

# The Left and Right Banks of the Ohio

"Thus the traveller who floats down the current of the Ohio, to the spot where that river falls into the Mississippi, may be said to sail between liberty and servitude..."

From: 1830 C.E. To: 1848 C.E.

Location: Cincinnati, Ohio



Alexis de Tocqueville

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Pioneer Stories

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From *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, 1848.

The first negroes were imported into Virginia about the year 1621. In America, therefore, as well as in the rest of the globe, slavery originated in the south. Thence it spread from one settlement to another; but the number of slaves diminished toward the northern states, and the negro population was always very limited in New England.

A century had scarcely elapsed since the foundation of the colonies, when the attention of the planters was struck by the extraordinary fact, that the provinces which were comparatively destitute of slaves, increased in population, in wealth, and in prosperity, more rapidly than those which contained the greatest number of negroes. In the former, however, the inhabitants were obliged to cultivate the soil themselves, or by hired labourers; in the latter, they were furnished with hands for which they paid no wages; yet, although labour and expense were on the one side, and ease with economy on the other, the former were in possession of the most advantageous system.

This consequence seemed to be the more difficult to explain, since the settlers, who all belonged to the same European race, had the same habits, the same result recurred at every step; and in general, the colonies in which there were no slaves became more populous and more rich than those

in which slavery flourished. The more progress was made, the more was it shown that slavery, which is so cruel to the slave, is prejudicial to the master.

But this truth was most satisfactorily demonstrated when civilization reached the banks of the Ohio. The stream which the Indians had distinguished by the name of Ohio, or Beautiful river, waters one of the most magnificent valleys which have ever been made the abode of man. Undulating lands extend upon both shores of the Ohio, whose soil affords inexhaustible treasures to the labourer; on either bank the air is wholesome and the climate mild; and each of them forms the extreme frontier of a vast state: that which follows the numerous windings of the Ohio upon the left is called Kentucky; that upon the right beare the name of the river. These two states only differ in a single respect; Kentucky has admitted slavery, but the state of Ohio has prohibited the existence of slaves within its borders.



*“Ohio River,” by Thomas K. Wharton, 1853.*

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Thus the traveller who floats down the current of the Ohio, to the spot where that river falls into the Mississippi, may be said to sail between liberty and servitude; and a transient inspection of the surrounding objects will convince him which of the two is most favourable to mankind.

Upon the left bank of the stream the population is rare; from time to time one descries a troop of slaves loitering in the half-desert fields; the primeval forest recurs at every turn; society seems to be asleep, man to be idle, and nature alone offers a scene of activity and of life.

From the right bank, on the contrary, a confused hum is heard, which proclaims the presence of industry; the fields are covered with abundant harvests; the elegance of the dwellings announces the taste and activity of the labourer; and man appears to be in the enjoyment of that wealth and contentment which are the reward of labour.

The activity of Ohio is not confined to individuals, but the undertakings of the state are surprisingly great: a canal has been established between Lake Erie and the Ohio, by means of which the valley of the Mississippi communicates with the river of the north, and the European commodities which arrive at New York, may be forwarded by water to New Orleans across five hundred leagues of continent.



*Thomas K. Wharton, 1853.*

*Courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections. Public Domain.*

The state of Kentucky was founded in 1775, the state of Ohio only twelve years later; but twelve years are more in America than half a century in Europe, and, at the present day, the population of

Ohio exceeds that of Kentucky by 250,000 souls. These opposite consequences of slavery and freedom may readily be understood; and they suffice to explain many of the differences which we remark between the civilization of antiquity and that of our own time.

Upon the left bank of the Ohio labour is confounded with the idea of slavery, upon the right bank it is identified with that of prosperity and improvement; on the one side it is degraded, on the other it is honoured; on the former territory no white labourers can be found, for they would be afraid of assimilating themselves to the negroes; on the latter no one is idle, for the white population extends its activity and its intelligence to every kind of employment. Thus the men whose task it is to cultivate the rich soil of Kentucky are ignorant and lukewarm; while those who are active and enlightened either do nothing, or pass over into the state of Ohio, where they may work without dishonour.

It is true that in Kentucky the planters are not obliged to pay wages to the slaves whom they employ; but they derive small profits from their labour, while the wages paid to free workmen would be returned with interest in the value of their services. The free workman is paid, but he does his work quicker than the slave; and rapidity of execution is one of the great elements of economy. The white sells his services, but they are only purchased at the times at which they may be useful; the black can claim no remuneration for his toil, but the expense of his maintenance is perpetual; he must be supported in his old age as well as in the prime of manhood, in his profitless infancy as well as in the productive years of youth.

Payment must equally be made in order to obtain the services of either class of men; the free workman receives his wages in money; the slave in education, in food, in care, and in clothing. The money which a master spends in the maintenance of his slaves, goes gradually and in detail, so that it is scarcely perceived; the salary of the free workman is paid in a round sum, which appears only to enrich the individual who receives it; but in the end the slave has cost more than the free servant, and his labour is less productive.

The influence of slavery extends still farther; it affects the character of the master, and imparts a peculiar tendency to his ideas and his tastes. Upon both banks of the Ohio, the character of the inhabitants is enterprising and energetic; but this vigour is very differently exercised in the two states. The white inhabitant of Ohio, who is obliged to subsist by his own exertions, regards temporal prosperity as the principal aim of his existence; and as the country which he occupies presents inexhaustible resources to his industry, and ever-varying lures to his activity, his acquisitive ardour

surpasses the ordinary limits of human cupidity: he is tormented by the desire of wealth, and he boldly enters upon every path which fortune opens to him; he becomes a sailor, pioneer, an artisan, or a labourer, with the same indifference, and he supports, with equal constancy, the fatigues and the dangers incidental to these various professions; the resources of his intelligence are astonishing, and his avidity in the pursuit of gain amounts to a species of heroism.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Pratt, Woodford. 1848.

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