In the spring of 1847, the well-known British engraver Frances Delamotte decided to publish a popular illustrated volume on the subject of “travelling and travellers.” Being more an artist than a writer, Delamotte asked his friend E. L. Blanchard, a famous writer of Drury Lane pantomimes, to supply the text. Blanchard complied, and in an astonishing six weeks he produced a slim, lighthearted work that he dubbed a “physiology . . . of travelling and travellers.” In it, he sought to present “an animated picture of that unceasing movement which is constantly impelling mutable humanity forwards and backwards, upwards and downwards, left and right, over the solid, or fluid, or gaseous portions of the world.” He gave his book the bombastic but prescient title *Heads and Tales of Travellers & Travelling: A Book for Everybody, Going Anywhere*. The *Sunday Times* called it “exactly one of those books that every one ought to read,” and many evidently did, because it remained in print on both sides of the Atlantic for a decade. It was an ephemeral piece of commercial entertainment, but the topic was well chosen and the timing was right, and its authors were amply rewarded.

Delamotte’s proposed subject of “travelling and travellers,” and the “physiology” template that Blanchard used to structure the book, were not chosen thoughtlessly. By the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the speed, distances, and modes of travel were all exploding, thanks to technological and market innovation and to relative peace in the Atlantic world after Napoleon’s fall at Waterloo. Contemporary observers
noticed that travel was becoming more central to people’s lives, as an economic pursuit, as an educational experience, and increasingly as a form of leisure. In recognition of this growing importance, Blanchard declared, “There is indeed a wide field open” thanks to the “numberless varieties of locomotion . . . which civilization, chance, and conveyance-companies have provided, at different time[s], for the exportation of the biped species.” This sense of the vast new possibilities of travel, created by modern business enterprises and used by an increasingly “mutable humanity,” demanded a new accounting and a new cataloging to make it comprehensible. A “physiology” did just that; a genre with roots in France in the 1830s, “physiologies” were textbooks that classified human bodies and expressions into readily understandable categories, which promised to help readers understand the interior character of strangers in an increasingly anonymous society. “Physiologies” offered a delineation of cultural types that taken together characterized the growing and restless societies of the nineteenth century. Blanchard’s “physiology” was a winkingly comedic take on a serious genre and on a social and cultural phenomenon that was attracting considerable attention from the more buttoned-up social analysts of his day.

As befit a physiology, Blanchard dissected the traveling body politic and analyzed its constituent parts. He examined different modes of travel, categories of destinations, and, most importantly, types of travelers. He drew distinctions between the disciples of “pedestrianism” and the new breed of commercial travelers. From both, he distinguished “tourists” as a kind of traveler “who merely travels for the sake of travelling.” It was the tourist who had pride of place as the subject of Blanchard’s first chapter, which suggests the outsized significance of this relatively new category of people on the road. But Blanchard’s work was a literary pantomime—lighthearted, comical, and topical—rather than a serious work of social analysis. This book takes seriously the project that Blanchard undertook facetiously, by explaining the origins and cultural significance of the distinctions he made among travelers at midcentury, and by explaining the emergence of a new category, the tourist, in nineteenth-century American culture.

At the opening of the nineteenth century, few observers made sharp linguistic or cultural distinctions between the different types of travelers they observed on the roads, rivers, and seas of the early American republic. The word “tour” had been used in English to describe traveling since the mid-seventeenth century, and it spawned the word “tourist” around the turn of the nineteenth century. In 1800, leading British
Figure I.1. Frances Delamotte’s visual physiology of traveling types, from the frontispiece of Heads and Tales of Travellers & Travelling. Courtesy of the University of Michigan Library.
lexicographer Samuel Pegge wrote, “A Traveller is now-a-days called a Tour-ist.” For Pegge, the two terms were equivalent, if not synonymous, and in fact they were treated as such in the earliest years of the neologism. The first appearance of the term “tourist” in an American imprint was in a 1798 novel by John Davis, a British literary entrepreneur who came to the United States in the 1790s hoping to make a name for himself on the nascent American literary scene. Davis celebrated the “pedestrian tourist” who dared to walk from New York to Philadelphia, but his compound noun shows he did not distinguish between “tourists” and practitioners of “pedestrianism,” as Blanchard would fifty years later. During that intervening half century, “tour” and “tourist” became more clearly distinguished from the general terms “travel” and “traveler,” such that Blanchard could treat them as self-evidently different social phenomena.

The meanings of the terms “traveler” and “tourist” began to diverge in the 1820s, as an emerging national market economy began to reshape the availability of geographical knowledge, the material conditions of travel, and the number and variety of destinations that sought to profit from visitors with money to spend. These interrelated developments, all pushed by a generation of ambitious boosters and entrepreneurs, began to transform the critical steps of travel—including choosing a place to go and obtaining the knowledge and the means to get there—into commodities that could be produced in volume and sold into a potentially national marketplace of consumers. The commodification of these components happened gradually and unevenly across the territory of the United States and the decades of the nineteenth century: certain print genres of geographical knowledge were more efficiently produced by industrial publishing firms than others; some routes of travel supported large-scale transportation businesses before others; and accessible destinations with appealing natural features attracted more visitors than did obscure and featureless resorts. The routes and technologies deployed by both the print and transportation industries tended to spread westward and southward from the major northeastern port cities, and thus their commodification took place earlier in the Northeast and the Old Northwest than they did in the Deep South and the Old Southwest. Because the commodification of print and travel was gradual and uneven, so too was the movement toward distinct meanings for “traveler” and “tourist” to which it gave rise. The term “tourist” was used by some authors to disparage British travelers in the early decades of the century; some guidebooks still hailed their audience as “travelers” on the eve of the
Civil War; and some observers continued to treat them as synonyms, especially when writing casually. But by the time Blanchard’s literary burlesque hit the shelves of American booksellers in 1847, pleasurable travel experiences were widely available for purchase by elite and middling Americans, and the consumers who bought such experiences were generally termed “tourists” and understood to be a separate and identifiable subset of the traveling public.

The growing nineteenth-century distinction between “travelers” and “tourists,” and the association of the latter with the consumption of commodified experiences, created new cultural fault lines that all travelers had to navigate. Some travelers became enthusiastic consumers of commodified experience and increasingly embraced the label of “tourist,” celebrating those experiences for the pleasure they provided and for the social and cultural benefits they accrued. Others rejected both the label and the commercialized travel products that defined it, seeking instead to define themselves in opposition to “tourists,” as “travelers” whose journeys were more original, useful, and meaningful than the predictable itineraries of tourism. Both groups sought to harness their travel to their ambitions for social and cultural status, but they chose different strategies for doing so. However, these two cultural positions were also mutually constitutive: a tourist was not a traveler, and a traveler was not a tourist. This fundamental opposition and the market relations that underlie it, rooted in the economic and cultural conditions of the early nineteenth century, continue to shape our understanding of the meanings of travel to this day.

Tracing the tourist’s emergence as a distinct cultural figure shows how deeply the emerging national market economy impacted the cultural structures of nineteenth-century American life. This analysis is deeply underwritten by the theoretical framework of “commodification,” the socioeconomic process that takes place when the value of a good is established by its exchangeability—which is to say its availability for sale in the marketplace—rather than through its utility. Although the concept has deep and important roots in Marxist political theory and anthropological analysis, it has been most concretely defined for historians of the nineteenth-century United States by William Cronon, who characterizes it as the transformation of the idiosyncratic products of nature into standardized, interchangeable commodities that could be exchanged in increasingly distant and anonymous markets. Commodification is a complex process, equal parts material and conceptual, so tracing its effects is a delicate and messy process. It also was not, to use Ann Blair’s
term, an “actors’ category”; the word was not used during the early American republic, and thus analyzing the world of nineteenth-century Americans using commodification as an explanatory framework is to see it in a way that was not theirs. Both the term and the process it describes have taken on a negative connotation in modern usage, both because Marxists have connected them with exploitation and because we associate commodities with inauthenticity. As a result, this book uses “commodification” carefully and advisedly as an analytical term, with attention to the complexity of the process; to the sometimes sharp divide between “actors’ categories” and modern scholarly language; and to the need to control for and explain the negative connotations that many modern readers associate with it.

Notwithstanding the delicacy with which the term must be used, it offers powerful insight into the lives of nineteenth-century Americans. Historians have detailed the myriad ways in which market relations restructured labor, families, knowledge, the nation-state, and class relations over the course of the century. As the material stuff of life was slowly commodified, American culture became increasingly dominated by an emerging bourgeois middle class, formed in the counting-houses of the market economy, in the loving homes of nuclear families, and in the pulpits of liberal Protestantism. But historians have not always extended the same perceptive analysis of commodification to the leisure activities of this middle class, at least not in the years before the Civil War. Analyzing the ways in which tourists were increasingly distinguished from travelers shows us that market-oriented Americans consumed *commodified experiences* as well as commodified goods in the early nineteenth century, and that their relationship to these commodified experiences was central to their own understanding of their social position. Tourists consumed nascent commercial cultural products—an experience with a price tag—that ideally embodied the standardization of idiosyncratic individual experiences of travel into predictable and interchangeable experiences of summer leisure. Ambitious Americans bought these experiences—or shunned them—in order to express their cultural values and their social standing. Putting tourists and their detractors at the center of an analysis of nineteenth-century American culture reveals a deep ambivalence at the heart of the economic and cultural processes that commodified experience. Market relations were becoming the most significant force in American culture, but many Americans remained—and remain—skeptical of their social effects.
The emergence of the tourist in nineteenth-century American culture becomes more significant when it is situated within the broader history of leisure travel. Although tourism in its modern commodified form was a product of the nineteenth century, travel for the purposes of pleasure, diversion, and personal gratification has a longer history, particularly on the other side of the Atlantic. As Blanchard’s London byline suggests, it is impossible to discuss Americans’ ideas about leisure travel without considering those of their British forebears and contemporaries. As with so many other facets of culture in the early national period, American discourse about travel emerged in imitation of and reaction to both a shared seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglo-American past and modern nineteenth-century British discourse. As the broad transatlantic circulation of Blanchard’s book suggests, British traditions of and ideas about leisure travel were broadly apparent to Americans because the print cultures of the two nations were so intertwined. Even though this book traces the emergence of the tourist in American culture, the story it tells is necessarily transatlantic because Americans were so aware of British precedents and analogues.

At the turn of the nineteenth century, when lexicographers like Samuel Pegge thought the term “tourist” was synonymous with the term “traveler,” the term “tour” was generally applied to the British phenomenon of the “Grand Tour.” The Grand Tour was an extended trip through continental Europe, made by aristocratic young British men as a part of their preparation for taking leadership roles at home. The practice had its roots in the mid-sixteenth century; the Grand Tour’s typical routes and preoccupations began to take form in 1549, when English linguist and historian William Thomas published *The History of Italy* after a four-year tour of the Italian states. Michael Brennan argues that by the beginning of the seventeenth century, “the educational efficacy of continental travel for young Englishmen with high ambitions for public and diplomatic service in later life was firmly established in ways which would remain valid for the next two hundred years.” The term “Grand Tour” was first coined in 1670 by Richard Lassels, a Catholic priest and tutor, in his *Voyage of Italy or a Compleat Journey through Italy*, and this codification in language and practice set the stage for what would become the heyday of the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century.

At its peak of popularity, the Grand Tour led across the English Channel, to Paris by way of the Loire Valley, and then on to Italy by way of Geneva. The aristocratic youth who made the tour would then spend time in the cities of Rome, Florence, and Venice, before returning home
through Austria, Germany, and Amsterdam. A proper Grand Tour could take as many as five years—usually right after graduation from Oxford or Cambridge—and was accompanied by at least one tutor or chaperone. These tutors were supposed to keep their charges’ attentions focused on the explicit goals of the Grand Tour, which included schooling in the languages and manners of refined continental society, enhancing their classical learning through exposure to the sites of antiquity, and cultivating aesthetic taste through the appreciation and acquisition of art. The tutors also enabled, if not encouraged, their charges to pursue temporary relationships with continental women, presumed to be less morally upright than British women of their own class, so that they could return home and enter into a respectable marriage. The term “tour” as a description of a broad, looping journey for pleasure and personal fulfillment thus entered the English language closely associated with this aristocratic rite of passage.

European continental tours that echoed the Grand Tour became more accessible to the rising British bourgeoisie after the Seven Years’ War and especially after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, as the Industrial Revolution built new fortunes in Britain and as peace and prosperity made European travel pleasurable again. But even in its later, more popular incarnation, the Grand Tour was largely a British phenomenon. Relatively few Americans traveled to Europe before 1860, and although the number steadily climbed in every decade save the 1830s, it remained at less than 1 percent of the population. The majority of this small group were not leisure travelers, although as Daniel Kilbride has demonstrated, many business travelers managed to fit in some touring when they went to the trouble of crossing the Atlantic. And trouble it was; transatlantic passage was expensive, unreliable, time-consuming, and potentially dangerous. Indeed, participation in even the increasingly commercialized version of the Grand Tour undertaken by the nineteenth-century British bourgeoisie was prohibitively costly for all but the wealthiest Americans through the Civil War. International travel, and especially international travel for pleasure, was an experience few nineteenth-century Americans could reasonably expect to have in their lifetimes.

Just because few Americans ever took a Grand Tour in the British sense does not mean that they were not well aware of the practice. From the late eighteenth century onward, American readers were avid consumers of travel books. In 1789, the Library Company of Philadelphia advertised more than two hundred volumes under the heading of “Voyages and Travels,” out of a collection of “eight thousand, the selection of which,
has in general been calculated to promote the more important interests of society.” In 1806, over 11 percent of the holdings of the Charleston Library Company in South Carolina were travel accounts. Many Americans also wrote travel accounts, especially after the American publication of Washington Irving’s The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon in 1820, which “helped raise the stature of travel writing in a nation struggling for self-identity and literary respect, and . . . demonstrated the viability of a heretofore unrecognized publishing market.” Many authors mined this profitable vein in the antebellum decades, writing and publishing mountains of travel narratives. Books relating to travel were one of the most popular and prolific genres of American print culture during the first half of the nineteenth century, second in quantity only to religious publications.

But Americans of the early republic did not only read and write about travel in distant Europe. A broader and more diverse cross-section of Americans traveled extensively within North America. Alexis de Tocqueville famously painted the Americans as a people on the move, as a nation of “happy men, restless in the midst of abundance.” They traveled for business and for migration, and increasingly for pleasure and to experience firsthand the continent they inhabited. The growing amount of travel for leisure was apparent in 1860, when a contributor to the Yale Literary Magazine observed, “We are a nation of travelers.” Americans of all classes traveled, “for if you can get neither to Niagara, nor Trenton, nor the Springs, giving up broader and more comprehensive views, you pay your last quarter to bask in the sunshine of the Elysian Fields at Hoboken, or borrow a dime to muse over the waters of the Spuyten Duvil Creek [sic] at Harlem.” Americans of the early republic were enthusiastic travelers as well as readers and writers of travel, and their restless inclinations were ripe for anatomization by observers like Blanchard.

Leisure travelers first became visible on the North American landscape in the decade after the Revolution, although their numbers were small, their destinations were limited, and the crowds were both tiny and elite. Virginia plantation owners, who were always among the most attentive students of elite British social practices, began to gather at mineral and hot springs in the Piedmont and in remote mountain valleys as early as the 1760s. By the 1780s, well-known Virginians like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington were visiting and promoting destinations like Warm Springs and Bath, later Berkeley Springs. New Yorkers were close behind; by the 1790s, pleasure excursions up the scenic and historic Hudson River valley brought travelers to Ballston, a small but
growing settlement of lodging houses and hotels clustered in a shady valley around a group of mineral springs. These early destinations could host only a few members of their regional elite and attracted attention mostly from their regional press, but they were nevertheless a visible manifestation of leisure travel on the landscape of the new United States.

The early seeds planted at Berkeley Springs and Ballston Spa began to grow vigorously in the beneficial social and economic climate following the close of the War of 1812. Beginning in the 1820s, a rapidly growing number of Americans undertook travel for pleasure and personal fulfillment within the borders of their own country. Indeed, it is this decade that scholars have generally identified as period of the “birth of American tourism,” as the title of one recent study has put it. By the 1820s, springs resorts had proliferated across the landscape of western Virginia and were being knit together by a network of turnpikes and stagecoaches. Ballston was already being supplanted by neighboring Saratoga Springs, a village with more springs, more hotels, and growing crowds. New types of destinations appeared on leisure travelers’ itineraries. Americans had long celebrated the natural wonder of Niagara Falls, but the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 made a summer excursion to them a practical undertaking. Ruined forts and overgrown battlefields from the Revolutionary War dotted upstate New York, and travelers sought them out for their romanticized historical and nationalist associations. A tragic but spectacular landslide that killed an entire family in New Hampshire in 1826 drew attention to the majestic scenery of the White Mountains, which brought a growing stream of visitors by the end of the decade. In the mid-1820s, boosters began to collectively label these northern destinations the “Fashionable Tour” or the “American Grand Tour.” This route led north out of New York City and up the Hudson and Mohawk valleys, with stops at Saratoga Springs and Niagara Falls. It then swung north through Montreal and Quebec, and returned to New York by way of the White Mountains and Boston. Like the old British Grand Tour, the American Fashionable Tour was more a set of destinations and social practices than a fixed route, and the term similarly applied to a broad, looping journey undertaken by the social elite for pleasure and personal fulfillment.

The trends of the 1820s intensified in subsequent decades. New destinations proliferated on the roads to the Virginia springs and along the Fashionable Tour. Leisure travelers struck out for new territories, as well; they were exploring the Ohio River valley by the 1830s, and the Great Lakes by the 1840s. Small towns like Bedford, Pennsylvania;
White Sulphur Springs, Ohio; and Avon, New York offered themselves as pleasant stops on a tourist’s itinerary. As the United States developed an increasingly integrated national market economy, a growing bourgeois upper middle class commanded the time and financial resources necessary to travel for pleasure. By the 1850s, no one spoke of the “American Grand Tour” in the singular sense of the 1820s, since tours and tourists seemed omnipresent. Thus when Blanchard anatomized the traveling public at midcentury, his American readers would have broadly recognized his dissection of the “tourist” as a distinct species of traveler because they were common figures on their bookshelves and a visible presence on highways and byways across much of the nation.

Historians who have studied American tourism have generally agreed on its broad chronological and geographical contours, but this consensus masks a complex and variegated literature. The existing scholarship on early American tourism is both richly developed and curiously isolated. Since the 1980s, innovative studies have proliferated exploring questions of nation, region, and class through early tourism. Much of the historiography focuses on the relationship between tourism and the creation of national identity in the early United States. Scholars such as John F. Sears, Marguerite Shaffer, Richard Gassan, and Thomas Chambers have discussed the ways in which visits to places of natural and cultural interest worked to produce a distinct national identity for the United States across the nineteenth century. Related work by scholars such as Dona Brown and Charlene Boyer Lewis has explored the ways in which distinctly regional tourism fostered regional identities that were often in tension with the nationalist project.

Another important strand in the literature of tourism and identity is related to class, specifically the question of the “emergence of the middle class.” Scholars like Chambers, Cindy Aron, Jon Sterngass, and Catherine Cocks have all argued that many different varieties of tourism were important to drawing and policing the boundaries of the “new middle class” and were often in turn shaped by their preoccupations. In each case, historians have interpreted tourism as a site at which nineteenth-century Americans worked out new understandings of the changing world around them.

As many of these scholars have found, studies of the history of tourism quickly stumble over a fundamental problem: who was a tourist, and who was not? They deal with this problem in a variety of ways: by restricting the scope of their studies so that the definition becomes clear in a very specific time or place; by formulating provisional definitions
that allow their work to move forward; or by simply treating the category of the tourist as self-evident according to some modern understanding of the word. This problem of defining tourism is exacerbated by historians’ tendency to see tourism as exceptional, as a time apart from ordinary life, and therefore as a sort of climate-controlled historical laboratory for the exploration of broader themes. Sterngass, for example, reads resort life using the Turnerian concept of “ritual liminality” and argues that resorts served as “laboratories in which visitors could experiment with new or different ideas about the value of the work ethic, the significance of luxury in a democratic republic, the proper roles of men and women, and the relationship between community and privacy.”

This analytical impulse, common in studies of early American tourism, stresses tourism’s separateness, which has severed it from the broader context of American mobility captured by observers like Tocqueville.

_Selling the Sights_ solves this problem by analyzing the history of tourism broadly and in relationship to the diverse landscape of travel that characterized the early American republic. Rather than deploying a provisional definition of tourism so it can be used as a tool for answering other cultural questions about the nineteenth-century United States, this book takes the very definition of tourism itself as one of its central questions. As earlier historians have found, no fixed definition of tourism emerged either in the nineteenth century or afterward. Rather, contemporaries identified tourists in more tangential ways. They tended to define them by their relationship to the market; tourists were travelers whose experiences were fundamentally mediated by the marketplace. And they increasingly defined them by who they were not; tourists were not “true travelers,” who avoided generic commercial experiences and instead sought experiences that they could frame as original, meaningful, and useful. Importantly, neither of these means of identifying tourists was stable. The boundaries of the marketplace, as well as the line between “travelers” and “tourists,” were both fuzzy, and they were drawn strategically according to the social and cultural agenda of each observer. Understanding this history turns the ambiguity of tourism from an analytical problem into a historical explanation: identifying “tourists” was a means by which nineteenth-century Americans came to grips with the market and sought to delineate what it was and what it was not. At the same time, distinguishing “tourists” as figures on the roads of the early republic was a means by which nineteenth-century Americans expressed how they valued or did not value the cultural products of the market. Finally, tracing the emerging definition of tourism helps us to
explain the opprobrium that has adhered to the term, because it allows us to witness how a broader cultural discomfort with the processes of commodification became adhered to the figure of the tourist over the course of the nineteenth century.

This analysis offers definitional clarity to historians working on the history of tourism in the United States, but it also offers historical specificity to the sociologists and other theoreticians of tourism who have worked to describe the relationship between tourism and capitalism. Much of the contemporary field of tourism studies is built on the work of Dean MacCannell, for whom “tourist attractions are an unplanned typology of structure that provides direct access to the modern consciousness or ‘world view.’” Tourists are therefore the ideal ethnographers of modernity, whose consumption of the spectacles of work and leisure allow them to contemplate its “unifying consciousness.” MacCannell’s “modernity” is specifically postindustrial capitalism, which is why an act of leisure is the most important act of understanding. Similarly, John Urry uses the concept of the “tourist gaze” to mark and distinguish acts of tourism, which are characterized by a particular way of seeing that overlays commercially produced images and myths onto travel destinations. Thus, while the most influential theorists in the field have identified the necessary relationship between tourism and capitalism, Selling the Sights shows how that relationship was born, in tourism’s moment of origin, out of the historically specific social, cultural, and economic conditions of the first half of the nineteenth century.

If this book brings the insights of the scholarship on nineteenth-century capitalism to bear on the analysis of tourism, then it also brings new insights from the study of tourism to the lively current literature on the cultural history of capitalism. Twenty-five years ago, Charles Sellers’s magisterial “market revolution” paradigm described a wholesale transformation of the American economy, and of American attitudes toward the economy, in the years after 1815. His analysis of the development of national markets in Jacksonian America showed how the production and distribution of a wide range of agricultural and handicraft products was increasingly controlled by a capitalist business elite rather than by individual producers. For Sellers and other historians of the market revolution, this spreading divide between production and consumption had important social, political, religious, and cultural effects in the antebellum period.

Building on Sellers’s insight, a new historiography of capitalism has emerged, which privileges analysis of the ways in which “capitalism
helped to transform personhood in the nineteenth century,” as Joanna Cohen has recently put it. This vibrant literature pays special attention to the ways in which the economic practices of capitalism spilled into everyday life, by creating and foreclosing possibilities and by supplying overwhelmingly powerful economic metaphors for facets of life not previously considered economic. It is from this scholarship on the lived experience of capitalist transformation that this book draws its theoretical framework of commodification. Attention to commodification has directed historians’ attention to absorption of ever-larger realms of human existence into “the market” and has produced some of the most original and illuminating recent histories of the nineteenth-century United States, from Cronon’s famous analysis of the commodification of nature and the creation of Chicago, to Walter Johnson’s analysis of the commodification of human beings and the creation of slave markets, to Jonathan Levy’s analysis of the commodification of contingency and the creation of a modern corporate capitalist order. In this tradition, Selling the Sights is an analysis of the commodification of experience and the creation of modern industries of leisure.

As productive as this line of analysis has been, historians are only beginning to understand how early national markets began to commodify less tangible but still saleable goods, like a pleasant evening at the theater or indeed an enjoyable summer’s day at the springs. Historians of urban popular amusements have begun to redeem the term “culture industry” to describe “the specific effects of corporate capitalism on specific cultural industries at specific moments in time,” and they have traced the emergence of such culture industries as early as the 1830s in the showrooms of P. T. Barnum and on the minstrel stages of T. D. Rice. The economic complex of innkeepers, steamboat lines, guidebook publishers, railroad corporations, and local boosters that created the tourist was just such a culture industry, and by interpreting the early American tourist industry through the lens of commodification, Selling the Sights shows that the commodification of experience was both broader and more tightly integrated into middle-class Americans’ lives than just in the showrooms of Barnum or on the stages of the touring circuit. A wider range of entrepreneurs than historians have previously understood, operating in both urban and rural environments, sought to transform unique experiences of leisure travel into predictable, interchangeable, marketable commodities which they could sell into a national market of potential tourists and from which they could thus derive profit. Experimentation with the alchemy of the commodification
of experience took place in remote mountain valleys in Virginia, not just in the pleasure palaces of Broadway and the Bowery. As a result, the identities of Americans prosperous enough to afford such commodities were fundamentally reshaped, as they were forced to negotiate new meanings associated with their consumption.36

This new history of tourism also forces us to reconsider the chronology of American capitalism. Historians tend to associate the commodification of experience with the turn of the twentieth century, albeit with important precursors in the nineteenth century. The attention that cultural historians have paid to circuses, dime novels, vaudeville, professional sports, department stores, dance halls, Coney Island, and moving pictures all point to a general historical consensus that Americans increasingly came to define themselves through the consumption of experience in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.37 But paying attention to tourists in the opening decades of that century, particularly in the context of the larger world of travel and mobility, shows that this process was much older and much more centrally woven into the emergence of bourgeois identities than we have previously understood. As much as tourists were the products of national and regional culture, or of the processes of middle-class formation, they were also products of the emerging market economy and the commodified experiences it produced. If, as Dean MacCannell would have it, tourists are definitionally modern and tourism is the fundamental social practice of modernity, then understanding tourists as some of the earliest consumers of commodified experience helps us to understand the history of modernity, or at least the originating connection between capitalism, commodification, and lived experience in the production of modernity.38

As with any historical change in the deep structure of culture, the commodification of travel experiences and the creation of the tourist was a slow, gradual, and uneven process over time and across space. Thus, as with any cultural history, the change over time traced by Selling the Sights is gradual, nonlinear, and always contested, but nonetheless real and meaningful. Such change is best analyzed thematically rather than strictly chronologically. Roughly grouped into a discussion of causes and a discussion of effects, the five chapters of this book consider different aspects of the commodification of travel and creation of the tourist. They do so by drawing from sources in which travelers and tourists wrote about themselves, including letters, diaries, and published travel accounts, and from sources in which observers wrote about the world
of travel around them, including guidebooks and prescriptive literature, social commentary, periodical literature, fiction, and advertisements. As befits a cultural history, Selling the Sights focuses more on the meanings nineteenth-century Americans made about travel than on the material experience of travel itself. The universe of possible meanings available to them was shaped by a larger discourse about the meanings of travel and the meanings of different kinds of travelers. This discourse can be found in the print sources that circulated widely and the set cultural parameters within which individual tourists could situate themselves. As a result, the chapters that follow largely though not exclusively build their arguments from the rich archive of print objects that were increasingly omnipresent in the world of nineteenth-century tourists.

The first three chapters trace the cultural and economic processes that drove the commodification of three critical components of tourism: the universe of print materials that taught tourists where to go; the various transportation technologies that got them there; and the entertainments that occupied them at their destinations. Chapter 1, “Describing the Terraqueous Globe: Tourists and the Culture of Geographical Knowledge,” traces how the commercialization of the print industry changed the print culture of geographical knowledge between the 1790s and the 1860s. In the earliest years of the American republic, when a group of authors, editors, and educators began to craft the first specifically American geographical texts, they did so as part of a late-Enlightenment intellectual culture that sought to catalogue comprehensive, universal knowledge and to publish it in encyclopedic form for the parlors, libraries, and schoolrooms of the new nation. Beginning in the 1810s and 1820s, a generation of local boosters began to use a still decentralized print infrastructure to craft new geographical texts, including gazetteers and guidebooks, designed to drive migration to, investment in, and for some, visitors to their hometowns. The volumes that they published were narrower and more specific than their Enlightenment predecessors, and they were ultimately intended as promotional tools. At the same time, a subset of printers in Philadelphia and New York began to specialize in publishing geographical texts, which were both tailored to particular audiences and generalized for sale in an increasingly national marketplace for books. These two trends came together in the 1850s as industrial-scale generalist publishing firms, mostly in New York, entered and quickly dominated the market for geographical texts. Their business incentive was to repackage existing geographical knowledge for as many audiences and for as large a market as possible. By midcentury, the changing conditions
of the marketplace for print had transformed the American culture of geographical knowledge from one of authorial craftsmanship and universalist ambitions to one of mass production and market specialization. This history drove the creation and evolution of guidebooks for tourists, of geographical knowledge packaged for specific experiences, aimed at the largest possible market of interchangeable leisure travelers.

During the same years, a parallel process of commodification was reshaping the industries that provided transportation to American travelers, and was also more significantly reshaping the experience of being transported. Chapter 2, “Yesterday the Springs, To-day the Falls: Tourism and the Commodification of Travel,” applies this analysis to the historical development that historians have usually known as “the transportation revolution.” At the beginning of the nineteenth century, transportation on the American continent was largely a self-produced affair. Travelers generally had to identify their route, assess its conditions, and figure out how to acquire the necessary carriage, food, and shelter along the way. But after 1815, a series of technological and business developments enabled transportation entrepreneurs to begin to provide all those necessary components of travel as a complete package, allowing individual travelers to become consumers of premade travel rather than producers of their own travel. Stagecoaches, turnpikes, and steamboats in the 1810s and 1820s, canals in the 1820s and 1830s, and finally railroads in the 1830s and 1840s provided the underlying technology that allowed easy and reliable transportation to be supplied on a mass scale. Entrepreneurs sold this transportation using new market mechanisms like the ticket, a paper representation of future transportation that could be bought and sold on the open market. This basic shift, from improvisational producers of unique journeys to comfortable consumers of ticketed transport, fundamentally reshaped travelers’ experiences of and expectations for travel. They expected commodified travel to be fast, comfortable, and affordable, and to increasingly be a source of leisure and even pleasure, rather than just utility. This market habit of mind with which travelers approached the problem of transportation mostly produced celebrations of the conveniences of commodified travel, although a minority bemoaned the inevitable creeping sameness of its itineraries. Either way, the commodification of travel created the market for mobility in which tourists could shop.

Chapter 3, “I Find Myself a Pilgrim: Commodified Experience and the Invention of the Tourist,” turns its attention to the destinations that these leisure travelers sought out through their guidebook reading and ticket
purchasing. Beginning in the 1820s with the same cohort of local boosters who were reshaping the print culture of geographical knowledge, a largely rural group of entrepreneurs began to offer different kinds of pleasurable experiences for sale to potential leisure travelers. The specific experiences they offered varied depending on what they perceived to be their unique local strengths, and as a result they varied from lively social experiences of belonging to a regional or national elite, to intense aesthetic experiences of spectacular landscapes, to bucolic summer experiences of idealized rural life. Both the kinds of experiences available for purchase and the number and variety of localities that sought to market such experiences proliferated over the subsequent decades, creating a lively national market for leisure travel by the middle of the century. These innovations represented the very earliest attempts at the creation of the domestic tourist industry, which in the nineteenth century consisted of an often-disconnected group of cultural entrepreneurs who increasingly sought to profit from the idea that experiences could be bought and sold in the marketplace. That this industry began to form at all shows that such commodified experiences had a lot of satisfied consumers, and significant traces of this satisfaction remain in both published and unpublished accounts of the pleasure tourists took from their destinations. They enjoyed them, generally, in precisely the ways that their proprietors intended for them to be enjoyed. However, like with commodified travel, commodified leisure experiences also had their detractors. A small but growing number of travelers began to doubt the value of commodified experience, which was by its very nature controlled, standardized, and predictable. The emerging marketplace for commodified leisure was the economic and cultural context in which the distinct modern meanings of the terms “tourist” and “tourism” were forged, complete with their modern ambivalence about the value of touristic experiences.

The final two chapters consider the cultural effects that this dichotomy produced as it hardened, especially in the decades before the Civil War. Together, they begin to articulate the opprobrium American observers displayed when they discussed tourists and tourist practices. Selling the Sights does not assume that the term “commodification” has a negative connotation, nor does it seek to tell the story of commodification as one of declension. Instead, these chapters propose to explain how one particular kind of commodified good—tourist experiences—came to get its negative connotation. These chapters incorporate more print sources that were British in origin, like Blanchard’s 1847 physiology. The material processes that commodified tourist experiences were largely and
necessarily American in their scope, scale, and origins. Reactions to the emergence of tourism, however, were broadly transatlantic, because parallel material processes were having similar effects in Britain at around the same time, and the strong transatlantic links in Anglo-American literary and intellectual culture meant that American reactions were shaped by and in response to British discourses.

Chapter 4 takes up this ambivalence and tracks its emergence through the transatlantic proliferation of literary satires aimed at tourists. Entitled “I’ll Picturesque It Everywhere: The Archetype of the Tourist in Satire,” this chapter identifies a diverse group of literary authors who used caricatures of tourists in their work. Spread across the first half of the nineteenth century and writing in English on both sides of the Atlantic, these satirists aimed their wits at social groups as diverse as the ambitious English bourgeoisie, condescending European travelers in America, and country hayseeds on their first trip to the city. Although their diversity prevents them from being labeled as a coherent genre, nevertheless these satirists of tourism identified overwhelmingly similar negative characteristics of tourists to heighten and exaggerate for comic effect. Tourists were ambitious, banal, formulaic, and ignorant. Their unoriginality, superficiality, and fondness for cliché made their claims to social and cultural importance ridiculous. Even though these authors wrote in different times and places, for different audiences, and with different satirical targets in mind, their comic renderings of tourists were sufficiently similar that a distinctly negative tourist archetype had formed by midcentury. Critically, those midcentury satirists increasingly associated tourists’ negative characteristics with the consumption of commodified experience. It was this broadly understood caricature of the tourist-consumer that Blanchard tapped into when he wrote that the great majority of tourists traveled not “in the true spirit of locomotion” but instead “because others have gone out of town before them, and they like not lingering behind.” For Blanchard, tourists who were driven by such banal social mimicry had no real engagement with their own journeys. He wryly noted that “the meditative fly that coolly perambulates the map of Europe suspended in your study, and stalks from the North Pole to the Mediterranean, before you have time to whisk him off with your handkerchief, scarcely scampers over the whole continent with more speed.” In the hands of masterful midcentury satirists like Blanchard and especially Mark Twain, the term “tourist” came to have a negative connotation that that was deeply rooted in tourists’ status as consumers of experience.
Chapter 5, “Traveling to Good Purpose: The Invention of the True Traveler,” considers those travelers who wished to avoid the opprobrium of the tourist’s increasingly negative connotation. Much as the term “tourist” came to have a meaning distinct from its onetime synonym, so too was the term “traveler” used in an increasingly specific and oppositional sense. As tourists became increasingly identifiable on American byways, a new subgenre of travel writers emerged who promised to teach travelers how to, in the words of Theodore Dwight, “travel to good purpose,” in order to avoid the taint of being superficial tourists. Beginning in the 1830s, Americans could read advice on traveling to good purpose from a variety of British and American essayists and educators. These writers agreed that travelers to good purpose could transcend the tourist label by shunning commodified experiences, by preparing themselves morally and intellectually for their journey, by cultivating consistent and exhaustive habits of observation and record keeping on the road, and by sharing the original knowledge that their travel produced through correspondence or scientific publication. Parents or guardians who took their children with them for the purpose of educating them could also claim that they were traveling to good purpose. These “travellers to good purpose” pushed back strongly against the association of tourism with decadent consumption; instead, they sought to position themselves as useful producers, a form of social and cultural worth that was uniquely powerful in the nineteenth century. But this task was a profoundly gendered one. Much writing on the subject suggested that in order to qualify as purposeful, travel had to have explicitly scientific means and ends, supported by the institutional structure of a publication, college, or learned society. By the 1830s and 1840s, such institutionally supported science was increasingly a masculine preserve, and as a result productive travel seemed closed to women travelers. Some women travelers vigorously opposed this discursive exclusion and sought to carve out a feminin-gendered space for purposeful travel that centered on observation of and education in morals and manners. Eager to distance themselves from the archetype of the tourist, such travelers to good purpose articulated their own social and cultural worth by positioning themselves as producers. Thus, by the eve of the Civil War, tourists and travelers were distinct figures in American culture, defined oppositionally and valued hierarchically, and forged in the heat of the emerging national market.

As a Saratoga society correspondent might have put it in the 1850s, it has been de rigueur for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century
scholars of tourism to quote Daniel Boorstin, whose 1961 essay “From Traveler to Tourist: The Lost Art of Travel” was a biting high-culture critique of tourists in the twentieth century. “The traveler was active; he went strenuously in search of people, of adventure, of experience,” Boorstin explained. “The tourist is passive; he expects interesting things to happen to him. He goes ‘sight-seeing.’” Boorstin articulated with great clarity, if also with enormous condescension, the basic organizing dichotomy that undergirds all modern discussions of travel and assessments of the value of travel in American society, from the most rarefied sociological theory to the most disposable visitor’s pamphlet. At its most fundamental level, this book seeks the origin of this organizing dichotomy in the years between the end of the Revolution and the beginning of the Civil War. It lies in the emergence of a national market economy in the early nineteenth century; in the dynamics of commodification that allowed inventive entrepreneurs to sell standardized leisure experiences to a potentially continental market of middle-class strangers; and in the social and cultural value systems that led some Americans to embrace commodification’s promise and others to reject its limitations. The dichotomy that Boorstin treated as fundamental in the twentieth century was in fact created by the fault lines of emergent modern market capitalism in the nineteenth century. Though we might not realize it, our impulse to anatomize “mutable humanity” into tourists and travelers has long been a part of living within and through that modern market capitalist world.