the way there. They hadn't eaten, and they now distrusted the guides. They were feeling isolated and overwhelmed.

The older guide accepted a bribe to continue on, a wicker-covered bottle, in which he had shown an interest earlier, grasping immediately its usefulness. For two hours they traveled at a fast pace. To keep going they switched places and allowed the guides to ride the horses.

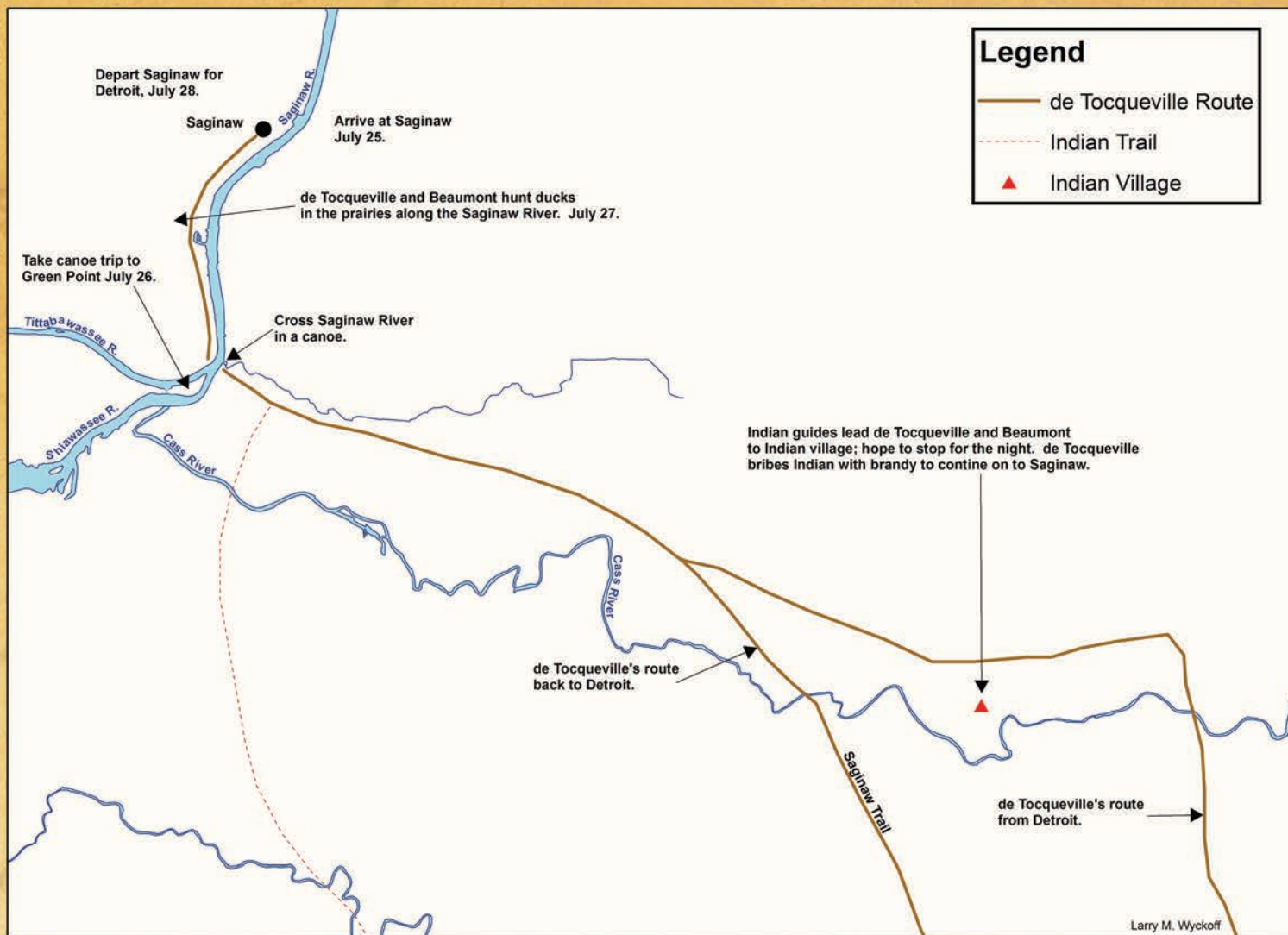
“*It was strange to see these half-naked men solemnly seated on an English saddle with our game bags and rifles slung over their shoulders while we struggled along on foot ahead of them. At length night fell, and a damp chill began to spread through the forest. Darkness altered the appearance of the woods and made them terrifying. The eye could make out only vague masses scattered hither and yon, bizarre, misshapen forms, incoherent tableaux, fantastic images that seemed to have sprung from some feverish imagination. . . . Never had the silence of forest seemed so daunting. . . . Too late, we recognized the wisdom of the Indian's counsel, but there was no question of turning back. We therefore continued to move ahead as rapidly as our strength and the darkness allowed. After an hour we emerged from the woods and found ourselves in a vast prairie.*”

The Indian guides let out three whoops, answered from a distance. In five minutes the guides and the two Frenchmen reached the bank of a river, the Saginaw, “almost as wide as the Seine in Paris.” A canoe approached, paddled by another Indian, who astonished Tocqueville, when he spoke to him in French, with a Norman accent. Not Indian but métis—he explained to Tocqueville that he was a Bois-Brûlé. Translated it means *burnt wood*, “the child of a Canadian father and an Indian mother.” They unsaddled the horses. Tocqueville, the Bois-Brûlé, and one of the guides crossed the river.

Saginaw Forest with Indian Guide







## Map 5

### Saginaw Area

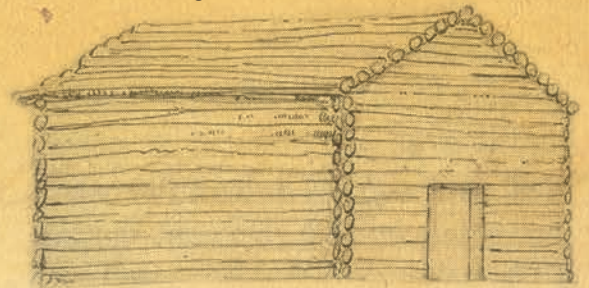
“  
*The canoe immediately went back for my companion. I will always remember the moment it approached the shore for the second time. The moon, which was full, was at that moment rising above the prairie we had just crossed. Only half of its disk appeared on the horizon. It was like a mysterious door, through which light streamed from some other sphere of existence. The shimmering rays reflected from the river held my eye. Along the very line marked out by the moon's pale light the Indian canoe advanced. The paddles could not be seen and there were no creaking oarlocks, so that the canoe slid rapidly and effortlessly across the water. . . . the Canadian paddled in silence, while behind him the powerful horse churned up the water of the Saginaw as he thrust his way forward.*  
 ”

“Having safely reached the shore, we hastened toward a house that the moon had revealed a short distance from the river, where the Canadian assured us we could find a bed.” They might have slept comfortably save for “the insect known in English as *mosquito*, and in Canadian French as *maringouin* . . . the scourge of the American wilderness,” that hovered about them in the thousands. Tocqueville had “never been subjected to torture equivalent to what I experienced throughout this journey and especially during our stay in Saginaw.”

## Saginaw: The edge of civilization

Tuesday morning, July 26, Tocqueville looked out over the village they had come so far to see, Saginaw, at this point in time “no more than a cultivated plain,” bordered by forests and “a beautiful tranquil river” along whose opposite bank a prairie stretched without limit. A few cabins hid under the foliage of the forest. There were only two well-constructed houses, the one they had slept in and another at the far end of the clearing. He was disappointed. There were few Native Americans. Their two guides, wrapped in blankets, “were sleeping near the door, alongside their dogs.” Columns of smoke led his eye down to several wigwams standing in the grasses beyond the river. In the cultivated field, he saw an overturned plow, some oxen, some half-wild horses.

Sketch of a cabin in Saginaw



The “edge of civilization” was a desolate place. There was “nothing to awaken an idea of either past or future,” no imported vestiges of the old Christian civilization—a gothic spire or a wayside cross. No, Tocqueville mused, “not even death itself had time to stake its claim,” and children entered “the world by stealth.” Their names unrecorded. News of the outside world had no certain way of reaching Saginaw, save once a year when a vessel sailed up the river.

Many of his reflections came later after he had returned to France and had the chance to rework the essay. They expressed a watering down of his romanticism as well as an ambivalence about the advance of civilization, particularly in its American form. He wrote of the American wilderness:

*This savage natural grandeur is about to meet its end, and the idea of it mingles in the mind with the superb images to which the triumphant march of civilization gives rise. One feels proud to be human, yet at the same time one somehow feels bitter regret that God had granted man so much power over nature. The mind is assailed by contradictory ideas and sentiments, yet no impression is without grandeur, and all leave an indelible trace.*

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At the time of his and Beaumont’s visit, there were only thirty individuals constituting the society of Saginaw, but Tocqueville viewed it as a microcosm of a world divided by race: the Frenchman, a man with “a taste for the pleasures of society and a carefree attitude toward life”; the American, “cold, tenacious, and pitiless in argument,” clinging to the land and taking whatever he can from the wild; the Indian, proud of his independence, smiling “bitterly when he sees [whites] torment [themselves] to acquire useless riches”; the Metis, “a child of two races . . . proud of his European origins, he despises the wilderness, yet he loves the savage liberty that reigns supreme.”

*A few exiled members of the great human family have come together to these vast forests. Their needs are common. . . . thirty of them in the midst of a forest where everything resists their efforts, yet they regard one another with hatred and suspicion. The color of their skin, their poverty or their wealth, their ignorance or enlightenment have already established indestructible classifications. National prejudices, prejudices of education and birth, divide and isolate them.*

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Harry Liebersohn argued that for Tocqueville the term race “corresponded to our use of ‘ethnic group’ today.” Tocqueville may have understood very little about Chippewa customs and society, but he was not following the path of “scientific” racial theorizing, like so many others in this period. His vision at Saginaw, of a humanity needlessly divided against itself, was of a piece with later analyses found in *Democracy in America*. Liebersohn claimed Tocqueville was pointing the way to modern social science, asking “how diverse groups of human beings were comparable despite their different appearances”—an early “approximation of socioeconomic analysis.” “In both his systematic work and his travel writing, Tocqueville took as his subject a single, united humanity whose differences could be explained through social scientific analysis.”

After lunch and a visit to Mr. William’s store, Tocqueville, Beaumont, and their guides, followed the Saginaw upstream to shoot wild ducks, where they were met by some Indians who paddled out of the reeds to examine and admire Tocqueville’s rifle. In the evening Tocqueville and Beaumont alone took a canoe upstream and paddled onto a branch of the Saginaw. “The wilderness we beheld before us was no doubt just as it appeared six thousand years ago to our earliest ancestors: a delightful, fragrant solitude filled with blossoms, a magnificent abode . . .” Serenity reigned. They lifted their paddles out of the water, both falling into a quiet reverie.

“*In the solitude of Saginaw’s ancient forests Tocqueville experienced “the sweetest and most natural emotions of the heart,” emotions that language cannot convey, “those rare moments when the universe stands, in perfect equilibrium before your eyes. When the soul, half asleep, hovers between present and future, between the real and the possible. When, surrounded by natural beauty and quiet warmth, man, at peace with himself amid universal peace, can hear the beat of his own heart, each pulse marking the passage of time as it flows drop by drop into the eternal river.*”

But rare moments could not prevent the imminent destruction of the source of his tranquility, the forest itself. “The rumble of civilization and industry will disrupt the silence of the Saginaw,” Tocqueville wrote. “The whisper of its waters will no longer be heard echoing in the woods.

“*Quays will imprison its banks, and currents that today flow through a nameless wilderness unheeded and undisturbed will find themselves parted by the bows of ships. Fifty leagues still stand between this place and the major European settlements, and we are perhaps the last travelers who will have been allowed to contemplate this solitude in all its primitive splendor—so great is the impetus that drives the white race to conquer the whole of the New World.*”

They intended to leave Saginaw the next day, July 27, “but one of our horses had been cut by its saddle, so we decided to stay another day.” That day they spent hunting in the prairies, avoiding Mississauga rattlesnakes, and battling relentless swarms of mosquitoes. They left at five the next morning, alone. All the Chippewas in the neighborhood, including the guides, had left to receive their annual gifts from the British. Tocqueville and Beaumont plunged into the “moist expanse” of the forest with much trepidation, and in three hours they came upon the crystal-clear Cass River, where they ate lunch. Shortly after leaving Cass River, they “came to a place where several trails diverged.” They chose one at random, not confident in their choice, as “the trail seemed close to vanishing in the thick forest.”

“It was in the midst of this profound solitude that we suddenly remembered the Revolution of 1830, the first anniversary of which had just passed . . . The shouts and smoke of combat, the roar of the cannon, the volleys of musket fire, the terrible clang of the tocsin . . . When I looked up and glanced around me, the apparition had already vanished.”

*Two Weeks in the Wilderness* ends with this paragraph. The rest of their stay in Michigan can be recounted from notebooks and correspondence. Once they recognized a place on the trail, they rode rapidly until they reached the Flint River. “This time the bear welcomed us as old friends and reared up on its hind legs only to celebrate our happy return.”

They reached Pontiac the next day, July 29, Tocqueville’s twenty-sixth birthday. They must have gone out to shoot birds, as was their custom, for Beaumont has left us a painting of a strange looking Blue Jay, the caption reading: “Blue jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) painted in Pontiac, July 29, 1831 (GBI).” The next day Tocqueville took time to visit two small lakes southwest of Pontiac, Orchard and Pine lakes, where young Dr. Burns, a highly-cultivated Scottish emigrant had a cabin and was now living the life of a poor farmer. Burns provided Tocqueville with yet more documents and explained to him how new settlers go about setting themselves up. “As a general rule, a man needs at least 150 to 200 dollars to establish himself.” The next day Tocqueville and Beaumont continued on from Dr. Burn’s cabin. They may have taken the Shiawassee Trail or they may have returned to Pontiac and continued down the Saginaw Trail. Tocqueville did not say, only that they returned to Detroit on July 31.

Painting of a Blue Jay  
(*Cyanocitta cristata*)



## Tour of the upper lakes

Walking along the dock that evening, they ran into a passenger they had met while crossing Lake Erie, who told them the *Superior* would soon arrive in Detroit and was headed to Green Bay. The *Detroit Gazette* had been advertising the tour as “an opportunity of viewing the splendid scenery of the upper lakes.” It was the first time a vessel of this size—it carried approximately 200 passengers—would visit Sault Ste. Marie. The two friends immediately changed plans and the next day, August 1, they were sailing on the St. Clair River.

That day on the *Superior* Tocqueville began writing *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*. The journey up the Saginaw Trail had laid to rest some of Tocqueville’s misconceptions. Territorial Michigan forced Tocqueville and Beaumont to recognize the speed at which change was occurring in the western United States. “The American felling of the forests was brutal and quick, and it replaced the stillness of ancient groves with the din of modern commerce,” wrote Liebersohn.

On August 2 they reached Fort Gratiot situated at the opening to Lake Huron. There were some musicians on board and that evening the passengers danced quadrilles on the deck. Bad weather stranded the *Superior* at Fort Gratiot for two days. Tocqueville worked on his manuscript, witnessed a war dance, and spent time hunting in the meadows on the other side of the St. Clair River. On August 4 they finally departed and sailed along the shore of Lake Huron toward Sault Ste. Marie. “These regions,” wrote Tocqueville, “which yet form only an immense wilderness, will become one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world. One can affirm it without being a prophet. . . . Nothing is missing except civilized man, and he is at the door.” Tocqueville at this point was divided about the United States, admiring of its energy and its future, yet recoiling from the rudeness and avarice of the typical American.



## Map 6 Detroit to Green Bay

On the St. Mary's River the *Superior* stopped just before reaching the Sault. There was a concert and ball. At midnight Beaumont played (either on violin or oboe) variations of *Di Tanti Palpiti*. Rossini echoed in the forest. The next day they took a canoe to visit Lake Superior along with several other passengers. They went as far as Pointe aux Pins. There Tocqueville met a Chippewa "chief" who was wearing two feathers in his hair, indicating he had killed two Sioux, the traditional enemy of the Chippewa. One of the feathers he gave to Tocqueville. Beaumont sketched Lake Superior, and the party returned and "bravely descended the rapids." Tocqueville met John Tanner, the Indian captive, and received from him a copy of his narrative, which Tocqueville would have translated into French.

On August 3 in the afternoon the *Superior* headed for Mackinac Island. Tocqueville had the chance to talk at length to Father Mullon, a passenger on the *Superior*, about religion in America and the wisdom of separating church and state. On the island Beaumont sketched while Tocqueville talked to seemingly everyone. He visited Madame LaFramboise, the wife of a trader who had been murdered years ago and was now a well-known trader in her own right. Tocqueville also spoke to the leader of a band of traders bivouacked on the shore, who answered many of his questions about the Indians.

When the *Superior* made its way to Green Bay, Tocqueville on August 9 had the opportunity to interview the commander at Fort Howard. Tocqueville wanted to learn all he could about Native Americans. Not just curiosity, he wanted to understand the underlying principles on which they based their lives and how this brought them into conflict with Anglo-Americans.

While Tocqueville accepted the rise of democracies, he also believed that the aristocracy's love of freedom, an ethos shared by hunter-warrior societies, was something that should not be lost. It could serve as a check on the excesses of egalitarianism. Unchecked, democracy's worst impulses invited political tyranny and cultural mediocrity.

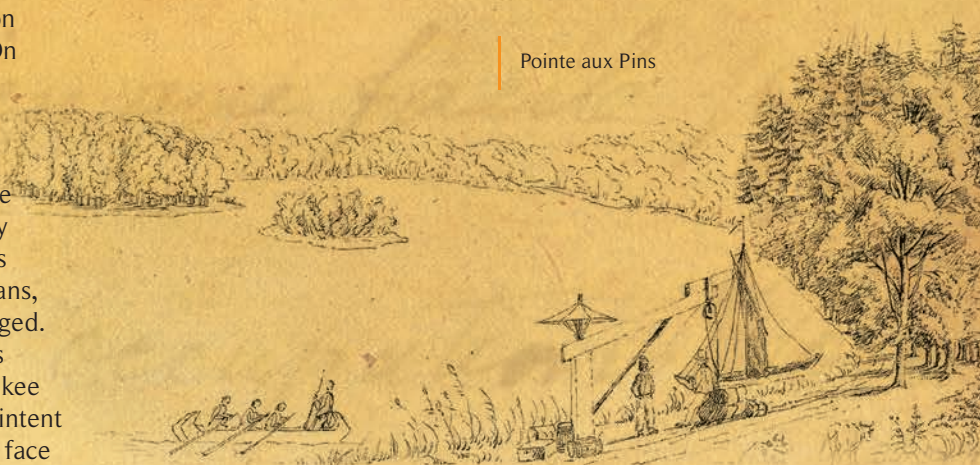
The *Superior* returned to Mackinac Island on the 12th and departed again on the 13th. On August 14 the *Superior* returned to Detroit. Tocqueville and Beaumont's days in the Michigan's wilderness had come to an end.

In *Two Weeks in the Wilderness*, Tocqueville was especially critical of the settler—It may have been his way of highlighting avarice as a problem democracy posed to the Americans, to whom the future of the new world belonged. His description of the American settler was judgmental but insightful. Tocqueville's Yankee was practical, dispassionate, persevering, "intent on a single goal—to make his fortune." His face was "a stoic rigidity," his words measured, "his mien austere." Yet Tocqueville may have been too severe. More than simple greed drove most settlers. The typical settler had a vision of his or her own. In the American's log cabin, Tocqueville observed, there is often a map of the United States and on a "lone shelf of rough-hewn board, stands . . . a Bible, its cover and spine already worn from use by two pious generations." These emigrant Yankees were remaking "wilderness" into American territory, a personal and a national project, that, in their own view, presented them with a moral as well as a physical challenge.

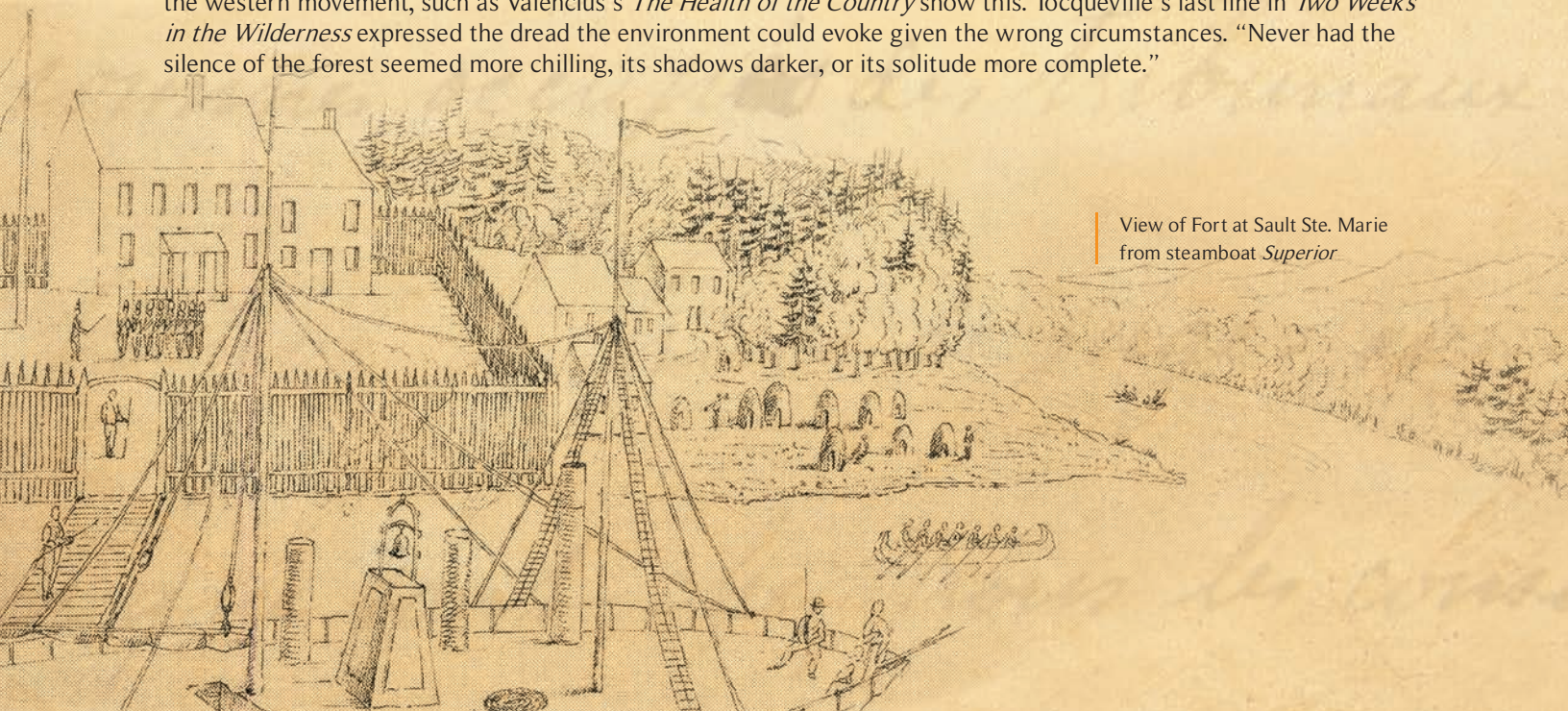
"From the nation's founding," writes historian Conevery Valenčius, "the connection between farming and virtue had found clear expression in American thought and writing. Orderly fields of straight rows clearly delineated from the surrounding unshaped terrain implied orderly virtue in their free cultivators." Optimistic settlers arrived in Michigan Territory ambitious for the new role they were taking on. They faced a tree-filled world to which they were to bring order in the form of new agriculture. For most it was a venture in nation-building that, for better or worse, succeeded.

In turn the environment had a shaping influence on the emigrants, an influence not always fully expressed in "triumphalist" accounts of Americans marching across the North American continent and settling the west. Tocqueville's vignette of a settler's wife described keenly the toll taken on their bodies while settling in the wilderness: "time had dealt harshly with her. In her features, prematurely lined with age, and in her spindly limbs, it is easy to see that life has been a heavy burden for her." Taking over the land was a fearful, anxious, complex, and perilous undertaking for individuals. It oftentimes ended in complete failure, or even death. Territorial expansion came at a cost. Environmental narratives of the western movement, such as Valenčius's *The Health of the Country* show this. Tocqueville's last line in *Two Weeks in the Wilderness* expressed the dread the environment could evoke given the wrong circumstances. "Never had the silence of the forest seemed more chilling, its shadows darker, or its solitude more complete."

Pointe aux Pins



View of Fort at Sault Ste. Marie from steamboat *Superior*



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- A complete collection of the maps featured in this booklet can be downloaded at [clarke.cmich.edu](http://clarke.cmich.edu)

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*[Faint, illegible cursive handwriting on aged paper]*



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