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Comment

John Ely Briggs

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Comment by the Editor

CALEB ATWATER, WESTERNER

Neither time nor circumstance could efface the image of President Jackson's first levee from the memory of Caleb Atwater. Out of deference to the western idea of simplicity, several of the ladies were dressed in American calico and "wore no ruffles and no ornaments of any sort". Mr. Atwater, for one, "could not help feeling proud that they were born and wholly educated in the West. The simplicity of their dress, their unaffected manners, their neatness, their ease, grace and dignity carried all before them. The diamonds sparkled in vain at the levee and western unadorned neatness, modesty and beauty bore off the palm with ease." In his estimation, it was "a splendid triumph for the Mississippi Valley."

Ever, as he mapped the course of his career, in private life and public office, Caleb Atwater faced westward. Born in Massachusetts, he went to New York City, after graduating from Williams College in 1804. There he conducted a school for young women while he studied theology. Later, he quit the Presbyterian ministry on account of poor health, studied law, and failed in business. Having migrated to Circleville, Ohio, in 1815, he completed the remaining fifty-two

years of his life as a lawyer, antiquarian, editor, statesman, and historian.

Too much concerned with questions of science and human welfare to bother about making money, he lived and died a poor man. But somehow, through all the vicissitudes of his pioneering, he managed to keep on the social and intellectual frontier. As a part of the first wave of the great migration, he contributed to the foundations of the Commonwealth that served as a model for the other States of the Old Northwest.

The selection of Caleb Atwater as one of the commissioners to negotiate with the Indians at Prairie du Chien for the cession of their mineral lands south of the Wisconsin River was at once the fulfillment and the culmination of his public service. Glad of the opportunity, he straightway set out in May, 1829, down the Ohio River, thence up the Mississippi, and returned overland late in the summer.

This trip confirmed his lifelong confidence in the potential greatness of the West. The time would certainly come, he believed, when this vast region would be "covered with farms and animated by countless millions of domestic animals", when splendid cities would "rear their tall and glittering spires", and when the people of the Great Valley would display talents and virtues of eternal benefit to mankind. Here would be the future seat of civilization.

J. E. B.