

Joseph Montfort Street: Establishing the Sac and Fox Indian Agency in Iowa Territory, 1838-1840

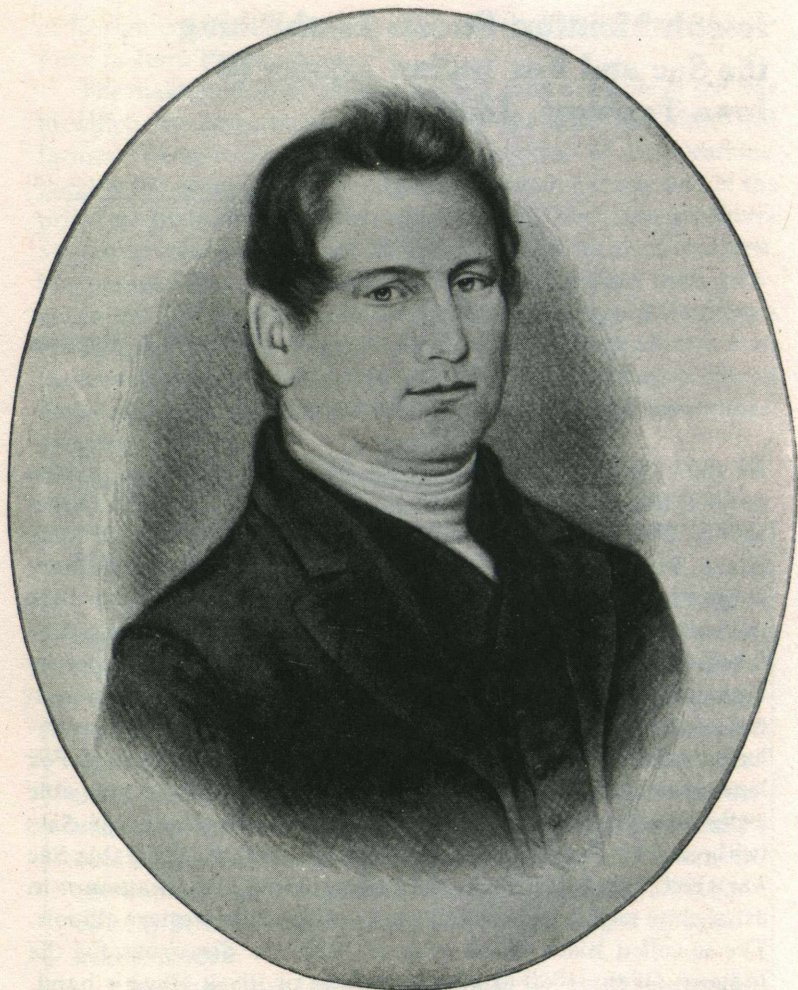
Ronald A. Rayman

IN 1837, THE UNITED STATES BUREAU of Indian Affairs decided that the permanent removal of the Sac and Fox Indian agency from Rock Island was necessary. The agency at Rock Island, Fort Armstrong, was originally constructed as a military outpost in 1816, and served as the Sac and Fox agency from 1834 until its termination in 1837.¹ The Sac and Fox were long-time inhabitants of the region, having joined in a loose confederacy against the French in the 1730s to resist French attempts at control of the Fox-Wisconsin Rivers area.² Thus began a century-long conflict with whites in the region which led to Sac and Fox land cessions in 1804 and later in 1824. Although led by such able leaders as Keokuk, Wapello, Appanoose, and others, the Sacs (without their Fox allies) finally rallied around the venerable Sac war chief, Black Hawk, in the spring of 1832 in an attempt to drive white settlers out of their ancestral lands in western Illinois. The so-called Black Hawk War of 1832 was disastrous for the Indians. Of the 1000 original members of Black Hawk's band, only 150 survived, including Black Hawk. The defeated Indians were forced to cede lands comprising roughly the eastern quarter of present-day Iowa, and the area was dubbed the "Black Hawk Purchase."³

¹Bruce E. Mahan, *Old Fort Crawford and the Frontier* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1926), 69-70.

²Cyrenus Cole, *A History of the People of Iowa* (Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1921), 32.

³Charles J. Kappler (comp. and ed.), *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883* (New York:



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Joseph Montfort Street

Tension between whites and Indians in the region had steadily increased as swelling numbers of whites crowded into the recently ceded Black Hawk Purchase.⁴ White-Indian friction became commonplace; a recurrence of open warfare was feared unless preventative measures were taken. In an effort to alleviate the tense situation, the United States negotiated a treaty with the Sac and Fox in October, 1837, whereby the Indians ceded a long, tapering sliver of land lying west of the Black Hawk Purchase. In return, the government reciprocated with a substantial land grant on the Des Moines River.⁵ Joseph Montfort Street, the Sac and Fox agent at Rock Island, was appointed agent for the new Des Moines River agency.

Street was a veteran Indian agent. Appointed by John Quincy Adams on August 8, 1827, Street had served first as Winnebago Indian agent at Prairie du Chien from 1827 until 1834.⁶ In March, 1835, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Elbert Herring⁷ ordered Street to assume authority over the Sac and Fox agency at Rock Island.⁸ Street remained there until November, 1837, when he was selected to establish the new Sac and Fox agency in what was to shortly become Iowa Territory.

Street traveled west from Rock Island to present-day Wapello County in early January, 1838. He immediately began searching for a suitable agency location. In addition, he collected information projecting the estimated costs of preparing agency farm-lands. In a letter of January 9, 1838, Street reported his findings to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Carey A. Harris.⁹ Street esti-

⁴The first federal census of the newly-created Wisconsin Territory showed 10,531 people in the Black Hawk Purchase in 1836; *Iowa Official Register, 1969-1970*, 476.

⁵William J. Petersen, *The History of Iowa*, I (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1952), 143-146. The area granted to the Sac and Fox encompassed roughly the central and south-central portions of present-day Iowa; "The Acquisition of Iowa Lands from the Indians," *Annals of Iowa*, VII (1905-1907), 283-290.

⁶Letter, James Barbour to Joseph Montfort Street, August 8, 1827, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Sent, 1824-1881, National Archives, Record Group 75, Series M21; Roll 4, 105-106. (Hereafter cited as LS.) The "M" series denotes microfilm.

⁷Elbert Herring served as Commissioner of Indian Affairs from July 10, 1832, until July 4, 1836; Felix S. Cohen, *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1942), 12.

⁸Herring to Street, March 5, 1835; LS, Roll 15, 24.

⁹Carey A. Harris served as Commissioner from July 4, 1836, until October 22, 1838; Cohen, 12.

mated \$10,516 would be required to break and fence 1248 acres of prairie; his calculations were based upon the labor of sixteen workmen, eight teams of oxen, tools, supplies, and a cook. A substantially larger expenditure of \$12,480 was envisioned for identical work in adjoining country to the east. The healthy savings, Street declared, would result from his extensive knowledge of the region and his personal bargaining prowess.¹⁰

Street was not a modest man. Anticipating the termination of the Rock Island agency and his forthcoming transfer, Street wrote in November, 1836: ". . . these Indians appear greatly attached to me . . . I feel confident that the S. and F. would even submit to have an amount equal to my salary paid out of their annuities, rather than I should leave them."¹¹

Although white workmen secured agency employment as laborers, Street urged the restriction of those with "objectionable habits." He firmly believed that agency whites should set a high moral example for Indian emulation; displays of white character would insure the agency's success. Street particularly deplored whiskey drinking: "I would consider it of first importance and morality; so as to set before the Indians examples of strict temperance and morality, at the same time we are placing before them improved plans of agriculture and domestic economy."¹²

An incident occurred in February, 1838, which forcefully strengthened Street's "dry" position regarding liquor. A small party of Sac and Fox braves were imbibing at a trader's store some forty miles west of Rock Island. Growing increasingly intoxicated, the Indians became unruly and began destroying merchandise. Ross, the store's proprietor, attempted to quell the disturbance, and a scuffling match ensued in the storeyard. Ross knocked one Indian, identified as Little Bear, to the ground ". . . with a billet of wood & took a fence rail and struck him on the head as he lay, breaking his scull [sic] shockingly."¹³

¹⁰Letter of Street to Harris, January 9, 1838; Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, 1824-1881, National Archives, Record Group 75, Series M234, Roll 730. (Hereafter cited as LR. This reference is to one roll, #730, and is unpagged.)

¹¹Street to his brother, November 7, 1836, Letterbook of Joseph Montfort Street held by the Iowa State Historical Department, Division of Historical Museum and Archives, Des Moines, Iowa, 82. (Hereafter cited as *Letterbook*.)

¹²Street to Harris, January 9, 1838, LR.

¹³Street to Wisconsin Territorial Governor Henry Dodge, February 3, 1838, LR.

Ross was bound over to appear in court and posted an \$800 bond.¹⁴ However, he promptly fled the country to avoid prosecution. Indian friends of deceased Little Bear, seeking vengeance for his death, killed a white man, Atwood, who had been working for the government on Indian lands: "His body was found some days afterward with the head tomahawked, one arm cut off and his body partially eaten by wolves."¹⁵

When informed of the Ross incident, Harris was stunned. He exhorted Street to expend every effort to effect a swift completion of the agency and removal of the Sac and Fox to it: "Every circumstance indicates that the Indians cannot remain in their [present] country with comfort or prosperity, after the settlements of the whites shall have multiplied among them."¹⁶

Determining a suitable location for the agency farm and buildings presented special problems for Street. Commissioner Harris suggested a location at least ten miles west of the eastern boundary of the Indian lands, but Street objected. Basing his objections upon first-hand observations of the area, Street argued that the agency would be most advantageously situated on a navigable river, rather than on open prairie. He advocated a river location to facilitate steamboat transportation and supply delivery. Government food supplies, guaranteed by provisions of the 1837 treaty, were essential, as only preliminary land breaking would be accomplished during 1838. Few crops would be planted; agency Indians would rely heavily upon government foodstuffs to survive the winter. Street reported:

I apprehend it will be impossible to do much this year save in preparing to raise anything for their subsistence . . . it is impossible to do more than break some prairie for the crop of 1839 this year . . . When they made the cession, they counted on getting some land broke early enough to plant this year. Now this cannot be done in a country where hands and teams are so scarce.¹⁷

Street's persistence swayed Harris who agreed to an agency constructed near a navigable waterway, provided that it was located well within Indian country. A prairie four miles northeast

¹⁴Street to Dodge, February 3, 1838, LR.

¹⁵George Mason Whicher, "Stephen Whicher," *Annals of Iowa*, Third Series, IV (1899-1901), 509-510.

¹⁶Harris to Street, March 10, 1838, *Letterbook*, 87.

¹⁷Street to Harris, April 7, 1838, LR.

of the Des Moines River was chosen—it was seventy-five or eighty miles west of Burlington, well within Indian boundaries. However, supply problems were not solved. Street reported to Harris in May that requisitioned supplies, badly needed to feed hungry Indians who had begun to drift into the agency, had not yet arrived.¹⁸

The undelivered supplies caused Street great concern. He wrote Wisconsin Territorial Governor Henry Dodge of the Indian's plight: "Two thirds of their number are living upon roots obtained in the prairies." Moreover, the Des Moines River country was itself being pressed by white settlements, compounding food shortages; ". . . the game has left the country as the pressure of the whites is great even to within eight or ten miles of the Indian towns." Street procured flour, pork, and nearly \$400 worth of beef cattle on the hoof for Indian relief. He informed Dodge that the meagre supplies were purchased not only because the government had failed to provide them, but also to prevent ". . . their meddling with the stock of numerous settlers that are filling up the country almost to the Ind. towns."¹⁹

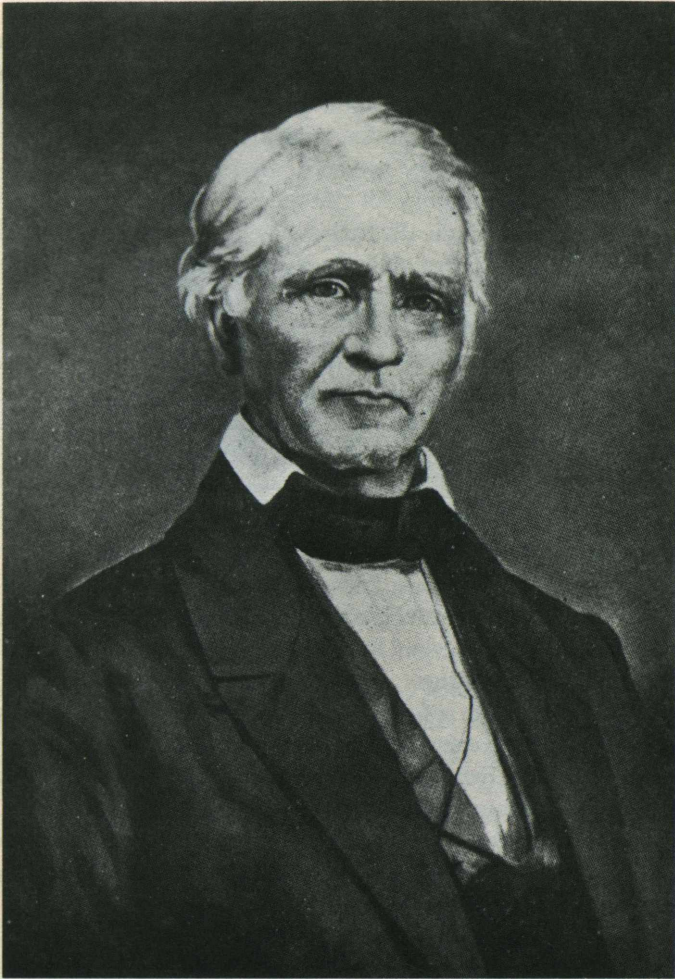
Street envisioned additional problems. Harris had ordered Street to let construction contracts in March, and Street complied.²⁰ Advertisements soliciting bids appeared in two newspapers, *The Missouri Republican* and *Burlington Territorial Gazette*, during the first week of May, 1838. Bids were to be accepted until June 1st for three different contracts: breaking and fencing two sections of prairie, construction of two mills, and construction of the agent's house and other "appropriate buildings."²¹ Street feared a small response to the advertisements. Canal and road building booms had seized Illinois, employing many regional construction firms—few sought contracts which compelled travel far out onto distant prairie lands. Street, back in Rock Island following his preliminary tour of Indian country, also bemoaned governmental regulations affecting construction con-

¹⁸Harris to Street, May 24, 1838; *Letterbook*, 88; Street to Dodge, July 13, 1838, *Letterbook*, 152; Street to Harris, May 26, 1838, LR.

¹⁹Street to Dodge, July 13, 1838, *Letterbook*, 152. The supply problem was not rectified until the fall of 1838 when supplies finally began to arrive.

²⁰Harris to Street, March 10, 1838, *Letterbook*, 87.

²¹Copy of advertisements for *Missouri Republican* and the *Burlington Territorial Gazette*, May 4, 1838, LR.



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Henry Dodge

tract payments. He stated that the government's policy of payment only upon completion of the entire job, as opposed to installment payments, ". . . drives off all but capitalists, and few of them will engage in work in Indian Country." He added: "I am

now apprehensive there will be no bid."²²

The troublesome delays in supply and construction plagued Street. He conveyed his frustration to Harris in July, complaining that repeated delays, affecting every aspect of agency development, would dishearten the Sac and Fox. Tangible examples of growing crops and healthy livestock were needed to demonstrate the superiority of farming over the Indian's nomadic wanderings: "If we hope to alter radically their whole character and manner of life we must place before them in bold relief, tangible objects of plain and easy comprehension, the direct benefit whereof may be felt and experienced."²³

Both Harris and Dodge were frequent recipients of Street's complaints. Street apologized to the latter for the repeated complaints, but added: ". . . my great anxiety to be of service to these Indians, and if possible to civilize them, is my only excuse."²⁴

Despite Street's exhortations, agency progress was slow. In December, 1838, Dodge requested (at Street's urging) that Street be allowed to winter at Rock Island and return to the agency the following spring. Although construction had finally begun, the agent's house was uninhabitable. Dodge explained: ". . . this severe climate will prevent his taking possession of it until the river opens in the spring . . . [and] . . . I hope no order will be given for his removal before the opening of the spring." Dodge's request must have been allowed. Street's reappointment as agent was confirmed in February, 1839; War Department notification of Street's reappointment was sent to him at Prairie du Chien on February 28, 1839.²⁵

Although Street had informed Dodge in October, 1838, that some agency buildings were completed, Street could not report all agency structures finished until September of the following year. In a letter of September 14th to Commissioner T. Hartley Craw-

²²Street to Harris, May 26, 1838, LR. Street was able to report in July that the contracts had been let, but added that he was compelled to hire contractors from three different places, one from Illinois, one from Missouri, and one from "Ioway," to fill the contracts; Street to Dodge, July 16, 1838, LR.

²³Street to Harris, July 27, 1838, LR.

²⁴Street to Dodge, July 16, 1838, LR.

²⁵Dodge to Crawford, December 10, 1838, *Letterbook*, 94; John M. Robinson to Street, February 28, 1839: *Letterbook*, 97. The letter had a Prairie du Chien postmark. Street made trips to Rock Island on business and to Prairie du Chien to visit his family until they also moved to the agency in the spring of 1839.



Drawing by Phyl McClain

Joseph Street's house, built in 1838-39, served as headquarters of the Sac and Fox Agency.

ford, he listed the completed agency buildings. The agent's house, council house, shop, smoke house, river warehouse (located three miles from the agent's house), sawmills, two grist mills, brick chimney and two furnaces were the principal buildings described as completed and in operation.²⁶

By this time, Street was encouraged by construction progress, but was disheartened that farm operations were lagging. Still intent on "altering" the Indian's lifestyle, Street wrote: "After [eventually] getting some flour from the wheat at the mills, I hope to effect something advantageous upon Indian manners . . .," but he hastened to add ". . . yet all depends upon a reasonable and judicious interference of the Genl. Government upon the whiskey sellers, and the white settlers."

Street reported 4,396 Indians living at, or near, the agency in the Indian villages, ". . . inhabiting a fertile, well-watered country, with the improvements made for the Sacs and Foxes, during

²⁶T. Hartley Crawford served as Commissioner of Indian Affairs from October 22, 1838 until October 28, 1845, well past Street's death in 1840; Cohen, 12; Street to Crawford, September 14, 1839, LR.

the present year, which could not be got into operation in time for their benefit during the present year, these Indians have the most flattering prospects of doing well and living happy."

Street experienced recurring ill-health throughout 1839 which contributed to the agency's problems. Apparently, Street's poor health had restricted his normally active correspondence as well. He wrote Crawford in November, apologizing for his inadequate communication, explaining that he would have written more but was unable to do so because ". . . at this moment I am too unwell." Iowa Territorial Governor Robert Lucas also noted Street's deficient correspondence. Lucas reported that Street was "dangerously [sic] ill."²⁷

In November, 1839, serious charges were leveled at Street accusing him of illegally withholding Sac and Fox annuity payments in 1838 and 1839. W. W. Chapman, identified by Street only as a trader, made the accusations in a letter of November 29th to Secretary of War Joel Poinsett.²⁸ Chapman alleged that Street actually paid the annuities to the American Fur Company. Chapman wrote:

Many other incidents of similar character has [sic] occurred and I am satisfied that Gen'l. Street will not tend his aid to any measure proposed by the government which has not a tendency to promote the interest of the Fur Company.²⁹

Crawford apprised Street of the charges in a letter of December 2nd and requested Street's defense of those charges.³⁰

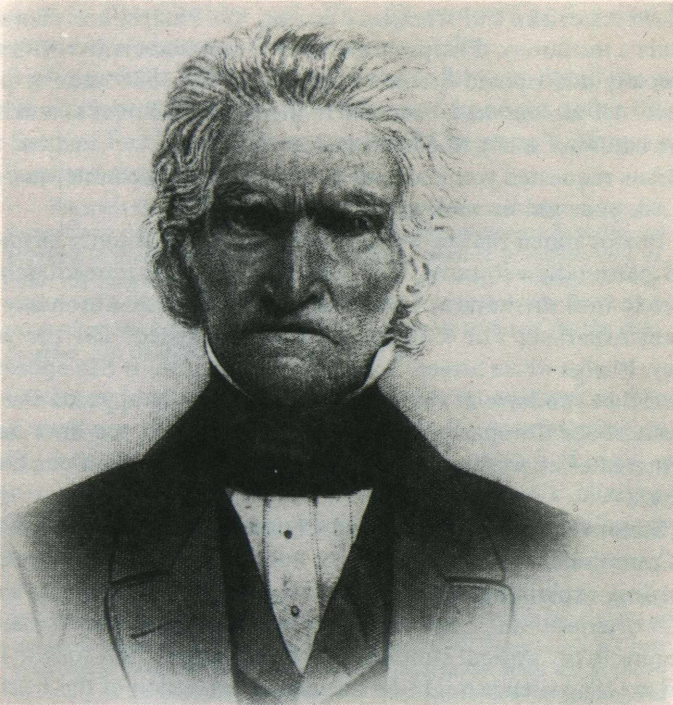
Street's reply to the charges was forthcoming on February 6, 1840. However, unsolicited support for Street sprang from several sources during the interim. The newspaper *Burlington Hawkeye and Iowa Patriot* lauded his integrity: "We have known General Street for many years, and believe him to be incapable of injuring

²⁷Street to Crawford, November 18, 1839, LR; Lucas to Crawford, September 20, 1839, LR.

²⁸Chapman's charges were ironic. The American Fur Company had tried to engineer Street's removal in 1834 and again in 1835 because he opposed the company's economic exploitation of the Winnebago at Prairie du Chien. Although Street refers to him only as a "trader," Chapman was even then Iowa Territorial delegate to Congress (September 10, 1838, until October 22, 1840); Lawrence F. Kennedy (comp.), *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1971* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1971), 727.

²⁹Chapman to Poinsett, November 29, 1839, *Letterbook*, 146.

³⁰Crawford to Street, December 2, 1839, LS, Roll 27, 412.



*Courtesy of Iowa State Historical Department,
Division of Historical Museum and Archives*

Robert Lucas

the red man . . . [and] . . . know the interest he has always manifested in behalf of the Indians."³¹

Josiah Smart, an interpreter, presented the War Department with an affidavit in which he affirmed Street's actions on the 1838 annuities payment. The arrangement to give Indian annuities over to the American Fur Company was concocted by those two groups the night preceding payment day—Street knew nothing of the plan. Smart stated:

Gen'l. Street has never since I have been with him advised or assisted the Inds. to make any arrangement with the Am. Fur Company, either for annuity purposes or any other purposes . . . His advise [sic] has always appeared to me to be for the benefit of the Indians exclusive of all personal interest or favour to anyone.³²

³¹"Council With the Sac and Foxes in 1840," *Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, XV, (1917), 430-436.

³²Josiah Smart Affidavit, January 9, 1840, LR.

An American Fur Company trader, W. Phelps, corroborated Smart's testimony. Phelps denied any Street association with the company and upheld Street's handling of the 1838 annuity payment. All monies had been fairly distributed; Street's activities were confined solely to dispensing the funds as ". . . neither the Indians requested you make an examination of Accounts, -nor did we ask your aid or receive any from you."³³

Phelps stated that he was present at the 1839 annuity payment and personally witnessed ". . . the annuity paid immediately & directly into the hands of the Chiefs themselves." Absolutely no Street-American Fur Company collusion existed. On the contrary, Phelps wrote Street: "So far from doing so, it has appeared to me that you have at various times too violently opposed the Interests of our Company. I can positively state that you have never furthered or attempted to further the Ints. [interests] of our Company."³⁴

Street vehemently denounced Chapman's charges. In a letter to Commissioner Crawford, Street apologized for his tardiness in replying, explaining that he had been prevented from doing so by a ". . . painful and protracted illness." He continued: "I should not now in my present state approach the subject, but for the fear that my long silence might be deemed a confession of the truth of Mr. C's. charges." Street adamantly declared that annuities allocated for 1838 and 1839 were paid in full to the Sac and Fox according to established governmental procedures. Condemning Chapman's sketchy knowledge of his role in Indian affairs, Street unleashed a counter-charge:

. . . his . . . knowledge of me and my official conduct amounts to nothing more than picking up and stringing together a few garbled statements & reports set afloat through the country by some disappointed creditors of the Inds.³⁵

Street accused Chapman as one of those "disappointed creditors" whose fraudulent claims of Winnebago half-breed debts had been disallowed by the government in 1839.³⁶ Street feared Chapman's

³³W. Phelps Affidavit, January 20, 1840, LR; Phelps to Street, February 20, 1840; *Letterbook*, 149.

³⁴Phelps to Street, January 20, 1840, LR.

³⁵Street to Crawford, February 6, 1840, LR.

³⁶Street had actively opposed false trader's claims against the Winnebago half-breeds in 1838 and early 1839, thereby incurring the hatred of many unscre-

attempt to discredit him and effect his removal as Sac and Fox agent would undermine the agency's viability.

To support his defense, Street went so far as to detail the manner in which he counted out ten, fifty, and hundred dollar bills to the Sac and Fox Chiefs. He summarized Chapman's charges with undisguised scorn:

Whether Mr. Chapman's private opinion of me and my conduct be favorable or not, is a matter of indifference. His gratuitous & malicious attempts to injure me by misrepresenting my conduct & endeavoring to effect my removal for a selfish purpose of his own, I disregard—His weakness I most sincerely pity—my sole object is to show the Dept. that my conduct has not been such as Mr. C., *burning with zeal for the public good*, has thought proper to represent it.³⁷

Governor Lucas reviewed the evidence in support of Street. That evidence, joined by Lucas' personal recommendation of Street, formed a convincing defense ". . . which I [Lucas] consider a triumphant refutation of Mr. Chapman's charges."³⁸ Lucas submitted the evidence gathered to Crawford along with his recommendation:

In justice to Gen'l. Street I will state that as far as I have had any intercourse with him he has maintained a deep interest for the welfare of the Inds. under his charge, and a willingness at all times to use his best exertions to fulfill the instructions of the Department and I am gratified to have it in my power to state that the Gen'ls. health is improving and will probably in a short time be entirely restored.³⁹

While Lucas' evaluation of Street's conduct was accurate, his assessment of Street's health was not. Before Street could learn of the War Department's final decision in the matter, he suffered an apparent heart attack, so-called "apoplexy," and died on May 5, 1840, at the Sac and Fox agency.

The War Department had assured Street's son Thomas in April, a full month before his father's death, that a family member would be appointed to succeed Street in the event of his continued illness or death. Accordingly, Street's son-in-law, Army

pulous traders in the region. Street had also participated in a Bureau of Indian Affairs investigation of the Simon Cameron Commission. Empowered to evaluate trader's claims against the Winnebago, the commission became the major vehicle of fraud in defrauding the Indians and was completely discredited; Ida M. Street, "The Simon Cameron Commission of 1838," *Annals of Iowa*, Third Series, VII, (1906-1907), 115-116.

³⁷Street to Crawford, February 6, 1840, LR.

³⁸Lucas to Street, February 18, 1840, *Letterbook*, 150.

³⁹Lucas to Crawford, February 18, 1840, LR.

Lieutenant John Beach, was appointed Street's successor on May 29, 1840, thus assuring Street's widow and fourteen children of a continued income.⁴⁰

A War Department letter of April 25th notified Lucas that Street's refutation of Chapman's charges was "completely satisfactory." Consequently, Jesse Williams, clerk to Governor Lucas, informed Street's widow on May 16th that her husband had been completely exonerated of all charges.⁴¹

Joseph Montfort Street's accomplishments at the Sac and Fox agency were impressive. Plagued by chronic illness, hampered by delays and embroiled in Chapman's attempt to discredit him, Street labored to successfully establish the Sac and Fox agency. To that end, all agency buildings were completed by the fall of 1839. Farming operations progressed more slowly, but full-scale cultivation was realized in 1840, although Street did not live long enough to witness that achievement. Nevertheless, in light of the formidable difficulties Street encountered from 1838 to 1840, his accomplishments were considerable.

⁴⁰W. B. Lewis to Thomas Street, April 6, 1840, *Letterbook*, 127; Senate Notification of Beach's Appointment, May 29, 1840, LR.

⁴¹Jesse Williams to Mrs. Joseph Montfort Street, May 16, 1840, *Letterbook*, 129.

Editor's Note: The historic site at Agency, Iowa—now known as Chief Wapello's Memorial Park—was entered in the National Register of Historic Places in April, 1975. Several commemorative activities at the park are being planned for the Bicentennial year. On July 4, 1976 there will be a celebration of the first worship service in the interior of Iowa, which took place in Chief Wapello's wickiup in 1838. An old fashioned camp meeting motif, with large tent, visiting evangelist on horseback, transportation by horse and buggy, and period costumes will be featured. On October 9-10, 1976 all known living descendents of General Street are invited to participate in a Street Family Reunion. During that same weekend John Kyl of the Department of the Interior will be the keynote speaker at a meeting celebrating the signing of the October 11, 1842 Treaty for the purchase of the remainder of Iowa from the Sac and Fox Indians. In conjunction with that celebration, an Indian art and artifacts festival is also being planned at the park site. For more information contact W. C. Trembly, president of Chief Wapello's Memorial Park Association, Box 115, Agency, Iowa 52530.