

**THE WILDERNESS ROAD, A DESCRIPTION
OF THE ROUTES OF TRAVEL BY WHICH
THE PIONEERS AND EARLY SETTLERS
FIRST CAME TO KENTUCKY. PREPARED
FOR THE FILSON CLUB**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649022137

The Wilderness road, a description of the routes of travel by which the pioneers and early settlers first came to Kentucky. Prepared for the Filson club by Thomas Speed

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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LOUISVILLE, KY.

Printers to the Filson Club.
1886

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PREFACE.

The story of the remarkable immigration to Kentucky which commenced in 1775, and in less than twenty years created a State in the Western wilderness with a population of nearly one hundred thousand, is more traditional than historical.

Many are now living, among our older citizens, who remember how their fathers and mothers told them of their travel to Kentucky from Virginia, or the Carolinas, or Maryland, or Pennsylvania. The greater portion of this travel in the early days was over the old Wilderness Road, though many persons made their way down the Ohio.

No attempt has been made to gather up the fragmentary accounts of this travel in the form of an historic narrative.

The account herewith presented, was prepared for the Filson Club, and is published by its direction for the purpose of preserving the facts and incidents it contains, and in the hope that it will stimulate further research and the production of additional historic material pertaining to the early Kentucky annals.

LOUISVILLE, KY., December 30, 1885.

The Wilderness Road.

Before the invention of steamboats and railroads the populations of the world fringed the sea-coasts or followed navigable streams into the interior. The settlement of America was no exception to this rule; the colonists clung tenaciously to the sea over which they came from the mother country. Less than two hundred miles inland, and parallel with the Atlantic coast were the mountains. Beyond these lay a wilderness of unknown extent, the occupation of which presented obstacles scarcely less formidable than those which attended the first planting of the colonies. The colonists made no attempt at such occupation until the last quarter of the last century. They were content, for a period of one hundred and fifty years, with possessions immediately along the coast. Up to the close of the Revolutionary war the three millions of people who had "engaged in the holy cause of liberty" only knew the country east of the Alleghany Mountains, and of this they only occupied so much as lay within one hundred miles or less of the sea. It is remarkable how slowly the New

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World was settled after its discovery. From 1492 until the planting of the first colony at Jamestown was more than an entire century, and then for a century and a half more no impression was made upon the continent other than was shown in the fringe of settlements along the Atlantic border. At the time the colonists had fully achieved their independence a singularly small extent of the States of New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and the Carolinas had been settled. The outposts of civilization in those States were not in the western but in the eastern parts. The Indians roamed in undisputed freedom over nearly all of New York west of the Hudson. The massacre at Wyoming, in 1778, took place less than one hundred miles west of New York City, at what was then a frontier village of Pennsylvania. The greater portion of Virginia and the Carolinas was an unbroken solitude, the hunting ground of savages, and the hiding place of wild beasts.

Fort Pitt was a distant outpost—merely a foothold in the far West. Another weak settlement had taken root on the head waters of the Holston River, near where is now the line between Virginia and Tennessee; it was known as the Watauga settlement. But no real impression was made upon the great West until after the war of the Revolution. With the accomplishment of independence, however, the time came for passing the western barriers; the section of occupied territory was to widen from a narrow ribbon along the coast line to the whole extent of the continent. Space was to be cleared for the gigantic growth of the new

Republic, and the coming wonders of the railway and steam navigation.

It was in the far-distant region of Kentucky that the permanent occupation of the West began. In the heart of that region, full five hundred miles as the crow flies from the sea-coast, and more than three hundred miles beyond the crests of the mountains, population suddenly gathered and civilization suddenly bloomed.

A glance at the map shows the immense distance this Kentucky civilization was from that of the East. It grew up in the wilderness, while another wilderness three hundred miles in extent separated it from the nearest inhabited country. In 1790 Kentucky had a population of over 73,000. Even at that date no growth westward had been made in New York State, and scarcely any had been made in Pennsylvania. But little extension of settlements had been made in Virginia, and the borders of the present State of Ohio had only been here and there touched. In two more years Kentucky took her position in the Union as a State. In 1800 her population was 220,000, being then nearly as great as that of Connecticut; only one third less than that of Maryland; more than half that of Massachusetts; more than one third that of Pennsylvania; one fourth that of Virginia, and nearly one fourth that of the two Carolinas.

These facts show not only how immigration went westward into Kentucky in advance of any other point, but also that it went by a mighty leap over and beyond the barriers. It was not the extension of continuously occupied country

like a peninsula of civilization stretching into the regions of the West; it was rather like an island of population far away from shore, only to be reached by a long, rough, and perilous passage.

The rapid growth of this Western plant is also suggested. In the short space of twenty years Kentucky took rank and station with the Atlantic States which were founded one hundred and fifty years before. It would be interesting to study the causes of these remarkable facts; among them may be mentioned the glowing accounts of the fertility and beauty of the "Land of Kentucke," spread by the early explorers; the easy terms on which the lands might be obtained, and the privilege of paying for them in the depreciated colonial and continental paper money; the high taxes, distress, and dissatisfaction following the Revolutionary war; the populousness of the States directly east of Kentucky, which had the effect to start the westward movement at that point; the important fact that the Kentucky lands were not occupied by any of the Indian tribes as a place of residence, which rendered their appropriation by the whites less difficult than it would otherwise have been. Kentucky was the hunting ground of the Indians, whose villages and towns were north of the Ohio, and of the Cherokees and Chickasaws of the South. It is true the pioneers encountered fierce Indian hostilities, for the savages were jealous of the occupation of their hunting ground; but they might have found a fiercer opposition if Kentucky, like Ohio and New York, had been the actual residence of warlike tribes.