

## **James Buckingham's Travels in Southern Appalachia, 1839**

*Tom Costa*  
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In two volumes published in 1842 as *The Slave States of America*, Englishman James Silk Buckingham offered his trenchant views of his journey through the southern United States. As a lifelong anti-slavery advocate, Buckingham devoted much of his trip to the lowland and Piedmont South where slavery was prevalent. His itinerary also included a lengthy sojourn in the southern mountains where slavery was less common, and his observations of mountain folk prove quite interesting.

He was born in 1786 in the village of Flushing, near Falmouth, into a family of modest means. As a child, he dreamed of going to sea, and he eventually secured a place aboard a government packet carrying mail to the Continent. His first trip to Lisbon, a strange yet magnificent seaport, fostered a lifelong interest in travel that took him to many foreign lands, including two visits to America. After settling for a time in India, he served a time in Parliament as member for Sheffield (1832-35). However it was his world travels and advocacy of various moral reforms that earned him his reputation.

As a teenager, Buckingham experienced a profound spiritual awakening and was baptized a Christian of the Calvinist persuasion. He remained a sincere Christian and moralist for the rest of his life, campaigning for temperance among other issues. But it was slavery—the subjugation of Africans—that attracted most of his criticism. As a youth in Falmouth, he met a talented black musician who offered “splendid proof of the utter groundlessness of the fallacy which supposes the negro intellect to be incapable of cultivation.” On a later visit to Trinidad, he described the island’s more “revolting” characteristics: “the constant sight of naked negroes working in gangs, many with chains on their legs, leaving sores by their friction, and others with iron collars round their necks, with great hooks projecting outwards from them on all sides.”<sup>1</sup> His interest in the southern United States arose naturally from this hatred of slavery.



James Silk Buckingham and his wife, depicted in eastern garb by painter Henry William Pickersgill in this 1820s portrait.

Having traveled throughout the world by the time of his second visit to America, Buckingham was an astute observer of Southern life and customs. While his biases are evident throughout the narrative—chiefly his temperance and anti-slavery views—he peppered his account with first-hand evidence from southerners with whom he talked, paying special attention to recording the views of slave owners. Of course his account incorporates language and reveals stereotypes no longer accepted, especially his descriptions of race and ethnicity: the terms “Negro,” “Negress,” “mulatto,” and “squaw,” for example, and his views of “sober” Germans, “intemperate” Irish, and “half-intoxicated” Indians. Overall, however, his two volumes on the South offer a rich and detailed account of the history, climate, flora and fauna, population, and social customs of the southern states.

Buckingham first visited the United States shortly before the War of 1812. He described Norfolk, Virginia, his first landfall, as containing “unpaved and dirty streets, with mud and snow mixed to a depth of ten or twelve inches, innumerable pigs and half-clad negroes and mulattoes shivering with the cold, common-looking white men, dirty and coarsely dressed, and groups of half-intoxicated and beggarly-looking Indians, and their squaws... .” Norfolk gentlemen chewed tobacco and smoked cigars, habits that the moralist Buckingham abhorred, and “slaves were everywhere abundant, lying about the outhouses and passages, as indolent as dirty, and as little cared for as the hogs whom they made their companions.”<sup>2</sup>

In the 1830s he returned to the United States, accompanied by his wife, their 12-year-old son, and an Irish manservant. He published four volumes that describe this latter visit, two on the northern states, entitled *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive*, and a two-volume work on the South, *The Slave States of America*, “a faithful Narrative of my Journey through that portion of the North American Republic, in which the Institution of Slavery still exists, and to which, its supporters and defenders still cling, with a tenacity as much to be deplored as it is to be wondered at.”<sup>3</sup>

His tour of the South began in January 1839 when he landed in Charleston, South Carolina, after what he described as an extremely disagreeable voyage from New York. During subsequent months, he traveled across the Deep South, visiting New Orleans and Natchez on the Mississippi River, and commenting frequently on southern history and social customs, plant and animal life, and particularly decrying the institution of slavery and its defenders.

His tour of the mountain South began in Asheville, North Carolina, where he arrived after crossing the steepest mountains he had yet encountered, “the road winding in a serpentine form . . . and being extremely difficult for the horses. All the way over this hill, the road wound through thick forests, with deep hollows of glens, occasional water-falls, and splendid forest-trees; besides innumerable bushes of the rhododendron and kalmia to the extent of hundreds in view at one time.”<sup>4</sup>

Asheville, he found, was “a small village, containing a brick Court-house, a wood-built Methodist Church, in which there are only occasional services, two hotels, and about twenty stores and dwelling-houses with a population of 200 persons, of whom not more than 120 are whites:” Leaving Asheville, he crossed the French Broad River: “The breadth of the stream was from 200 to 300 feet; the water was beautifully clear, and in many parts it reminded me of the rapids of the Nile, at what is called the Second

cataract, the first great interruption to the full and unbroken flow of the stream.” He thought the scenery along the river among the most beautiful he had seen, “neither the Valley of the Mohawk in the North, nor of the Wye in Monmouthshire, appeared to me so nobly picturesque, as the Valley of the French Broad, in North Carolina.”<sup>5</sup>

Following the river’s route, he encountered wranglers driving a herd of horses and mules south from Kentucky toward South Carolina: “Some idea may be formed of the extent of this traffic, when it is mentioned that not less than 10,000 horses and mules, from these middle or western States come down every year for sale to the purchasers in the Atlantic States . . . as many as 500 at a time frequently passing through Greenville in a single day.”<sup>6</sup>

Leaving the banks of the French Broad, Buckingham moved north into Tennessee, making for Greenville. As his party went up and down the numerous hills, the coachman frequently stopped to lock and unlock the wheels to prevent losing control. Buckingham deemed it the most disagreeable road he had yet traveled. And he did not find the inn at Greenville much better; the well-traveled Briton objected to the lack of an unoccupied room for him and his wife: “At length, for the lady’s accommodation, we were shown what was called the ‘reserved room for families;’ where, in a space not much larger than enough to contain the two beds within it, we had to accommodate ourselves as well as we could.” When he noted the presence of cigar stubs and empty whiskey glasses in the room, Buckingham was assured that it was clean, “as no one had been in it but Governor Polk, and he had merely lain down on the bed without taking his clothes off.”<sup>7</sup>

Polk had recently visited Greenville in the midst of his campaign for governor against the Whig candidate, Newton Cannon, who was in town at the same time, staying at the rival hotel. The two candidates debated outdoors, and as Buckingham was told, Polk was the favorite, “admitted on all sides to be the best orator; and this weighs much more with the people of America, than higher and more important qualifications.” Polk indeed won the contest in October 1839, a step on his way to the presidency, to which he was elected five years later.

The following day, taking the stage to Blountville, Buckingham commented on a scandalous painting on one of the doors of the stagecoach, “the only one in the country on which I had ever seen a picture painted on the door-panel. . . . The picture on the one side represented a hussar warrior taking leave of his wife or lover, while his horse and military companions awaited him at the garden-gate of his dwelling; and in this there was nothing

objectionable.” The other door featured the scene to which Buckingham objected: “a fashionably-dressed beau, embracing a lady on a sofa; and the offensively amorous manner in which the figures were placed, seemed to attract the vulgar jests of the surrounding crowd.”<sup>8</sup>

On the road northeast from Greenville, Tennessee, he encountered that icon of American westward movement, the Conestoga Wagon, heading south on the road from Kentucky to the Carolinas: “They are as long, but much narrower, than our English waggons; are, like them, covered with a canvas-cloth spread over arched hoops on the top; but instead of the ends being perpendicular, and the roof level or horizontal, the top is curved in a much deeper bend than the hollowest back of a horse; and the ends are made to cock up nearly two feet above the lowest part of the bend of the centre. ... The front projects forward, and the hind part backward, each in an angle of 20 [degrees] to 25 [degrees] beyond the perpendicular; and this shelters persons sitting in the front or back of the waggon from rain or sun.”<sup>9</sup>

Arriving at Jonesborough in the late afternoon, he discovered that he had caught up with the gubernatorial candidates, who had been debating each other since breakfast. Buckingham decided to travel on to Blountville since Jonesborough was mobbed with the crowd who had come to see the politicians, but first he stopped at the local hotel to catch up on the news. Looking over the local paper as well as an edition from Athens, Tennessee, Buckingham admitted being “shocked and disgusted by the ruffianly and blood-thirsty spirit which seemed to guide the pens of the editors of these two papers; nor could I wonder at the unwillingness of men of worth and honour to enter into the stormy sea of political life, and undergo the ordeal of a popular election in this country, while they are so certain of being assailed with the most unmeasured vituperation, and made the victim of the most foul aspersions by their political opponents.” He found the Tennessee newspapers to be worse than any others in their “coarseness and violence.” He was not alone in his critique of American newspapers; he cited Americans themselves who lamented the nastiness of the political press.<sup>10</sup>

In Blountville, Buckingham and his group stayed at the Inn of William Deery, an Ulsterman who welcomed the Englishman with open arms and unbridled hospitality. Deery told Buckingham that he had left Londonderry at the age of nineteen and arrived in Tennessee early in the century with a supply of stores he thought the backcountry settlers would buy. He repeated this first venture several times and eventually settled at Blountville, opening a permanent store and buying land. By the time of Buckingham’s visit in 1839 he was one of the wealthiest men in the neighborhood. To the

Englishman's approval, the entire family was "temperate and religious; the father having never tasted spirits or wine for forty years—the son never; and family worship being their habitual practice." That evening, he was treated to a pianoforte recital by Deery's eldest daughter. Her instrument was "of Clementi's make, which her father had imported from London expressly for her use. This brought a crowd of farmers, who were still in town, round the windows; others entered the hall or passage; and some came into the drawing-room, and seated themselves with their hats on, to enjoy the music."<sup>11</sup>

Leaving Blountville at night by the mail stage, Buckingham entered after midnight, "what is called 'The Old Dominion,'" arriving at Abingdon around seven in the morning. He found Abingdon to be "pleasantly situated, in an undulated part of the country. ...The town consists chiefly of one main street, and has about 200 houses, and from 1,600 to 1,800 inhabitants, including not more than 200 blacks employed chiefly as domestic servants in the town, though negro slaves are abundantly used in the cultivation of the surrounding country." On Sunday, Buckingham attended a Methodist service; about 100 whites were there, and the 50 or 60 blacks in attendance sat in a separate gallery "as is universal in this country." The preacher, "a primitive old man of eighty, dressed in a suit of grey cotton-cloth, with silvery-white hair, and feeble voice," told the assembled congregation that Americans were ungrateful for God's manifest blessings and occupied themselves in the pursuit of Mammon:

He denounced the luxurious habits of the times, the love of pomp and display, which infected all classes; and he invoked the female part of his audience especially, to consider this besetting sin.

At the close of the service, the preacher announced that he should be ready to meet the "coloured class of the communicants" at three o'clock in the afternoon, and the "white class" at four; the distinction being maintained as rigidly between the blacks and whites in the ordinances of religion, and the sacrament of the Lord's supper, as in every other occupation—as if there were a higher heaven for the white race hereafter, and a lower heaven for the blacks, supposing them to be admitted there at all, for as to this, some entertain doubts.<sup>12</sup>

During his five-day stay in Abingdon, Buckingham lectured at the local Presbyterian church; in the large audience were Virginia Governor David Campbell and South Carolina Senator William Preston.<sup>13</sup> "The system of manual labour schools has lately been introduced into this part of Virginia,

and a school of this description has been established within about ten miles of Abingdon. It is called the 'Amory [sic] and Henry College,' the former being the name of a celebrated and popular bishop of Virginia, and the latter the name of their great revolutionary orator, Patrick Henry." Students were to study for two hours before breakfast, four hours after the morning meal, then work for three hours "in the field, garden, or workshop," between lunch and supper.<sup>14</sup>

Departing from Abingdon on August 1, Buckingham arrived that afternoon at Seven Mile Ford, "the situation of which was beautifully romantic, but both the hotel and its keeper, a fat colonel, were dirty in the extreme. We were asked here, for the first time on the road, to drink ardent spirits before dinner, this being the practice of the colonel himself, and one which he recommended to all his guests. I was happy to perceive, however, that every one declined it, and I was assured by some of our fellow-passengers, that in this there has been a manifest and extensive reform, within the last few years, which they attributed chiefly to the change in public opinion, brought about by the efforts of the Temperance Societies."<sup>15</sup>

Buckingham expressed puzzlement that since he had entered Virginia, "the original seat of the tobacco plant, there were fewer persons who chewed this stimulating weed, than in any of the Southern States through which we had lately traveled. Smoking was, however, very general; but instead of the cigar, so common everywhere else, the pipe was here more frequent; and this was constructed of a clay bowl of the ordinary shape and size, with a long thin hollow tube of cane for its stem. We saw many women using such pipes, as openly and freely as the men, a practice we had nowhere else observed among the sex, but which we were told was not at all uncommon here."<sup>16</sup> He also noted several of the peculiar expressions of Southwest Virginia, some of which are still in use:

baggage is very generally called "plunder," and it sounded oddly enough to hear the inn-keeping colonel say to us— "Why, you and your family seem to require a pretty considerable deal of *plunder* to carry with you." Horses are called "critturs," and we several times heard the expression— "There is no getting a *crittur* for love or money; they are all employed *hauling* oats." The word "tote" is used to signify carry; and you hear the driver say— "Here, you nigger-fellow, *tote* this lady's *plunder* to her room." Up-stairs is pronounced "up-starrs;" the words bear and fear, are pronounced "barr" and "farr;" and one passenger was told, "The room *up-starrs* is quite *preparred*, so that your *plunder* may be *toted* there whenever you've a mind."<sup>17</sup>

From Seven Mile Ford, Buckingham proceeded north along the Great Road to Wytheville, where his party spent the night, and ate breakfast before traveling on. "Here we witnessed the characteristic operation of a large house-dog being sent in chase of a chicken, which he caught in his mouth and brought to the cook, who forthwith killed, plucked, dissected, and fried the same for our use; the whole operation, from the catching to the serving up, occupying less than half an hour of time."<sup>18</sup>

They left Wytheville, bound for Newbern. Buckingham complained of being cheated by the coach's proprietor, who charged him for an extra team of horses: "The truth is, this passion for the acquisition of money is much stronger and more universal in this country than in any other under the sun, at least that I have visited; and in proportion to the strength of the passion, so is the weakness of conscientiousness, or the sense of justice, among all ranks."<sup>19</sup>

On the road to Newbern, Buckingham commented on the countryside, including one of Virginia's many family cemeteries: "we observed in the fields a large sycamore-tree, with wide-spreading branches, enclosed with a neat palisade, and was told that this was a very usual way of forming a rustic cemetery, which was confirmed by our seeing several graves within the enclosure." He also noted a buckeye, observing that these trees were very prevalent in Kentucky, so much

that the Kentuckians are often called "buck-eyes." In a few of the fields, also, we saw the buckwheat growing, from the grain of which are made the buckwheat cakes, so well known in all parts of America, as a favourite appendage to the breakfast table, both in the northern, southern, and western States ... . We saw here, also, a number of the small birds, called partridges by some, and quails by others; but more nearly resembling the quails of Arabia than the partridges of England, in size, form, and colour. They appeared very tame, and are said to form excellent food; but the people of the country are so satisfied with their daily fare of coarse fat bacon and beans (called here, "snaps") that few give themselves the trouble to shoot bird for their table.<sup>20</sup>

From Newbern, another stagecoach took him north into what is now West Virginia, to visit the many mountain health resorts. The spas and springs of the mountains of Virginia were well-known among the upper classes of both North and South. The cool mountain climate and reputed medical benefits of the waters attracted a crowd of visitors every summer. Sojourners included notable men such as Thomas Jefferson, who designed

the octagonal bath house at Warm Springs in Bath County, and Martin Van Buren, who spent time at Red and White Sulphur Springs, the latter the location of today's famous Greenbrier hotel and resort.<sup>21</sup>

On his journey north from Newbern, Buckingham noted the immense grazing fields common further west across the mountains. These fields reminded him of home: "the rich green grass of which, so unusual and pleasing to the eye, was particularly refreshing and agreeable ... . Vast herds of cattle are driven up here from the southern and western parts of the state—we saw as many as 600 at least in one drove—to be pastured and fattened for the eastern markets; and it is thought to be even more profitable than planting, though capital invested in that yields from 25 to 30 per cent; but in grazing it is said to realize 50 to 60 per cent, on the average of many years running."<sup>22</sup>

Climbing the range of mountains between Newbern and Giles Court House (Pearisburg), Buckingham described a Methodist camp as

a large collection of log-sheds, pens, and small buildings, without a creature near them, though they covered several acres of ground, and enclosed an open parallelogram. These we learnt were the buildings belonging to one of the Methodist conferences, at which a camp-meeting was held every year, generally in August or September, when all the harvest business is over. Our informant said he had seen 5,000 or 6,000 persons assembled here from all parts of the surrounding country; and sometimes scenes of such extravagance were enacted, and such violent groans and screams were uttered, accompanied with faintings and hysterics, that it would give a stranger an idea of an Indian attack upon an encampment, with scalplings and tomahawkings, rather than a devout religious meeting.<sup>23</sup>

Following a change of horses at Giles Court House, they crossed the New River where, on the opposite bank, stood "one of the largest and most beautiful weeping willows I had ever seen; but it hung its drooping branches over a wretchedly dilapidated and dirty dwelling, disgraceful to its occupant." Several members of the group wished to get some bread, but were unable to do so. "The country-people use little or no wheaten flour; the meal of Indian corn is substituted for it; and 'corn-bread,' as this is called, is always eaten hot. No more, therefore, is baked at any time than is thought to be necessary for a meal ... . Orchards, however, were abundant and the permission of the owner of those near the house was asked, to gather of their produce."<sup>24</sup>

From Peterstown to the Red Sulphur Springs, the depressing scenes continued:

The dwellings and people we saw, from this onward for several miles, were among the dirtiest we had yet met with. The men seemed as if they did not shave more than once a month, or wash more than once a year; the women looked as though a comb never went through their hair, or soap and water over their skins; and the children, though they were all clothed, never had their garments mended, and were as ragged as they were dirty. Yet they were all of the white race; and no negroes, Indians or savages among the wildest tribes of Africa or Australia, could possibly be dirtier, or apparently more indolent, than they were. It is indeed to this latter vice, that all their defects are to be traced. With a fine soil, a fine climate, good health, and sufficient means to cultivate their grounds, they could hardly fail, if they were industrious, to lay by a surplus every year and progressively get rich; but having negro slaves to do their work, they seem to think labour an evil to be studiously avoided; so that their dwellings and persons are dirty, and comfortless in the extreme.<sup>25</sup>

But the resort, several miles north of Peterstown, presented an elegant contrast to the preceding countryside. Here Buckingham spent two days, enjoying “the repose of body, serenity of mind, the delightful social intercourse with the visitors.” He contrasted the pleasures of the resort with the personal discomforts he had experienced throughout his journey thus



Lithograph of Red Sulphur Springs resort by Edward Beyer, published in 1857 in his *Album of Virginia*.

far: "this delightful watering-place presented to us was literally delicious, and we enjoyed it to the full."<sup>26</sup> On the day after his arrival, Buckingham attended a Sunday service

conducted after the English Episcopalian ritual, by a clergyman of South Carolina, whose sermon was excellent ... . Service was repeated, in the afternoon, with an equally full audience; and the evening was spent in walks, social visits, and conversations. Altogether it appeared to be a very happy day to all parties; and to us it was peculiarly so, from our meeting here with friends from New York and Albany on the one hand, and from New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston on the other—embracing, therefore, the northern and southern extremes of the country; while from the intermediate cities of Philadelphia and Baltimore we met several others, whose renewed intercourse was peculiarly agreeable.

He noted visitors from New Orleans and Mobile, Texas and Havana, Cuba, as well as naval officers from Pensacola and army officers from Key West, and gentlemen from Arkansas, Missouri, Alabama, Georgia, South and North Carolina, Kentucky and Ohio. The majority, however, of the approximately 200 guests at the Red Sulphur Springs hailed from Virginia.<sup>27</sup>

The name of the resort came from the reddish deposit on the rock at the bottom of the springs. The water itself was clear and "delightfully cold, and only slightly sulphurous in taste or smell." The overflow, carried in pipes to the baths, was also bottled and shipped some distance, and according to Buckingham, had a great reputation for its medicinal properties. The resort featured a large hotel and rows of cabins for single men as well as families. The dining hall held as many as 300. "It is sufficiently lofty to be always airy; and has suspended from the ceiling, by a complicated framework, a handsome and well-fitted series of table-fans, like the punkahs of the East Indies, but composed of several in succession pulled up and down the table lengthwise, instead of a single large board pulled across the table breadthwise, which last is the most simple, elegant, and efficient of the two and is the only kind used all over Hindoostan."<sup>28</sup>

There were several points of interest within riding distance of the spa town: the Falls of the Kanawha, and a nearby "blowing cave," where the wind blew so hard "the current can scarcely be stood up against, from its force." But the most interesting local attraction, according to Buckingham, was what he understood to be a newly formed lake (Mountain Lake), once a creek and salt lick that had become blocked at one end, and the rising water had submerged all the trees on either side of the hill.<sup>29</sup>

From Red Sulphur Springs, Buckingham journeyed to the much larger White Sulphur Springs, the most popular of the mountain resorts. On the way, he related a story about one of his fellow travelers that illustrated American political symbolism:

An officer in the American navy had with him a fine straight walking-stick, which was admired and commented upon by another of our fellow-passengers, as one of the straightest and prettiest pieces of hickory he had seen for some time. This led to a statement of its history. It was cut from a hickory tree which overshadows the tomb of the ex-President Jefferson, the great revolutionary leader of the democratic party, and author of the Declaration of Independence, at Monticello. The hickory, from its hardness, toughness, and obstinate powers of resistance, has been selected as the fittest emblem of the modern leader of the democratic party, the ex-President Jackson, who is familiarly called "Old Hickory." To make this walking-stick more perfect, it was cut from the tree, of the length necessary to include a knot for every letter in the name of Andrew Jackson, neither more nor less, and yet it was the exact height required for a walking-cane. It was, therefore, at once a sort of emblem and talisman combined ...<sup>30</sup>

Along the road to the White Sulphur Springs, Buckingham saw numerous sugar maple trees and described the process of extracting the sap and boiling it down:

In the months of February and March, while the sap is rising, the sheds called "sugar-camps," are erected, or the old ones resorted to, in the centre of a large cluster of these trees. These sheds contain the boilers, of from fifteen to twenty gallons each, and moulds to receive the syrup when brought to the proper consistency for forming it into cakes. The borers then proceed, with an auger of about an inch in diameter, to bore the tree with two holes, four or five inches apart from each other, both about twenty feet from the ground, and in an obliquely ascending direction. In these are placed tubes of elder, of the proper size to fill the holes, and about ten inches long. These are usually placed on the south side of the tree, and do not penetrate more than half an inch beneath the surface as the sap is most abundant there. The sap is thus drawn off by these tubes, and falls into the troughs placed to receive it, being collected every day, and poured into casks till required to be placed in the boilers. In these it is boiled, and the scum is taken off carefully, and fresh sap added, till the whole becomes a fine syrup. After this it is suffered to cool, and strained through some woollen substance,

by which the remaining impurities are removed. Each tree, upon the average, will yield about four pounds of sugar; this, when well made, is quite equal in taste and strength to the brown sugar of the cane; and when refined, it is not inferior to the best loaf sugar of Europe. It is chiefly consumed, however, in the interior districts.

Further along the way, he asked a gentleman whether the inhabitants made much of the maple sugar and recorded the response, “‘Yes, they do, I reckon, right smart,’” which Buckingham learned meant “in great quantity.”<sup>31</sup>

At his next stop, the Salt Sulphur Springs, Buckingham described the chief mode of physical activity for the patients, bowling, in which both men and women engaged: “For the exercise of the Invalids, there is a ten-pin alley, under a shed, at which the ladies exercise themselves as well as gentlemen; and as the ball is rolled along a wooden platform, and not as with us on the grass, it is less laborious, and many of the ladies whom we saw engaged, threw the ball with skill and grace.”<sup>32</sup>

At Union, the next town on the road to White Sulphur Springs, Buckingham noted a large oak tree that the locals termed “The Mammoth Oak,” “it being the custom of this country to call everything very large by the epithet of ‘mammoth;’ so that one hears of a mammoth cake, a mammoth pie, a mammoth oyster—terms the most incongruous.” Buckingham thought the tree, while large, did not rival the cedars of Lebanon, or the African baobab.<sup>33</sup>

He was also less than impressed with the local beer, although it did have the virtue of being non-alcoholic. It “did not much resemble the beer of England, being made only of hop-water and molasses, without fermentation, so that it would not keep more than three days in draught, or a week in bottle, and it possessed no power of intoxication, however great the quantity that might be drank. It was, therefore, merely a sweet and bitter drink, which a vitiated taste might by habit be brought to prefer to pure water ... . It had the advantage over English beer, of not intoxicating those who drank it, while it was quite as wholesome.”

Indeed, Buckingham praised mountain and back country folk for their sobriety: “In the thousands of miles we had travelled through the interior, we had scarcely seen a drunken man, and never a drunken group or party; nor had we witnessed half the quarrelling, abuse, and profane swearing, that is to be seen and heard between almost any two post-towns in England. At the public tables, neither wine, spirits, or beer are placed; simple water or milk is the beverage of all.”<sup>34</sup>

White Sulphur Springs was by far the largest resort Buckingham had yet visited. The ballroom was much too small for the five or six hundred guests, and there was no drawing room or general public space for ladies and gentlemen to gather. And while the wealthier guests had their private carriages with which to explore the surrounding area, the majority of the visitors had little to occupy them. The food, he wrote, was also bad: "The fare at the table we thought worse than at any other Springs, and the servants, almost all negroes, were both dirty and ill-disciplined ... . In the evening we attended the ball, where, in a small and crowded room, about 200 persons were literally packed. In addition to the animal heat from such a number in a small space, (the room moreover being very low, and greatly heated by the number of lights,) the orchestra was filled by negro musicians; the bands being almost always formed of coloured people. Every door and window, at which, if unoccupied, fresh air might have come in, was crowded by the negro servants of the visitors, so that the heat and effluvia from such sources were far from agreeable. There was a great admixture of company also, more than I had thought likely to assemble at such a place. The majority were genteel in dress, appearance, and manners; but there were many coarse and vulgar persons, among the men especially, and some few among the women."<sup>35</sup>

The manly Englishman, who had traveled the world, also complained about the numerous dandies of both sexes at the resort, although he admitted that there were generally fewer dandies in America than in either France or England: "One of the males ... had ... suffered his hair, beard, and moustaches to grow uncut in wild luxuriance, and to all appearance uncombed. ... Another of these caricatures of humanity seemed to wish to be taken for an hermaphrodite, as his dress and appearance left you in doubt as to which of the sexes he belonged ... his hair, which he put up at night, as we were told, in curl papers, hung down around his face in the most feminine ringlets; while a white seam marked the place of its parting on the top of his head; and his affected lisp and mincing gait were precisely those of a conceited young boarding-school miss ... . The few female dandies we saw were not quite so ridiculous as the males; their peculiarities consisting chiefly in the extravagant excess to which they pushed the prevailing style of dress beyond its usual limits; extremely compressed waists, very low bodies, greatly exposed back, and perfectly naked shoulders, hugely protruding bustles, and artificially projecting busts, added to the most beseeching coquetry of attitude and manner."<sup>36</sup>

Leaving White Sulphur Springs on the morning of August 8, Buckingham traveled south, crossing the continental divide around noon.

The view was magnificent at nearly 4,000 feet above sea level, "a succession of rich and beautiful valleys." He found Sweet Springs to be the oldest and most beautiful of the resorts: "The superintendant of the bath, was an old Frenchman, who left Paris in 1789, after having been present at the destruction of the Bastille. He landed at Alexandria near Washington in that year, and has never been out of the State of Virginia since; though now eighty years of age, he is as healthy and vivacious as any Parisian who had never quitted the capital." Most of the guests, however, as the visitors he had encountered at the other resorts, came to these places for the society rather than to take a cure, and Buckingham thought this practice on the whole to be harmful. Travel for the purpose of seeing the natural wonders and exploring the natural history of the area he thought worthy, but to visit the spas for the "perpetual round of frivolous amusements," he believed was not.<sup>37</sup>

On August 9 Buckingham left Sweet Springs for Fincastle, crossing "Prince's Mountain," which he judged the most beautiful scene he had yet viewed. "The grandeur of the prospect, and the depth and solemnity of its effects upon the feelings, were indescribable. I had crossed many loftier mountains than these—Lebanon in Palestine, and Zagros and Louristan in Persia, especially—but even in the former, rich and beautiful as it is in scenes of the greatest loveliness, they seemed to me all inferior to the unrivalled splendour revealed to our delighted vision, by the progressive winding ascent of the western slope of Prince's Mountain."<sup>38</sup>

At Fincastle, he lodged at the Boar's Head Inn, the first of that name he had seen in America. The town itself "contains about 250 houses, and 800 inhabitants, of whom, there are nearly 200 negro slaves; these increasing in their proportion to the whites as you approach the Atlantic coast. There are four churches here, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal; a Court house, built of an octagonal shape, and crowned with a dome; two large Academies, well attended by male and female students; a Weekly Newspaper of democratic politics; this being the party to which the farmers of the interior chiefly belong."<sup>39</sup>

With the mention of newspapers, the talk eventually turned to politics.

I found here, as elsewhere, that the rich and mercantile classes were nearly all Whigs; and the people of moderate fortunes, and the agriculturalists, nearly all Democrats. The difference between them, however, is not so much on the principles of general politics, as on the question of banks; the Whigs being for a national bank, a credit system, and paper currency; the Democrats being for the custody of the

public money by a national treasury, ready-money transactions, and a metallic currency; while both, as usual in political controversies, carry out their doctrines to extremes. A new party is rising up, however, called by themselves Conservatives, who will not ally themselves to either. By both the old parties, however, these Conservatives are called "Impracticables." Mr. Rives, a distinguished Senator from Virginia, has seceded from the Democrats, but not gone over to the Whigs, nor joined the Conservatives.<sup>40</sup>

Departing Fincastle, Buckingham proceeded along the Great Valley Road to Buchanan: "This is seated on the banks of the James River, and is at the head of its navigation. The river is crossed by a good bridge; and several boats laden with supplies, for Richmond, lay at the bank. The town has about 100 houses and 600 inhabitants. There was a militia muster as we passed through; but this body being highly popular here, we did not remark any of the extravagancies we had seen in New York and in Georgia, where the object of all was to bring it into contempt. On the contrary, the young men here appeared proud of their military display; and as, from the abundance of deer in the mountains, they have good opportunities of practising with the rifle, they could muster a company of 100 good marksmen, which would furnish an excellent quota to a provincial army, if foreign aggression or internal insurrection should render their services necessary. In every point of view this seems a better force for a free country to keep ready for its defence, than the standing armies of Europe."<sup>41</sup>

Traveling northwards through the Valley, he stopped at Natural Bridge, which he compared to the Pyramids of Egypt in being more impressive up close than as seen in pictures. He was shown the place where some years earlier a young man had scaled the rock to write his name above that of George Washington, who had done the same in his youth:

The aspirant to fame succeeded in his object of passing beyond the spot where Washington's name was written, and inscribed his own above it. But on looking below to survey the height over which he had climbed, he conceived that it might be as easy and more safe to complete the remainder of the ascent, than to retrace his steps; and the resolution was thence formed to attempt it. His efforts were crowned with success; but when he reached the summit, and threw himself prostrate on the earth above, he fainted, according to some, and lost his reason, according to others ... . On looking at the spot, it would seem impossible for anyone to accomplish such an ascent; but the records of

extraordinary daring are too full of acts of astonishing achievements, to make it easy to set limits to the personal energies of man, under peculiar circumstances of danger or excitement.

Buckingham went on to describe the awesome beauty of the rock bridge and gorge, concluding that there were "few spots on the globe, where beauty and sublimity are more effectively combined than here."<sup>42</sup>

From Natural Bridge, Buckingham journeyed to Lexington, getting a view of the Peaks of Otter and crossing the James-Kanawha Canal.<sup>43</sup> He described Lexington as having "the appearance of a well-built and thriving



Frederic Church, "The Natural Bridge," painted in 1852, considered an example of the Hudson River School.



Edward Johnson's more distant view of Natural Bridge was painted in 1860. Like Church's it is in the tradition of the Hudson River School.

town.” The town was home to three churches, Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist, as well as a state arsenal and Washington College, which began as “Liberty-Hall Academy.” There was also a female academy called Ann-Smith Academy that held nearly 100 students.<sup>44</sup>

Staunton was the next large town on his itinerary,

one of the oldest as well as largest of the country towns of Virginia west of the mountains. It was founded by the British long before the Revolution; and so early in 1745, a Court of Justice held its sittings in the Court House here, under the Colonial jurisdiction ... . Staunton has now about 300 houses, and upwards of 2,000 inhabitants, with very few negroes, or people of colour. There are two Court Houses, one for common and statute-law cases, and one for chancery cases; a public markethouse, and four hotels; four churches, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptists, and Episcopalian; one male academy, two female seminaries, and a primary school.<sup>45</sup>

From Staunton he traveled to Waynesboro, then took a stage to Weyers Cave. The farmland in this portion of the valley reminded Buckingham of the cultivated fields of England, “presenting altogether the richest agricultural landscape that we had yet seen in the country. It struck us more like the

best parts of the Vale of Taunton, by the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey, than anything to which we could compare it at home; but much more extensive in area, and bounded by more lofty mountains . . . as a rich and fertile plain, nothing could surpass it in beauty."<sup>46</sup>

He was treated to a complete tour of the cave, after paying a dollar admission fee, and noted its remarkable features, including the Dragon Room, Devil's Gallery, and Solomon's Temple. The following day he returned to the cave, joined by hundreds of other visitors who came for the grand illumination advertised by the proprietor. Buckingham was disappointed by the spectacle, noting that the light of the 2,000 candles advertised was barely able to light the large halls, the immense crowd hindered the view, and even the band was annoying. Furthermore, after the illumination, the large crowd continued to enjoy themselves, as the proprietor and hotel owner "placed no restraint on the supply of ardent spirits to all who chose to pay for it at the bar." The result was a drunken riot, during which the landlord got into a fight with one of the guests, to Buckingham's extreme annoyance.<sup>47</sup>

Descending from the Blue Ridge Mountains through Rockfish Gap, Buckingham immediately noted the difference between plain and highland: "We found here, besides the marked change in temperature, two other corresponding changes;—one, the more frequent cultivation of the tobacco plant; and the other, the greater abundance of negroes."<sup>48</sup>

He visited Jefferson's home at Monticello, where he sadly noted the condition of the great Virginian's tomb, "the neglected and wretched condition of which ought to make every American, who values the Declaration of his country's independence, blush with shame." He had difficulty gaining an entrance to the house, then occupied by "a family very little disposed to encourage the visits of strangers." The family was that of Uriah Levy, an officer in the U.S. Navy, then absent on duty in the West Indies. Inside the house, Buckingham evaluated conditions as much better than the outside had led him to believe. He found the interior more in the French than English style and the most tasteful and harmonious he had yet seen in his tour of the South.<sup>49</sup>

Descending from Jefferson's little mountain to the town of Charlottesville, Buckingham made a visit to the University of Virginia. Since the school was then out of session, he saw few students, and devoted his attention to describing the principal buildings, the Rotunda housing the museum and library, and the lawn and pavilions on either side. At the time of Buckingham's visit around 200 students were enrolled; he noted their curriculum comprising Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, along with modern

languages, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Danish, Swedish, Dutch, and Portuguese. The more “technical” subjects included mathematics, natural philosophy (science), chemistry, materia medica (a sort of 19<sup>th</sup>-century course in pharmacology), anatomy and surgery, moral philosophy, and law.<sup>50</sup>

Traveling east from Charlottesville, Buckingham made a stop in Richmond, describing the site of the Virginia capital as “particularly striking and beautiful.” As he moved from the Piedmont into the Tidewater region, he remarked upon the decayed appearance of the fields, which he blamed on slavery. He ended this stage of his journey eastward through Virginia at Norfolk, the town he had first visited so long ago. He found it had grown considerably in the thirty years since his first visit, but many of its former inhabitants had died or moved away. Norfolk’s commerce did not match other cities he had visited: New York, New Orleans, even Richmond had overtaken it. True to form, he attributed the lack of business to the evil effects of slavery.<sup>51</sup>

He departed from Norfolk on September 11, and then visited Jamestown, Williamsburg, Fredericksburg, and Alexandria where he stopped at Mount Vernon. From Mount Vernon he traveled north again, visiting Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Philadelphia, and finished his trip to the United States with another stay in New York City.

Despite his occasional forays into romantic excess and his frequent moralizing on the evils of slavery and alcohol, Buckingham’s account has much to offer. His description of the South, particularly the mountain south, offers us a number of entertaining and instructive snippets of nineteenth-century American life and customs seen through the eyes of an educated world traveler.

### Endnotes

1. James Silk Buckingham, *Autobiography of James Silk Buckingham* (London, 1855), vol. 1, 171, 221. The young black musician was Joseph Emedee, or Emidy, who became quite well known as a performer and composer in and around Cornwall. Buckingham himself took music lessons from Emedee.
2. *Autobiography*, 253, 257.
3. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America*, 2 vols. (London, 1842), vol. 1, “Dedication,” [unpaged, p. i].
4. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 194.
5. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 202-3, 206.
6. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 203.
7. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 239.
8. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 241.
9. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 243-4.

10. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 246-7.
11. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 259, 263. The Deery Inn in Blountville is today a historic site, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Muzio Clementi (1752-1832) was an Italian composer and piano-maker who lived and worked in England.
12. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 273-5.
13. David Campbell of Abingdon served as governor of Virginia from 1837 to 1840. William Preston, son of Francis Preston of Abingdon and grandson and namesake of William Preston of Smithfield, and a cousin of Governor Campbell, was Whig Senator from South Carolina from 1837 to 1845. He later became president of South Carolina College (later University).
14. *Slave States*, vol. 2, pp. 276-7. Emory and Henry College was founded in 1836. Its campus is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
15. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 291-2.
16. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 292.
17. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 292-3.
18. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 294.
19. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 295.
20. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 296-7.
21. See E. Lee Shepard, ed., "'Trip to the Virginia Springs': An Extract from the Diary of Blair Bolling," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 96, no. 2 (April 1988), pp. 193-212.
22. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 298-9.
23. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 302-3.
24. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 303-4.
25. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 305.
26. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 306.
27. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 307, 316.
28. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 309, 312.
29. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 314-15. The "newly formed" lake is Mountain Lake, located in Giles County, Virginia. Buckingham repeats the common myth that the lake formed within the memory of man. It was first described by Christopher Gist in 1751 and is probably at least 2,000 years old. Its level fluctuates considerably depending on rainfall, which may explain the mention of submerged trees.
30. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 320-1.
31. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 322, 327.
32. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 324.
33. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 326-7.
34. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 328-9.
35. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 335-6.
36. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 336-7.
37. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 343-4, 347-8.
38. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 350. Buckingham's Prince's Mountain may be Price Mountain, the highest ridge between Sweet Springs and Fincastle.
39. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 352.
40. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 354. William Cabell Rives, Senator from Albemarle County, started his career as a Jacksonian Democrat, but eventually became a Whig and was a leader in Virginia of the Constitutional Union Party in 1860.
41. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 355.
42. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 358-9, 361.
43. The Canal, intended to provide western farmers a means of bringing their produce to Richmond, was begun in the 1790s and by 1851 had reached as far as Buchanan, eventually being superseded by rail transportation.
44. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 362-3.

45. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 365-6.
46. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 367.
47. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 390-1.
48. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 395.
49. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 400-2. See *Saving Monticello: The Levy Family's Epic Quest to Rescue the House That Jefferson Built* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).
50. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 404-5.
51. *Slave States*, vol. 2, 456.

### Notes on Illustrations

Henry William Pickersgill - James Silk Buckingham and wife, page 2  
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Edward Beyer - Red Sulphur Springs, page 10  
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David Johnson - Natural Bridge, Virginia, page 18  
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