

# Washington Irving's 1832 Independence Visit

By R. James Stilley Jr.

George Washington Irving was the first American writer to gain enormous popularity and respect throughout not only America, but also Europe. Today he is best remembered as the author of the short stories *Rip Van Winkle* and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*.

Irving was not only a supremely creative fiction writer, but also an important historian with prodigious research abilities. In 1828, published the *Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. In 1859, just before his death, he completed a five-volume biography of George Washington, his namesake.

Irving's older brothers owned an import business with offices in New York City and Liverpool, England. Already a successful writer, Irving went to England in 1815 initially to work in the family business. But after it went bankrupt in 1818, he remained abroad and traveled throughout England and Europe serving as a member of the U.S. diplomatic corps to England and Spain.

By 1832, the 49-year-old Irving had not been home for 17 years. He longed to reacquaint himself with his vastly changing homeland. On April 11, 1832, Irving boarded the ship *Havre* in Le Havre, France. While on board he became friends with fellow passengers Charles Joseph LaTrobe and Count Albert-Alexandre de Pourtales, who were traveling together.

LaTrobe, a 31-years-old British citizen of French Huguenot descent, was an accomplished mountaineer, travel book writer, amateur botanist and artist, whom Irving described as "... a citizen of the world, easily adapting himself



This is an 1832 George Washington Irving engraving done by Hatch and Smillie. National Portrait Gallery, Washington, DC.

to any change." While climbing in the Swiss Alps, LaTrobe became friends with the 19-year-old Count and his family.

During the early 1800s it was fashionable among adventurous young male members of the European nobility to take extended trips to the United States to visit growing cities on the east coast and to embark on grand hunting expeditions west of the Mississippi River.

During the summer of 1827, the Count had seen in France six Osage American Indians who were paraded around Europe, arousing much curiosity and fanfare. With charm and charisma, he literally became one of the most famous persons alive. His large circle of friends and acquaintances was a virtual list of the who's who of the day.

The young Count dreamt of seeing the Osage in their natural habitat in the western frontier of the United States. LaTrobe wanted to visit

family members who had emigrated to the U.S. His uncle Benjamin Henry LaTrobe was the principal architect involved in rebuilding the U.S. Capitol and the White House after they were damaged by fire during the War of 1812. The Count's family agreed the older LaTrobe would be a suitable chaperone for the Count's trip to America.

By the time the *Havre* arrived in New York City in late May, the passengers – Irving, LaTrobe and the Count – had agreed to travel to the western plains together. They reassembled in late August in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. before embarking west.

Their first stop was Niagara Falls and then a steamboat trip on Lake Erie where they met Henry L. Ellsworth, a 40-year-old attorney who was a well-traveled and well-connected president of Aetna Insurance Co. in Hartford, Conn.

When they met, Ellsworth was one of three U.S. Commissioners of Indian Affairs appointed by president Andrew Jackson to serve on the Stoke Commission. The Commissioners were investigating lands where American Indian tribes in the East could be relocated.

On behalf of the U.S. government, Ellsworth was on his way to Fort Gibson in Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma. He invited his new friends to accompany him. The three were thrilled to accept his invitation.

After crossing Ohio, the foursome traveled by steamboats on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Two hours before reaching St. Louis, their steamboat *Illinois* was hit by the steamboat *Yellowstone*. Fortunately no one was hurt.

The *Yellowstone* had recently returned after carrying George Catlin, the painter of Indians, and others 2,000 miles up the Missouri River to the mouth of the Yellowstone River.

On Sept. 12, 1832, the *Illinois* docked at St. Louis which by then had a population of approximately 6,900 predominately French-speaking residents. The town had been founded in 1764 by Peter Laclède and his stepson Auguste Chouteau.

When the travelers arrived, the Old Cathedral — still standing today near the present-day Arch — was under construction. There were other churches, a theater, a court house, numerous cafes, and two newspapers. St. Louis College (now St. Louis University) was established in 1818 and was the oldest institution west of the Mississippi River.

**S**t. Louis was the major outfitting point for fur traders and explorers of the American West. The largest commercial business was the American Fur Company, founded by John Jacob Astor, which included Pierre Chouteau and other members of his family.

Later, Irving would become a close friend of Astor and would write the book *Astoria*, a history of the American Fur Company.

The travelers called on Gen. William Clark — one of the co-leaders of the 1804-06 Lewis and Clark expedition — who was then Superintendent of Indian Affairs having previously served as the Governor of the Missouri Territory. Clark treated them to a sumptuous dinner. Irving would later describe their 62-year-old dinner host as jovial and a “fine healthy robust man.”

On Sept. 14, Irving, LaTrobe, and the Count visited the Jefferson Barracks outside St. Louis. They went primarily to see Black Hawk,

the Sauk tribal warrior who had led a rebellion that year in Illinois. Other Indian warriors, including Chief White Cloud, were also held as prisoners at the military barracks.

In the meantime, Ellsworth hired Pierre Chouteau as the expedition’s guide. Ellsworth also needed Chouteau’s assistance negotiating with the Indians. The parties agreed to divide up and rendezvous in Independence. Ellsworth and a friend of his, Dr. O’Dwyer, took a steamboat up the Missouri River; Irving, LaTrobe and the Count went by horseback; and Chouteau and his entourage went overland, but not with the Irving party.

Irving’s party hired a French Creole named Antoine Deshetres from Florissant to drive their wagon of supplies across Missouri and to act as a guide, cook and jack-of-all-trades. The three friends left St. Louis on Sept. 15th.

They spent their first night in a small French inn across the Missouri River from St. Charles. The next morning they crossed the river to St. Charles. They traveled west along carriage roads and Indian paths.

On Sept. 19th, they arrived in Columbia, then a small settlement of about 20 houses. Irving was interviewed by a reporter from “The Missouri Intelligencer.” On Sept. 20<sup>th</sup>, they made a side trip to Boone’s Lick. In New Franklin, they bought some goods to use for trade with the Indians.

On Sept. 21st, they crossed the Missouri River using the ferry at Arrow Rock and thereafter traveled on the south side of the Missouri River.

On Sept. 22nd, the Irving party met William L. Sublette, the famous mountain man and fur trapper. His party of about 70 men were just returning from the

Northwest where they had attended the trappers’ Rendezvous in July 1832, at Pierre’s Hole, in what is now Idaho. Sublette was wounded in a battle with the Blackfeet and had his arm in a sling.

On Sept. 24th, the Irving party arrived in Independence. Chouteau and his entourage arrived later in the evening. Independence was pretty much the last European settlement on the western frontier. A little beyond it, all carriage roads ceased to exist.

Irving described Independence as “a straggling little frontier village.” Independence had been platted and organized in 1827 and was the county seat. A new two-story brick courthouse, located in the center of Independence Square, had been completed in October 1831.

**I**n 1832, Independence was experiencing substantial changes and tumultuous times. In 1831, members of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints (the Mormon Church) began moving to Independence in large numbers and began buying property.

Church founder, Joseph Smith, Jr., had recently shared his revelation that Independence was the City of Zion and would be the site of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Non-Mormons regarded the new believers with disdain and worried about their motives. There was trouble and local conflicts.

W.W. Phelps began publishing *The Evening and Morning Star* — a Mormon tabloid — in June 1832 and shared this account of Irving’s visit in the October edition:

*“Washington Irving (and a couple of foreign gentlemen) upon a literary expedition, and H.L. Ellsworth and others, as commissioners to settle the location of the western Indians, were in this town the last of September, on their way to*

Containment [Fort] Gibson, Arkansas Territory.”

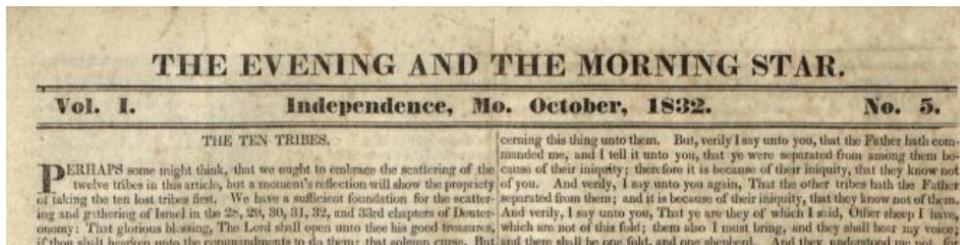
So what did Irving and party do while in Independence?

Apparently they all spent the first day unsuccessfully deer hunting with local settlers believed to include Cole Younger’s father, Henry Washington Younger. On the second day, LaTrobe went by horse to the nearest Missouri River ferry to check on Ellsworth’s steamboat which had yet to arrive.

There was no word on the steamboat, however LaTrobe met a man who offered to take him six or seven miles downstream on the Missouri to visit a friend’s farm.

Upon arriving, they discovered several women involved in a “quilting frolic” while the men visited. He joined the group for an outdoor dinner. LaTrobe noted cows, pigs and crops of corn and pumpkins being raised or grown on the farm. There were also Negro slaves.

On the third day, LaTrobe bought horses and additional supplies



Washington Irving’s Independence visit was noted in the Mormon monthly newspaper *The Evening and Morning Star* in its October 1832 edition. An angry mob, who opposed the Mormons, destroyed the newspaper printing office was destroyed in July 1833.

from Independence merchants for the next leg of the trip.

Ellsworth and O’Dwyer arrived in Independence on September 27th having had to hitch a wagon ride for the last 100 miles after their steamboat had run aground on the Missouri River. Ellsworth was in no mood to linger in Independence. He and LaTrobe left almost immediately for the “Shawnee Agency” to find Isaac McCoy to pick up surveys done by McCoy. The rest of the party, led by Pierre Chouteau, headed south toward Fort Gibson. Ellsworth and LaTrobe caught up with them the next day.

From Independence they all arrived safely at Fort Gibson on the Grand River in Indian Territory.

The travelers lived off the land, enjoying bear, bison, deer, wolf and wild turkey. They had generally good encounters with the Indians.

Amazingly, the Count saw one of the Osage men (nicknamed “Gros Soldat” by the French) who he had seen five years before in Europe. Irving, LaTrobe and the Count all were able to hunt buffalo with the Osages, a thrilling experience.

After several weeks of one adventure after another, Irving left Indian Territory and headed East. LaTrobe and the Count continued their North American travels for another year and visited not only other parts of the U.S., but also Canada and Mexico.

The primary members of the Irving/Ellsworth party achieved much after their western adventures. Here’s a short summary.

**Irving** – The author built his residence, known as “Sunnyside,” along the Hudson River in Tarrytown, NY. Irving subsequently returned to Europe and served as the U.S. Ambassador to Spain. Irving continued to write numerous books, including *A Tour on the Prairies*, about his 1832 trip to Independence and Indian Territory. His actual journal from the trip was lost so mentions of Independence are found in letters from the trip. He died at Sunnyside on Nov. 28, 1859.

**Ellsworth** - He was appointed the first Commissioner of the U.S. Patent Office and served from 1835-1845. Upon his death on Dec. 27, 1858, he bequeathed the sum of \$700,000 and substantial tracts of Ohio land to his alma mater, Yale University.

**LaTrobe** – He wrote two books on his travels to North America and Mexico, i.e. *The Rambler in North America* and *The Rambler in Mexico*. In 1836 he was appointed as a British diplomat to the British West Indies. After impressing his superiors, he was then offered an appointment in Australia as Superintendent of the newly settled Port Phillip District of New South Wales. He later became the first Governor of Victoria (Australia). Today there are statues of LaTrobe in Australia and a large university in Melbourne is named after him.

**de Pourtales** - The Count returned to Switzerland and served in the Prussian diplomatic corps. He kept a journal of his North American trip. It remained unpublished until an American tourist, George F. Spaulding, learned about them in 1965 while staying at a German inn owned by the Count’s great-granddaughter. The journals were published in 1968 as *On the Western Tour with Washington Irving: The Journal and Letters of Count de Pourtales*.