Revolutionary Tourist: Chastellux in America

By Jack Kelly, *Journal of the American Revolution*

[Note: Another excellent submission from Paul Kane]

Almost every day, I drive past a Revolutionary War roadside marker. It commemorates a house that served as the headquarters of patriot Gen. Israel Putnam in 1777. Putnam occupied the elegant brick building briefly while he mustered militia to oppose a British incursion up the Hudson River. The enemy raid was intended to relieve Burgoyne's army, then stalemated at Saratoga.

But I always think of the house, which was an inn during the eighteenth century, in another context. Three years after Putnam's stay, Francois-Jean de Beauvoir, Chevalier de Chastellux, a general in Rochambeau's expeditionary force (and later a marquis), spent a night there during his travels in America. Chastellux was using the time following the military campaigning season to gather material for a travelogue describing the landscape, people and customs of America.

On a raw day in December 1780, he traveled twenty-three miles through sleet and snow to reach this inn, then in the town of Rhinebeck. The inn's warmth was welcome, and Chastellux found its owner, Jacob Thomas, an interesting talker. Besides keeping the inn and farming, Thomas traded horses. Before the war interrupted the business, he explained, he would travel to Canada in the winter over the ice on Lake George and Lake Champlain. With two or three other hostlers he would drive a hundred horses to New York City, where the animals would be loaded onto ships and sold in the West Indies. Some years back, he said, "It was I who made, or rather who repaired the fortunes of that rogue of an Arnold." This was only three months after Benedict Arnold's treasonous attempt to hand West Point over to the British. Thomas claimed to have instructed the ambitious former apothecary in the horse trade. Indeed, Arnold would later be derisively referred to as a "jockey" by his enemies.

"All American conversation must finish with politics," Chastellux notes. Although Thomas claimed to be an avid Whig, the Frenchman thought him equivocal. Thomas was most enthusiastic about a potential patriot conquest of Canada, a feat that would allow him to again profit from trade to the north. At eight o'clock the next morning, Chastellux was on his way, following the post road north.

Everyone with a deep interest in the American Revolution must sometimes dream of traveling in time to see the country as it was then and to meet the people of that day. Chastellux, an astute observer and skilled writer, offers the next best thing. In his Travels in North America in the Years 1780, 1781 and 1782, he gives us one of the clearest windows on that time offered by any contemporary observer. He provides just the right mix of travel journal, portraiture, anecdote and keen observation to create a vivid sense of the reality of eighteenth century America.

Chastellux's two-volume work was published in its entirety in 1786. An English version by an anonymous translator, who was later revealed to be the Englishman George Grieve, appeared the same year. Grieve, a man of strong Whig sympathies, added explanations and not a little commentary in his footnotes. The American scholar Howard D. Rice Jr. edited an elegant, definitive English edition in 1963. His two volumes were published by The University of North Carolina Press and include additional commentary and clarification

As we set off with Chastellux on his journey, we are immediately struck by the sheer difficulty of traveling in the era of the Revolution. During his first season, the author journeys on horseback from French headquarters in Newport, Rhode Island, across Connecticut to New York, down through New Jersey to Philadelphia, then back up to Albany, finishing with a tour of the battlefield at Saratoga. His record repeatedly mentions the bad roads, difficult fords and wild countryside.

Every evening, he must find a room for himself and several servants who travel with him, as well as feed for their horses. Most inns he describes as "rather bad." They are often kept by farmers to earn extra money and the service is inexpert. Near Fishkill, New York, he lodges in a room with panes of glass missing and has to stuff rags in the window. At another stop, he has no choice but to put up at an inn crowded with thirteen New Hampshire farmers, who are driving two hundred fifty head of cattle to sell to the Continental Army. When he can find no room at an inn, he seeks out a respectable house in the area and pays the owner for accommodations.

If travel is slow, it's also expensive. With a servant and two horses, a traveler has to pay as much as eight dollars a night. One innkeeper, who served him "bad cider-brandy" instead of wine, charges Chastellux sixteen dollars the next morning. The author complains. But when offered a discount, he refuses it. He claims he only wanted to make a point. He can see that the innkeeper is hard up and doesn't begrudge him a bit of extra profit.

This generosity of spirit makes Chastellux an appealing character. He's a thoroughly military man, descended from a line of nobles who had served France in war for centuries. He joined the army at thirteen and was made a colonel at twenty-one. During the Seven Years War, he fought in Germany. He was forty-six at the time of his American travels and an esteemed figure in the French army.

But at heart, Chastellux was a thinker and a philosopher, one of the leading men of the French Enlightenment. He had written plays and adapted some of the works of Shakespeare (he gave Romeo and Juliet a happy ending). In 1772 he wrote a two-volume philosophical work called Public Happiness, advocating a cooperative social organization as the best way to attain "the greatest happiness for the greatest number of individuals." Some have said his ideas prefigure those of Karl Marx. He idolized Voltaire, who lavishly praised the military man's work. In 1775, Chastellux was elected to join the forty "immortals" of the French Academy, the pinnacle of intellectual prestige in the realm.

Chastellux accompanied the French army to America in July 1780. Because the commander Rochambeau spoke no English, Chastellux often acted as interpreter. He was called "the diplomat of Rochambeau's army." He took charge of the force when Rochambeau had to be away. He was an avid cheerleader for the patriot cause. "Every philosopher," he wrote, "must hope . . . that America will continue to grow in population and perfection."

Like any Enlightenment humanist, Chastellux was keenly interested in people, politics, and natural phenomena. A friend of Horace Walpole and David Hume, he was "fond of controversy," a contemporary observed, "and willingly engaged in it, but with grace and fairness." He enjoyed keen wit, interesting stories, and any display of cleverness. He also had a sharp military mind and was eager to gather information about the war's battles.

He began his tour at a time when the American cause had reached one of its low points. In 1780, patriot financial coffers were barren, and army morale was low. Earlier in the year, the British had captured Charleston and demolished an American army under Horatio Gates at Camden, South Carolina. It seemed to some that Benedict Arnold's September treason might presage a general disaffection.

But Chastellux saw a resilience in the American population. After five years of armed conflict, "it may be asserted that North America is entirely military and inured to war." Their grim experience had made it easy for patriots to summon additional soldiers as needed. "I have not found two who have not borne arms, heard the whistling of bullets, and even received some wounds," he writes.

West Point is the first significant stop on Chastellux's journey. Arriving there on November 21, he is impressed by the view from across the Hudson River and by the military advantage of the Point's two redoubts and six interconnected forts. On the way, he meets Gen. John Stark heading out with 2,500 infantrymen on a foraging expedition to White Plains, farther south along the river. As he crosses to the west side, the French general is honored by a salute from thirteen 24-pounder cannon.

Chastellux muses that "two years ago West Point was an almost inaccessible wilderness," and that it is now covered with artillery mounted "by a people, who six years before had scarcely ever seen cannon." The idea that "a horse trader, transformed into a general" came so close to betraying this place to the enemy gives him "sufficient food for thought."

From West Point, he proceeds south to New Jersey, where the Continental Army is headquartered. He arrives to find that "M. de La Fayette was conversing in the yard with a tall man, five feet nine inches high, of a noble and mild countenance. It was the General himself."

George Washington takes Chastellux into his house, where the Frenchman meets the generals Henry Knox, Anthony Wayne, and Robert Howe, as well as Alexander Hamilton and Tench Tilghman, Washington's aides. Because he himself is such a highly regarded personage, Chastellux gives the

impression of being on relaxed and cordial terms with these distinguished generals and with persons of all ranks.

Chastellux is a keen observer of men. He talks with New Jersey Gen. William Alexander, always known among Americans as Lord Stirling. “A part of his estate has been dissipated by the war and by his taste for spending,” Chastellux notes. “He is accused of liking the table and the bottle, full as much as becomes a Lord, but more than becomes a General.”

The next day he dines with Washington and twenty guests, including Arthur St. Clair, who is holding down a headquarters position after being forced to abandon Fort Ticonderoga in the face of Burgoyne’s juggernaut. The large meal “in the English fashion” includes ten dishes of meat and poultry, reinforced with vegetables, pies and puddings. The tablecloth is then stripped away and the gentlemen spend the next two hours consuming apples and a great quantity of nuts, which they smash open with a hammer.

The weather is so inclement the following day that the Frenchman is unable to make the rounds to visit the various generals, but he is consoled by the “great luxury” of spending the day with Washington. He becomes a great admirer of the American commander, whom he calls “brave without temerity, laborious without ambition, generous without prodigality, noble without pride, virtuous without severity.”

Chastellux moves on to spend a few days in Philadelphia, observing along the way the ruined buildings that are the signs of war. “You imagine you are in the country after a storm,” he notes. As he travels, he takes in the various battlefields, at Princeton and Trenton, then at Germantown and Brandywine. Lafayette gives him a guided tour of Barren Hill, describing his daring raid and close call during the campaign two years earlier.

Chastellux records his conversation in Philadelphia with Samuel Adams. Earlier, the Frenchman had interrupted Adams in a “tête-à-tête” with a fifteen-year-old serving girl. Nothing to be scandalized over, Chastellux slyly notes, since Adams was at least sixty. Now the two men sit down to talk politics, a fascinating topic at a time when the United States was “like a newborn child.”

Chastellux expresses his concern that making the people the sovereign might be fine for now, “because every citizen is about equally well-off.” But as inequality inevitably arises in the country, “the real force will invariably be on the side of property.” He fears “the two equally dangerous extremes of aristocracy and anarchy”. Adams, referring to the constitution of Massachusetts, explains how a system of checks and balances will allow democracy to rule in the Assembly even as the Senate and Governor exercise aristocratic caution.

Looking around Philadelphia, Chastellux admires the sidewalks, “as in London,” and the useful establishments ranging from hospitals to prisons. But the town is “so deficient in what might serve for the enjoyment of life, that there is not a single public walk.” This he attributes to the abstemious

Quakers, who are opposed to any amusement. Their day seems to be passing, he observes. “The little zeal they have displayed in the present crisis has made them lose their credit.”

He comments on the government of Pennsylvania, where contention is rife among patriots, loyalists and the lukewarm Quakers. “A popular government cannot be strong whenever the people are uncertain and vacillating in their opinions,” Chastellux declares, “for then the leaders seek to please rather than to serve them.” He puts his finger on an inherent issue with any democracy: political leaders who “are more inclined to flatter than to enlighten” the people. He goes as far as to see democracy as “a sort of seduction,” crafted by leaders like Benjamin Franklin, “in order to lead to independence a timid and avaricious people.”

While in Philadelphia, the author encounters Sarah Franklin Bache, Benjamin Franklin’s daughter. Chastellux notes that the woman, who was thirty-six and had four children, possesses the same spirit of benevolence as her father. An enthusiastic patriot, she shows her visitor a room filled with 2,200 linen shirts “for the soldiers of Pennsylvania.” Philadelphia ladies had bought the fabric and cut and sewn the garments. Chastellux has seen enough American soldiers in rags to understand the importance of the effort.

Chastellux frequently comments on Americans’ manners and customs. For example, after sharing an inn with the group of New Hampshire farmers, “we parted good friends, touching, or rather ‘shaking’ hands in the English fashion.” The men express their delight in having the chance to shake hands with a French general.

Accustomed to the refined feelings of upper-class Europeans, Chastellux at times finds Americans lacking in genuine sentiment. Social customs are “more ceremonies than compliments in America. All their politeness is mere form.” Handshaking and other courtesies seem empty to him. “Politeness here,” he writes, “is like religion in Italy, all in practice and nothing from principle.”

American meals take some getting used to. Chastellux several times remarks on the heartiness of the breakfasts he’s offered. “A few loins of veal, some legs of mutton, and other trifles of that kind always slip in among the teacups and coffee cups,” he notes. He also has to adjust to the American style of after-dinner toasts. Fortunately for the general, who was not a heavy drinker, Americans do not, like the Germans, insist that everyone quaff an entire tankard to seal a toast. But he complains of the “barbarous” custom of “cruelly charitable neighbors” at dinner who continually interrupt him with offers to drink his health.

Attending a dance at the home of the Chevalier de La Luzerne, the French ambassador, he notes that each woman has a partner with whom she dances repeatedly, “as is the custom in America.” In Europe, he notes sardonically, dancing is the “emblem both of gaiety and of love; here it seems to be the emblem of legislation and of marriage,” the first because the dancers’ places are marked and the moves of the dances rigidly prescribed; the second because of the taking partners for the whole evening.

Chastellux wouldn't have been a Frenchman if he had not cast an evaluative eye on American women. At one stop along the road, he meets the beautiful Miss Pearce. Like all American women, he writes, "she had no objection to being looked at, having her beauty commended, or even receiving a few caresses, provided it was without any appearance of familiarity or wantonness." American women never engage in "licentious manners." When Miss Pearce has to pass through his bedroom that night, he pretends to be asleep. "I do not know whether I shall pronounce my own praise or condemnation, by saying that I soon afterwards fell into a profound sleep."

Leaving the big city behind, Chastellux retraces his steps northward. He again lodges with George Washington at the army's winter quarters in New Windsor, New York. He inquires of the general's favorite military books. Washington names "the King of Prussia's Instruction to his Generals, and the Tactics of M. de Guibert," convincing Chastellux of his wisdom in this area.

Chastellux marvels over two contradictory aspects of the American landscape. On the one hand, the territory he crosses, particularly in Connecticut and New York, is untamed to the point of being a virtual wilderness, "woods as old as creation." But in the midst of the most remote forests, he encounters a brand-new settlement cleared by one of the indefatigable subsistence farmers who are in the process of claiming the land, one homestead at a time. "I was obliged to admire this new country where one cannot travel four miles without finding a dwelling."

It's a novelty for someone accustomed to the orderly, settled regions of Europe, to encounter a land still largely untamed. Chastellux marvels at how quickly pioneers cut the forest and plant crops. A pioneer typically throws up a cabin that takes only two days to build, then later spends a month constructing a more substantial house. "In America a man is never alone, never an isolated being," he writes. Neighbors always "make it a point of hospitality to aid the newcomer." They pitch in to help and receive a cask of cider or a gallon of rum as a gesture of gratitude.

Passing through "the wildest and most deserted country" west of the Hudson River, he hopes to spot an elk, a caribou or some other wild animal. On coming to a small clearing, he thinks he has. He makes out a large quadruped in the distance. Excited, he approaches cautiously this "monster of the wilderness." On closer observation, he finds it to be only a "forlorn horse peaceably grazing there." The clearing is in fact a farm field cut out of the woods. He immediately encounters two children, eight or ten years old, "returning quietly from school, carrying under their arms a little basket of large books."

Chastellux admires the tremendous opportunity the frontier affords the common people of America. At an inn, he encounters servants who are saving their salaries with the idea of soon having enough to buy a plot of land and become their own masters.

Plunging northward as winter looms, he spends the night at Thomas's Inn and continues on to Albany. He joins several other French noblemen at the house of Philip Schuyler, who had commanded the northern division until Horatio Gates had supplanted him during the Burgoyne

invasion. Schuyler's daughter Elizabeth had married Alexander Hamilton barely two weeks earlier and remains at the mansion. She's a comely woman, Chastellux notes, and Schuyler's other daughter Peggy "lacks only teeth to be as pretty as her sister." It wasn't only George Washington who suffered the dental difficulties of the time.

The men decide to make a side trip to Schenectady, only sixteen miles away but "in the very country of the Indians." They ride through "an immense forest of spruce trees, untouched by the axe," and reach a settlement surrounded by a palisade.

A messenger arrives to report that a party of 150 Seneca Indians and several Tories has been spotted near Saratoga. It's a reminder that even after Burgoyne's defeat and surrender, the northern frontier remained a disputed territory, subject to raids from Canada and from the New York interior. In fact, 1780 would be known locally as "the year of the great burning." Chastellux notes that the desolation of charred buildings and deserted farms stretches along the Mohawk Valley from Fort Stanwix, at present-day Rome, to Fort Edward, twelve miles north of Saratoga.

Bad roads and a lack of ice on the rivers convince the Frenchmen to return to Albany for a few days. Then they set out, with Schuyler as their guide, to ride over the snow-covered battlefield at Saratoga. Chastellux concludes that Burgoyne made a mistake following the September 19 battle at Freeman's Farm. For the "frivolous honor of sleeping on the field of battle," he stationed his troops too near the American camp to maneuver, or to retreat without danger. The result was a stalemate that lasted eighteen days before his second defeat on October 7.

Thousands of tourists have followed in Chastellux's footsteps over the past two centuries, but he had the advantage of viewing a field where fir trees were still "torn by musket and cannon shot." He was also guided around the scene of the campaign's conclusion and the British invaders' surrender by Schuyler, who had been present for the momentous event. He dismisses his host's disparaging comments about General Gates, noting that "General Schuyler's criticism is rather that of a harsh rival than of a learned and methodical tactician."

Chastellux relates a tale about the stay of General Burgoyne and his officers at Schuyler's mansion after the surrender. The Englishmen were crowded into an upstairs bedroom when Schuyler's nine-year-old son, "a spoiled little child, as are all American children" burst into the room and laughingly declared, "You are all my prisoners!" "This innocent remark was cruel to them," the author notes, "and rendered them more melancholy than they had been the evening before."

After their battlefield visit, the Frenchmen return to Albany. That night, Chastellux is awakened at four in the morning, first by musket shots, then by a crowd of shouting children and young people. It's early on January 1 and war-weariness has not dampened the Americans' fervor to celebrate of the arrival of 1781. Chastellux is mildly annoyed. But when informed that they have come to honor him, he has an aide go down to give them some money. The revelers have already burst into the house and helped themselves to his landlord's rum.

That same day he and his companions take leave of their hosts and set out on the road again, hoping to reach Newport before the worst of winter arrives. Before leaving town, Chastellux notes, “I met nothing but drunken people in the streets.”