

AN EARLY DESCRIPTION OF TENNESSEE

The following description is from Gilbert Imlay's *A Topographical Description of the Western Territory of North America* (London: J. Oebrett, 1797). The letter originally appeared in the *Philadelphia Gazette* of 17 October 1795.

A Short Description of the Southwestern Territory, in a Letter from a Resident There, Dated July 1795

The territory of the United States, south of the river Ohio, is that tract of country situate between 35 and 36 1/2 degrees north latitude, being bounded on the north by Kentucky, on the south by Georgia, on the east by North-Carolina, and on the west by the river Mississippi. It was originally part of North-Carolina, but was ceded to the United States in the year 1789; the Cumberland country and settlements are included in its limits, all together forming an extent of country of not less than 500 miles in length; its width about 105 miles.

The natural advantages which this temperate climate possesses, exceed those of any other part of the United States, or perhaps of the world. A circumstance peculiar to this country is, that the soil will yield all the productions common to both the northern and southern climates: here it is customary to see in the same field, or fields contiguous to each other, wheat, indian corn, rye, barley, rice, tobacco, hemp, indigo, cotton, and every kind of vegetable, growing to the greatest perfection. Persons who have seen this country, and who have been accustomed to the cultivation of vines, say that there is no doubt but that it will be extremely productive of wine,

whenever it becomes sufficiently populated to make it proper to attend to that object; and it is probable that the time is not distant, when population will have made such advances as to enable the people to attend to the raising those articles which will be most proper for exportation: it is generally well known with what rapidity the state of Kentucky has been peopled since it became an independent government. This territory has also taken steps to become a separate state, and will, in the course of a few months, be admitted into the union as a state, there being no doubt, from the prodigious emigration which has lately taken place, that under the constitution they will be entitled to become a separate state whenever they choose. The bounds of this letter do not admit of a detail of the many instances of the rapid population of this country: suffice it to say, that Knoxville, the present seat of the territorial government, not more than three years since was a wood, in which a blockhouse necessary to repel indian invasions was erected since; which time, a town has grown up here, consisting of from 2 to 300 houses, inhabited by a great number of respectable families; and although it is not more

AN EARLY DESCRIPTION OF TENNESSEE

than two years since the Indians appeared at least 1000 strong before this town, such has since been the progress of population, that many wealthy and respectable families have now set down with the greatest safety from 30 to 40 miles nearer the indian boundary; and it is already contemplated to remove the seat of government to a more central situation of the territory, 30 miles from Knoxville, on the banks of the Tenasee. To a person who observes the migration to this country, it appears as if North and South Carolina, and Georgia, were emptying themselves into it. It is not unfrequent to see from 2 to 300 people in a body coming from those southern climates, oppressed with diseases, to revive and enjoy health in this salubrious air. From the northern states the emigration here has been little or none: the greater facility of removing families down the Ohio to Kentucky, is one reason of it; and the intercourse of the inhabitants of it with the northern people being very small, and of course no opportunity of their becoming acquainted with its merits, is another; but then there is no doubt that the south-western possesses many advantages over Kentucky, or the territory north-west of the Ohio. One advantage is the abundant supplies of water from the best springs, that are to be found dispersed all over the face of this country; many of them large enough, at their very sources, to turn a mill constructed for the purposes of grinding or other manufactures. The circumstance of this being as well watered a country as any in the

world, added to the general temperature of the air, are supposed to be the real causes of the inhabitants enjoying a greater degree of health, than in any other part of America.

So great are the natural advantages of water in this country, that it is asserted with truth, there is not a spot in it 20 miles distant from a boatable navigation, from whence the farmer, planter, or manufacturer, may with cheapness, safety, and ease, convey his different articles for foreign markets, down the great river Tenasee, or Cumberland, into the Ohio and Mississippi, and thence to New Orleans. The face of this country may be said to be generally irregular: except on the river bottoms, we find no land entirely level; but since lands have become valuable, and the most hilly parts, as well as the river bottoms, are peopling, the hills and worst-looking lands produce not less than 30 to 49 bushels of indian corn to the acre; and although the bottoms will produce more than double as much indian corn, the uplands are found best adapted to the growth of small grain; what time may do by reducing those lands, and thereby rendering them more fit for raising of wheat, rye, &c. is yet to be experienced; but little or no alteration has been discovered in the soil by a few years cultivation. This country cannot but be considered as offering a welcome to the emigrant; on his arrival in it, even in the most inclement season of the year, he can easily, with his own hands, let him be ever so bad an artificer, erect a building entirely sufficient to repel all the evils which

AN EARLY DESCRIPTION OF TENNESSEE

are here felt from the weather: his cattle are supported from the spontaneous growth of the fields and woods, which afford an excellent range, even in the coldest season.

So great is the fertility of the soil, that the inhabitants with little labour raise thrice as much grain as supplies their families, and the balance is hospitably given up to the emigrant, or those who from accident have been deprived of sustenance. Here there is not the same necessity to secure yourself in your house from the invasion of the winds; for they are harmless, and do not possess the injurious qualities of those experienced in the atlantic states. Here are no sudden changes from heat to cold, effected by the different directions of the winds; but the inhabitants are equally secured from the cold chilling blasts of the north-west and north-east winds, as from the warm relaxing breezes of the south. The state of the air is only materially affected by the gradual approach or departure of the sun; in short, the hand of nature has placed its first blessings on this land, and proclaimed that, whoever be the inhabitants, they must be happy and independent. There is not a necessary, and but few luxuries of life, which cannot here be attained with ease. Salt, sugar, iron, saltpetre, copperas, &c. abound everywhere. In this climate the system of nature seems to be in its highest vigour; and there is no necessary production of the earth, sea, or air, proper for the comfort of man, that is not found here.

The modes of getting titles to lands have been various here. At

the time North-Carolina ceded to congress this territory, they reserved the right to still laying on its lands all warrants then issued, which warrants are now all appropriated; and as there is a great deal more land in this territory than they could cover, it is probable they have been laid on the best, particularly as there is scarcely any annoyance met with by the white people from the Indians; and the country has therefore been freely explored. For the lands on which the warrants have been laid, North-Carolina has issued patents agreeable to the cession act. Another mode lately adopted, of obtaining a prior claim to lands in this country, is by a survey and location, which, there is no doubt, will give a priority of entry in the United States' land office, when opened; which, I am told, will be the case at the next session of congress: and, if the form of the bill I have seen should be adopted, it will give a person in Philadelphia the same opportunity of confirming and completing a title to the lands under these surveys that the people resident in this country have. Another mode which has been supposed to secure a right to land is, that people have set down on the lands which they like best, that were not before appropriated, and expect to be allowed a right of pre-emption; but this is supposed to be the worst kind of claim, as they have never paid any consideration for them; and for the surveys and locations the surveyor general's and other fees have been paid. . . ❖