One of the most important European travelers to the American west in the early 19th century was the German nobleman Maximilian, Prince of Wied. He recorded his impressions at a time when America was rapidly changing from an agrarian to an industrial
nation. Maximilian’s accounts of the Indian nations along the Upper Missouri and of the Great Plains formed a striking first image of the New World for Europeans at the time and are still recognized for their accuracy by anthropologists and historians today.

Perhaps even more significant are the paintings and sketches by his traveling companion, Swiss artist Karl Bodmer (1809-1893) who, with painstaking detail, documented notable Indian leaders as well as the tribal life that would soon disappear.

That Maximilian of Wied in preparation for his journey to the west stayed for a while in Pittsburgh and its surroundings is an almost forgotten episode. However, his descriptions of this part of his trip provide vivid images of Western Pennsylvania in the early 1830s.

Maximilian was born in 1782 as the eighth of 11 children of Louise Wilhelmine Countess of Sayn-Wittgenstein-Berleburg and Friedrich Carl Count of Wied-Neuwied, ruler of one of Germany’s many small principalities. From 1802 until 1806 and from 1813 to 1814, Maximilian served in the Prussian army, rising to the rank of major of the Third Brandenburg Hussar regiment. He fought in the battles of Jena and Auerstedt and was awarded the Iron Cross. Between 1806 and 1813 and after his retirement from military service, he devoted himself to studies of natural science as well as geographical and ethnological subjects as a so-called Privatgelehrter (private scholar), a practice common for noblemen in those days who were not involved in governmental tasks. As the eighth child with several older brothers, Maximilian had no prospect of heading the family estate. In fact, he spent his entire appanage on scientific literature, research, explorations, expeditions, and publication of his studies. From 1815 to 1817, his first explorative journey led him to South America. Two years later, he began planning his North American expedition, which took place between 1832 and 1834 and garnered him international recognition.

Together with his servant, the Leibjaeger, Dreidoppel (a skillful hunter and expert taxidermist), and Bodmer, the artist, Maximilian boarded an American steamship in May 1832, near Rotterdam, Holland, and landed on July 4 in Boston. From here, the group proceeded to New York and Philadelphia, and then deeper into the country by carriage.

Despite his enterprising and adventurous spirit, Maximilian was a physically frail man of ailing health, just about 5 foot 4 inches in height. He suffered from old injuries received in the battle of Château-Thierry and from malaria, which he had caught in Brazil. According to some eyewitnesses, he was missing his front teeth, and was thus difficult to understand. On top of all this, he spoke English with a strong Prussian accent. Several times during his North American journey his health almost collapsed, but he demonstrated an astounding stamina, an iron will, and firm determination, especially during the hard winter at Fort Clark, Dakota Territory.

Originally, he had planned an immediate departure to the west on his arrival in Boston. His intention was to head for St. Louis and take the first steamer to the Upper Missouri. However, while traveling from Philadelphia he was smitten with cholera, which had spread over eastern North America at that time: “This disease reached a highly dangerous degree in New York and Philadelphia.... It seemed to be impossible to avoid it, so I chose the way down the Ohio, ... and set out for Pittsburgh.” He stopped in Bethlehem, Reading, and Harrisburg, where he received some scanty medical treatment, arriving in Pittsburgh at midnight on September 22.

Here, he was welcomed and hosted by several citizens of German origin. Two were Charles L. Volz and Charles von Bonnhorst. According to the Pittsburgh City Directory, Volz was a wholesaler of English and German goods located on the east side of Wood Street between
Second and Front Streets. Von Bonnhorst was a nobleman and former Prussian officer who was an active contributor to the cultural life of the city. Both men had close business relations with the Harmonist Society in Economy.

Despite his poor health, Maximilian toured Pittsburgh and left a description that showed a significant, aspiring industrial city:

Pittsburgh is a fairly old, widespread but not very attractive town. It is famous for its factories and its flourishing trade .... The city as such has about 12,000 inhabitants, but together with its suburbs, one reckons with an entire population of about 24,000. Among them are many Germans and among those some well-off merchants. Coal mines nearby, some of them burning at present, furnish the many steam machines, furnaces and chimneys with plenty of fuel, and the whole city is covered in grey smoke. This smoke ... gives the buildings a dark appearance. The architecture of this town is not uniform. Nice brick buildings stand in between older wooden structures. Some streets of newer development are handsome; the new houses are splendid and elegant. The streets, however, are badly paved, dirty, and insufficiently lighted.

There are many iron works, rolling mills, ... glass factories and cotton mills, mostly powered by steam engines ... which, too, are constructed here. The city is situated on a point between the rivers Monongahela and Alleghany, which on their confluence form the Ohio .... The Alleghany is spanned by a 500 steps [approx. 1,300 ft.] long bridge, which has covered sidewalks on each side. A covered water pipe of the same length crosses the river as well. A similar, very long and colossal bridge is constructed across the Monongahela.

Maximilian met with celebrated Pittsburgh artist James Reid Lambdin (1807-1889), a prominent portrait painter who had just opened a gallery and museum, and also decided to visit the settlement of Economy, founded in 1824 by the Harmonist sect from Southwest Germany. He traveled there on September 29: The friendly settlement with wide, chessboard-like laid out but unpaved, streets with fine singly built houses and a remarkable church offers a scene of good order and well-being. A wide road leads into the village, where we took up quarters in an excellent boarding house, which is administered by the community. All the inhabitants are Germans.

The Harmonists represented one of the few 19th-century religious-socialistic experiments in the United States that experienced economic success. They launched high-quality profitable industries, and their greatly esteemed hand-crafted and industrial products made them one of the wealthiest ecclesiastical communities in America.

The order established in Economy is exemplary. During the day, nobody is on the streets, as all inhabitants are usefully occupied. Young men and women are working as well as the children in different factories. They don't get any wages but plenty of everything they need. All of them are wearing their clean and tidy Swabian costume, and the only language one can hear is German. The entire estate and the turnover is common property. Every inhabitant had given his personal means into a mutual fund. Mr. Rapp and his adopted son are the directors, but there are some complaints about a lack of a regular account rendering and the somewhat dictatorial administration. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the founding and management of this artificial community is exemplary and meritorious for its founder. Rapp established several plants with steam machines. Moreover, they are manufacturing silk from their own sericulture. They produce all their needs themselves; there is significant agriculture, wine-growing and cattle breeding ....
On Maximilian’s visit to Economy, the Society had not yet reached its economic peak. The village counted about 150 buildings. In their wisely managed, prosperous plants, Maximilian noted that they always adopted the newest technologies. Their factories already made an annual profit of over $20,000, an impressive sum in those days.14

Yet, as their members were obliged to live in celibacy and access to the Society was restricted by George Rapp, the Harmonists died out at the beginning of the 20th century.

With surprise, the Prince noticed the strong educational mission of the Harmonists. In 1827, the Society not only installed one of the first natural history museums in the United States but also boasted one of the best scientific libraries in the country. Here, Maximilian had the opportunity to study the most recent scholarly publications on North American flora, fauna, and geography. He finished his final preparations for his western venture among the Harmonists. Some of his impressions on his visit to Economy read as follows:

… It is known that the old Rapp with his society of 600 to 700 Swabian immigrants came with very little means to America. With his followers, he founded three settlements, first Old Harmony near the Ohio, then New Harmony at the Wabash in Indiana, and now Economy near Pittsburgh.15
Two examples of the so-called "Alleghany Alligator" as sketched by Karl Bodmer. An adult specimen is seen at top with a young example below. These creatures were well known in the Pittsburgh area during Maximilian's time. From Hans Laeng, Indianer waren meine Freunde, 1976: 19, The Newberry Library, Chicago

After we had seen all the points of interest ... we went to the director's house and received a friendly welcome from his family entirely dressed in the style of rural Wurttemberg [the German province from whence the Harmonists came]... Very soon, the founder, Mr. Rapp appeared, an elderly, stout, and venerable looking man with grey and white hair and a long beard. We had supper with him, drank a very good self-produced wine, and enjoyed, finally, the singing and piano recital of six or seven young girls and a young man, who works as a teacher here.16

Not only had the setting of Pittsburgh and its surroundings attracted Maximilian's attention, but also as a dedicated naturalist, he immediately developed a scholarly interest in plants and animals of the area. "The region of Pittsburgh boasts some zoological curiosities."17 On several islands on the Ohio, he examined and measured the different trees and expressed his surprise at their height. In his notes, he mentions river mussels and big "soft shell turtles, ... which are often offered on the local markets," and furthermore, a "noteworthy ... animal," which was locally called "Alleghany Alligator."18 Maximilian had several of them caught and sketched by Karl Bodmer.19

The prince left Pittsburgh on October 8, 1832. As the Ohio was too shallow for steamships at that time of year, "we had to travel overland till Wheeling... We crossed the Ohio with a ferryboat whose paddle wheels were driven by four horses."20 On the other side of the river he entered a stage-coach. From Wheeling, he steamed up the Ohio to New Harmony, Indiana, where his weak health, caused by the cholera, forced him to stay for the entire winter. Bodmer used the time to make some independent trips to different parts of southern and eastern United States and to sketch and paint animals from the south, as well as from the Allegheny and Ohio valleys. His works later illustrated a scholarly publication by Maximilian on North American reptiles and amphibians — a volume, which is not only extremely rare, but also similarly unknown to the general public, as is the visit of this famous European traveler and explorer to Pittsburgh and Economy.

Dietmar Kuegler is a publisher and author in Germany. In 1983, he established the Verlag fuer Amerikanistik, the only German publishing house concentrating on American history and Native American culture. Within approximately 35 years, he has authored several dozens books and hundreds of articles on American frontier history. He edits the quarterly Magazin fuer Amerikanistik and writes regularly for the Austrian military magazine Pallasch and the German gun magazine Deutsches Waffen-Journal. Recently, he launched the imprint Tatanka Press and published the two volume Festschrift The People of the Buffalo, written by leading American and European anthropologists in honor of the late Smithsonian ethnologist, John C. Ewers.

Maximilian of Wied's travel journals were translated from German for this article by the author, Dietmar Kuegler.
On Nov. 1, 1840, the Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, appointed Maximilian Major General. (Gondorf 1993: 39).

The term “Leibjäger” described a special servant at court who was akin to an official hunter and accompanied, assisted, and reported to his master (the Prince) at hunts. He had to look after the equipment, care for the guns and the ammunition, save the kill, skin the game, and – if necessary – preserve meat and hides. In his master’s own forest, he acted as gamekeeper. In the case of Maximilian of Wied, Dreidoppel also served as personal butler on his journeys. (Gondorf 1993: 39).

According to Maximilian’s traveling passport, Koblenz, 1832. As usual in those days, Maximilian traveled for a time under the name “Baron von Braunberg” to stay incognito. (Gondorf 1993: 39).

The so-called “Alleghany Alligator” was the Hellbender (Cryptobranchus alleganiensis), one of only three giant salamanders found in the world. In Maximilian’s time, it was still common throughout the Mideastern United States. Since, it has disappeared from many streams because of declining water quality. Hellbenders are 16 to 17 inches long on average, although single specimens have reached a length of up to 29 inches. (Laeng 1993: 13).

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The Harmonists were founded in 1785 in Iptingen, a small town near Stuttgart, today in the German state of Baden-Wuerttemberg. Under the leadership of their founder, George Rapp (1757-1847), they immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1803/04. (Wied, 81).

There were about 100 utopian, communistic (religious and non-religious) settlements in the United States in the first half of the 19th century. Most of them failed. The Harmonists were not only successful but one of the longest living of these community experiments. They inspired some prominent philosophers and intellectuals of their time e.g. the British social reformer, Robert Owen, the German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and the German economist, Friedrich List with regard to an idealistic social order and form of government. (Sollbach 2/2000: 59).


Williams, Aaron. The Harmony Society (Pittsburgh: W.S. Haven, 1866).