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AN EVALUATION OF DOCUMENTS USEFUL TO
THE ETHNOHISTORIAN:
THE PAPERS OF LAWRENCE TALIAFERRO

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The story of the American Indian is but one phase of a world-old problem. In a few hundred years, Indians of Stone Age culture have been compelled to adjust themselves to the Steel Age of the migrating white men from Europe. The newcomers, of course, brought with them guns, iron and steel axes, hoes, cooking utensils, and many other Steel Age articles hundreds of years in advance of anything that the Indians had ever used or seen. In 1609 the French explorer Champlain introduced the Iroquois of upper New York to the gun, and thereby created a demand for this new and improved weapon. The Spaniards had performed the same service for the southern tribes a half century earlier. The gun made hunting easier for the tribesman, and gave him a cultural push upwards. This important weapon was not long in reaching the Indians of the lakes who possessed quantities of fine furs, valuable to the white men. Exchange of commodities promptly got under way, and we have the beginnings of the fur trade which was to play such a tremendous role in the story of America as well as in international affairs for the ensuing two and a half centuries.

The unveiling of the lives of the pre-white Indians, and the changes resulting from the impact of the Steel Age culture upon them, has required the united efforts of scientists in many fields. The historian in his work utilizes the journals, diaries, and correspondence of explorers, traders, missionaries, government officials, and travelers, to contribute his share to the epic of primitive life. All of these types of scholarship have their obvious merits, and each must call upon the others for assistance and verification.

For the Minnesota Indians, and particularly for the Sioux, during the great transition period from 1800 to 1850, when these Indians were changing from warlike, self-supporting hunters to a condition of almost complete dependence upon white goods and government annuities, the ethno-historian finds himself in great good luck. The excellent records of the North West Company and the American Fur Company, those great business concerns that brought in the trade goods causing the great change, have been preserved. The detailed accounts of such devoted missionaries as Samuel and Gideon Pond, Stephen R. Riggs, Frederick Ayer, and others, are available. Best of all most of the journals, letter books, and correspondence of Lawrence Taliaferro, the United States Indian agent at Fort Snelling from 1820 to 1840, have been saved for posterity. Ten out of a possible thirteen journals, written up daily in meticulous fashion by Taliaferro, two of his letter books,

and several hundred letters received by him are among the prized possessions of the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul. Quantities of additional Taliaferro material, including account books, returns for supplies, reports, and correspondence both originals and copies, may be found in the William Clark Collection at Topeka, Kansas, and in the Indian Office files in the National Archives at Washington.

Under the system of administering Indian affairs, set up by the American government during the Revolution, regional offices designated as agencies, were established in the Indian country at strategic places—usually in association with a military post—for the handling of relations with the various tribes. Such a regional office, known as the St. Peters Agency from the old name of the Minnesota River, was established in 1819 in conjunction with the beginnings of the army post which was soon to be named Fort Snelling. Indian agents, although strictly civil officials at least for the first half century, were responsible to the secretary of war, and they depended for the enforcement of their rules upon the military.

William Clark, Superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis, at the close of the War of 1812 had submitted to the War Department a detailed statement covering the whole Indian situation west of the Mississippi River. In that report he had advocated the appointment of a number of Indian agents, subagents, and interpreters for stations throughout the West, and one of the points recommended for an agency was the mouth of the St. Peters or Minnesota River. From this spot, it would be possible to exercise some control over the Sioux living along that stream and along the upper Mississippi. For three years no action was taken upon his proposal, and Nicholas Boilvin, the agent at Prairie du Chien, exercised a nominal control over them.

The need for adequate supervision over these warlike Indians, however, had been fully demonstrated during the War of 1812, when nearly all of them had actively supported the British. The Chippewa in northern Minnesota had been similarly hostile to the American cause. Under the leadership of the Sioux chief Wabasha some members of his band from the Winona region had even conducted a raid as far south as Natchez. British flags and medals were to be found throughout the Sioux and Chippewa country, and most of the white Indian traders there were holdovers from the British regime. Their anti-American influence continued for at least ten years after the close of that war. British officials on the Great Lakes, too, for a long period maintained a policy of making extremely liberal presents to Indian visitors from the upper Mississippi country.

Finally, in the summer and fall of 1818 Secretary of War Calhoun issued orders to Major General Jacob Brown to establish a military post at the junction of the Minnesota and Mississippi rivers during the ensuing season. It will be recalled that Lieutenant

Zebulon Pike in the early fall of 1805 had purchased by a treaty with the local Sioux a tract of land at that point for a military post, but no payment had ever been made. The sum of \$2,000, payable in goods, had been inserted in the blank document when the agreement was ratified by the Senate in 1808.

During the spring and summer of 1819 a detachment of the Fifth Infantry, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Henry Leavenworth consequently made its way from Detroit via the Great Lakes, the Fox-Wisconsin river route, and the Mississippi to the mouth of the Minnesota. There a temporary log cantonment was established on the Mendota side near a post of the American Fur Company. An Indian agent from St. Louis accompanied the troops and paid to the Indians the specified amount.

Under the authority of an act of Congress dated March 3, 1819, President Monroe designated the new location as the seat of an Indian agency. He named as agent Lawrence Taliaferro, a personal friend and an ex-lieutenant in the United States Army. The new agent's commission was dated March 27, 1819, but he did not arrive at his post until the early summer of 1820. By that time the troops had been moved to the north bank of the Minnesota, where the high bluffs commanded the junction of the two rivers and there was no danger of being flooded out by high water.

Lawrence Taliaferro, a young man twenty-five years of age, of good Virginia family, was a determined individual with strong convictions as to his duty towards his new Indian charges. No sooner had he reached his post than he notified Colonel Leavenworth (who had functioned temporarily as Indian agent during the winter of 1819) that he, Taliaferro, was now in charge of Indian affairs in the district, and that less intercourse between Indians and the garrison was desirable. A few days later the agent notified the commandant of the stabbing of a Sioux chief, the Old Bustard, near the cantonment by a companion, while the two were en route home with a gift keg of liquor. "This was caused doubtless by an anxiety to obtain the chief's whiskey," wrote Taliaferro. "I beg, therefore, that no whiskey whatever be given to any Indian unless it be through their proper agent. While an overplus of whiskey thwarts the beneficent and humane policies of the Government, it entails misery upon the Indians and endangers their lives as well as those of their own people."

By the time Taliaferro assumed his duties as agent, however, the Minnesota Indians had become so addicted to the use of liquor, as the result of their dealings with the fur traders, that it was not possible for him to carry out his good intentions in the matter of prohibition. He could, and did, to some extent, check the introduction of whiskey for trade use, but he found it necessary to include liquor rather freely among his endless presents to visiting Indians as a means of gaining their good will. For example, Flat

Mouth, an important Chippewa chief from northern Minnesota, was given eight gallons of whiskey when he visited Major Taliaferro on August 29, 1821, and others fared about as well. The early journals are full of such entries. In extenuation of this practice, however, it should be said that this particular chief had a considerable party with him, that he had been in the habit of going to the British Indian agency at Drummond's Island just east of the Straits of Mackinac where the "milk" always flowed freely, and that it was his first visit to the new American agency at the mouth of the Minnesota. Incidentally, Flat Mouth became one of Taliaferro's staunchest supporters in the unending struggle to keep the Chippewa and the Sioux at peace with each other.

In general, the policy of the American government was strongly against the gift or sale of liquor to Indians. The laws strictly prohibited the introduction of high wines or whiskey into the Indian country, and boats were regularly searched for excess amounts of liquor. Yet whiskey was a regular part of the army ration in the 1820's, and quantities of it thus came legally to the fort. Journal entries and exchanges of letters between the Indian agent and the post commander show clearly that some of this liquor "leaked" out a convenient postern gate in the fort wall. Further, although fur traders had to be licensed under heavy bond in order to enter the Indian country, their permits allowed them to bring in generous specified quantities of liquor for their own consumption and for the use of their men. On one or two occasions when Taliaferro's official rations' supply ran short, several of his agency laborers threatened to strike because they did not get their whiskey. About 1830, however, the entries in his journals, mentioning gifts of liquor to the Indians disappear, and it is evident that the earlier policy had been terminated.

Behind the scenes, during most of the Taliaferro period, ran the ceaseless battle of the American Fur Company to establish and maintain its virtual monopoly of the northern Minnesota-Wisconsin fur trade (through control of the Great Lakes' routes to the Indian country) against the encroachments of independent traders. Since "Indian country" was closed to all whites (exclusive of the military and government officials) except those holding fur-trading licenses issued by government Indian agents stationed at key points, or permits for a few special purposes, control of the Indian agents would produce the results desired by the American Fur Company.

The company moved most of its northwestern goods up the Great Lakes to the old central distributing depot at Mackinac. From there the outfits traveled via Sault Ste. Marie to Lake Superior, along the south shore of the lake to Fond du Lac on the St. Louis River near present-day Duluth, and then via the Savannah Portage to the headwaters of the Mississippi; to Green Bay and thence via the Fox-Wisconsin rivers to Prairie du Chien on the Mississippi; and to the Illinois country via Chicago. Governor

Lewis Cass reigned at Detroit as superintendent of Indian affairs as far west as the Mississippi by virtue of his position as governor of Michigan Territory. At the beginning of 1824, according to a War Department list, George Boyd was agent at Mackinac, Henry R. Schoolcraft at Sault Ste. Marie, Henry B. Brevoort at Green Bay, Alexander Wolcott at Chicago, Nicholas Boilvin at Prairie du Chien, and Lawrence Taliaferro at St. Peters.

An Indian agent, remote from contacts with Washington, had wide latitude in the granting of trading licenses. If these officials could be induced to look favorably upon American Fur Company applications and overlook suspiciously large stocks of liquor on their boats, there was little chance for an outsider. Not only was such a friendly attitude in evidence along the upper Great Lakes, but American Fur Company chiefs went directly into the office of the secretary of war, under whose jurisdiction Indian affairs were administered, and secured special orders and rulings which they wanted.

At the St. Peters Agency alone was there opposition to the American Fur Company's plans. Lawrence Taliaferro, stationed at the last key point controlling access to the rich Minnesota Valley and the upper Mississippi region, would not play ball. He persisted in issuing licenses for both the Minnesota and the upper Mississippi rivers to such opposition traders as the Columbia Fur Company men based on St. Louis. Since his agency from 1820 to 1827 had jurisdiction over both the Sioux and the Chippewa of Minnesota, and influence did not produce results, Taliaferro was a source of great annoyance to the American Fur Company officials. The agent himself had influential relatives and friends back in Virginia, and notations in the journals show that he was in constant communication with them. Eventually the American Fur Company solved much of its opposition problem by absorbing the Columbia organization and taking over its important traders. The transfer of jurisdiction over the Minnesota Chippewa from the St. Peters Agency to that of the good company friend, Henry R. Schoolcraft at Sault Ste. Marie, coupled with an Indian Department ruling that an agent could only issue licenses for his own area, further strengthened the company's monopoly.

Taliaferro's jurisdiction, as just stated, during the first seven years of his service extended over both the Sioux and the Minnesota Chippewa, despite the danger of bringing the traditionally hostile Chippewa to an agency well within Sioux territory. Much of Taliaferro's time, therefore, was given to the work of keeping these two fighting tribes at peace with each other. There were endless councils at the agency house, at which the influential chiefs of each tribe would air their grievances. These usually involved a stray killing or two along the border line or the killing of game within the territory claimed by the other. There would be much flowery and figurative oratory extending over many hours, endless

repetition, and equally flowery "now you must be good children and keep the peace" speeches from Major Taliaferro. The peace pipe would be smoked by all, and an agreement to hunt freely and jointly on the upper St. Croix, the Sauk River, and around Otter-tail Lake would be made. Such Sioux-Chippewa peace pledges might last for as much as two and a half years, or they might be violated within a matter of hours. On May 27, 1827, for instance, when Flat Mouth and a party of Chippewa came to the agency at Fort Snelling on business, Colonel Snelling took the precaution of assigning to these visitors a special camping place close under the walls of the post. Sioux and Chippewa chiefs and braves smoked the friendly pipe, danced together, and visited each others' lodges. Yet that very night about nine o'clock the Sioux fired into the Chippewa wigwams, killed two men and wounded several more. Taliaferro and Snelling at once demanded that the guilty persons be given up for punishment. The perpetrators were surrendered, and they were summarily executed by the Chippewa while running the gauntlet on the plain just outside the fort. In cases of inter-tribal outrages, this Indian agent was a firm believer in the old rule of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

Personal influence and fidelity to his promises were the principal sources of Lawrence Taliaferro's success with his Indian wards, an influence maintained throughout his term of office with members of both tribes, even though officially he had no jurisdiction over the Chippewa after June, 1827, when they were assigned to the Sault Ste. Marie Agency under Henry R. Schoolcraft. Even the belated placing of a subagent for the Chippewa at La Pointe on Madeline Island had little effect, and these Indians continued to float down the Mississippi to Fort Snelling until the end of the Taliaferro regime in 1840. A visit to the Sault Ste. Marie Agency meant a journey of some eight hundred to a thousand miles for many of the Minnesota Chippewa, La Pointe was off the beaten track, and the Indians claimed that when they did get to either of these official agencies, they received nothing—not even provisions to assist them on their way home. Taliaferro, on the other hand, usually gave at least minor presents to visiting Indians, whether Sioux or Chippewa, as well as rations of pork, flour, and plugs of tobacco to cover a limited amount of visiting and travel time. The cost of such goods and supplies purchased from the white traders,

especially in the latter period, frequently came out of his own pocket. While he was partially reimbursed for such outlays in the settlements after the treaties of 1837, his journal entries indicate that he was still out considerable money. His salary while agent ranged from \$1,300 to \$1,500 per year with certain living allowances.

Reading through the ten journals which have been preserved, one gets a vivid picture at the agency. Chiefs and head men of the various bands of Sioux and Chippewa arrive to "shake hands"

with their "father," whether they are starting out for or returning from the fall and spring hunts, or visiting him to transact such real business as the receipt of their annuities or to file complaints of isolated killings by one or the other of the adjacent tribes in the border country. There is endless talking in the council house on the constant theme that "we are poor, hungry and naked, without even a pipeful of tobacco to smoke, though we have kept our ears open to our Father's words and have treasured them in our hearts." There are medicine and buffalo dances as well as other ceremonials around the agency and the fort. There is infinite paper work to be done by the agent to satisfy the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, the Superintendent at St. Louis, the auditors and military disbursing agents, and even newspaper critics. Fur traders must be examined and licensed and penalized for violations of the law or damage to Indian property. In his leisure time, the agent tries to raise potatoes and garden stuffs to supplement official rations.

Perhaps the most significant items in the Taliaferro journals for the ethno-historian are the endless entries of the names of the chiefs, head men, and warriors, both Sioux and Chippewa, who swarmed in and out of the St. Peters Agency. The agent carefully identified each by name, tribe, village, or band, and gave their rank, whether "Chief," "2nd Chief," "War Chief," "Head Man," or "Warrior." Villages along the Minnesota River are often mentioned as the "4 mile village," "9 mile village," etc., and there are references to the hunting grounds of the various bands. There is much statistical information, varying all the way from semi-censuses of the bands within Taliaferro's Sioux-Chippewa jurisdiction, down to the number of Indians accompanying a chief on a visit to the agency. As might be expected, the agent's spelling of the names of his visitors is anything but uniform, and the entries may use either the Sioux or Chippewa Indian form, a French version, an English equivalent, or perhaps a nickname. A card file, however, could be worked out through cross checking, which would specifically identify several hundred Sioux and Chippewa Indians by name, tribe, band, village, and, in some cases, kinship.

As the years rolled on, Washington headquarters, always about a season remote from the agent at the mouth of the Minnesota, became more and more neglectful. For one period of more than six months in 1836 neither money for salaries and wages nor supplies of any kind, including annuity goods, presents, and even food, reached the agency. Shortly before the Mississippi began to freeze up for the winter, Taliaferro had to send a special boat down to Prairie du Chien to get what should have come in June. At the time, his blacksmith was appealing for help to keep his family from starving, because he had received no pay with which to buy food from the traders, although rations were supposed to be furnished him. The Indians, too, had become utterly lazy and unwilling even to fish for food for their families, and spent most of their time hanging around the fort and the agency in the hope of

receiving hand-outs. Fort and agency gardens were being raided of their vegetables, and more and more government cattle and horses were slaughtered for food or for mere wantonness. The few remaining reliable old chiefs were acknowledging their inability to control the younger elements. One feels the sense of futility and despair through the final journals, as Lawrence Taliaferro doubtless thought of his many years of labor for these once self-supporting, self-respecting Indians.

The ratification in the spring of 1838 of the Chippewa and Sioux treaties signed the preceding year brought the fringe of white settlement to the east bank of the Mississippi, and Major Taliaferro must have felt that his work for the Minnesota Indians was done. On July 15, 1839, he submitted his resignation, to take effect on December 31 of that year. The final entry in his journal of 1839 is dated October 7. It notes the arrival of a steamboat which will save him a canoe voyage down the river.

Perhaps an entry in the journal for October 21, 1836 may well serve as his own summary of his career.

“He would never take a Bribe—
 He would see justice done all Traders—
 He guided and protected the Indians—
 He broke down foreign influence—
 He drove whiskey out of the country
 He forced dishonest Traders out
 He is too independent for a tool
 He is opposed to paying for *old credits* lost or said to be lost
 in Trade for 20 years
 He keeps peace & has the confidence of the Indians—
 He keeps off oppression by the Traders & causes the Indians
 by frequent councils to pay their just debts
 He advises to take goods instead of money as annuities—
 when called upon for his opinion
 He has prevented a Set of Canadians & other persons from
 making slaves of the Indians—both of minds as well as
 persons
 He causes the Indians to be instructed how to raise corn &
 use implements of husbandry—
 He has altogether too much influence over the Indians for us
 or our designs of enriching our selves out of them and
 their lands.—”