

Book review: Author offers interesting look at president's inaugural trip

Although there are numerous biographies of Andrew Jackson available, Carlton Jackson's "Bittersweet Journey" focuses instead on a little-known slice of Jackson's life and produces a very interesting chronicle of the president's journey from the Hermitage in Nashville to Washington, D.C., to be inaugurated in 1829. The trip was bittersweet, despite the jubilation over a change in national leaders and administrations, because Andrew Jackson's beloved wife, Rachel, had died just before Christmas in 1828. Travel in 1829 was relatively slow and it took more than three weeks by steamer and horse and carriage to reach Washington.

The author discusses, in his introduction, overarching themes, which include the transportation revolution that began to change travel in America during Jackson's presidency from the age of steamboats to one dominated by railroads. Telegraphy and photography would effect similar metamorphoses in other fields as well during this period.

The detailed endnotes and bibliography reflect the depth of research the author had to perform, particularly in collections of letters and in newspapers, in order to piece together a narrative almost totally ignored in previous Jackson studies. What is particularly interesting is to read about the future president's receptions at each stage of his journey. As he approached Louisville, he observed "supporters on both banks of the river waving hickory brooms back and forth." The theme of sweeping out the old order and beginning a new one was also echoed on the steamboat Pennsylvania, which Jackson boarded in Louisville, where he saw two huge hickory-handled brooms attached to the bow of the vessel. At various stops on his trip, the nation's leader was greeted by political figures, bands playing patriotic tunes and throngs of local citizens eager to catch a glimpse of the new president or even shake his hand. There were also visits to local inns for meals and often a room for the night as well.

The book is illustrated with numerous sketches of Jackson and places and things he encountered along the way, as well as a map of the journey. The author has produced an interesting account of the president's trip to Washington and captured a slice of America during that period as well. Readers who enjoy historical works on 19th-century America will "get on board" and experience Andrew Jackson's "bittersweet journey" with him.

-- Reviewed by Richard Weigel, Western Kentucky University, History Department.

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