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Letter from George Sibley to Josiah Johnston, February 1, 1829

George Champlin Sibley
St. Charles, Missouri

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St. Charles February 1. 1829.

My Dear Sir,

Your favour dated in December, was only received by the Mail of last week, how it came to be So long on the way, is to me unaccountable.

I wrote you about Christmas, as I remember, and then informed you that my proposed visit to the Seat of Govt. was abandoned altogether – What you say of Master John Sibley, must Satisfy me. for the present; and I am well convinced that his track in the busy Scenes of the bustling World, ought to be decided on So Soon as his _____ capacity and disposition are ripe enough (?) to ground a proper decision on - Had I time (which at this moment I have not) and my head ached less violently, (which now does ache very much) I might be tempted to enlarge pretty tediously, on this Subject of education: and Should especially take occasion to write down my opinions at large, that I find are in a great degree adverse to the present ruling propensity of every Parent, to attempt at least, to make great Statesmen. Lawyers Doctors, Generals of their Sons. whatever nature may have Said to the contrary; and I Should assert my convictions of the Justice of the claims of Agriculture, Commerce + Manufacture, to a due Share of the advantages of classical Education. that is to Say, I might Set forth by way of protest my decided opinion. that it is unjust. and unwise to appropriate all the educated talents of our youth, to the professions, as they are termed; having as it were, the refuse, for the other pursuits of life – It appears to me, that if I had a Son of ordinary promise, I would educate him, not expressly for a Farmer, but certainly with the view of his becoming one, unless Subsequent development of his character+ fitness, forbade it. His acquirements Should be Such however, as to enable him creditably, to pursue any other course, that his riper years might point out to be most fit and proper – I think there is a great defect in our System of Public Education; which if properly corrected, might more than any thing else contribute to the permanency of our Theory of Government, or rather, to make the practice Conform to the theory advantageously –

Would it be impracticable to place within the reach of all who can afford the means of entering the Public Schools, of the higher grades; instruction in the elementary principles of Agriculture, Government, Manufacturer, Commerce; as well as in Law, Physic + _____ - But I am not now to discuss this Subject –

Nor am I in the humour to dabble in any Politics to day. having been Sorely dozed last night; and being a good deal fatigued this morning. with Gov. Edwards' Popularity Seeking message; in which he has proved to my mind, that the new States have no right to demand, nor the Congress any right to Surrender to them, the vacant Lands within their limits – Seldom have I ever been more dissatisfied with any grave production of the human mind, than with that alluded to. — If there does really exist So much intrinsic difficulty, as Some assert, in disposing of the Public Domain so as to distribute it fairly among those who will cultivate it, and effectually guard it from the cupidity of monopolising Speculators. why not leave the present System untouched? For the purposes named, it is perhaps, the very best that human wisdom can devise –

Had I the honour of a voice in your honourable body, + it appeared expedient to disturb the present System. by a transfer of the Lands in question. from the controul of the Genl. Govt. to that of the States in which they lie; I Should propose the following, as the most likely method of Stopping the popular Clamour, and removing this great bribe, with the least danger and injury — I would propose, that the Lands in question Should be offered on Sale to the States in which they lie, at about 50 Cents an Acre, or Such price as will defray the expense of Surveying +., and pay a net profit of Say 20 Cents an Acre; the Amt. of which, Should be fairly divided among the Old States when received, to be by them applied exclusively to purposes of Education – That the States purchasing those Lands, Should be bound to retain the present System of Surveying, Selling +. and not to raise the minimum price above \$1=25 an Acre. and to appropriate 20 C_. an Acre of all Lands Sold. for Schools. and the balance for internal improvements – I am strongly fixed in the opinion, after much thought, and a careful comparison of all the Schemes that I have Seen proposed; that this, or Some plan very nearly like it, might be Safely and peradventure wisely, adopted.

It Seems probable enough, that the Public Lands will be a “bone of Contention,” and a fruitful Source of clamour and confusion. So long as the Genl. Govt. has the controul over them. Nay, I fear the extreme anxiety of the West to get these Lands, may reconcile the People of the Western States to Submit to Some compromise with the Anti- Tariff States, by which the Tariff would be repealed perhaps – I wish very much to See this matter Settled with the Genl. Govt., So that it may be put at rest forever; tho’ I cannot for a moment entertain the hope, that the distribution of the Lands can be effected nearly as well by the States, as by the U:S: – So long as any portion remains unappropriated, demagogues + popularity Seeking Men will make it the theme of their declamations. and the pretence for agitating the Public mind – And it is not probable that the interests of Agriculture will demand the actual use of a moiety (?) of the Lands now vacant, for Fifty years to come – Our demagogues may be Said to offer the People. their own Land at reduced prices, or gratis, in consideration for their Votes - The Sooner this System of bribery can be destroyed, the better - If the Lands could be Sunk, the evil would be less than there likely to flow from the perpetual agitation of the People about their division –

We are all well, and all write in most affectionate regards to Ann Eliza + yourself and William. My head ache obliges me to Shut out the light.

very truly yrs.

G. c. Sibley

Hon. J. S. Johnston –

[In this manuscript it is almost impossible to distinguish between periods and commas. Sometimes a mark is rendered a period when a comma would be more grammatically appropriate, if the mark simply did not at all look like a comma.]