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Tourism had become well established in Europe, and particularly in England, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Stimulated by the popularity of landscape gardening and painting, and by the publication of a series of widely read essays on the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque, well-to-do English people were seized by a mania for traveling in search of picturesque and sublime scenery.

For several reasons, this delight in scenery was not to grip America intensely until the 1820s and 1830s. Tourism requires a population with the money and the leisure to travel, an adequate means of transportation, and conditions of reasonable safety and comfort at the places people go to visit. It also demands a body of images and descriptions of those places—a mythology of unusual things to see—to excite people’s imaginations and induce them to travel. These requirements were not fully met in America until the 1820s. Throughout much of the eighteenth century the English colonies in America were engaged in wars against the French and Indians to the north and then in the struggle for independence against England. Americans were preoccupied with the task of clearing the wilderness and founding towns. Roads, where they existed at all, were poor. A few wealthy people began visiting resorts like Saratoga Springs in New York and White Sulphur Springs in Virginia for health and recreation, but very few visited natural wonders like Virginia’s Natural Bridge or Niagara Falls.

Several factors served to change this situation in the first decades of the nineteenth century. The construction of turnpikes led to improved stagecoach service. Robert Fulton’s successful experiment with a steamboat on the Hudson River in 1807 introduced
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faster and more reliable transportation on the nation's waterways. The building of canals, ushered in by the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825, was quickly followed by the construction of railroads beginning in the 1830s. This revolution in transportation made tourism possible. It also spurred the development of the country's urban, commercial, and industrial centers, encouraging the growth of a prosperous middle class and thus creating a potential body of tourists.

The incentive to travel came partly from the forms of transportation themselves. "The wonderful facilities for locomotion furnished by modern ingenuity," wrote James Kirke Paulding in 1828, "have increased the number of travellers to such a degree, that they now constitute a large portion of the human family. All ages and sexes are to be found on the wing." A standard itinerary, or American Grand Tour, which encompassed the Hudson River, the Catskills, Lake George, the Erie Canal, Niagara Falls, the White Mountains, and the Connecticut Valley, was quickly established. Tourism became fashionable for the well-to-do, so fashionable that Paulding's *The New Mirror for Travellers; and Guide to the Springs* (1828) satirized the phenomenon, poking fun at the hurry, pretensions, and superficiality of the tourists. Traveling, he wrote, is "the most exquisite mode of killing time and spending money ever yet devised by lazy ingenuity."

But the development of American tourism had deeper cultural sources than the need for diversion. Tourism played a powerful role in America's invention of itself as a culture. The eighteenth-century English tradition of landscape gardening; the aesthetics of the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque; and the work of Romantic writers, like William Wordsworth, Sir Walter Scott, and Lord Byron, had identified culture and landscape so closely with each other that they seemed almost identical. Furthermore, from the beginning Americans had sought their identity in their relationship to the land they had settled. It was inevitable, when they set out to establish a national culture in the 1820s and 1830s, that they would turn to the landscape of America as the basis of that culture. America was still a new country in search of an identity. Educated Americans desperately wished to meet European standards of culture and, at the same time, to develop a distinct national image. Tourist attractions are a feature of all modern societies. But because of America's relationship to Europe and to its own past, because its cultural identity was not given by tradition but had to be created, tourist attractions have played an especially important role in America.

Americans found part of their national identity in the role they
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played as tourists in Europe. Not only Washington Irving’s Sketch Book, but Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Marble Faun, the novels and stories of Henry James, and Mark Twain’s Innocents Abroad depicted American travelers as they defined themselves by interacting with European culture. American painters brought back images of European places. But these same writers and painters also participated in the self-conscious creation of America’s own tourist attractions. Tourism provided a means of defining America as a place and taking pride in the special features of its landscape. From the 1820s until well after the Civil War American artists, like Thomas Cole, Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran, depicted American tourist attractions in their work, and often made their reputations on those paintings. Writers like Irving, Hawthorne, and James described their visits to the same attractions or incorporated them into their fictions. Sometimes these artists and writers chose famous places as the subject of their work; sometimes their work made the places famous. In either case, their work conferred value on the scenes depicted and helped shape the vision of tourists who visited them. The interest in tourist attractions and experiences permeated the work of both serious and popular writers and artists until the latter part of the nineteenth century, and they produced thousands of images and descriptions, or stories related to them, for the numerous guidebooks, gift books, magazines, picture books, and collections of stereographs devoted to travel in the United States during this period. Descriptions of tourist attractions even penetrated scientific journals like the American Journal of Science and Arts.

The writers who described their visits to tourist attractions in the nineteenth century often referred to themselves as “pilgrims.” Tourists at Mammoth Cave squeezed through “Fat Man’s Misery,” crawled on hands and knees through “the Valley of Humility,” crossed over the “Bottomless Pit,” and passed along “Bunyan’s Way” as they made a “subterranean pilgrimage” through the cave.² The use of such terms suggests that nineteenth-century American tourist attractions assumed some of the functions of sacred places in traditional societies. Protestants had rejected the pilgrimage as a religious rite. In America there were no actual pilgrim shrines. But as Victor and Edith Turner suggest, “Some form of deliberate travel to a far place intimately associated with the deepest, most cherished, axiomatic values of the traveler seems to be a ‘cultural universal.’ If it is not religiously sanctioned, counseled, or encouraged, it will take other forms.” As the Turners point out, “The precincts of ‘Old Faithful’ in the Yellowstone Park irresistibly recall the cultural landscape of a major religious
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shrine." Both tourism and the pilgrimage provide escape from the anxieties (and comforts) of everyday life; freedom from ordinary social relationships, hierarchies, and restraints; and hence evoke playfulness and a feeling of liberation. They both promise spiritual renewal through contact with a transcendent reality (the shrine of the saint or the sublime waterfall). Sometimes they offer the hope of physical regeneration as well through the aid of a sacred or medicinal spring. A tourist, write the Tumers, is “half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist.”

In his article “Niagara as Jerusalem,” Patrick McGreevy notes that medieval pilgrims regarded their destination—Canterbury, for example—as a sacred place where they would experience God more closely. They expected it to be fabulous. When they left home they stepped out of their usual routine. Their journey was a metaphor for their passage through life to heaven and their destination a porthole into eternity. Similarly, nineteenth-century tourists left their everyday worlds behind as they set out on their journey to Niagara Falls. Their destination was a waterfall rather than a cathedral, but as one of God’s grandest, if not the grandest of His creations, Niagara revealed to the nineteenth-century tourist His power and glory.

Although Niagara remained the most famous American destination for the nineteenth-century pilgrims, McGreevy’s comparison of it to a medieval shrine applies equally well to other attractions, and not only to those which were primarily natural phenomena. Whether natural or man-made, tourist attractions stand apart from ordinary reality. They replicate in significant ways the function of sacred space in archaic societies. A sacred precinct, a temple, a sacred city, or a cosmic mountain, writes Mircea Eliade, was regarded in those societies as the center or navel of the world, the axis mundi. Such places represented an “irruption of the sacred into the world.” Man was created at such “a central point” and paradise was located there. Sacred places were also copies of transcendent models. Thus Jerusalem reproduced the Heavenly Jerusalem; the Christian basilica, which inherited the earlier symbolism, imitated the Heavenly Jerusalem, Paradise, or the celestial world.

The strong religious tradition of many Americans predisposed them to construct the symbolic landscape of their own country in a similar fashion. America was the Promised Land; God had guided people to its shores for some transcendent purpose; America was the place where the millennial expectations of Christians would be fulfilled. Given these conceptions of America, it is not surprising that Niagara Falls, the Willey House, Mount Auburn
Cemetery, and other tourist attractions suggested transcendent meanings and functioned as the sacred places of nineteenth-century American society.

But there was another reason why tourist attractions played such an important role in the cultural life of the nation. Nineteenth-century American society was composed of a wide variety of religious sects, and these sects continued to multiply in a country that provided the most fertile ground for religious experiment in the history of the world. Tourist attractions, however, are the sacred places of a nation or people, not a sect. Their religious meaning was broad enough to appeal to people of any persuasion. In a pluralistic society they provided points of mythic and national unity. The rural cemeteries, for example, although Protestant, were nondenominational. They functioned as cultural monuments and were proudly shown off to visiting Europeans as expressions of American refinement.

America’s nineteenth-century tourist attractions also appealed to
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members of both sexes. Annette Kolodny has demonstrated that the prevailing male and female fantasies about the American frontier were quite different from each other. Men sexualized the wilderness, seeing it as "Paradise with all her Virgin beauties," a fertile land to be ravished. They dreamt of transforming the land and extracting its wealth. Women, on the other hand, domesticated the frontier landscape. They fantasized about homes, communities, and gardens. Did nineteenth-century men and women also respond to America's tourist attractions differently? This study did not address that question systematically, but no obvious differences stood out in the literature by male and female authors, and it would be very surprising if further analysis revealed differences as sharp as those described by Kolodny in the case of the frontier. Tourism, unlike hunting or plowing, tending a flower garden or caring for children, was never gender identified. Both men and women participated in it, often together, sometimes with children, and in doing so shared the same space. Furthermore, the tourist attractions described in this book, with the possible exception of Mauch Chunk, embody the fantasies of both men and women about the American landscape as they are described by Kolodny. Niagara Falls, for example, represented the seemingly inexhaustible resources of our continent, but with its walkways, staircases, and shops was highly domesticated. The Catskill Mountain House, the Willey House in the White Mountains, and the family plots in the rural cemeteries were symbolically tied to the homes that tourists left when they went to see these sights and to the idealized image of Home that many of them shared. Finally, both male and female travel writers wrote disapprovingly of the American obsession with utilitarian ends. Tourism, they hoped, would encourage a greater regard for beauty and for the leisure to enjoy it. In other words, tourism seemed to offer a cultural check on aggressive fantasies of exploiting America's resources to the fullest extent possible. The establishment of the parks at Yosemite and Yellowstone in the 1870s and 1880s finally institutionalized this impulse toward recreation and aesthetic contemplation. These parks both preserved a part of the wild, untamed land—the virginal paradise about which men had fantasized—and domesticated it. Now free of Indians and the hardships of settlement, the parks offered the delights of recreational camping to those with the leisure to "rough it" for pleasure. If tourist attractions were non denominational, they were also free of being identified as either male or female space. They offered a common ground to all.

The capacity of tourist attractions to serve the needs of a diverse
people may derive in part from the fact that they do not reflect one harmonious set of values. They often embody the contradictions of a society in a concentrated visual form. They unify opposing poles of value. Like the sacred places of earlier periods, tourist attractions embrace both the religious and the secular. In medieval times fairs and markets invariably crowded the great pilgrim churches, and shops and circus entertainment often surrounded nineteenth-century tourist attractions as well. Niagara Falls, for example, became surrounded by a “fixed fair” which provided entertainment for the visitor that was often totally unrelated to the Falls themselves.

But the tourist attractions that emerged in the nineteenth century were not merely accompanied, like the shrines of the medieval world, by commercial activity on their perimeters. The tourist attractions themselves strongly reflected the more secular, bourgeois culture which was developing in America, a culture increasingly oriented to consumerism. The process of industrialization and urbanization that enabled well-to-do people to travel
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also affected their values. Although the culture of consumerism did not fully develop in the United States until the latter part of the nineteenth century, it began to emerge even before the Civil War in the establishment of such institutions as the department store and the exposition, in the glorification of woman’s role as homemaker, and in the tourist industry itself. The nation’s tourist attractions were consumer products, promoted by the railroads which carried the tourists to them and organized to satisfy the customers who had the leisure to enjoy them, but their role as products was often marked by religious rhetoric or behavior. Tourism helped reconcile religious values with the desire to buy new products and experiences. If Niagara Falls, the Willey House, Mount Auburn Cemetery, and the other popular sights absorbed some of the functions of sacred space, they integrated those functions into a new form that yoked the sacred and profane, the spiritual and the commercial, the mythic and the trivial, the natural and the artificial, the profound and the superficial, the elite and the popular in a sometimes uneasy combination.

This study focuses on famous sights that tourists went to see, rather than on resorts like Saratoga Springs or Coney Island where the emphasis fell on activities other than sightseeing. The subject is American tourist attractions rather than the European sights, which Americans also went to see, because I seek to understand the way Americans developed an image of their own land rather than the way they responded to European places or the way Europeans experienced tourist attractions in their own countries. Finally, this study deals with the period from about 1825 to 1885 when tourist travel was dominated by a genteel elite, when America’s tourist attractions were celebrated by its writers and painters, and when the categories of the sublime and the picturesque, inherited from Europe, shaped the way tourists viewed the landscape. Most tourists before the Civil War were well-to-do and they were encouraged by the genteel culture of the period to draw moral lessons from their experience, to aspire to refined behavior, and to cultivate their aesthetic sensibilities. As railroad fares fell, however, and America’s urban population increased, clerks, bureaucrats, and others of modest means were able to go on excursions. At the same time the romantic and religious enthusiasms of the first half of the century waned. As a result, tourism had become by 1885 more of a mass phenomenon and more commercial. Tourist attractions lost some of their conscious and explicit religious resonance.

These changes led to conflict, particularly at Niagara Falls where commercialization provoked one of the first successful
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efforts to protect the environment. The case of Niagara Falls also inspired the establishment of National Parks in the West where mass tourism had not yet penetrated. A debate began between those who wished to preserve certain places from exploitation and those who saw this as the effort of an elite to restrict the free use of America's resources. The reverence for nature, which before the Civil War usually took the form of a Romantic love of sublime scenery, was gradually replaced by the reverence for the complex system of nature articulated by writers like John Muir and John Burroughs. As these and other genteel writers recognized, the commercialization of American culture increased rather than diminished the need for sacred places accessible to all Americans. Tourist attractions continued to play this important role, but not always in the ways approved by the arbiters of genteel taste. They increasingly catered to the desire for excitement and escape, as well as to the wish for edification and spiritual revitalization.

Today, tourism is an activity in which almost everyone but the poor participates. It is a nearly universal cultural experience. This was not true in the 1820s, but it was becoming true by the end of the century. The following chapters chronicle the development of the major nineteenth-century American tourist attractions and explore the significant role that tourism played in the formation of America's national identity. Tourist attractions remain a lively component of the American cultural landscape today, but they are never likely to figure as prominently in the artistic life of the nation as they did in the nineteenth century nor to form such a vital intersection between "high" culture and popular culture.