In the late 1860’s and early 1870’s, D. Appleton and Company of New York developed the concept for a series of articles that would unite the United States after the Civil War within the romantic themes of beauty and landscape. The outcome, *Picturesque America* was a serialized publication that highlighted some of the more exotic, interesting, and well-known places (Bryant, 1872-1874). Exotic locations, such as the Grand Canyon, were relatively new to most Americans and certainly most never saw the canyon or read accessible descriptions beyond John Wesley Powell’s interesting accounts published in the same decade as *Picturesque America* (Powell, 1875). Interesting sites such as New Orleans or Savannah were of interest to many in post-Civil War America due to the significance of these places to the history of the war. Also, well-known sites, such as Chicago, New York, the Catskills, and the Long Island Coast were highlighted and brought a sense of accessibility to many who lived in or near these places and who had visited them.

Edited by William Cullen Bryant, the book was the first of its kind and was a sensation. There are dozens of chapters which, when bound, accounted for two volumes. Each chapter contains, to the modern ear, flamboyant and colorful prose as well as lovely steel engravings and wood cuts. The authors and artists were highly regarded of the times and include such notables as Harry Fen, Worthington Whittredge, and William Hamilton Gibson. Today, poor quality versions of the books can be purchased for approximately $600 with mint condition copies selling for several thousand dollars. Unfortunately, many of the volumes have been pirated for the high-quality steel engravings that have been removed to create framed art that can be purchased in antique stores. The books have been mined to make more money than the original value of the books. The set contains 50 steel engravings and 900 wood carving illustrations.

The volumes were published at a time in American history when romanticism was in full bloom in literature and art (Brion, 1966). The American art scene was heavily dominated by the Hudson River School, a movement that brought landscape romanticism to great heights (The R.W. Norton Art Gallery, 1973). Artists were inspired by the natural beauty of the Hudson River area, including the Catskills and White Mountains, and constructed their works to convey a rapturous beauty that mirrors the texts one sees in writers like Emerson and Wordsworth (Johnston and Ruoff, 1987). In addition, there were other artists, such as George Catlin, who were inspired by the new landscapes of the west and the exotic cultures encountered by visitors (Dippie, 1990). While there were some American artists of the same period such as James Whistler who touched on the beginnings of American impressionism and realism in art, their work was more notable in Europe (McCullough, 2011). During the 1870’s the Hudson Valley School dominated the popular art and discourse of the United States.
Romantic and transcendental writers like Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman embellished this romantic era with prose that linked the beauty of nature to the significance of human existence. While dark romantic writers of the 19th century like Edgar Allan Poe linked romanticism to failings of man, transcendental and romantic writers sought to elevate man over its failings that were starting to become apparent as a result of the industrial revolution. The celebration of the character of man and the elevation of nature became key themes. It was these writers who mostly influenced the development of *Picturesque America*.

This quote from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854) epitomizes the transcendental thinking of the era. “I once had a sparrow alight on my shoulder for a moment while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulette I could have worn.” Thoreau also believed that the perception of beauty was a moral character.

The dramatic events of the Civil War enhanced the romanticism of the time by eliciting patriotic and familial emotions within society. The poem, Battle-Worn Banners written by Park Benjamin in 1864 captures the sentiments of the romantic movement in the midst of the Civil War (Hoover, 1948). An excerpt is below:

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God bless the soldiers! Cry the folk
    Whose cheers of welcome swell;
God bless those banners, black with smoke
    And torn by shot and shell!
They should be hung on sacred shrines,
    Baptized with grateful tears,
And live embalmed in poetry’s lines
    Through all succeeding years.

No grander trophies could be brought
    By patriot sire to son,
Of Glorious battles nobly fought,
    Brave deeds sublimely done.
And so, today, I chanced with pride
    And solemn joy to see
Those remnants from the bloody tide
    Of Victory!
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Given the context of the time, it is not entirely surprising that D. Appleton and Company picked the William Cullen Bryant as the editor of the volumes. Bryant was the editor of the *New York Evening Post* and the author of innumerable poems and essays (Brodin and others, 1983). His poetry reflected the era as noted in these lines from the below poem, June (Milford, 1914):
I gazed upon the glorious sky
And the green mountains round,
And thought that when I came to lie
Within the silent ground,
*Twere pleasant that in flowery June,
When brooks send up a cheerful tune,
And groves a joyous sound,
The sexton’s hand, my grave to make,
The rich, green mountain turf should break.

Thus Bryant had a keen eye to place the prose and images of *Picturesque America* within a framework that was quite different from the reality of post-Civil War America. While there was starvation on the prairies, genocide of Native Americans, ecological devastation of natural resources, we see a distinct boosterism of America that was pleasant and safe (Lesy, 1973). The precisely titled volumes do not speak to an unpicturesque or dangerous landscape but to a picturesque and romantic space that unified the nation. The editions were marketed to a middle class America that was proud of their newly unified country seeking good news that was distinctly different from the realities of the dark romanticism of the Civil War. In many ways, *Picturesque America* set the stage for the widespread settlement of the United States by familiarizing Americans and others with the natural landscape and urban spaces of the country. People could read about far corner of the continent and know what was to be seen and done. There was a comfort in understanding what one could find if one would visit or move there.

*Picturesque America* also provided one of the first comprehensive informal geographies and travelogues of the United States. The articles described unique landscapes and landforms and the images provided some of the most detailed and artistic renderings of American cities and landforms ever achieved at this date. It is worthwhile to compare the romantic movement of the period with the development of science (Knight, 1998). In many ways, the late 19th-century was a golden age of scientific discovery. Scientific developments had a profound impact on the culture of the era (Fulford and others, 2004) Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859. Great discoveries in physics and chemistry were taking place all over the world (particularly in Germany), and there was a greater systemization and sharing of information. In some cases, the romantic intertwined and critiqued the scientific discoveries of the 19th century, particularly in the case of Frankenstein published by Mary Shelley in 1818. Science itself was not particularly immune from the presentation of the romantic in expression as can be seen in the displays of scientific information of the time, particularly in the illustrations of John James Audubon and in many scientific books and articles (Rhodes, 2006). While the clarity of Darwin’s work is in stark contrast to the florid language in *Picturesque America*, others writing about Darwin sometimes diverge more to the romantic camp of Bryant.

At the time of publication, geology was of growing interest to the scientific community, particularly because of its role in understanding the great antiquity of the earth and the impact of this information on evolutionary ideas and astronomy. It was highly influenced by the romantic movement (Heringman, 2010). Lyell’s book, *Principles of Geology* (1830) was well known and the work of Louis Agassiz brought a deeper understanding to landscape formation in areas impacted by glaciers (Lurie, 1988). By 1840, the Association of American Geologists formed (eventually becoming the GSA in 1888 after splitting from the group that was renamed the
American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1848) leading to more organized scientific inquiry and publication on the topic. Yet, little was known about karst—a landscape type that received scant attention in the United States until the 20th century.

The origin of karst science is often traced to the publication of *Das Karstphänomen* by the Serbian scientist, Jovan Cvijic (1893). While limestone landscapes and caves were discussed in the 19th century geologic literature, they were not presented within the context of the organized landscape we now recognize as karst. Instead, they were represented within the more evolutionary approaches to geologic interpretation present in that century. While Twain might write with a sense of both realism and romanticism about caves within *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Twain, 1876), the North American scientific community did not recognize the uniqueness and significance of karst landscapes until much later.

Yet, within this context, how were caves and karst represented in *Picturesque America*? The book reviewed many of the key natural and urban landscapes in the volumes and karst was represented as part of the overall spectacular geology of North America. Of the fifty steel engravings, two of them were of caves and several of them were of landforms that could be considered part of a broader karst landscape.

One chapter is entirely devoted to one unique karst feature, Niagara Falls. While clearly part of the Niagara Escarpment, the Falls nevertheless are formed on dolomitic rock within a broader karst plain that was heavily modified by glaciation. Yet, it is a fitting stepping off point for a discussion of the romantic vision of karst given the language used in this chapter which starts: “Niagara! Who has not heard of this peerless cataract, which is among waterfalls what the Himalayas are among mountain-ranges, not only the grandest, but so greatly preëminent as to be without rivalry? (p. 140)” Realism creeps in when the setting is discussed, “Niagara has no advantages of striking character in its surroundings. All that it boasts of the sublime and the beautiful is contained within the rock walls of its stupendous chasm. All its approaches are plain, dull, and tedious. The country around is almost absolutely flat, divided into fields that wave pleasantly with bearded grain, and dotted with white-painted wooden houses, ugly churches, homely factories and, and mills (p. 141).” But the water is described as a “deep emerald tinge of great beauty” and that the setting is so vast that it produces “stupefaction of extreme awe to allow him to notice individual details.” The falls themselves are described in great detail, “At the points where the whirlpools are, the scene is fairly terrific; the waters battle and rage and foam.

Current opposes current, wave fights wave…”

There are several engravings associated with this chapter by noted illustrator Harry Fenn who did many illustrations of a variety of books and magazines of the era. The steel engraving associated with the chapter is spectacular (Figure 1). It shows a vista of the falls from a high promontory over Horseshoe Falls. The broad river behind the falls is evident, as are the rapids above and below the falls.
Figure 1: Steel engraving of Niagara Falls showing a vista of the falls from a high promontory over Horseshoe Falls.

Source: Picturesque America

Other illustrations in the chapter on Niagara Falls show unique features found in the falls environs. Whirlpools and rapids are illustrated as are the unique characteristic ice formations that occur in the winter months. However, one of the most striking images in the entire book is a vertical image of the falls from a side perspective (Figure 2). In many ways, this is one of the most impressionistic images in the entire book. While an observer is present in the lower left corner of the image to give the falls perspective and size, the overall image is difficult to capture. It is more like an early 20th century Monet painting of water lilies in that the observer understands what is present by the form and shading, but the exact representation is not immediately obvious. While the falls themselves are certainly difficult to capture in a single illustration, Fenn is able to illicit movement and even humidity in this fine illustration. Just like one can feel the sunlight and weather conditions in Monet’s impressionist masterpieces, one can sense the atmospheric sensations in this illustration.

Figure 2: Wood engraving showing a vertical image of Niagara Falls.

Source: Picturesque America
The upper Mississippi River Valley was another karst area that was highlighted in *Picturesque America*. This region, which we now call the Driftless Area, was an area that was largely unglaciated during the most recent Ice Age. The karst landforms date to the Paleozoic and represent some of the oldest unaltered karst surfaces in North America. The region is characterized by solution valleys, caves, and subtle sinkholes that were filled by loess deposits in the Pleistocene.

The image of the upper Mississippi (Figure 3) represents a charming landscape that provided almost a heroic landscape reminiscent of the representation of the Hudson Valley School of art that dominated the American art scene. The image shows a sun setting over Lake Pepin near Maiden Rock, Wisconsin. A steamboat moves across the water in a panoramic landscape to create one of the most picturesque and romantic landscape views in the entire volume.

A lengthy chapter is devoted to one of the most significant karst landscape areas of North America—Florida. Yet, what is discussed in the Chapter is not so much the geology, but the unique historical and tropical setting. At the time of the writing of *Picturesque America*, Florida was sparsely populated. The population centers were mainly in the north in places like Tallahassee and St. Augustine. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the text about Florida focuses on the unique historical setting of St. Augustine and the unique tropical swamps in the St. Johns and Ocklawaha River watersheds.

**Figure 3:**
Steel engraving of a highly idealized landscape in the upper Mississippi River valley.
Figure 4: Wood engraving showing Spanish ruins near St. Augustine.

Source: Picturesque America

Figure 5: Wood engraving depicting coquina mining.

Source: Picturesque America
The houses in St. Augustine are described as “...built around uncovered courts, so that passing through the main door of a building you find yourself still in the open air, instead of within the dwelling. These high and solid garden-walls are quite common along the principal streets; and an occasional latticed door gives you a peep into the attractive area beyond the massive structure, with perhaps a show of huge stone arches, or of a winding staircase between heavy stone columns, or a profusion of tropical vegetation in the winter-garden bringing to mind the stories in poem and romance of the loves of Spanish damsels, and of stolen interviews at the garden-gate, or elopements by means of the false key or the bribed porter (p 123).” Such a remarkable romantic vision at the close of rather ordinary descriptive prose evinces the times rather clearly. While the book highlights the historic ruins made of coquina and the existing coquina mines seen in Figures 4 and 5, the focus is on the exotic and the different (Figure 6).

The interior of Florida is described largely in terms of its unique plant and animal life. Of particular notice to the authors were the Spanish moss, birds, and alligators within the damper landscapes of this subtropical landscape. In describing a trip through a swamp the author notes, “Another run of a half-mil brings us into the cypress again, the firelight giving new ideas of the picturesque. The tall shafts, more than ever shrouded in the hanging moss, looked as if they had been draped in sad habilments, while the wind sighed through the limbs; and when the sonorous sounds of the alligators were heard, groaning and complaining, the sad, dismal picture of desolation was complete (p. 135).” The only true description of a karst landform in Florida is of Silver Spring. The author noted, “For a hundred feet downward we could look, and at this great depth see duplicated the scene of the upperworld, the clearness of the water assisting rather than interfering with the vision. The bottom of this basin was white sand, studded with eccentric formations of crystals of a pale emerald tint (p 138).” The images of the swamps are festooned with wildlife and unique plants. It is almost as if the illustrator, again Henry Fenn, intended to capture as much exotica as possible to represent the oddness of the landscape to consumers of the text. They seem almost like botanical illustrations. Florida was not only unique, but also unusual and worth seeing in order to experience the unusual. But, Florida was also noted as a tourist destination even in the 1870’s as a “great winter resort....easily accessible from any of the Northern capitals (p 127)”.

Given this context, it is not surprising that an illustration of a Florida beach was included in the chapter (Figure 7).
Figure 7: 19th century Florida was known as a tourist attraction and beaches were part of the allure that brought tourists to the region.

Source: Picturesque America

Other karst landscapes are also discussed, such as the western canyons and portions of the Appalachian Mountains. The descriptions of these places, however, focus more on the broader beauty of the landscape without distinctly tying the region to themes within karst science. Indeed, limestone is rarely mentioned and the focus is on the overall forms, the beauty, and the known attractions.

Caves are also represented quite prominently in the book, although the illustrations and prose associated with them are not as inspired as others. For example, Mammoth Cave earned only a four-page chapter with illustrations by the noted Civil War illustrator, Alfred Waud (Ray, 1974). The descriptions of the cave are rather bland with startlingly short sentences for the time. The text seems more of a diary of a cave tour as opposed to the romantic musings of someone travelling through Florida. “The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky is the largest known cave in the world. It is near Green River, on the road from Louisville to Nashville. The railway takes you directly to an old-fashioned hotel.” This was clearly realistic prose at its most terse and hardly indicative of most of the other text in the book. In great contrast is the description of a sea cave in Maine, “Every time the waves dash in the cave, they dislodge some of these stones, sometimes dragging them back, sometimes lifting them up and tossing them against the sides of the cavity, and, as these bowlders thus roll and grind together, they produce in the hollow of the cavern almost the exact mutterings and reverberations of thunder. p. 17”.

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The illustrations of Weyers Cave in Virginia provide a glimpse into 19th century cave tours (Figure 8). Weyers Cave, now called Grand Caverns, is America’s oldest show caverns. It opened for tours in 1806. Thus, by the time the illustrator for *Picturesque America* visited, it was open for decades. Many of the formations were named with terms such as “Cleopatra’s Needle” and “The Bridal Veil” and the images captured the most scenic formation in the caverns indicating to tourists familiar and interesting landforms that they could see if they were to visit. The images in the text show some of the unique lighting that was employed for cave tours well before Edison’s day. The formations in the caves were described as “…more or less describing objects in Nature, or as wild and weird as the most imaginative brain could conjure out for fiction (p 215).” Several other caves are described in the text, and all have similar illustrations or prose. Caves were definitely known landscapes that attracted the imagination of 19th century artists and writers—even if Mammoth Cave was only briefly described.

**Summary**

*Picturesque America* provides a glimpse into the common understanding of the landscape of North America at a time that science, and particularly geology, was capturing the imagination of the American mind (Stegner, 1954). In many ways, the volumes are not all the dissimilar from the content of the more geographical dimensions of the Discovery Channel in that each shows places in ways that are often appealing to the viewers while providing educational content. Each is safe. While the Discovery Channel, with shows like the arguably romantic and transcendent Man vs. Wild and the neogothic Deadliest Catch, portray a more crude and less polite society, it does capture many of the romantic elements of landscape romanticism present in *Picturesque America*.

Karst, while not an organized science at the time of the publication of the volumes, is well represented throughout the book. Both surface and subsurface features are described and highlighted. Karst landforms were well known and part of the discourse on American landscapes. Yet, it must be noted that the beautiful landscapes are the ones that received the greatest amount of attention by artists and writers in the volumes. There was no prose that described the beauty of sinkholes in Florida or the karst plains of Texas. There were no illustrations of disappearing streams in Kentucky, or karst depressions in the New Mexico. Instead, the artists and writers focused on the themes of the romantic, the beautiful, and the dramatic. Yet there were striking images of caves that provided a glimpse into the subsurface and perhaps symbolized the more subconscious themes of the romantic movement (Sommer, 2003).
When one considers the history of geology of North America, one reflects on the role of the romantic era in its development. Geologic studies of this period on the Grand Canyon and the geology of the American West highly influenced the kinds of topics studied. The discovery of gold and other minerals in remote California also brought themes of the romantic era into play. Perhaps the slow development of karst science in the United States was hampered by the fact that the landscapes were not romantic enough. They did not fit well within the ideals of the Hudson River School of art that elevated the dramatic and romantic over the mundane and ordinary. The early development of the Romantic landscape art and the significance of such images in the American imagination certainly influenced the development of geology in the 19th century and perhaps delayed the development of karst science.

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