

A CRITIC VIEWS IOWA'S FIRST MILITARY POST

By Donald Jackson*

Because documents relating to old Fort Madison are not plentiful, each new one that comes to light is noteworthy — even a crank letter from an anonymous writer. The letter presented here contains some facts not recorded elsewhere, but it must, of course, be read with skepticism.

Perhaps the letter is more significant as a mirror of the times than as a source of information. There was turmoil on the Mississippi River frontier in the years just before the War of 1812. Life was hard; French, British, and American interests were in conflict; and many men were quick to complain. Newspapers carried vituperative editorials and accepted scurrilous letters from subscribers, and it was common for a disgruntled citizen to write directly to the heads of government in Washington. And so, when "A Democrat" wished to complain about conditions at Fort Madison in 1811, he wrote directly to the Secretary of War.

The author of the letter appears to be a civilian who has either lived at the fort or visited it many times, and he is clearly not of French descent — unlike most of the civilians about the fort. He cares enough about the situation to write a bitter letter. He is disturbed about the awarding of the sutler's post and alleged discrimination against American traders. Perhaps he is one of the two Americans who, he says, have been denied the sutler-ship by the commander.

Fort Madison provided a livelihood for perhaps a dozen civilians and supplemented the incomes of many more. Of those living at the post, the man who had the most contact with the military was the sutler, a dealer in goods for the comfort and convenience of the soldiers — including food items not in the army ration. Two other important civilians were those hired by the War Department to deal with the Indians: the factor who engaged in trade with the tribes, and the sub-agent who counseled with them, heard their grievances, and directed their relations with the government. Each of these men required an interpreter, and the factor also had a full-

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time assistant. Lesser figures included the contractor's agent, who supervised the slaughter of beeves and the issuance of rations to the post; the blacksmith who repaired guns and traps for the Indians; the interpreter assigned to the commander of the fort; and a number of laborers. Add to these the itinerant traders and boatmen, the wives of the officers, and the coterie of "tame" Indians that frequented the camp, and it is possible to say that Fort Madison's soldiers were at times nearly outnumbered by non-combatants.

Built in late 1808 under the direction of Lieutenant Alpha Kingsley, the fort was located some ten miles above the Des Moines Rapids of the Mississippi River. During its five-year history it was manned by from sixty to eighty men of the First Infantry Regiment, United States Army. The position was found to be untenable, however, and after a serious attack by Indians in 1812, and another in 1813, Fort Madison was abandoned by the soldiers and civilians stationed there.

Had the post survived, these people might have become the founders of the city that now bears the name of Fort Madison. But within two years after the writing of this diatribe, nothing remained of the fort but a scattering of stone chimneys; soldiers and civilians alike had withdrawn in the face of constant Indian attacks.

The letter follows:

A HINT¹

Do not be surprised at receiving an anonymous letter — the nature of my situation at present requires it.

Captain H. Stark² of the 1st Regt. Infantry says that a *limited Mon-*

¹ The letter is in the National Archives, filed in the D-1811 section of the Unregistered Letters series, Record Group 107, which is the correspondence of the Secretary of War. It bears no date, but since the annotation on the back states that it was received on Nov 8, 1811, it probably was written in early October of that year. Presumably the addressee is the Secretary of War, although the letter bears no address.

² Horatio Stark assumed command of Fort Madison in August, 1809, a year after the post was established, and remained until September, 1812. He entered the Army as an ensign in 1799, and at the time of his transfer to Fort Madison was in command of Cantonment Columbian Springs on the lower Mississippi. The charge that he treated British traders "with servile attention" is too strong, although he was friendly with many of them. But soon after his arrival at Fort Madison he seized the merchandise of Jacques Porlier, Josiah Bleakely, and Edward Lagoterie, because those men were commonly suspected of promoting an attempted Indian attack on the gar-

archy would suit the *American people best!!!* A fine principle for an Officer of the *United States Army*. He loves the British Traders — treats them with servile attention, when the *Americans* scarcely meet with common politeness! He is in a few days going to recommend a *Monsr. Julien*³ a *Frenchman* & British Trader as a sutler to the troops at *Fort Madison!!* Well done — two good *Americans* met with a refusal. A present of a Keg of *rum*, some shrub, a new Coat &c. &c. &c. are great temptations — surely no honest man could refuse them. The Cat tho is now out of the bag.

Mr. George Hunt⁴ a son of a good old *revolutionary Officer* is to be dismissed on the last day of October — *bon pas de Frenchman*, he comes in for snacks.⁵

A Mr. Dixon⁶ also a *British Trader*, had a daughter died here (half squaw) the honest Captain had her decently interred — a nice headstone

risson. Then Stark wrote to his superior, Col. Daniel Bissell: "Should those persons still have any sinister designs against the United States the means of future mischief is thus withheld from them until they can clear up their characters." Later Stark was ordered to release the goods, and an apology was made to the traders. (Stark to Bissell, Oct. 4, 1809, and Bissell to Stark, Oct. 25, 1809, Record Group 107, National Archives; Frederick Bates to Porlier and Bleakely, Bates letterbook, Missouri Historical Society.)

³ Denis Julien had settled in 1805 on the east bank of the Mississippi near present Nauvoo, Illinois, and had been engaged in the Indian trade for many years. He performed duties for hire at the fort, but there is no indication that he was a sutler. (For details of his residence, see his quit claim deed of April 28, 1819, Records of Madison County, Ill., Book W, p. 83.)

⁴ Hunt was a son of Col. Thomas Hunt, former commander of the First Infantry Regiment. He became sutler at Fort Madison soon after its establishment and served the troops there until the fall of 1811. He then took an assortment of trade goods up-river to the lead mines below Dubuque, where he bartered for lead and furs until driven away by the Winnebagoes in January, 1812. (His own account, written many years later, is divided: one portion is in *Michigan Historical Collections*, 8:662-9 (1885); and another portion in *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 11:517-25 (October, 1913).

⁵ That is, the Frenchman comes in for his share.

⁶ Robert Dickson's apparent friendship for the United States was unmasked later during the War of 1812, when he helped to arouse the Indians to fight on the British side. But in 1811 he was still on good terms with the Americans along the river. Stark wrote to Col. Jacob Kingsbury, in Detroit, on June 20, 1810: "Should Mr. Dickson visit your part of the Country you will confer a great obligation on me by shewing him such attention as in your Power. You will find him in all things Honorable & intelligent and very Much of the Gentleman." (Kingsbury papers, Detroit Public Library.) The death of Dickson's daughter at Fort Madison is not mentioned in any other extant document.

cut, growned and lettered, to perpetuate her memory, besides handsomely inclosing the grave with pailings — all done by the labor of the Soldiers, which is all nothing but correct in a morrel point of view — but hear more, the honest Soldiers who had *died* at the same post, their graves are left exposed to be distroy'd by Hogs, Cattle & Horses, no *headstone* or any thing to mark the traces of their buddies!⁷ Excellent captain, noble Sir, his Soldiers love him no doubt. 25 men discharged during the summer — only drunken vagabonds reinlist at the post.⁸ This Mr. Dixion frequently makes the honest Captain a present of a Keg of *rum*.

The Captain being asked one day why the British Traders alone made him those presents: he answered, that "it was a *national pride* they possessed such as the Americans never would have — as to his part he always thought they wanted principle to make them as [one word illegible] as the Europeans were" — this I heard myself.

The Garrison looks as if it was ready to be given up at the first Summons. No fixed ammunition⁹ — no appointed places for her Officers and

⁷ Men known to have died at the fort before this letter was written include Private John King, described in the muster rolls as suffering from "age and general debility," and Privates Daniel O'Flanagan, James Moore, and Nicholas Tracy. Private Jacob Clinger, listed on the rolls as a "maniac" in confinement for murder and desertion, is not mentioned after June 30, 1809, and is presumed to have died at the fort. (Muster, pay, and recruiting rolls, 1st Infantry Regiment, 1802-1811, Record Group 94, National Archives.)

⁸ In the spring of 1811, Stark felt sure that at least fifty of his men would re-enlist within the year, particularly if the War Department would let him sign up a few chronic drunkards. The Adjutant-General replied that he could have a little latitude in this regard. But by October 1 he was discouraged by the slowness of re-enlistments, and told the Adjutant-General: "This Country has been most unusually Sickly which has occasioned a considerable depression of spirits; but I hope so soon as this scourge leaves us to be as successful as heretofore." (Stark to the Adjutant-General, May 31 and Oct. 1, 1811, and Adjutant-General to Stark, June 13, 1811, Record Group 94, National Archives.) Perhaps one reason for Stark's failure as a recruiter was his reputation as a harsh officer. Before coming to Fort Madison he had been court-martialed and reprimanded for cruelly beating a soldier. During his tour of duty at Fort Madison his surgeon's mate, Dr. Robert Simpson, attempted to have him tried again for cruelty. On one occasion, when Stark was on temporary duty at Fort Belle Fontaine near St. Louis, he sentenced a mutinous soldier to receive fifty strokes with a wire-tipped lash on two successive days, and an extra twenty-five strokes for insolence. By this time, flogging had been outlawed in the Army. (For Stark's trial and reprimand, see Cantonment Columbian Springs order book, Vol. 115, Record Group 94, National Archives.)

⁹ By fixed ammunition he means fused, hollow shells for the six-pounders, as distinct from grape shot or solid balls.

Soldiers in case of an alarm! One six pounder remains in a remote part of the Garrison & can be taken possession of at any time by an enemy! No notice is taken of it.

The Garrison is in such a rascally situation and so badly calculated for defence, that at least 300 men could be hidden around it and could not be hurt by either Cannon or small arms.¹⁰ He is [one word illegible] beyond expression to the *Government*, and plans everything in his power to make it disrespected. He lays even his own neglect to the want of capacity in the Government. He has been 2 years at the post in August last and has not as much as put his Company thru the Manual *exercise*!!¹¹

There is 1290 feet of the Garrison to be defended, and at present but 50 men to do it — which makes 64½ feet for each man. It can be so contracted as to measure but 332 feet which, by the same rule would require but 16½ feet pr. man, and would gain 3 out of 4, which would still be too much for that number to defend.¹²

This reduction could be made and not cost the United States \$25 besides quarters sufficient for the accomodation of one hundred Soldiers and the equivalent of officers! Astonishing it may seem indeed. This rascally Captain should never be suffered to Command but directly under the eye of his superiors. All this is true, believe me tho you do not know my *name*, yet you receive facts, which I call *God* to man to witness.

Send him to where he can be better attended to, and give the command to Lieut. Thos. Hamilton¹³ for but 2 or 3 months with order to new *Model* it — if he does not meet with your expectations; I will come for-

¹⁰ The fort was unfortunately located with a ravine on one side and a hill in the rear, and Indians often concealed themselves in these positions to fire upon the garrison. The site had been chosen by Stark's predecessor, Lt. Alpha Kingsley.

¹¹ Unlikely, since Stark was himself writing a drill manual while at Fort Madison which he described as an improvement on the standard manual of Von Steuben. (Stark to the Adjutant-General, Dec. 20, 1814, Record Group 94, National Archives; and Stark to Kingsbury, June 11, 1815, Kingsbury Papers.)

¹² The arithmetic is poor, but the proposal was one that many people, including Colonel Bissell, considered sound. Bissell urged Stark to eliminate the "tail," which was a long, fortified passage leading to a blockhouse on the hill behind the fort. Stark declined, since the blockhouse was essential to the defense of the fort, but there are indications that he later did so. (Bissell to Secretary of War, Jan. 20 and Sept. 26, 1812, Record Group 107, National Archives.)

¹³ Commander of Fort Madison after Stark's ill health forced him to ask for a transfer. Hamilton was in command during the most strenuous fighting, and supervised the abandonment of the fort in the fall of 1813.

ward, and acknowledge myself the greatest *liar* in the United States, for I know him to be a man of genius and enterprise. After that is done, send who you please to command. It is not every man who can command, that can build. Not a Lock for the Garrison Gates — that would be too much expence, still it is not so great as to purchase \$50 worth of Iron Locks for the Officers quarters, tho there is no window shutters to either of them — pretty defence. There is a number of other things that are worse than they could be represented.¹⁴

A Democrat.

¹⁴ Some support is given these various charges by Dr. Simpson's allegations and by Bissell's comment to the Secretary of War in his letter of Jan. 20, 1812: "Captain Owens when he returned from Fort Madison, in Octr. last . . . informed me that the Post appeared in Good Repair, and Judiciously Commanded, and that the Troops looked Extreemly well, yet from Doctor Simpson's known worth as an officer and his Veracity as a Gentleman, I cannot doubt there may be a Relaxation of Duty and Some want of Propriety in Capt. Starke's Conduct. . . ."