

# THE PALIMPSEST

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## Fulfilling the Treaty

To the traders who poled their keelboats up the Mississippi, it was a vast and lonely river. It was lonely in the channel because the glassy spread of olive-green water reached out hundreds of yards on either side. It was lonely close to shore (where the morning fogs combed through the willow tops and the crows sang out hoarse jibes at the boat crews) for it was useless to look for a white man. In all the weeks it took a crew to cordelle, warp, pole, row, and sail a boat from St. Louis to Prairie du Chien, there were but a few places where voyagers might expect a clearing, a light, and a halloo from the shore.

One of these places, after the fall of 1808, was Fort Madison. Every boatman knew when to look for it; coming upstream you passed the mouth of the Des Moines, and then you felt you were in Fort Madison country — but there still was a dangerous stretch of rapids ahead that would keep the crew busy for a day. Past the head of the rapids the water was placid and the river began

to make a great turn to the northeast. On the left-hand shore you saw the smoke of many chimneys and the gleam of peeled logs as the new stockade came into view. If it was a time when the Sauks, Foxes, and Winnebagoes were surly and unpredictable, you were delighted to hear the oaken gates come thudding shut behind you as you entered the safety and fellowship of the fort: the safety of log walls, the fellowship of sixty to eighty men of the First Infantry Regiment, U. S. Army.

For five years, from 1808 to 1813, Fort Madison stood at the Mississippi's edge guarding the frontier. Its blue-coated soldiers paraded, scouted, mounted guard, and lined up at the commissary window twice a day for their ration of whisky. Its government trader dealt across the counter with the Indians, exchanging fabrics, weapons, and baubles for the furs and lead brought in by the tribes. Then history took a giant step and left Fort Madison far behind. When the ashes of the burned stockade had cooled, men began to forget it. Facts died, legends grew. So little has been known of the fort in modern times that the names of most of the soldiers who lived and died there have gone unuttered for a century and a half.

The purpose of this story is to recall the facts and utter the names.

One day in the late summer of 1804, near the mouth of the Quivre River fifty miles above St.

Louis, two white settlers were killed by a small party of Sauk warriors. While such raids were not uncommon on the frontier, this particular incident proved a turning point in Mississippi Valley history. It led to a treaty, to long years of unrest among the Indians of the Upper Mississippi Valley, and to the Black Hawk War a generation later.

When word of the killings reached the Sauk and Fox villages, which were then at the mouth of the Des Moines, two chiefs went down to St. Louis to make amends. Major James Bruff, military commandant of Upper Louisiana, immediately sent them back to bring down the men who had actually committed the murders. They were also instructed to bring along some of the chiefs and important men of the two tribes. William Henry Harrison, governor of Indiana Territory, was coming to St. Louis in October to organize the District of Louisiana. One of the vexing things that had been on Harrison's mind for several years was the problem of getting the Sauks and Foxes to sign a treaty with the United States, but he had never succeeded in getting those Indians around a council fire. Now, with a delegation due to come down with hostages, he would have his chance.

Until 1804 the Sauk and Fox Indians had dealt but little with the Americans. Although they lived in United States territory at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the Indians considered themselves

political allies of the Spanish governor at St. Louis, and the commercial partners of the British fur traders from Canada. The persuasive British had told them what rascals the Americans were.

The Sauks and Foxes lived together in a loose confederation and claimed as their own a substantial part of what is now northern Illinois and southwestern Wisconsin. The land they occupied was vital to the United States because it lay along the Mississippi, a natural boundary separating the nation from European interests in the New World. President Thomas Jefferson was eager to extinguish the Indian title to all lands lying on the eastern shore of the river, and Governor Harrison was his special appointee for the accomplishment of this mission.

Although the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 had quieted American fears about French expansion, there remained the threat of the British in Canada, who tried hard to retain the good will of the Indians as they brought trade down the river and spoke to the chiefs of disaffection and revolt. A clear title to the eastern shore would help President Jefferson to control the activities of these British agents.

Of course the Indians knew nothing of the plan to buy their lands. As far as they knew, the two Fox and three Sauk chiefs who were taking a hostage to St. Louis had no other mission but to counsel with the Americans about the murders.

Had the Indian tribes expected to sell land, they would have sent a large delegation containing some of their shrewdest chiefs and most eloquent orators — Chief White Skin of the Sauks, for example, or Black Thunder of the Foxes. Instead they sent five mediocre chiefs, and they even failed to produce more than one of the murderers.

A government clerk made a cross after each chief's name on the treaty, while the chief touched the feathery end of the goose quill. When the ceremony of November 3, 1804, was over, the Indians had signed away fifteen million acres of land to the Americans. The land was to remain in the Indians' hands until the government had sold it, and they were to get a thousand dollars a year in annuities, plus the services of a trader, a blacksmith, and a man to teach them farming. Eventually they were to vacate the east side of the river.

Some of the Indians later claimed they were intoxicated at the treaty council and did not know what they were doing. Perhaps they were right. One of them, Quashquame, was strongly inclined to drink, and American treaty makers had long before learned what wonders of diplomacy could be wrought with a keg or two of Monongahela whisky.

The Sauk prisoner who had been jailed for the murders on the Quivre lay in a St. Louis guard-house all winter and into the spring. Mail traveled

slowly, and no one in St. Louis knew that President Jefferson had pardoned the prisoner in February. Before the pardon could arrive, the forlorn warrior could endure his confinement no longer. He broke away and was shot by a sentinel as he fled. His body was later found outside the town.

It seemed that relations between the Indians and the United States were beginning badly, at least on the frontier. Back in Washington the Secretary of War was planning to carry out those provisions of the treaty that concerned the welfare of the Indians. By April a site was being discussed for the factory (trading house) called for by the treaty. But when it was finally built, at Fort Belle Fontaine on the south bank of the Missouri, four miles above the confluence of that river with the Mississippi, the location was too remote for the convenience of the tribes. They continued to deal with the British and with private American traders.

Next, the government turned to the matter of teaching agriculture to the Sauks and Foxes. To the head of the Des Moines Rapids in the summer of 1805 came the new agricultural agent, with a mare, a horse, and a wagonload of farming tools. He chose a location that was later to become the Nauvoo of the Mormons on the east bank of the river; across from him, on the west bank where Montrose, Iowa, now stands, was Quashquame's village of Sauks.

The agent was William Ewing, "a sober, hon-

est, faithful young man" whom Secretary of War Henry Dearborn had found in Pennsylvania. Agreeing to take the post for \$400 a year, he had left the East in March with a letter from Dearborn to Harrison in his pocket. The letter described him as "well acquainted with the practical part of common farming in Pennsylvania." Harrison was instructed to supply him with agricultural tools and send him off to the Sauk and Fox country. The person chosen to be Ewing's interpreter was a Creole trader named Louis Tesson Honoré, who had lived at the head of the Rapids, west of the river, for several years.

William Ewing had little success at his new post. His Indians already were fair farmers — the women did the field work — and they were prejudiced against the Americans. Even worse, Ewing was a grafter and a spendthrift in the eyes of his superiors in St. Louis. He was constantly sending down for costly shipments of supplies; he spent government funds on trinkets for the Indian women; he traded whisky to the braves in exchange for muskets, then sold the muskets back at a high price.

During Ewing's stay at the Rapids, a new supervisor came into the picture who did not appreciate such foolishness. He was William Clark, back from his famous journey with Meriwether Lewis and now hard at work as Superintendent of Indian Affairs in St. Louis. (His traveling com-

panion, Lewis, was the new governor of the Territory.) Clark lost no time in having William Ewing discharged.

The first attempt to "civilize" the Sauk and Fox people was a failure. Later, under more competent supervision, the farming experiment would make more progress; but now the government was ready to try something else.

The factory at Fort Belle Fontaine was doing little business now because of its remoteness from northern tribes. At the same time the area around St. Louis was settling rapidly and Indian trading parties posed a threat to white residents.

In the fall of 1805, when General James Wilkinson, military commandant at St. Louis, had mentioned the possibility of establishing a post at the mouth of the Des Moines, the Secretary of War had advised against it "until the subject shall have been more fully considered." But by next April the Secretary was asking the factor or trader at Belle Fontaine "to make such inquiries, as circumstances will permit, concerning the propriety of establishing a Branch of the St. Louis Factory at the rapids of the Mississippi. . . ."

Here the matter lay until the fall of 1807, when Frederick Bates, acting governor of the Territory in the absence of Lewis, proposed to send a supply of trade goods up to the Rapids for the benefit of the Indians. The key to the plan was old Colonel Thomas Hunt, in command of the mili-



tary garrison at Fort Belle Fontaine. When he refused to provide soldiers to escort the factory goods, Bates abandoned the plan; but he did send Indian agent Nicholas Boilvin up to spend the winter at the Rapids with a small supply of goods.

The government also hired a blacksmith to repair the traps and muskets of the Sauks and Foxes. He was Alexander Willard, formerly a soldier on the Lewis and Clark expedition, who agreed to work for \$30 a month plus one and a half rations a day. Governor Lewis promised him tools, a shop and coal house, a comfortable cabin, the free transportation of his baggage to the Rapids, and finally an assistant or striker. Willard had already assured himself a shaky place in history, on the Lewis and Clark expedition, by sleeping on watch (for which he had been flogged) and by losing both his rifle and tomahawk on the same day. It may be assumed that he was not Lewis' first choice for the job at the Rapids; but not many men wanted to go up into dangerous Indian country when they could find work in St. Louis.

At last the government decided to erect a factory at the mouth of the Des Moines. In the spring of 1808 the Belle Fontaine factory was abandoned and the factor was instructed to divide the goods on hand between two smaller factories, one to be located on the Missouri in the Osage country, the other near the mouth of the Des Moines.

The next step was to buy land for the factory

and for the fort that was to guard it. At a council in St. Louis in midsummer, Governor Lewis obtained three square miles from the Sauks, Foxes, and Ioways, on the west side of the river at the head of the Rapids.

It was agreed that Colonel Hunt would command the expedition going up the Mississippi. (Another group, scheduled to build Fort Osage on the Missouri, would be led by William Clark.) The Colonel's orderly book began to carry instructions for the company of men who were preparing to go with him; there were boats to caulk, arms to repair, and supplies to pack. The company was mustered under the name of Captain Ninian Pinkney, but Pinkney was away on detached duty in the East, so his company was to be taken by First Lieutenant Alpha Kingsley. Colonel Hunt would be in over-all charge of the expedition, but when the fort was well begun he would return to St. Louis, leaving Alpha Kingsley in charge of the new post.

Six days before the expedition could move, the old colonel suddenly grew ill and died. Lieutenant Kingsley draped the hilt of his sword and put on a black armband to mourn the death of his superior. He was now in full command of the expedition, and he had never seen the Rapids, never commanded a post. Also, he had never built a fort.

DONALD JACKSON