

George Flower Comes to the Illinois Country

A New Look at Motivations

MARY ANN SALTER

THE FOUNDING of the English Settlement in Illinois by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower has been cited as an event of far greater significance for the state than the number of persons involved might indicate. The persuasive power of Birkbeck's books and the controversy they generated undoubtedly attracted many settlers—as well as a horde of English travelers who publicized the undertaking. The Englishmen's grand attempt to capitalize prairie farming hastened the recognition that cultivation of grasslands was possible. Finally, the indefatigable pen of Birkbeck and the leadership of both men in opposition to the 1824 referendum on a constitutional convention contributed significantly to keeping Illinois a free-soil state. These achievements have long been known.

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In recent years, a collection of private papers, including letters written to England by George Flower during his **tour** of the United States in 1816–1817, has been deposited in the manuscript **collections** of the Illinois State Historical Library. Though **not** the originals, the **letters** were copied by hand into a book that thus became a record of the young **man's travels**. The letters, together with the **journal** kept during the same time, are especially **valuable** for what they tell us about his **motivations** and his impressions on that **original** trip; the documents also give us insight into the relationship between Flower and Birkbeck in the enterprise they **subsequently** undertook together. In **particular**, the letters and journal **clearly** show that it was **Birkbeck** who chanced to pioneer in the West, and that **Flower's predilection** for the South was so strong that **it** nearly **overcame** his antipathy to **slavery**.

Flower's departure from England was not, as has **sometimes** been assumed, on commission to investigate **possible sites** for settlement. Neither he nor **Birkbeck** had

fully decided to emigrate when he embarked from Liverpool aboard the Robert Burns on June 12, 1816.¹ Grim times they were for English farmers. "To persons of fastidious political tastes," Flower remarked, "the United States of North America seemed to be the only country left for emigration,"² but the journey "was undertaken from mixed motives."³ An unhappy marriage had become unbearable for Flower and his wife, or for one of them, and Flower sought a change of scene.⁴ His two young sons were left in the care of his sister Mary Catherine, to whom he wrote almost immediately on arriving in New York on August 3.⁵ That this arrangement was a temporary one seems probable from a letter written January 18, 1817, to a friend. At the time, Flower was tentatively planning to return to England in late March or April.⁶

Though my stay in England will be short, yet it is necessary that I should return once more to make some family arrangements, which nothing but the embarrassed feelings under which I left my native country will excuse my leaving undone.⁷

However turbulent his emotions may have been, the milieu of a new country—its political institutions so congenial to his own republican tastes, its developing democratic society so novel and at times disconcerting—was exciting to explore, and his discoveries were communicated with the enthusiasm of one who enjoys traveling and conversation. As he toured New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, he gathered information on the state of agriculture and commerce, which he reported to his father.⁸ To his brother William he described business opportunities and his own enthusiasm for the United States? and to Edward, his youngest brother, he wrote of the adventure of riding through the forests of Ohio, where he was often in the company of backwoodsmen.¹⁰ But to his mother he confessed, "The State of Ohio is almost too democratic for me I mean for me to enjoy myself in." He was uncomfortable with the familiarity of "ignorant upstart slovely fellows . . . nevertheless I would not have the System encroach'd

upon in the least the Advantages of republicanism are too striking." Flower said that he was more favorably impressed with the state of Kentucky, which he toured in October. He reiterated his growing conviction that America was where he wished to be.

If it was not for my parents and my children I should never return to England again, for without doubt the means of procuring a living is so easy to what it is in our old country, that there can be no hesitation about Choice."

Increasingly he felt drawn to the South. Kentucky seemed healthier than Ohio, and its society more congenial than that of Ohio or Pennsylvania. After visiting Tennessee, he turned eastward and hurried to reach Virginia before winter came to the mountains. General Lafayette, whom he and Birkbeck had met in France in 1814, had given him a letter of introduction to Thomas Jefferson,¹² and Flower now presented himself at Poplar Forest, a new plantation the former President had purchased near Lynchburg. Flower was received with "the greatest hospitality and spent a most delightful day of Rest after [a] . . . fatiguing journey." Flower's description of Jefferson is an affectionate one:

In person he is tall and thin and tho near 80 years old, as active as a Boy. A person of such sure acquirments [?] & abilities I never met

¹This date is taken from the letters. In his *History of the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois* (Chicago: Fergus Printing Co., 1882, p. 30), Flower later wrote, "I sailed from Liverpool in April 1816." The history was composed at least forty years later, and in this detail probably indicates the fallibility of an old man's memory of his youth.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 27–28.

³*Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴William Faux, *Memorable Days In America* (London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1823), p. 291.

⁵The letter of Flower to his sister Mary was started July 6 at sea and completed when he "arrived at New York Aug. 3, 1816; Copybook of Flower Letters, 1816–1817, MS, Illinois State Historical Library, Springfield. All letters hereinafter cited are from this copybook.

⁶George Flower to [Morris Birkbeck], Dec. 15, 1816.

⁷George Flower to [Mr. Gurney], Jan. 18, 1817. The Gurneys were a prominent Quaker family, and several were active in the fight against slavery. The



Slaves at work on a cotton plantation

with, both in his dress and House there is the greatest plainness and simplicity. He wears a coarse Cloth Coat with large steel Buttons and in our old fashion a red plush Waistcoat and a pair of dark brown corderoy Breeches with

colored worsted Stockings. in his appearance like a respectable old english Gardener. regular in his habits methodical in his actions, temperate in living, affable in and polite in his Manners accessible to the most illiterate person, and a companion for persons of the polliish'd Manners & the greatest literary Attainments.¹³

Jefferson gave Flower letters of introduction and invited him to visit Monticello in a few days. From Poplar Forest, Flower went to the home of Colonel John Coles, father of Edward Coles, who later became governor of Illinois.¹⁴ The charm of Virginia hospitality and aristocratic republicans enhanced Flower's affinity for the South. Even the detestable institution of slavery seemed less cruel and oppressive than he had expected. And the presence of servants made living more gracious, more comfortable, more comparable to life in England. In Virginia and Kentucky, society was better, there were more gentlemen.¹⁵ There "is just enough of aristocracy left, to let an old country man down

Gurney and Flower families were related by marriage in at least two generations. See Robert Birkbeck, *The Birkbecks of Westmoreland* ([London:] Mitchell & Hughes, 1900).

¹³George Flower to his father, Richard, Aug. 12, 1816.

¹⁴George Flower to his brother William, Oct. 1, 1816.

¹⁵George Flower to his brother Edward, Oct. 14, 1816.

¹⁶George Flower to his mother, Elizabeth, Oct. 24, 1816. (Errors in punctuation and capitalization in the letters should probably be ascribed to careless copying. All are not in the same handwriting, and some are more carefully done than others. The letters are presented here as they appear in the copybook.)

¹⁷Flower, pp. 31-32.

¹⁸George Flower to his father, Richard, Dec. 20, 1816.

¹⁹Flower, p. 43.

²⁰George Flower to his cousin [probably Elias Pym Fordham], Jan. 12, 1817.

easy amongst republicans," he wrote to a friend.¹⁷

In view of his later undoubted commitment to the antislavery cause and his association with efforts to ameliorate the condition of both slaves and free Negroes, the initial wavering of his attitude is surprising, yet understandable. On the plantations of men like Jefferson and Coles, the inhumanity of the system would not have been apparent, for there was no flagrant cruelty. Having in mind the wretchedness of English laborers, who were suffering greatly in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars and the dislocations of the industrial revolution, Flower did not find the situation of well-fed, well-cared-for slaves to be so unfortunate. After visiting Monticello, he wrote a long letter to his father in which he gave his observations of the situation there, where slaves were numerous. Neither Jefferson nor his son-in-law had "a free man belonging to them," except for the overseers, who in Flower's view corresponded to the English bailiff.

Now I have touched on the subject of slavery I must give some account of the slaves. . . . As men have become more enlightened the Rigour of Slavery has abated, and the State of the Slave has been improved up to the present time. It is rare to find an inhumane master on many establishments a blow has not been struck for years. and all barbarous usage is spoken of with horror and detestation.

Noting the ample provision of food and clothing, he continued:

Thus treated and under a good Master their lot would be envied by many of our *distres'd* labourers in England."

In Kentucky, where he had first seen slaves and masters, he had written in his journal: Slavery in Kentucky is mild, and the unfortunate people who are condemned to perpetual inferiority are treated with kindness. They are in general well fed and well clothed, their tasks are light and their cheerful countenances bespeak a presence of happiness that frequently is denied to their more anxious masters. Although some advantage is obtained by the labour of the negro yet the general evil of Slavery is as sensibly felt by the Inhabitants of this state as by those who view it from a distance and are

loud in their condemnation without being aware of the difficulties that present themselves in its removal.¹⁸

Flower was convinced that real efforts were being made towards eventual emancipation, particularly in Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Kentucky. Virginia statutes impeded the freeing of slaves by requiring that freed Negroes be sent out of the state, an inhumane provision in itself. But alternatives were being sought. Letters to his father and to a Mr. Gurney contain considerable information about an attempt to establish in Sierra Leone a colony for "those free people of colour that wander about the union in a state of degradation between liberty and slavery."

If this succeeds it will open a door to emancipation, that will not close until slavery ceases to exist."¹⁹

In Richmond, Virginia, in the latter part of December, 1816, Flower received a letter from his father informing him that Morris Birkbeck had decided to emigrate. Flower then wrote his friend his thoughts on locations for settlement. Pennsylvania he had ruled out as being too cold—as well as uncongenial for gentlemen such as himself and Birkbeck. There were many German landowners who worked "with their own hands," but too few laborers for hire. In Ohio, also, the scarcity of workers would not allow farming on a large scale. Kentucky was far from markets, but it supplied most of the cattle in the United States, and society there was much better than in Ohio. Of all the citizens in the West, he preferred "the Kentuckians." Tennessee had both social and agricultural drawbacks, being too cool for cotton, too warm for tobacco and wheat, and less congenial than Kentucky for gentlemen. In

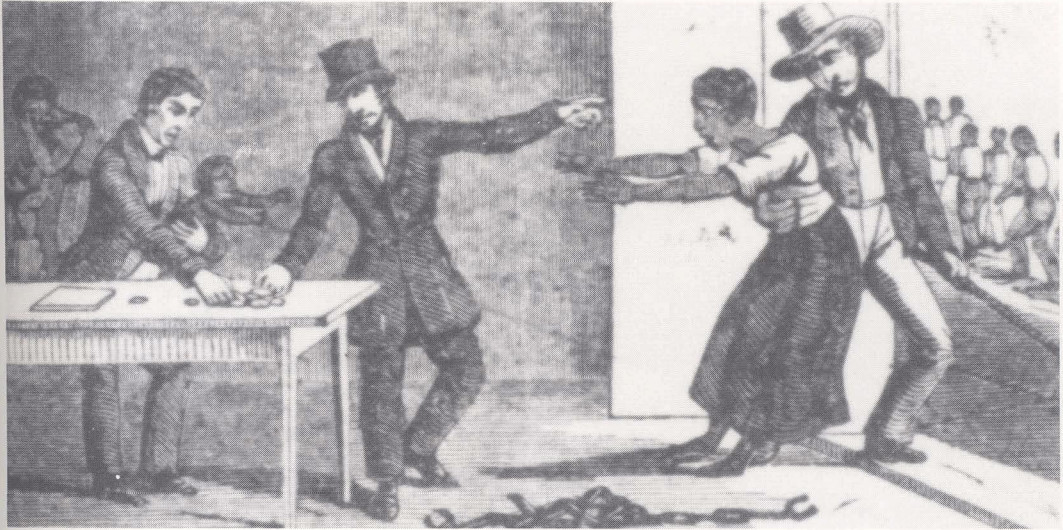
¹⁷George Flower to [Mr. Gurney], Jan. 18, 1817.

¹⁸George Flower to his father, Richard, Jan. 11, 1817.

¹⁹Flower "Journal," Tuesday, Oct. 13, 1816, MS, Illinois State Historical Library. (Dates in this copy do not agree with those in the Flower "Diaries," MSS, Chicago Historical Society, where the quotation appears in Vol. II, p. 126.)

²⁰George Flower to [Mr. Gurney], Jan. 18, 1817.

²¹George Flower to [Morris Birkbeck], Dec. 15,



"Separating a Mother from Her Child," an illustration from an 1839 abolitionist journal

the final reckoning, Virginia seemed to have the most advantages. Society and manners weighed heavily in his preferences, and the men of Virginia were "Gentleman farmers." Lands were poor, it was true, but the existing farming was poorly done, giving scope for the talents of enlightened English farmers. The wisest thing for a European to do, he believed, was to rent a farm with a comfortable house and slaves until he could decide on a place for permanent settlement. As to slavery:

Our principles are right but our notions as to the misery of their lives are very erroneous. Their condition has been ameliorated greatly within these 20 years. . . . The public opinion is favourable to emancipation Slavery is felt as an evil, but there are many difficulties enough.

Urging his friend to come, he said, "You are well known in America and would be

1816. The date of this letter, written from Richmond, is apparently in error. The "Diaries," III, Chicago Historical Society, indicate Flower was at Monticello from Dec. 12 to 16 and arrived in Richmond on Dec. 20. A postscript on a letter sent that day from Richmond to his father, **Richard Flower**, indicates that he had just received the news of Birkbeck's decision to emigrate.

²George Flower to his father, Richard, Jan. 11, 1817 (quotations are from separate paragraphs).

received with the most sincere congratulations of friendship."²⁰

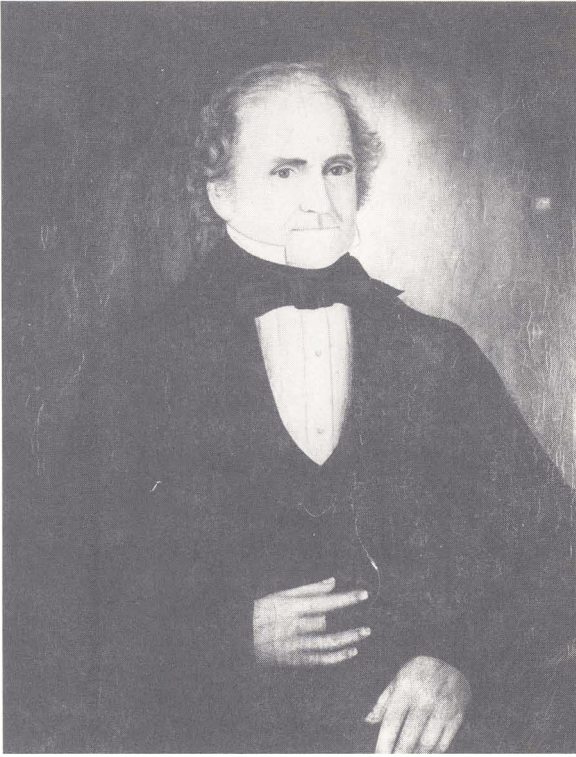
In early January, Flower undertook a short tour through northwestern Virginia. In the same letter to his father in which he revealed his moderating attitude toward slavery, he described farming methods, distinguishing between planters (who grew tobacco, corn, and cotton) and farmers (who produced small grain, hay, and grass, and kept sheep and oxen). Of the former he wrote:

He cuts down timber to procure him fresh land every year which he impoverishes and abandons until he has gone over his estate (which) he then sells at a low price. Wheat and clover improve this land with good ploughing and when it is farmed a few years it doubles and triples in Value.

I should be very strongly tempted to purchase a farm of from 5 to 800 acres, if I knew Mr. Birkbeck's mind upon this subject.

For I should be sorry that we should separate far from each other in this country. It would be desirable as a home a point to come to at once and would save a deal of expense in living in Cities and Towns, [which] fortunately for the farmer is extravagant in this country. Let me hear from you and Mr. B.²¹

Both to his father and to his cousin he indicated a preference for settling east of the mountains, where markets were



George Flower

nearby, the climate healthful and pleasant, and society and manners most similar to those of England.²²

It was not until February 7 that two long-delayed letters from Birkbeck finally reached Flower. Meanwhile, he had bought a farm in Campbell County, Virginia, ten miles from Lynchburg. For \$10 per acre, he had acquired an abandoned plantation of 752 acres, 300 of which were cleared. On the property was a small but comfortable house. Writing to Birkbeck on February 10, 1817, Flower conveyed this news and his intention of returning to England in April unless he heard that Birkbeck was arriving near the scheduled departure date. In that case Flower would delay his own departure. The letters from Birkbeck had been written in June and September, 1816, and apparently indicated an intention on his part to settle on the frontier. Flower responded, "You seem to be driving to the West with such vengeance that I despair of catching you in an Atlantic State till you rebound from the

rocky ridges." Flower, to whom the thought of pioneering must have been appalling, invited Birkbeck to inspect his farm and take possession if He cared to, should be arrive after Flower's departure for England. Slavery, he knew, would be an objection.

But when you have seen it in this state you will have very different feeling on the subject. Indeed I am not sure that you would not give a preference to settling in a country where Slavery exhibits itself in a form as mild as it does in Virginia, seeing that you may be of essential service to a class low in political existence but by no means the most miserable. I would not ask you to an encreasing evil, or to one you must augment by your support, but to this you may grant your full share of mitigation therefore I have no scruples. The System (for systematic

²²George Flower to his cousin [probably Elias Pym Fordham], Jan. 12, 1817.

²³George Flower to [Morris Birkbeck], Feb. 10, 1817.

²⁴Morris Birkbeck, *Notes on a Journey in America* (London: James Ridgway, 1818), p. 21.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 22, 23.

Eliza Julia Andrews Flower



slavery however disguised must be wicked) originated in violent injustice was for a time continued with cruel oppression, but increasing goodness has altered its **obnoxious** features. There is nothing left to shock humanity and very little to disgust."

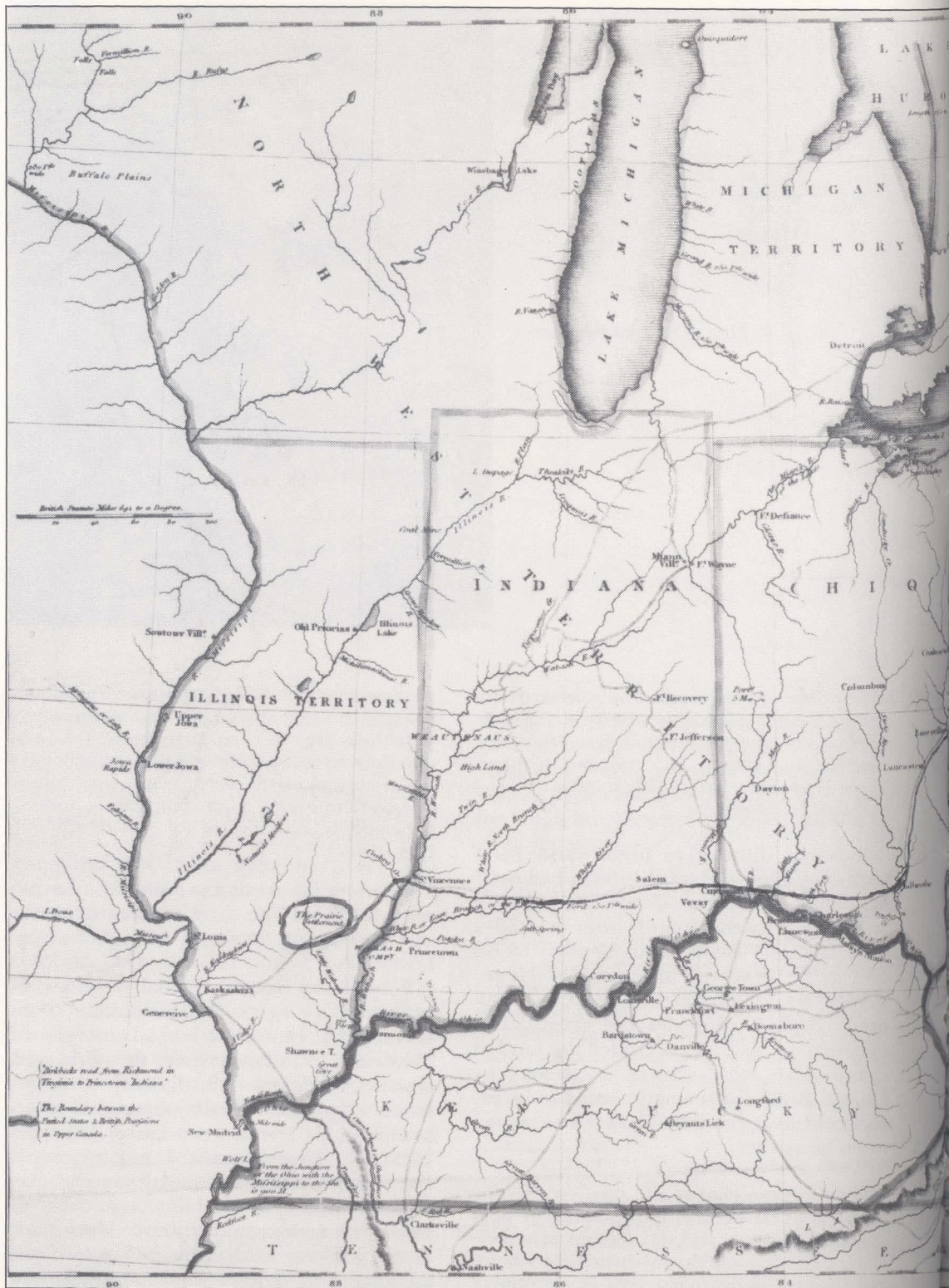
It is not difficult to understand **Birkbeck's** rejection of both his friend's invitation and his attitude. Almost immediately on arriving in Richmond, he witnessed a slave auction, which brought tears to his eyes as he observed the grief of Negro women being separated from their children.²⁴ Strong principles and great determination on his part precluded the kind of compromise with slavery suggested by Flower. **Birkbeck** seemed almost to be directly refuting his friend's rationalizations when he wrote:

It has also been confidently **alleged** that the condition of slaves in Virginia, under the mild treatment they are said to experience, is preferable to that of our English labourers. I know and lament the degraded state of dependent

poverty, to which the latter have been gradually reduced. . . . I know also, that many slaves pass their lives in comparative ease . . . and that the most wretched of our paupers might envy the allotment of the happy negro: this is not, however, instituting a fair comparison, to bring the opposite extremes of the two classes into competition.

He then pointed out a number of inherent advantages of the free laborer over the slave, especially in terms of rights under law.²⁵

In view of Flower's actual purchase of property in Virginia and his opinions concerning the comparative advantages of West and South—formed through personal observation—it is difficult to understand why he was finally persuaded to accompany his friend west. In his letters to Birkbeck, Flower pointed out succinctly the chief obstacles that ultimately prevented their personal success: lack of labor, low prices, and distance from markets. It is true that early in his tour the advantage of a joint land purchase had

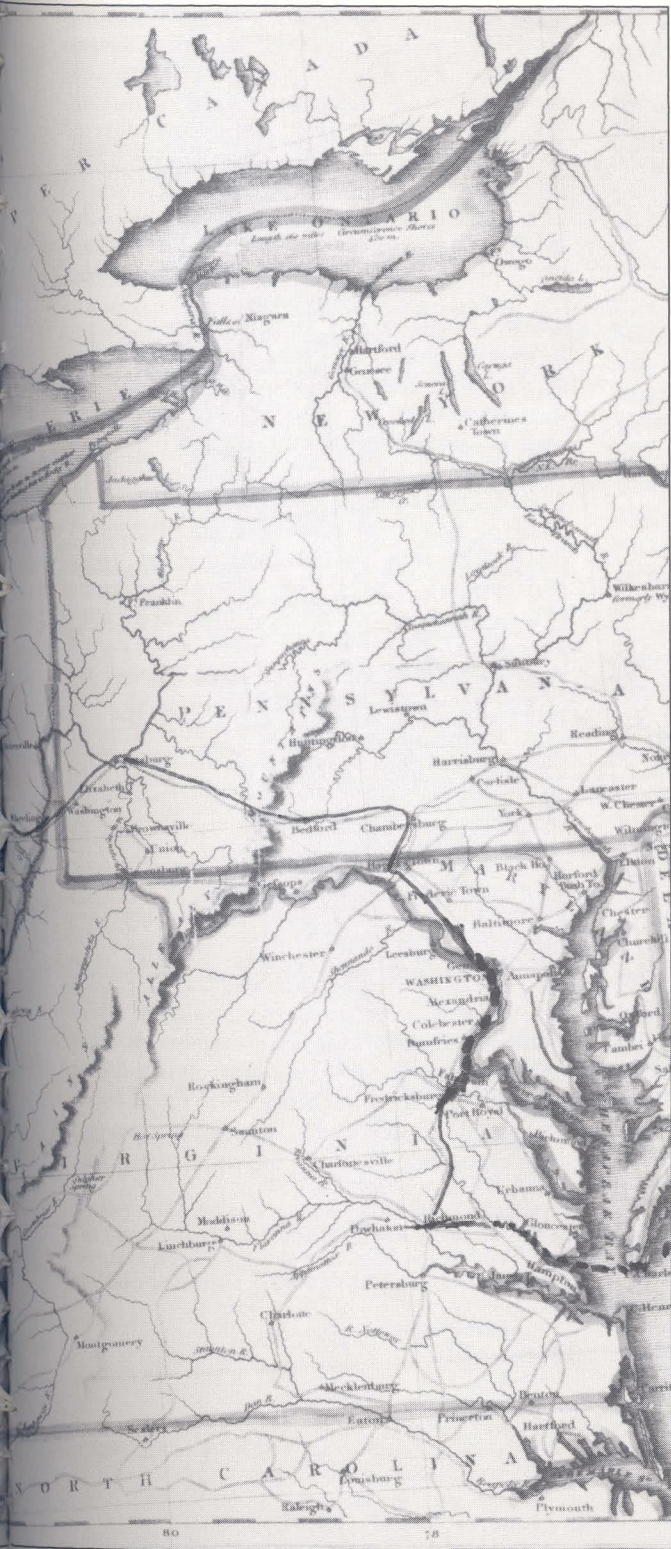


British Standard, Miles 4 1/2 to a Degree.

Backbone road from Richmond in Virginia to Vincennes Indiana.

The Boundary between the United States & British Possessions in Upper Canada.

From the Landing of the Ohio with the Mississippi to the Sea to run all.



This map indicates Birkbeck's journey from Richmond, Virginia, to the "Prairie Settlement" in Illinois.

occurred to him. Indeed, the idea of an English Settlement may originally have been his.

If farming is the object a stout party from England settling near to each other in a healthy and fertile situation could not fail of success for the value of that part of the land which might be improved at the end of 5 years would be doubled tripled or quadrupled by the improvement on the other part.%

But these observations were made in relation to conditions in Pennsylvania and the eastern edge of Ohio, and both those states, he later wrote, lacked the supply of labor necessary for large-scale farming. When he learned that Birkbeck was intent on locating in the West, Flower advised:

In the Western States there is much rich land, high wages, low prices and distant from market precludes farming on a large scale. The liability to diseases and a total change of habits weigh more with me. There are notwithstanding as many reasons to urge, an American westward as to induce an European to stop short. His method of cultivating the Earth compels him to a mode of labour for which he is well qualified. We must not rush forward into the foremost rank, to fell trees hunt Bears and fight Indians. Our Policy is to let pioneers do the heavy work for us while we content ourselves upon their old plantations and endeavor to apply our skill after their labour."

Writing to a friend in England on the relative advantages of the East and the West, Flower maintained that for Europeans, the Atlantic states would be more desirable because of the greater similarity of manners and the facility of communications with Europe. This was precisely the position William Cobbett was to take in his bitter attack on the English Settlement in his Letter to Morris Birkbeck, published in 1818.²⁸

Flower's perennial concern for "good society" could not have been easily allayed, and the comforts of civilized living were obviously of importance to him. Shortly after writing to Birkbeck, he wrote a whimsical letter to his sisters describing the "manner of living" in Pennsylvania and Virginia.

In Pensy — the female of the house must be a

bustling managing working dame ready to make sauce herself, or take it from her servant.

In Virginia, on the other hand:

The Lady presides at the table as in England, and every Lady in the family has her waiting maid.

When I see you again you must tell me in which you had rather live.²⁹

There is no doubt that Birkbeck was a persuasive man, and his *Notes on a Journey in America* contains arguments that he also may have used to win over his young colleague. By surrounding themselves with likeminded people from England, they would create their own society;³⁰ and in offering an escape route for the oppressed poor of England, they would provide their own source of labor.³¹ On the Illinois prairie they would be five hundred miles nearer than Cincinnati to the markets of New Orleans.³² What better prospects, he might have asked, could one expect?

It seems quite possible, however, that Flower was persuaded to go to Illinois by circumstances that had little to do with reason or argument. When the Birkbecks arrived in Virginia, Miss Eliza Julia Andrews was one of the party. She was a friend of the Flower family and, possibly, the cause of George Flower's marital difficulties.³³ At any rate, Flower accompanied

²⁸George Flower to his brother William, Oct. 1, 1816.

²⁹George Flower to [Morris Birkbeck], Feb. 10, 1817.

³⁰William Cobbett, *A Year's Residence in the United States of America* (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1819), pp. 528, 534, 537.

³¹George Flower to his sisters, Feb. 12, 1817. Flower had three sisters—Mary Catherine, Martha, and Elizabeth—the last-named may not have been living at this time. Only Martha and Mary Catherine came to Illinois in 1818.

³²Birkbeck, p. 160.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁵Faux, p. 296.

³⁶Flower, p. 56.

³⁷*Laws of Illinois, 9 G.A., 2 Sess. (Jan. 15, 1836), pp. 259–60 (italics added).*

³⁸Flower, pp. 100–12.

³⁹Faux, pp. 290–97.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 295.

his friends west in 1817 and at Vincennes was married to Miss Andrews. The ceremony took place, according to Flower, in the house of "Col. LaSalle" and was performed by Elihu Stout, a justice of the peace.³⁴ In view of that assertion, two documents of public record in Illinois for the year 1836 are of great interest. The first, a private law of January 15, 1836, provides "that the bands of matrimony be, and the same are hereby dissolved, between . . . George Flower and *Jane his wife*."³⁵

The second document, a photocopy of which is among the Flower papers in the Illinois State Historical Library, is a marriage license issued March 18, 1836, and endorsed by Justin Harlan of Edwards County Circuit Court, who "this 18 day of March" married G. Flower and Eliza Julia Andrews according to the law of the state of Illinois. The license was returned to the registrar's office March 19, 1836, and registered that day.

Flower's first marriage was to Jane Dawson, his first cousin, and by her he had two sons, who were with him when he came back to Illinois in 1818 (he had delayed his trip to England until the fall of 1817). His parents, two sisters, and two brothers also accompanied him from England. Eliza Flower meanwhile awaited their return at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where she gave birth to a daughter a few weeks before George arrived to take her back to the West. Whatever domestic arrangements he may have made in England, a divorce, apparently, was not among them.³⁶ Indeed, a divorce could only have been obtained in England through a church court,

followed by a special act of Parliament—an expensive proceeding not hastily or easily accomplished. The frontier, he may have thought, would be a more comfortable place than Virginia for a man in his situation.

It may not have proved to be so; the 1836 divorce and marriage make more credible William Faux's account of the famous quarrel between Birkbeck and Flower that was so devastating to the English Settlement:" According to Faux, who has been dismissed as a gossip, Birkbeck had learned during the Flowers' absence in 1817-1818 that Miss Andrews had been the cause of separation in George's first marriage and that the elder Flowers had placed her in Birkbeck's party for the purpose of marrying her to their son. Having been so deceived in an "iniquitous" scheme, Birkbeck refused to meet the young couple on their return. Birkbeck also declined to purchase land for the elder Flowers, who had sent him money for that purpose from England, and were living temporarily in Kentucky, Flower, said Faux, did not "defend his departure from law and custom, in this second marriage," but asserted that "as Mr. Birkbeck knew his situation intimately, he would not have censured him, had he not wished to marry the lady himself." "The truth concerning Miss Andrews' presence in the Birkbeck party and Birkbeck's feelings towards her may always remain obscure, but the supposition seems reasonable that she, as much as Morris Birkbeck, led George Flower to a pioneering life in Illinois.