

"OUR OWN COUNTRY"

by James Brooks

This patriotic essay is an abbreviated version of a two-part work, which first appeared in *Knickerbocker*, a New York City literary magazine, in January 1835. This edition was published in the *Portland Sketch Book*, 1836. It clearly alludes to the author's tour of the Slave States in 1833.

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What nation presents such a spectacle as ours, of a confederated government, so complicated, so full of checks and balances, over such a vast extent of territory, with so many varied interests, and yet moving so harmoniously! I go within the walls of the capitol at Washington, and there, under the star-spangled banners that wave amid its domes, I find the representatives of three territories, and of twenty-four nations, nations in many senses they may be called, that have within them all the germ and sinew to raise a greater people than many of the proud principalities of Europe, all speaking one language—all acting with one heart, and all burning with the same enthusiasm—the love and glory of our common country—even if parties do exist, and bitter domestic quarrels now and then arise. I take my map, and I mark from whence they come. What a breadth of latitude, and of longitude, too—in the fairest portion of North-America! What a variety of climate—and then what a variety of production! What a stretch of sea-coast, on two oceans—with harbors enough for all the commerce of the world! What an immense national domain, surveyed, and unsurveyed, of extinguished, and unextinguished Indian titles within the States and Territories, and without, estimated, in the aggregate, to be 1,090,871,753 acres, and to be worth the immense sum of \$1,363,589,69—750,000,000 acres of which are without the bounds of the States and the territories, and are yet to make new States, and to be admitted into the Union! Our annual revenue, now, from the sales, is over three millions of dollars. Our national debt, too, is already more than extinguished—and yet within fifty-eight years, starting with a population of about three millions, we have fought the War of Independence, again not ingloriously struggled with the greatest naval power in the world, fresh with laurels won on sea and land—and now we have a population of over thirteen millions of souls.

One cannot feel the grandeur of our Republic unless he surveys it in detail. For example, a Senator in Congress, from Louisiana, has just arrived in Washington. Twenty days of his journey he passed in a steam-boat on inland waters—moving not so rapidly, perhaps, as other steam-boats sometimes move, in deeper waters, but constantly moving, at a quick pace too, day and night. I never shall forget the rapture of a traveler, who left the green parks of New Orleans early in March—that land of the orange and the olive, then teeming with verdure, freshness and life, and, as it were, mocking him with the mid-summer of his own northern home. He journeyed leisurely toward the region of ice and snow, to watch the budding of the young flowers, and to catch the breeze of the Spring. He crossed the Lakes Pontchartrain and Borgne; he ascended the big Tombigbee in a comfortable steamboat. From Tuscaloosa, he shot athwart the wilds of Alabama, over Indian grounds, that bloody battles have rendered ever memorable. He traversed Georgia, the Carolinas, ranged along the base of the mountains of Virginia—and for three months and more, he enjoyed one perpetual, one unvarying, ever-coming Spring—that most delicious season of the year—till, by the middle of June, he found himself in the fogs of the Passamaquoddy, where tardy summer was even then hesitating whether it was time to come. And yet he had not been off the soil of his own country! The flag that he saw on the summit of the fortress, on the lakes near New Orleans, was the like of that which floated from the staff on the hills of Fort Sullivan, in the easternmost extremity of Maine; and the morning gun that startled his slumbers, among the rocky battlements that defy the wild tides of the Bay of Fundy, was not answered till many minutes after, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. The swamps, the embankments, the cane-brakes of the Father of Waters, on whose muddy banks the croaking alligator displayed his ponderous jaws—the cotton-fields, the rice-grounds of the low southern country—and the vast fields of wheat and corn in the regions of the mountains, were far, far behind him: and he was now, in a Hyperborean land—where nature wore a rough and surly aspect, and a cold soil and a cold clime, drove man to launch his bark upon the ocean, to dare wind and wave, and to seek from the deep, in fisheries, and from freights, the treasures his own home will not give him. Indeed, such a journey as this, in one's own country, to an inquisitive mind, is worth all 'the tours of Europe.'

If a young American, then, wishes to feel the full importance of an American Congress, let him make such a journey. Let him stand on the levee at New Orleans and count the number and the tiers of American vessels that there lie, four, five and six thick, on its long embankment. Let him hear the puff, puff, puff,

of the high-pressure steam-boats, that come sweeping in almost every hour, perhaps from a port two thousand miles off—from the then frozen winter of the North, to the full burning summer of the South—all inland navigation—fleets of them under his eye—splendid boats, too, many of them, as the world can show—with elegant rooms, neat berths, spacious saloons, and a costly piano, it may be—so that travelers of both sexes can dance or sing their way to Louisville, as if they were on a party of pleasure. Let him survey all these, as they come in with products from the Red River, twelve hundred miles in one direction, or from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, two thousand miles in another direction, from the western tributaries of the vast Mississippi, the thickets of the Arkansas, or White River—from the muddy, far-reaching Missouri, and its hundreds of branches: and then in the east, from the Illinois, the Ohio, and its numerous tributaries—such as the Tennessee, the Cumberland, or the meanest of which, such as the Sandy River, on the borders of Kentucky—that will in a freshet fret and roar, and dash, as if it were the Father of Floods, till it sinks into nothing, when embosomed in the greater stream, and there acknowledges its own insignificance. Let him see 'the Broad Horns,' the adventurous flatboats of western waters, on which—frail bark!—the daring backwoodsman sallies forth from the Wabash, or rivers hundreds of miles above, on a voyage of Atlantic distance, with hogs—horses—oxen and cattle of all kinds on board—corn, flour, wheat, all the products of rich western lands— and let him see them, too, as he stems the strong current of the Mississippi, as if the wood on which he floated was realizing the fable of the Nymphs of Ida—goddesses, instead of pines.

Take the young traveler where the clear, silvery waters of the Ohio become tinged with the mud from the Missouri, and where the currents of the mighty rivers run apart for miles, as if indignant at the strange embrace. Ascend with him farther, to St. Louis, where, if he looks upon the map he will find that he is about as near the east as the west, and that soon, the emigrant, who is borne on the wave of population that now beats at the base of the Rocky Mountains, and anon will overleap its summits—will speak of him as he now speaks of New England, as far in the east. And then tell him that far west as he is, he is but at the beginning of steam navigation—that the Mississippi itself is navigable six or seven hundred miles upward—and that steam-boats have actually gone on the Missouri two thousand one hundred miles above its mouth, and that they *can go* five hundred miles farther still! Take him, then, from this land where the woodsman is leveling the forest every hour, across the rich prairies of Illinois, where civilization is throwing up towns and villages, pointed with the spire of

the church, and adorned with the college and the school—then athwart the flourishing fields of Indiana, to Cincinnati—well called 'the Queen of the West'—a city of thirty thousand inhabitants, with paved streets, numerous churches, flourishing manufactories, and an intelligent society too—and this in a State with a million of souls in it now, that has undertaken gigantic public works—where the fierce savages, even within the memory of the young men, made the hearts of their parents quake with fear—roaming over the forests, as they did, in unbridled triumph—wielding the tomahawk in terror, and ringing the war-whoop like demons of vengeance let loose from below!

Show him our immense inland seas, from Green Bay to Lake Ontario—not inconsiderable oceans—encompassed with fertile fields. Show him the public works of the Empire State, as well as those of Pennsylvania—works the wonder of the world—such as no people in modern times have ever equaled. And then introduce him to the busy, humming, thriving population of New England, from the Green Mountains of Vermont, the Switzerland of America, to the northern lakes and wide sea-coast of Maine. Show him the industry, energy, skill and ingenuity of these hardy people, who let not a rivulet run, nor a puff of wind blow, without turning it to some account—who mingle in everything, speculate in everything, and dare everything wherever a cent of money is to be earned—whose lumbermen are found not only in the deepest woods of the snowy and fearful wilds of Maine, throwing up sawmills on the lone waterfalls, and making the woods ring with their hissing music—but found, too, on the banks of the St. Lawrence, and coming also on mighty rafts of deal from every eastern tributary of the wild St. John, Meduxnekeag and Aroostook, streams whose names geographers hardly know. And then too, as if this were not enough, they turn their enterprise and form companies 'to log and lumber,' even on the Ocmulgee and Oconee of the State of Georgia—and on this day they are actually found in the Floridas, there planning similar schemes, and as there are no waterfalls, making steam impel their saws. Show him the banks of the Penobscot, now studded with superb villages—jewels of places, that have sprung up like magic—the magnificent military road that leads to the United States' garrison at Houlton, a fairy spot in the wilderness, but approached by as excellent a road as the United States can boast of. Show him the hundreds and hundreds of coasters that run up every creek and inlet of tidewater there, at times left high and dry, as if the ocean would never float them more: and then lift him above considerations of a mercenary character, and show him how New England men are perpetuating their high character and holy love of liberty—and how, by neat and elegant churches, that adorn every village—by comfortable school-

houses, that appear every two miles, or oftener, upon almost every road, free for everybody—high-born, and low-born—by academies and colleges, that thicken even to an inconvenience; by asylums and institutions, munificently endowed, for the benefit of the poor: and see, too, with what generous pride their bosoms swell when they go within the consecrated walls of Faneuil Hall, or point out the heights of Bunker Hill, or speak of Concord, or Lexington.

Give any young man such a tour as this—the best he can make—and I am sure his heart will beat quick, when he sees the proud spectacle of the assemblage of the representatives of all these people, and all these interests, within a single hall. He will more and more revere the residue of those revolutionary patriots, who not only left us such a heritage, won by their sufferings and their blood, but such a constitution—such a government here in Washington, regulating all our national concerns—but who have also, in effect, left us twenty-four other governments, with territory enough to double them by-and-by—that regulate all the minor concerns of the people, acting within their own sphere; now, in the winter, assembling within their various capitols, from Jefferson City, on Missouri, to Augusta, on the Kennebec—from the capital on the Hudson, to the government house on the Mississippi. Show me a spectacle more glorious, more encouraging, than this, even in the pages of all history; such a constellation of free States, with no public force, but public opinion—moving by well-regulated law—each in its own proper orbit, around the brighter star in Washington—thus realizing, as it were, on earth, almost practically, the beautiful display of infinite wisdom, that fixed the sun in the center, and sent the revolving planets on their errands. God grant it may end as with them!

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