

The first American tourist guidebooks:

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Authorship and the print culture of the 1820s.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The First American Tourist Guidebooks

Authorship and the Print Culture of the 1820s

Richard Gassan

Tourist guidebooks are a ubiquitous part of print culture. Published in the millions, they address a vast variety of subjects and come in a wide range of formats, reaching nearly every part of the tourist experience. They are as disposable as almanacs, as mundane as calendars, and as temporally limited as a catalog. We accept them as a fundamental consumer good, as consumable as tourism itself.¹

In Europe, the form began with pilgrims' guides. The first appeared around the inception of the first millennium, although they were often based on travelers' writings extending back some seven hundred years previously. The guides themselves were often in the form of a travel narrative. Although their primary readership undoubtedly never saw the sights they described, a fair number of them were clearly intended to be used for actual travel advice.² In the mid-1500s, the first of the "Grand Tour" guides appeared, directing mostly student travelers around the continent. In England, a culture of tourism, begun in the mid-1600s with summer sojourns by royals and nobles to spas and other resorts, generated a body of travel literature. By around 1700 the earliest guides of the city of London had emerged. The first of these (1698) was supposedly intended to warn away the neophyte from disreputable areas (while giving just enough specific information to **[End Page 51]** allow those seeking out such vices to find them). Later guides would be a bit more temperate. By 1780, guides were written for country jaunts by leisure travelers.³ In North America, there was a steady stream of travel writing that began with the first settlements. However, in the absence of a well-developed tourist market, the first guidebook did not appear there until the nineteenth century.

The sudden appearance of the tourist guidebook in America came as a result of three major factors: the creation of a tourist industry, the appearance of relatively large numbers of tourists willing to buy these transitory products, and the arrival of a writing culture that fired a set of new young authors. The process was sped by changes in the manufacture and culture of print that allowed for the creation of this new genre of inexpensive, disposable books.

By 1822, America's first tourist circuit had been developed. Extending from New York City north up the Hudson River Valley, it relied on the technological marvels of steamboats and the as-yet uncompleted Erie Canal to reach as far west as Niagara Falls.⁴ Its three main sites were New York City, the source of many of its patrons; Saratoga Springs, a newly created resort and the site of the nation's largest nonurban collection of hotels; and, to the west, Niagara Falls, with one new, large hotel and more to come.⁵ All of these places represented a flow of money and people, and their continued growth demonstrates that they met an increasing demand. The people who patronized these places composed a new market, one that had the surplus income to purchase newly developed products. With this concentration of customers, it was perhaps inevitable that products would arise to serve them. However, for most people outside of the region, this group would have been nearly invisible. Even for those who knew it existed, it is probable that they did not realize the relative size and scope of tourism in this era.

As a result, it is not surprising that when the first American tourist guidebook was published in 1822, it emerged not from the era's major publishing centers of Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. Instead, it was published in Saratoga Springs, New York, the epicenter of American tourism. And rather than being written by the kind of gentleman-author idealized in that era, the writer of this book was Saratoga's printer, a man of humble roots and ink-stained hands, Gideon Minor Davison. He presumed to call his book *The Fashionable Tour...*

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