

The Michigan Land Rush in 1836

*Edited with an Introduction by Douglas H. Gordon
and George S. May*

IN THE FALL OF 1836, JOHN MONTGOMERY GORDON, a rising young Baltimore lawyer and banker, accompanied by Clement Biddle of Philadelphia, his wife's first cousin, journeyed to Michigan, bought large amounts of government lands and laid the foundations of a fortune. From July, when he decided to make the trip, until his return to Baltimore in December, Gordon kept a careful and detailed journal. He records his thorough preparations for the journey, the events of each day, and his observations of the country, the people and their life as he traveled from Baltimore to New York, up the Hudson River to Albany, westward to Buffalo, across Lake Erie to Detroit, and through southern Michigan to St. Joseph and Ionia.

As he began his journal Gordon declared that it "will form a connected narrative of the successive steps towards the formation of an opinion, will shew to my posterity the lights I acted under, whether successfull or unsuccessfull in any Land purchases and will be a convenient mode of informing my friends of the state of that North West country should any of them wish to invest in it." In the portion of his journal which survives and is now published for the first time, Gordon achieved these objectives admirably, providing to the historian much valuable information, particularly to the student of Michigan during the height of the land rush in the middle 1830's¹

¹The manuscript copies of the journals of John M. Gordon are in the Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore, to which they were presented by his great-granddaughters, Rebecca Gordon Poultney and Emily Blackford Poultney Smith. Written in Gordon's precise handwriting, the Michigan portion of the journals fills 280 pages in two volumes. A microfilm copy of this is in the Burton Historical Collection of the Detroit Public Library. Gordon returned to Baltimore on December, 3, 1836, and he noted in his diary on December 27 that his travel journal had been completed to the third. However, that portion of the journal for the period October 31-December 3 has been lost. The surviving portion is being printed in four installments in *Michigan History*. With one exception noted at the beginning, it is being published in its entirety. Gordon's punctuation and spelling, which were at times careless, have been retained throughout. The first installment which follows this introduction covers the trip from Baltimore to Buffalo. The remaining installments, to be published in successive issues

Travel accounts, always a popular item with the reading public, have since the earliest times also been a favorite source of material for historians. This has been especially true in writing histories of regions on the frontiers of civilization where the scarcity of other sources often compels the use of the occasional reports of travelers, though these may be superficial or even unreliable. Such is still the case in Michigan in the latter part of the territorial period, although newspapers, government records, private papers, and pioneer reminiscences are available to the researcher in greater abundance than for the earlier periods. However, the frequent references to such travel narratives as those of Thomas L. McKenney, Charles Fenno Hoffman, and Harriet Martineau² indicate how much historians continue to rely upon intelligent, sharp-eyed visitors of the late 1820's and 1830's for information about Michigan and its people during those years.

Both by his training and his special interests John Montgomery Gordon qualifies as a traveler whose observations should command respect.³ Born at "Kenmore" in Fredericksburg, Virginia, on February 4, 1810, he was one of nine children⁴ of Samuel Gordon and Susannah Fitzhugh Knox Gordon. From childhood, when he browsed through the well-stocked family library, Gordon acquired a love of books which he retained throughout his life and which is evidenced by the many literary quotations and references found in his Michigan journal. At the same time reminiscences of outdoor activities along the Rappahannock River indicate that young Gordon's physical development had not been slighted, a fact which is also demonstrated by his ability to withstand the hardships of the long and arduous western trip.

of the magazine, will cover the journey from Buffalo to Detroit, from Detroit to St. Joseph, and from St. Joseph to Ionia, where the journal ends.

²Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes* (Baltimore, 1827); [Charles Fenno Hoffman], *A Winter in the West, by a New-Yorker*, 2 vols. (New York, 1835); and Harriet Martineau, *Society in America*, 3 vols. (London, 1837).

³The biographical material that follows is based on family records, principally Gordon's diary for the years 1835-42, and 1866-68, which are in the Maryland Historical Society. See Douglas H. Gordon, ed., "A Virginian and his Baltimore Diary," in *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 49:196-204 (September, 1954).

⁴A tenth child died in infancy.

Entering Yale at the age of sixteen, Gordon in the following four years made hosts of friends, was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa Society, and received his A. B. in 1830. The next academic year he studied at the Harvard law school for a short time and then continued his law studies until he was admitted to the bar by the Supreme Bench of Baltimore City in 1834.

On November 21, 1833, Gordon married Miss Emily Chapman of Philadelphia, whom he had first met three years before at Niagara Falls. His wife's father was Dr. Nathaniel Chapman, a Virginian by birth, who was not only Philadelphia's most eminent doctor, but was also known far beyond the bounds of that city. He was at the organization of the American Medical Association, and was elected by acclamation its first president. Yet he was proudest, as a Virginian, of being chosen president of the American Philosophical Society, an office once held by Thomas Jefferson. Through her mother, née Rebecca Cornell Biddle, Gordon's wife was related to Nicholas Biddle, powerful head of the Bank of the United States, and to other members of the influential Biddle family. These family connections, together with his college friendships, were to be of great advantage to Gordon on his western trip in 1836, as they were throughout his life.

The young couple settled in Baltimore and began what Gordon was shortly to refer to as "the sunniest part of my existence." On August 2, 1834, Chapman, the Gordons' first child, was born, and he soon became the idol of his maternal grandparents. "My dear, dear little boy," Mrs. Chapman called him while sending him "kisses from Grand Pa and Grand Ma." In August, 1836, when Gordon was in the midst of preparations for his trip, a second son, John, was born, but died the following day. A daughter, Susan, was born early in 1838, followed by Emily in 1840 and Rebecca in 1842.

In his adopted city of Baltimore, Gordon soon became a prominent and respected member of the community. He was first mentioned in the city directory for 1835-36 as a lawyer, but by this time he had also been elected a director of the Union Bank of Maryland, probably because of bank stock owned by his father and uncle. In 1835 he became acting cashier, and eventually, in 1841, president, a position he held for many years during which the bank became the second largest in the city.

An indication of his high standing is shown by his election to the Monday Club, a small intellectual group composed of some of Baltimore's most influential men, most of them considerably older than Gordon.⁵ The diary which he began to keep in 1835 includes many references to a busy social life. The Gordons were constantly entertaining their Virginia and Philadelphia relatives, Gordon's college friends, and many others, and as frequently attending parties and social gatherings in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Fredericksburg. With all this activity Gordon still found time for hunting, fishing and other outdoor recreation which he enjoyed and also for his reading, both of the classics and current books. In fact, Gordon, who took with him on his trip to Michigan several volumes of his favorite English authors, once expressed the fear that his "preference for works of taste and belle lettres 'might be' becoming a little too strong for the advancement of law and the sciences."

Although such a fear was unfounded, it showed Gordon's anxiety about his business affairs. It was this anxiety which led him to make his trip to Michigan in 1836. Although he and his family were assured of a comfortable living from the income from the 101 shares in the Bank of Virginia and the 120 shares in the Farmers' Bank of Virginia which had been a wedding present from his father, Gordon wrote in his Michigan journal, just a year before the panic of 1837, that he was "becoming timid on the subject of all banks" and that he had "an obligation" to his children to make some safer investments of his funds. Therefore, he sold at least part of his Virginia bank stock to obtain some of the capital he needed for the purchase of western lands.

Gordon's travel journal contains in abundance the usual comments and observations that are associated with such narratives. There are the complaints about accommodations, ranging from New York City's fashionable Astor House, which Gordon compared with a stable, to tiny inns in Michigan where he once slept "in an open garret under a crack and awoke with a stiff neck." Traveling by virtually every known means of conveyance, including stagecoach, railroad train, river boat, canal packet, steamship, and horseback, Gordon was particularly impressed by the New York omnibuses and

⁵See William D. Hoyt, Jr., "The Monday Club," in *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 49:301-13 (December, 1954).

by their passengers, who were already developing the disagreeable techniques so familiar to bus and subway riders of a later era. He went from Schenectady to Utica on a new railroad and was properly impressed at being "whirled" along at a speed of twenty miles an hour, "as observed by the watch."

Until he reached Buffalo, most of the territory Gordon traversed was familiar to him from previous trips. He amused himself by writing at length about such things as the beauty of a revenue cutter and a fight between an eagle and a hawk, his remarks reflecting the strong influence of Sir Walter Scott's novels upon that romantic age. Outstanding in this part of the journal is his enjoyment of a visit to his old college acquaintance, James S. Wadsworth, in western New York. Indeed, Gordon found that the charms of the Wadsworth estate, where he had stayed on his trip to Niagara Falls in 1830, "almost steal me from the sweet memory of my own home."

As Gordon proceeded from Buffalo to Detroit in the lake steamer Michigan, the pleasures of the trip were marred by seasickness and then by unfavorable weather which delayed the ship's arrival at Detroit. Gordon found much that was worthy of recording, from his observations of all classes of the people of Detroit, where he stayed for several days before setting forth across southern Michigan. On his way on horseback to St. Joseph, via the Territorial Road, and then northward to Grand Rapids and Ionia, he had many interesting experiences. The most unusual of these took place at Grand Rapids where he was present when some of the Michigan Indians received the payments due them under the terms of the Treaty of Washington signed the previous spring. Gordon's report of this event, and especially his descriptions of some of the Indian chiefs, makes this one of the most outstanding parts of the entire journal.

However, the most valuable feature of the journal as a whole is the light that it sheds upon the sale of lands during the great "Michigan Fever," and especially the role of the land speculator. Although Gordon was somewhat uneasy about being called by the latter term, it was essentially as such that he came to Michigan. His purpose was to purchase public lands at \$1.25 an acre which he hoped to sell advantageously soon afterwards. Although he apparently gave some casual consideration to the idea of establishing in Michigan a landed estate such as the Wadsworths had created in

New York, he never seriously intended to settle on any of the land that he bought.

Actually, as Gordon's journal amply proves, he was simply one of an army of individuals who descended upon Michigan in the middle 1830's convinced that public lands were a lucrative investment. In an age before the widespread sale of stocks, unimproved lands and town lots were "the chief items of speculation in the United States."⁶ The rush for western lands at this time was so great that it has probably never been equalled in American history. Although the boom was nationwide, with the value of real estate in the country increasing by 150 per cent between 1830 and 1836, sales were by far the greatest in the west.⁷ By 1835 the principal attention of those who had been seized by the land mania was being focused on Michigan.

Sales of public lands here, which had totalled only 37,865 acres when the Detroit land office was opened in 1818, had reached a peak of 134,946 acres in 1825 and then had fallen off until 1830 when sales of 147,062 acres were a faint forecast of what was to come. By 1834 sales were up to 498,423 acres; in 1835 they reached 1,817,248, and in 1836 the astounding figure of 4,189,823 acres was recorded. This exceeded the sales in any other state or territory during 1836 and constituted one-fifth of the national total of public-land sales in that record-setting year.⁸ Although new land offices were established at Flint and Ionia during 1836, in addition to the existing offices at Detroit, Monroe, and Kalamazoo, it was impossible for officials to keep abreast of sales.

How much of the tremendous increase in sales was due to the

⁶Paul Wallace Gates, "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie Counties of Indiana," in *Indiana Magazine of History*, 35: 3 (March, 1939).

⁷Roy M. Robbins, *Our Landed Heritage: The Public Domain, 1776-1936*, 59-60 (Princeton, 1942). Chapter 4 of this work summarizes the speculation of the 1830's. See also Benjamin Horace Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies*, 209-27 (New York, 1924); and, for the picture in the Northwest, R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest: Pioneer Period, 1815-1840*, 2:147-59 (Indianapolis, 1950).

⁸In no year between 1800 and 1842, at least, did the land sales of any state or territory come close to equaling the record set in Michigan in 1836. "Report from the Secretary of the Treasury, Communicating, In Compliance with two resolutions of the Senate, statements of the quantity, surveys, acquisitions, sales and reservations of the Public Lands, March 2, 1843," in *Senate Document 246*, pages 5-10 (27 Congress, 3 session) (Washington, 1843).

wholesale purchases of speculators has never been estimated to any exact degree for Michigan. Certainly, the prevailing belief of contemporaries was that a very large percentage of the land went to speculators and not to actual settlers. Much evidence exists to support this contention.⁹ In an effort to curb such speculation and the inflation which accompanied it, President Andrew Jackson ordered the issuance on July 11, 1836, of the Specie Circular, decreeing that after August 15, with a few minor exceptions, only gold and silver would be accepted by the government in payment for public lands.

Although this action, which came just four days before Gordon decided to travel west, contributed to the drastic reduction in sales volume in 1837, the effects were not felt for several months. Gordon took with him only a few hundred dollars in cash. Unfortunately his journal ends before he had actually purchased any lands. Thus we do not know how he converted his \$8,000 in treasury receipts, his letter of credit, and his other funds into specie, a question which he discussed with officials at Detroit and Kalamazoo.

The loss of Gordon's journal for the period from October 31 to December 3, when he returned to Baltimore, deprives us of his report of the lands he bought and the details of his return trip. But in the portion that remains he records his observations concerning the quality of the soil, the availability of water, the timber supply, the transportation facilities that existed or might be built in a few years, and other factors that might influence the future value of the land. He sought to place himself in the "column of emigration" and thus select lands that would be in the greatest demand when the choice public lands had been taken up. Everywhere he asked what lands were selling for and what was considered to be a fair return on an investment, and he carefully wrote down as much as he could

⁹Very little work has been done in the area of Michigan land history. With regard to the question of land speculation in Michigan during the 1830's, one student has declared, "There was undoubtedly a large element of speculation in these purchases even before 1835." George Newman Fuller, *Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan: A Study of the Settlement of the Lower Peninsula during the Territorial Period, 1805-1837*, 66 (Lansing, 1916). This pioneering study contains numerous references to speculative activities in Michigan, as does Buley in *The Old Northwest*. For the reminiscences of one of the leading speculators, see Kate Ball Powers, Flora Ball Hopkins, and Lucy Ball, comps., *Autobiography of John Ball*, 133-49 (Grand Rapids, 1925).

recall at the end of each day's journey. "Every one," he reported as he approached Kalamazoo, "with whom I converse, talks of 100 pr. ct. as the lowest return on an investment, no one is known ever to have lost any thing by a purchase and sale of real estate, nor are any sales of land made at second hand under \$2.50 cts. per acre." With such assurances as these, he purchased several thousand acres of public land before returning home.¹⁰

For a number of years after John M. Gordon's return, the Gordon family continued to prosper. In 1841 Gordon was elected president of the Fredericktown, Boonsborough and Cumberland Turnpike Road companies. He fulfilled a long-standing ambition for a country home by purchasing the John McKim, Jr. home, "Darley Hall," which he called "Kenmuir," in memory of his boyhood home in Fredericksburg.

But shortly dark clouds descended upon the happy family. In 1844 four-year-old Emily died, and two years later the oldest Gordon child, Chapman, also died. In 1847 the Gordons sold their country home and moved back into the city. Five years later, Emily Chapman Gordon, having outlived three of her five children, died at the age of 41. Left with two daughters, Susan, 14, and Rebecca, not quite 10, John M. Gordon continued as president of the Union Bank of Maryland. In 1857, upon the founding of the Peabody Institute, he was the first on the list of trustees named by George Peabody, and at the organization meeting he was elected first treasurer of the institute.

In 1858 Susan Gordon died at the age of 20. Her delightful maturity and affectionate nature had given support to her father in

¹⁰According to Paul Wallace Gates, who examined the entry books of the General Land Office, Gordon entered a total of 6,764 acres in Michigan in 1836. Paul Wallace Gates, "Southern Investments in Northern Lands before the Civil War," in the *Journal of Southern History*, 5:159 (May, 1939). Other records indicate that he purchased 6,023 acres in Van Buren and Berrien counties alone. See the Tract Books for Van Buren and Berrien counties in the tax division of the auditor general's office, Lansing. These books contain the record of the first purchase of land from the United States government as copied from the original land office records. These books have been microfilmed by the Daughters of the American Colonists, State of Michigan, and the films deposited in the Michigan State Library, Lansing. According to Gates individual holdings of 5,000 to 10,000 acres were common during this period and land holdings of as much as 50,000 to 100,000 "were not unknown." Gates, "Land Policy and Tenancy in the Prairie Counties of Indiana," 3.



Courtesy of Rebecca Gordon Poultney

JOHN MONTGOMERY GORDON

his numerous bereavements. Upon her death he lost all interest in his many business activities, sold his home in 1860, declined to run for re-election as treasurer of the Peabody Institute and left Baltimore. He traveled in Europe, sought recovery from his "melancholia" in South Carolina, then lived for some years in Lynchburg and for a time in Norfolk, Virginia. He diverted himself with genealogy. But his real consolation was in his books.

During these troubled years in Gordon's life, his only surviving child, Rebecca, lived with her father's sister, Susan Fitzhugh Gordon, in Baltimore. After the Civil War, in 1867, Rebecca married Major Eugene Blackford, C. S. A., of Lynchburg. When she settled in that city her father lived with her for some years and began to show some interest in life once again. Upon the birth of the Blackford's first child in 1868 Gordon gave Major Blackford \$5,000. About the same time he brought his long diary to an end on the strong note of a lengthy list of new books to be bought.

Not long afterwards Major Blackford built a home near Baltimore, naming it "Cleve." In its large library Gordon spent most of the rest of his life, reliving with the three grandchildren the happy period of his own early married life. On November 5, 1874, he resigned as a trustee of the Peabody Institute, thereby bringing to an end the last of his once numerous activities. He died at Cleve on March 11, 1884.