

Lindenwood University

Digital Commons@Lindenwood University

George Champlin Sibley Papers

George and Mary Easton Sibley Papers

4-16-1819

Letter from George Sibley to Thomas McKenney, April 16, 1819

George Champlin Sibley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/george>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

I am yet ignorant what alterations have been made by Congress, at their last session, in our Indian trade system, though I have accidentally learned that the trading-houses are continued for another year. I said "Indian trade system;" so it is called; but it is no more like a system, than the yells of an Indian are like music; and yet it is complained that "the Government system has not effected much, if any, good; that it has not realized the public expectations; has not civilized and Christianized the savages, or extended and strengthened the influence of the Government among the Indians."

Little, indeed, has this "system" effected, and that little is more than ought reasonably to have been expected, if it is considered how very defective our laws are on the subject of Indian trade and intercourse, and how little support this system, as it is called, has ever received from Government. True, it has received its existence from Government, and has, by sufferance, from year to year, been kept in a miserable languishing state to this time. Like a wretch under sentence of death, it has been roprieved from year to year, still under sentence, growing weaker and weaker; while its enemies are acquiring fresh vigor from new hopes; and, in the mean time, this poor skeleton of a wretched system is tortured with upbraidings, abuse, and reproaches, because blood still flows on the frontiers, and the tomahawk and scalping-knife are not exchanged for the Bible and the plough. Let our legislators look fairly into this subject. If it is a subject worthy to be considered, why is it so neglected? If unworthy, dismiss it, and let loose the hungry traders. If the lives and property of our frontier people are in the safe-keeping of their Government, it would seem proper that Government should control those whose irregular commerce places those lives and that property in jeopardy. If we (I rank myself among the frontier settlers) are not entitled to that protection, keep us no longer in suspense; give up the Indian trade (and with it, of course, all influence over the Indians) to "*individual enterprise*," and let this be proclaimed along the frontiers: "Americans, farmers! you who may emphatically be called the pioneers of civilization; you have been induced to remove your families to the borders, you have purchased lands there from the Government, and have been led to believe that your Government possessed and meant to retain the power to control your only enemies, the savages and the traders, and thus afford you protection; and such truly was the intention of Government. But, it is now different; the clamorous cupidity of the traders will no longer be restrained; the Indian trade must be given up to '*individual enterprise*,' to merciless men, who feel not for your sufferings, and care not for your wrongs; to intriguing foreigners, who thirst for the blood of your wives and little ones; to the unprincipled pioneers of commerce of every shade and hue. We will instruct these people to conduct their trade honestly, to abstain from every practice that may have a tendency to endanger your peace and safety, and we shall compel them to give bonds, with securities, for the faithful observance of our instructions. Further, we cannot protect you, for these enterprising people must be left free to pursue the trade with the Indians; they are entitled to the benefits of the fur trade, and have assured us, on *their honor*, that they cannot prosecute it to their liking under the present checks and restrictions.

"Your property will be sacrificed, your families murdered, and your farms desolated; but these men insist upon their rights, and the fur trade must be left open to them. Your Indian neighbors must also be given up to the moral and political schooling of this worthy class of citizens; they will be kept in darkness, and their natural pursuits of war and hunting protracted as long as there remains a beaver or a bear in these extensive forests. If they sometimes break in upon you, and commit robberies and murders, you know it is the nature of a savage so to act. Perhaps these traders might, if they thought proper, divest them of those propensities, and induce them to adopt the arts and the habits of civilization, and your example would greatly encourage them; but, alas! this would not accord with the traders' interest, nor can they look upon your example with a friendly eye. What is the bleeding scalp of an infant, compared with the rich fur of a beaver skin?

"You are numerous, peaceful, and industrious; many of you have borne arms in the defence of your country; many are settled on that very land given to you by your Government for military services, to which you once fondly hoped to retire in safety, to pass the remnant of your lives in happiness. But you have deceived yourselves; you are still doomed to a life of toil and danger; your little property, the fruits of many years' labor, must be left exposed to savage depredations; your arms must defend the frontiers, and the blood of your wives and children appease the savage propensities of your Indian neighbors, who must be left in their present unhappy state, a scourge to our frontiers, a reproach to the Government; but profitable to those few highly favored, because highly meritorious citizens, the Indian traders."

But I hope for better things; and, although we are left for another year powerless and unprotected from the malice and the galling insults of every renegade trader; although the agents of the Government are still subjected

to the derision and the open opposition of the traders, without any official power to compel those people to treat the institutions of the Government with a becoming respect; still I look forward, confidently, to the next Congress, for better regulations. Under that hope, I shall content myself as well as I can to serve out another year; still using personal influence instead of that which ought to belong, but does not, to my official station, to support the character of Government, and cause its policy to be respected among the Indians. I will conclude these remarks, sir, with this assurance, that, *under present circumstances*, the United States trading-houses in this quarter are very little better than useless to the Government as respects any political influence they have over the Indians, (though they are certainly great conveniences, and some protection to those people;) and, in my opinion, had better be abolished, unless they are regenerated, better protected, and continued in operation for a longer term, instead of from year to year, as heretofore.

Very respectfully, sir, &c.

G. C. SIBLEY.

THOMAS L. MCKENNEY, Esq., *Superintendent of Indian Trade.*