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Letter from George Sibley to Rufus Easton, September 1821

George Champlin Sibley
Fort Osage

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Recommended Citation

Sibley, George Champlin, "Letter from George Sibley to Rufus Easton, September 1821" (1821). *George Champlin Sibley Papers*. 86.

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Fort Osage Co. Sept. 1821

My dear Sir:

In looking over my file of unanswered letters, this morning I find two of yours, one date 1st. the other 13th ult. and tho' there is nothing in either of them requiring any particular reply, yet as you complain of my not writing you (in a letter to Mary) I conclude to scribble a few lines for your edification, notwithstanding I am in none of the best scribbling humors just now being considerably annoyed by griping pains in my bowels. You continue to remind me in almost every one of your letters that you want money that such and such sums are absolutely necessary to save certain property etc. I am fully aware of all your embarrassments as regards your pecuniary affairs, and can only report to you my regrets that I have not the power to offer you any assistance. As to borrowing money, as you suggest, I beg leave to say, that I am entirely averse to such shifts, even if it were in my power to use them. To borrow money from one man to pay another, is doing nothing. It is always a very dangerous expedient, 'tis much more so now, for no man will lend mortgages on real property at half price, which still leaves the property involved. It seems to me that I should prefer to wipe off all debts that were likely to be pressing, at once at almost any sacrifice. I am sure I should be much more content and vastly more independent with a very moderate fortune, nay a mere competency unincumbered than to be the slave, the steward of a vast estate pledged and bound and every way involved for debt. In such a case, I believe I should not hesitate a moment which to choose. Ease and independence and content and happiness, we all know full well do not necessarily follow in the train of wealth. In truth they are very seldom found there. If found at all, they are in the inmates of those who know how to enjoy a competency, and to despise the cares and anxieties and toils and perplexities (falsely called the pleasures) that ever attend the victories of wealth, in the beautiful language of the Poet. "Man wants but little here below, nor wants that little long." If I live five years longer, you will see me practising upon this Philosophy I hope. It is drawn from immutable truth. It contains the true source of individual and National Independence, and I may add it contains an infallible cure from what we call Hard Times.

Hard Times! The term is vague and unmeaning - - the Savage complains of Hard times when he is denied his accustomed supply of the useless luxury of Tobacco. What tho' the plains abound with Buffalo and other game, the forests and groves with delicious fruits, the river with fish and fine furs and then fields with grain etc., he overlooks all these the riches and bountiful supplies of nature, and denies himself the enjoyment of them, because one useless Luxury is withheld, Instead of cheerful thanks to the disperser of all good gifts, for the real comforts of life, he wears a sullen gloomy countenance, frets, and wastes his health in fitful repinings for an imaginary good. In what are we much better and wiser? By our own acts, we have converted the plains and simple natural laws of commerce, into entangling and inextricable regulations and counter-regulations. That which was at first adopted as a mere counter, a mute slave, we have transformed to be our master, nay our God, before which we fall down in worship. What tho we have Houses and Lands and - - - - and Food and Raiment in abundance tho' the earth teems with the superabundance of its productions for the use and benefit of man, and the lap of nature is filled with all good things and bounteously spread before us. We are miserable, distressed, ruined, because this slave, these counters, this money is scarce. We harass one another, without pity or remorse. Innocent women and children are unfeelingly turned out naked and hungry (in a land of abundance) to suffer and be miserable, all in consequence of our devotion to this false God.

Let us imagine a stranger from another planet placed in the Midst of one of our opulent cities. After viewing the vast hoard of comforts and luxuries there collected, the spacious and comfortable dwellings, the rich and ample supplies of provision and luxuries from every clime, he would exclaim, this People

must be happy. But what would be his astonishment when told that all the blessings and good things he had seen were completely neutralized, now turned into curses and afflictions, in consequence of the foolish laws which the People had imposed upon themselves to regulate their dealings with each other. It would be difficult to explain the minute causes and precise properties of so complicated a curse as this commercial system, all that could be done to satisfy the stronger, would be to point out the effects – that done, he would exclaim “Surely this People is accursed of Heaven, for in their hands the cup of joy and Happiness is changed to a Cup of bitterness and misery.”

It is in such a vein that my reflections run sometimes. The more I reflect and the more I remark on this subject, the more am I convinced that the Hard Times proceed naturally from the folly of our own laws and regulations and from the false estimates men make of the uses and true value, as regards worldly Happiness, of Worldly riches –

You think that I ought to husband my means at present and not lay out much money in buildings. I value my comfort with much more than I do money for I am always willing to buy comfort with money. I shall not be extravagant in my Houses. What money I have resolved to expend in that way can be laid out to better advantage I think, now that money has attained such a high value, than in ordinary times, when money is low and labour high. In consequence of the uncommon sickliness of the season my new Houses does not advance as fast as I could wish. All my working men are sick and have done nothing for more than a week.

I have been talking of going to Washington next winter, but begin to think now that I shall in all probability decline that journey. I am a little afraid of the expense, and do not like to lose the time. My object would be chiefly of an official nature. I sh. however avail myself of the occasion to attend to some of my own private concerns which perhaps tho I can nearly as well do by letters to some friend.

Mrs. Easton and the children are in good Health, Langdon’s head has healed up perfectly. Do you not intend Sir, to favor us with a visit this fall? We shall all be happy to see you, I assure you.

Mary is pretty well. She fatigues herself quite too much nursing and giving medicien to about 20 sick persons in this neighborhood. I am only so so, as to health. I am a little bilious, but am in hopes I shall escape any thing like a serious illness.

Rufus Easton, Esquire
ST. Charles,

Yours very truly,
G. C. Sibley