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5-1-1825

## Letter from George Sibley to Owen, May 1, 1825

George Champlin Sibley

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Letter 1.

Owen-----

George C. Sibley  
May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1825

My Dear Owen,

Having as you know, determined to accept the appointment of Commissioner on the part of our Govt. to carry into effect the Act of the last Session of Congress, which authorities the president to cause a road to be marked out from Western frontier of Missouri, to the confines of New Mexico, and very cheerfully complying with your desire, to be informed from time to time of my progress in this arduous undertaking, and of the result of my observations on the Wild Region through which the Road is to pass, and on the Trade which it is proposed thus to protect & encourage, I now commence for your amusement a series of letters, which I hope to continue from place to place as I proceed, and which may or may not afford you the gratification you seem to expect from my report.

It is not necessary to go into a very particular account of the trade from Missouri to Sta. Fee in N. Mexico- suffice it to say that it began on a very small scale in the year and has been growing ever since in importance; the first adventurers were hardy enterprising men, who being tired of the dull & profitless pursuits of husbandry & the common Mechanical Arts on the frontier, determined to turn Merchants of Traders, and in the true Spirit of Western enterprise, directed their steps Westward to the Settlements of New Mexico, from whence many strange and marvelous stories of inexhaustible wealth in the precious metals, has long before, found their way to & were circulated and readily believed thru our settlements on the Missouri. I believe the honor of the first enterprise of this sort belongs to William Becknell, a Man of good character, great personal bravery, by nature & habit hardy and enterprising – His pursuit immediately

previous to his first trip to Sta. Fee was, as I am informed, that of a Salt maker- He certainly had no knowledge of Mercantile concerns, & is tho' very shrewd and intelligent, very deficient in Education- His outfit consisted of a few Hundred dollars worth of coarse Cotton Goods- His followers were about----, in number all of the same description of persons or nearly so, & fitted out in the same manner- Their whole outfit of merchandise might probably have cost in Philadelphia. They left our frontier at Ft. Osage, in and after suffering many hardships, and encountering many dangers, reached the settlements of Taos in N. Mexico where they were well received- In the following----- Becknell & his party returned home, having disposed of their merchandise to some advantage, the proceeds of which they brought home in Specie, Mules, Asses, & Spanish coverlids or blankets- This successful (for so it may be termed) expedition instantly excited many others to adventure to Sta. Fee; and among the Rest were some few, who had been partially bred to the retailing of merchandise in the U. States- The result of the experiments & observations of those best informed in commercial matters who visited Sta. Fee the next 3 years after the return of Becknell; was reported, & seemed decidedly to discountenance any further Trade- It was at once discovered that the precious metals were far less abundant in N. Mexico, than was at first supposed, & that the other resources of the country were for want of enterprise & industry in the Inhabitants yet very partially developed. That the inhabitants were generally extremely poor & ignorant, and the local Govt. tho' a little emerged from its former Servile State, & evidently fast improving in liberal principles, was yet very strongly biased against the proper encouragement of a liberal intercourse with our people.

Notwithstanding these discouraging circumstances, they had little or no influence except with the merchants- in fact they seemed to have had a contrary effect on those who had first adventured, and others of the same description- Still larger Caravans were equipped, composed

almost entirely of farmers' sons, mechanics, hunters and trappers, very few, if any, were qualified as merchants- These caravans being better equipped, & much better organized, as well as more numerous were able to search for, and find out better routes than their predecessors the journey was thus not only somewhat shortened, but was also rid of some of the dangers & difficulties that at first beset it- And thus this trade has gone on the increase, in such hands as I have described, and has at length aroused our Commercial men, & our statesmen and our Government to its importance- A large capital is ready to be invested, the moment our merchants can see their way clearer, and that the General Government intends to extend its protection and encouragement to this trade- You are aware that a law passed at the last session of Congress, having for its object this very thing; providing for a Survey of the country intervening between the two settlements of Missouri & Mexico, the marking a road, & negotiating with the intervening Tribes of Indians for the free & unmolested use of the road by the citizens of the two Republicans- Since the passage of this Law which is strong evidence of the fostering care of the Government. This Trade to New Mexico has been carried on with increased vigor- A very large Caravan is now assembling in the Western Frontier, which it is reported will consist of not less than 3 wagons & 100 pack horses & Mules laden with merchandise. Several adventures from Kentucky have gone on to join this Caravan, which it is expected will set out from Ft. Osage some time in this month, carrying with them a much larger & better assortment of merchandise, than has ever gone from here to N. Mexico before.

Congress appropriated the sum of \$30,000 for the purpose of marking a road & obtaining the consent of the Indians to use it. The President has appointed Benjamin H. Reeves, G. C. Sibley & Pierre Menard, Commissioners, to carry the Act of Congress into effect, & has instructed us to proceed in the duties assigned by the Act, & has given us discretionary powers,

& entire control of the fund appropriated- The Commissioners are allowed to appoint a Secretary & Surveyor to employ as many men as they may deem necessary for Hunters, Chainmen, Waggoners, & Their own compensation is fixed at \$8 p day, that of their Secy. \$5 p day & their Surveyor & men at such rates may deem proper- I came from my residence at Ft. Osage to this place, upon my own private business, not being at all aware when I left home of this Appointment, or even dreaming of such an honor, as I never applied for it in any way whatever- I am waiting here for Col: Reeves, who I understand accepts, that he and I may consult together and proceed as soon as we can to business.

Mr. Menard it is said will not accept, He is not here however, & is not expected for some days to come.

The detention here so much longer than I expected when I left home, is not a little hurtful to my private business. If I continue here till the necessary preparations can be made to set out on this service, I shall probably not see home for two months to come; & as I left my affairs as a man necessarily suffer very considerably in my absence I am embarked however & cannot now retract- tho' I must say that nothing but the force of circumstances, could have impelled me to leave for a year my family & cottage, to undertake a service that I am persuaded must be fraught with difficulties & privations & hazards innumerable- A principal reason for my entering upon this duty, is the hope & belief, that it may be beneficial to my health, which tho' not exactly bad at this time, is & has been, for 3 or 4 years past indifferent...

Your friend

G. C. Sibley