

ALABAMA IN THE 1830'S

AS RECORDED BY BRITISH TRAVELLERS

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JAMES S. BUCKINGHAM

James S. Buckingham (1786-1855), English author and world traveller, retired from Parliament in 1837 and devoted nearly four years to an extensive tour of America. His travels were published in nine volumes, three of which were devoted to the northern section of the United States, three to the eastern and western states, two to the slave states, and one to Canada. In March, 1839, Buckingham passed by stage from Columbus to Tuskegee and then to Montgomery, from which place he descended the Alabama River to Mobile. *The Slave States of America* contains a fund of information on almost every phase of American life but perhaps few of his observations are more worth-while than those devoted to Alabama.

In³⁹ this [exclusive] coach we⁴⁰ left Columbus at eight o'clock on the morning of Wednesday the 13th of March [1839]; and crossing the river Chatahoochee a little below the falls, by the [covered] wooden bridge . . . , we entered on the state of Alabama. . . .

The change of aspect in scenery and condition was very striking. The woods, into which we were entering, seemed more wild, the road being a mere pathway through and around standing trees, the tops of which touched our heads in many places; the land was poorer in quality, but being more undulated in surface, the swamps in the bottoms were more abundant; the brooks ran with greater impetuosity, and the bridges over them were more rude than any we had yet seen. Rough corduroy roads occurred for many hundred yards at a time, and loose planks laid across horizontal beams, supported on single pillars, but neither nailed nor fastened, served for bridges; while frequently the coach would have to go through water deep enough to come close up to the coach-door, and threaten us, by the slightest false step, with immersion. The stations, where we changed horses, were mere log-huts, used as stables: and all the way, for miles in succession, we saw neither a human being, a fence, a rood of cleared land, nor anything indeed that could indicate the presence of man, or the trace of civilization. . . .

. . . Beyond this belt, signs of settlement began gradually to appear, but even these were of the rudest kind. A blacksmith's shop, a few log-huts, and a "confectionary," with the ever-ready poison of strong drink, constituted a village; and for forty miles of our road we saw only one instance of a store where any other goods could be procured. . . .

It was five o'clock . . . when we reached the little village of Tuskegeea, forty-five miles from Columbus; and here we should have halted for the night. . . . The inn, at which we changed horses, was one of the neatest and cleanest we had seen in the South; and though very humble in its appearance and furniture, there was such an air

39. From James S. Buckingham, *The Slave States of America* (2 vols., London, 1842), I, 250-508 *passim*.

40. A family of three and a man-servant.

of neatness, cleanliness, and order about it, that it excited our warm commendation.

Our next stage from hence was a distance of twelve miles, through the same description of scenery as that passed in the morning, but the soil was more clayey, and the road better, though all our drive was performed through a deluge of heavy rain. . . .

At the end of this stage we reached a log-house, where we were to sleep for the night. The beds and interior accommodations were most uninviting; but we had no choice, so, lighting a large wood-fire, and preparing some tea, . . . [we] retired early. During the night, the rain poured down with great violence, and as the roof of the log-house was not water-proof, we had streams entering at different parts of it, which made our position very uncomfortable. The partitions between the several small apartments into which the house was divided, were so thin . . . it was like sleeping with a dozen persons in the same apartment. The cries of young children, the snoring of the negroes scattered about lying on the floor, the constant barking of several large dogs, saluting and answering each other in alternate volleys, and the incessant creaking of the frogs . . . made it almost impossible to sleep. We therefore got out to trim the fire, and see the hour, several times during the night, and were extremely glad when the daylight broke on us, our first perception of this being through the chinks of the roof, as there was no window whatever in the room in which we slept.

We left this log-house [after breakfast] at half-past eight, in the same coach that brought us from Tuskegee; and proceeded onward for Montgomery, reaching, after a few miles, a new settlement called Cubahatchee. The soil now became richer on each side, and the woods very much more variegated, as, besides, the ever-succeeding pine, there was a thick underwood of various flowering shrubs and trees including magnolias, yellow jessamines, the dogwood, and the grape-vine, with a very beautiful tree called the willow-oak.

Excellent as the soil was here, and rich and productive as all the fields around us seemed to be, the roads were even worse than usual, the corduroy ridges of round logs extending sometimes for upwards of a mile in continuity, and so violently shaking the coach that though it was nearly new, and built with great strength, it broke down with us in the middle of the road. We were therefore obliged to get out, and walk about half a mile to a farm-house during the rain, while it was repairing. . . .

Our coach being set up again, we proceeded on our way, and soon passed a very spacious and elegant mansion, with large verandas all round, a beautiful and extensive garden, with vineries, arbours, and