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Excerpt from Thomas Nuttall's diary, travels into the Arkansas Territory

Thomas Nuttall

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Thomas Nuttall was an English born naturalist who conducted an investigation of Arkansas's natural resources from 1818 to 1819. His memoir recounts his visits to Arkansas Post, Cadron, and other early Arkansas settlements. While his main subjects were the geographical and natural resources of Arkansas, he included descriptions of the people and culture that were a part of Arkansas Territory.

From *Travels into the Arkansa Territory* by Thomas Nuttall (1819)

The town, or rather settlement of the Post of Arkansas, was somewhat dispersed over a prairie, nearly as elevated as that of the Chicasaw Bluffs, and containing in all between 30 and 40 houses. The merchants, then transacting nearly all the business of the Arkansa and White river, were Messrs. Braham and Drope, Mr. Lewis, and Monsieur Notrebe, who kept well-assorted stores of merchandize, supplied chiefly from New Orleans, with the exception of some heavy articles of domestic manufacture obtained from Pittsburgh. Mr. Drope, to whom I was also introduced by letter, received me with politeness, and I could not but now for a while consider myself as once more introduced into the circle of civilization.

The improvement and settlement of this place proceeded slowly, owing, in some measure, as I am informed, to the uncertain titles of the neighbouring lands. Several enormous Spanish grants remained still undecided; that of Messrs. Winters, of Natchez, called for no less than one million of acres, but the congress of the United States, inclined to put in force a kind of agrarian law against such monopolizers, had laid them, as I was told, under the stipulation of settling upon this immense tract a certain number of families.

The cotton produced in this neighbourhood, of a quality no way inferior to that of Red river, obtained this year from six to six and a half dollars per cwt. In the seed, and there were now two gins established for its preparation, though, like every thing else, in this infant settlement of the poor and improvident, but little attention beyond that of absolute necessity, was as yet paid to any branch of agriculture. Nature has here done so much, and man so little, that we are yet totally unable to appreciate the value and resources of the soil. Amongst other kinds of grain, rice has been tried on a small scale, and found to answer every expectation. The price of this grain, brought from New Orleans, was no less than 25 to 37 ½ cents per lb. by retail. Under the influence of a climate mild as the south of Europe, and a soil equal to that of Kentucky, wealth will ere long flow, no doubt, to the banks of the Arkansa.

I again made application to the land speculators, trying to prevail upon them on any terms, to take up my baggage, as far as the Cadron, which would have enabled me immediately to proceed on my journey, across the great prairie, but they remained inexorable.

The houses, commonly surrounded with open galleries, destitute of glass windows, and perforated with numerous doors, are well enough suited for a summer shelter, but totally destitute of comfort in the winter. Without mechanics, domestic conveniences and articles of

dress were badly supplied at the most expensive rate. Provision produced in the country, such as beef and pork, did not exceed six cents per pound; but potatoes, onions, apples, flour, spirits, wine, and almost every other necessary article of diet, were imported at an enormous price, into a country which ought to possess every article of the kind for exportation to New Orleans. Such is the evil which may always be anticipated by forcing a town, like a garrison, into being, previous to the existence of necessary supplies. With a little industry, surely every person in possession of slaves might have, at least, a kitchen garden! But these Canadian descendants, so long nurtured amidst savages, have become strangers to civilized comforts and regular industry. They must, however, in time give way to the introduction of more enterprising inhabitants.

The river still continued rising. This morning I walked out two or three miles over the hills, and found the land, except in the small depressions and alluvion of the creek, of an inferior quality, and chiefly timbered with oaks and hickories thinly scattered. Ages must elapse before this kind of land will be worth purchasing at any price. Still, in its present state, it will afford a good range of pasturage for cattle, producing abundance of herbage, but would be unfit for cotton or maize, though, perhaps, suited to the production of smaller grain; there is not, however, yet a grist-mill on the Arkansa, and flour commonly sells above the Post, at 12 dollars per barrel. For the preparation of maize, a wooden mortar, or different kinds of hand or horse-mills are sufficient. Sugar and coffee are also high priced articles, more particularly this year. In common, I suppose, sugar retails at 25 cents the pound, and coffee at 50. Competition will, however, regulate and reduce the prices of these and other articles, which, but a few years ago, were sold at such an exorbitant rate, as to be almost proscribed from general use. There is a maple in this country, or rather, I believe, on the banks of White river, which has not come under my notice, called the sugar-tree (though not, as they say, the *Acer saccharinum*), that would, no doubt, by a little attention afford sugar at a low rate; and the decoctions of the wood of the sassafras and spice bush (*Laurus benzoin*), which abound in this country, are certainly very palatable substitutes for tea.

It is to be regretted that the widely scattered state of the population in this territory, is but too favourable to the spread of ignorance and barbarism. The means of education are, at present, nearly proscribed, and the rising generation are growing up in mental darkness, like the French hunters who have preceded them, and who have almost forgot that they appertain to the civilized world. This barrier will, however, be effectually removed by the progressive accession of population, which, like a resistless tide, still continues to set towards the west.

On the evening of the 18th of December, I again arrived at the Cadron, where four families not resided. A considerable concourse of travelers and some emigrants begin to make their appearance at the imaginary town. The only tavern, very ill provided, was consequently crowded with all sorts of company. It contained only two tenantable rooms, built of logs, with hundreds of crevices still left open, notwithstanding the severity of the season.

Every reasonable and rational amusement appeared here to be swallowed up in dram-drinking, jockeying, and gambling; even our landlord, in defiance of the law, was often the ring-leader of what it was his duty to suppress. Although I have been through life perfectly steeled against games of hazard, neither wishing to rob nor be robbed, I felt somewhat mortified to be thus left alone, because of my unconquerable aversion to enter this vortex of swindling and idleness.