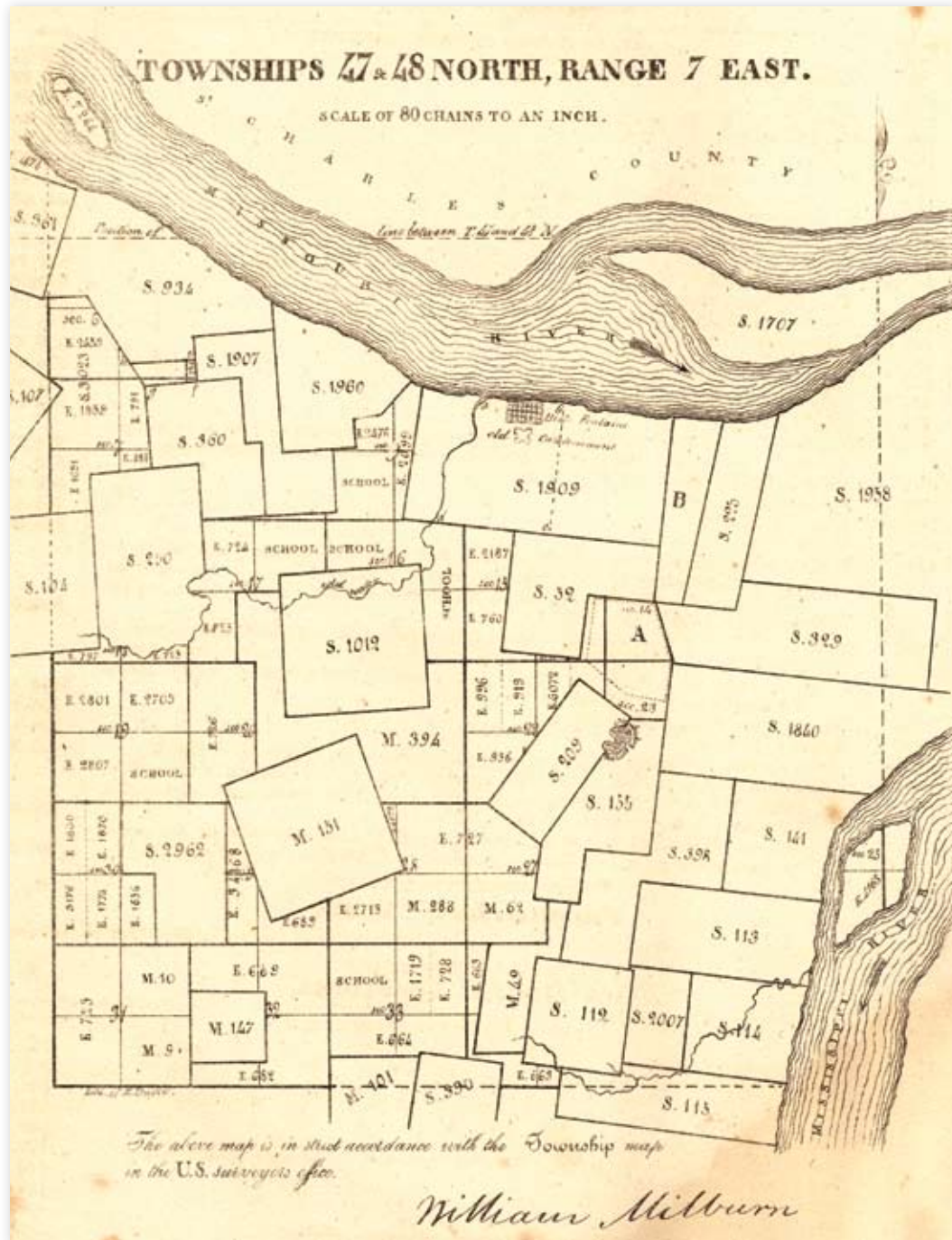


# George Champlain Sibley:

## SHADY DEALINGS ON THE EARLY FRONTIER

BY THOMAS C. DANISI



Investigations into early trade on the frontier involving the “factory system” have been few in recent years, and even rarer has been the study of corruption within the factory system from a time when oft-repeated charges were common and were usually denied by the U.S. government. In the case of Rodolphe Tillier, Factor at Fort Belle Fontaine in the Louisiana Territory, we now actually have proof of misappropriation of funds in office. Without the official correspondence of George Sibley, the Assistant Factor at the same fort, we might not even know of this story today. The working relationship between Tillier and Sibley was a difficult one, and it appears that Sibley’s integrity resulted in his dismissal. New evidence reveals that in order to conceal his illegal activities, Tillier resorted to deceptive measures which included, at the beginning of November 1807, the dismissal of his subordinate Sibley, and in 1809, a letter written to officials in Washington accusing both Meriwether Lewis and William Clark of abusing government funds.

On April 18, 1796, at the suggestion of President George Washington, Congress instituted the “factory system” to trade fairly and without profit with the Indians, using “factors” (that is, traders appointed by the President) as official agents of the government. Factories were embedded in military forts on the edges of the frontier, ostensibly to be more convenient for Indian trade. In fact, the creation of official traders was an attempt to remove evils resulting from unscrupulous private traders and their high prices, shoddy goods, and liquor as well as to destroy British influence with the Indians and gain native friendship for the United States. A total of 28 posts served as factories between 1796 and 1822, when the factory system was abolished, primarily because of pressure from fur traders led by John Jacob Astor and aided mightily by Senator Thomas Hart Benton. William Clark, who oversaw the factory system in the West, lost the 1820 election as the first governor of the State of Missouri largely over Indian policies that included trade at western factories.<sup>1</sup>

What appeared on the surface to be a method of fostering good relations with native populations was seen in a different, Machiavellian light by U.S. government officials. To them, the goal of the factors was “to make the Indians dependent on government trade goods...and to win the Indians’ friendship.” President Thomas Jefferson, who established several factories, believed that the factory system worked to his advantage because “there is no method more irresistible of obtaining lands than by letting them get in debt [at factories; and when debts] were too

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(Left) Fort Belle Fontaine was established in 1805, just a year after the “three flags ceremony” finalizing the transfer of Louisiana to the United States. Originally, it was a military fort with a trade factory for Native American tribes embedded in it. The Sauk and Fox tribes were the primary customers, who were already in the habit of bringing furs to St. Louis to sell to the Spanish before the United States took control of the area. When the factory closed in 1808, factor Rodolphe Tillier was out of a job and his assistant, George Sibley, became factor at the new Fort Osage. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

heavy to be paid, they are always willing to lop off by a cession of land.”<sup>2</sup>

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the U.S. factory system had posts in several territories, but the Louisiana Territory would add only four more posts to that number, despite its vastness. The first factory in upper Louisiana was built in 1805 at the site of a new fort on the Mississippi River near the mouth of the Missouri. Dr. John Sibley, a Revolutionary War physician and an expert on Native American tribes living in Lower Louisiana, introduced his eighteen-year-old son, George Champlain Sibley, to a friend in the Jefferson administration in 1803. He felt that George, while still “a lad,” was familiar with Native Americans and would prove an asset to the government if he worked among them.<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson appointed U.S. Army General James Wilkinson as the first governor of Upper Louisiana

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James Wilkinson, by Charles Willson Peale, 1796-7. General James Wilkinson (1757-1825) ranks among the most notorious figures of the early republic. As United States Senior Officer (the highest ranking officer in the army), Wilkinson was also a secret agent on the Spanish payroll for a time. Around the time he accepted the appointment as the first governor of the Louisiana Territory, he became an accomplice of Aaron Burr; eventually, Wilkinson wrote a letter to President Thomas Jefferson that led to Burr’s arrest, trial, and acquittal on treason charges. (Photo: Independence National Historical Park)



in March 1805.<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson was a veteran of the Revolutionary War and the Indian campaigns in Ohio under the command of General Anthony Wayne in 1794-1796. Many inhabitants and settlers in the Louisiana Territory were unhappy with General Wilkinson's appointment because its intent was to restore order militarily and not democratically.<sup>5</sup> One aspect of Wilkinson's job was to select a site for a new fort and factory near the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. He chose a lowland site below some bluffs along the Missouri River about eighteen miles due north of St. Louis, naming it Fort Belle Fontaine after a nearby natural spring. Two months later, Rodolphe Tillier of New York was appointed as the fort's first factor.<sup>6</sup>

Like many young men in the United States with ambitions to work on the frontier, George Sibley was eagerly looking for opportunities. He heard that two factories were being established in the Louisiana Territory and immediately applied to the Jefferson administration for a position. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn sent Sibley good news in August 1805:

In answer to your letter...I have to remark that as the Factory to be established at Natchitoches will be on a small scale compared with the one at St. Louis, there will be no assistant at the former... on a salary from two to three hundred dollars a year. You will herewith receive an appointment as Assistant Agent...[at Fort Belle Fontaine].<sup>7</sup>

Dearborn also offered Sibley an advance on his salary and ordered him to procure a bond and "two sufficient sureties."<sup>8</sup> The Secretary projected that Sibley would arrive in St. Louis by October 10 and told him to report to Tillier, although if he had not arrived by then to check in with Governor Wilkinson.<sup>9</sup>

Tillier was a native of Berne, Switzerland, who came to the United States in the 1780s. Tillier brushed elbows with nearly all of the Founding Fathers, procuring letters of recommendation from John Adams at The Hague in 1783, serving as the Philadelphia agent for the Dutch firm DeVinck and Company by the mid-1780s, and being received by Thomas Jefferson in Paris in 1789. He became the third husband of Sarah Biddle Penrose Shaw of Philadelphia and was a business partner of her brothers Owen and Clement Biddle, both of whom were prominent during the Revolutionary War. Tillier's connection by marriage to one of the most important families in the United States extended to those who could protect him in political and personal wrangles. Ann Biddle Wilkinson, who was married to James Wilkinson, was his sister-in-law; Clement Biddle Penrose, appointed by President Jefferson as land commissioner at St. Louis in 1805, was his stepson. After his wife's death in 1794, Tillier administered a budding French land development interest in upstate New York (called Castorland) designed for the resettlement of refugees from the French Revolution. He was accused of mismanaging the Castorland company's accounts and in a famous civil suit was defended by

Alexander Hamilton. Within a few years Tillier resigned from the Castorland post but stayed on in America only to gain further notoriety stemming from his misdealing at Belle Fontaine.<sup>10</sup>

Before Rodolphe Tillier departed New York for his new appointment at Belle Fontaine, he proposed rather grandiose personal designs for the St. Louis factory building. He sent his drawings to William Davy, the principal agent for all U.S. factories in Philadelphia, who then forwarded them to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn. Dearborn rejected the proposal, arguing that

Mr. Tillier ought to be instructed on the subject of the buildings to be erected for the Factory. His ideas appear to be extravagant... You know that our system is a commercial one; and that we want no assistance from Engineers, as the

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George Sibley (1782-1863) moved to St. Louis to become assistant factor at Fort Bellefontaine. After the federal government closed the factory there, Sibley was appointed factor at the newly established Fort Osage in present-day Jackson County, east of Kansas City. Later, Sibley was part of the Santa Fe Trail Commission to mark the trail and establish treaties with native tribes there; upon his return, he and his wife Mary founded Linden Wood Female College. (Photo: Lindenwood University)



buildings are to be constructed of logs.<sup>11</sup>

Davy sent a letter to Tillier mirroring Dearborn's message and adding that "the appropriation for [the] establishment... is small, we are under the necessity of studying economy in our expenditures."<sup>12</sup>

When George Sibley arrived in St. Louis in October, he took the oath of office. Wilkinson described him to Dearborn as "a very young, but a very decent young man."<sup>13</sup> Tillier, along with his wife and five children, arrived on December 3.<sup>14</sup> Construction of the fort had commenced in September and was completed a week after Tillier's arrival, writing:

Mr. Tillier is about to take his Quarters at the Cantonment, to attend to the finishing of the house for his goods which He [sic] finds too small, but it may readily be enlarged if necessary—It is thirty six, by twenty eight feet with a twelve foot gallery all around it—I hear nothing of the goods and it grows too late in the season for us to expect them before the opening of Spring.<sup>15</sup>

By January, the factory had been established, but Tillier had to wait through the winter before trade goods could be delivered; they finally arrived in mid-April 1806.<sup>16</sup>

Factory duties were detailed and revolved around the subtraction and addition of a vast quantity of numbers that were reflected in trade goods. These government-procured goods had to be painstakingly enumerated with a value and then graded and stored. Pelts procured from the Indians were bundled in packs of a hundred and rigorously inspected for damage, worms, moths, and other vermin. The inventory of goods coming and going had to be counted, money had to be safely stored and handled, and ferriage to New Orleans had to be properly packed and stored for the six-week trip. Lastly, a plethora of accounting ledgers was maintained and regularly sent to Washington for examination by government accountants. How Tillier and Sibley divided the work is unknown, and how much money and goods traded hands would not be known until the first year of business was completed. In the meantime, seeds of conflict were being sown—had already been sown—that would profoundly affect both Tillier and Sibley as their work together unfolded.

In 1804, President Jefferson still had to honor annual gifts to tribes until land treaties could be exchanged for goods, and the Louisiana Purchase increased the sheer number of tribes for whom the U.S. had to provide gifts. Wilkinson realized even before the factory was built at Belle Fontaine that its location was too far from thriving Indian populations, and that it would eventually have to be moved upriver.<sup>17</sup> The War Department agreed to establish another branch of the factory on the Mississippi but, at the time, the territory lacked a large military presence. A sizeable army detachment was needed to build it while the other half remained in St. Louis, and thus a much smaller branch was set up in June.<sup>18</sup>

The factory and fort at Belle Fontaine functioned separately from the civil government in St. Louis, and being eighteen miles north of St. Louis (a day's comfortable ride) it might as well have been considered a distant outpost. These were troubling times for the territory, and the chain of command had been broken by civil unrest. Settlers coming into St. Louis could not procure land. The only parcels for sale were privately owned and had not been officially surveyed by the American government. This led to illegal squatting or what Governor Wilkinson described as "pettifoggers who begin to swarm here like locusts."<sup>19</sup>

In June 1806, Governor Wilkinson had been ordered to New Orleans and departed two months later. The following month, the Lewis and Clark expedition returned from western explorations—arriving at Fort Belle Fontaine on September 21, 1806, with the Mandan chief Sheheke-shote and his family. President Jefferson had asked Lewis to encourage Native Americans to meet with their new "white father" in Washington:

If a few of their influential chiefs... wish to visit us, arrange such a visit with them, and furnish them with authority to call on our officers, on their entering the U.S. to have them conveyed to this place at the public expence [sic].<sup>20</sup>

This encouragement had already led to two Indian delegations, including one of Osage chiefs, visiting Washington prior to Lewis and Clark's arrival with the Mandan.

In 1804, the first year of Lewis and Clark's expedition, the explorers wintered in present-day North Dakota near the three Mandan villages. Upon the Corps' return from the Pacific coast, Lewis and Clark invited one of the tribe's principal chiefs, Sheheke-shote, to travel with them to Washington. The entourage arrived in the nation's capital at the end of December and returned to St. Louis in February 1807. A military outfit had been prepared to take them back to their village, but a warring Indian tribe, the Arikara, had ambushed them. In May 1809, the Mandan, under military escort with orders from Governor Meriwether Lewis, departed St. Louis and safely arrived in September—three years after their departure.

At the end of September 1806, when Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery rested at Fort Belle Fontaine, George Sibley took copious notes of Meriwether Lewis' recounting of the upper Missouri fur trade. Sibley wrote a voluminous letter to his brother explaining his first year as an assistant factor and the sudden arrival of Lewis:

As matters now stand, I can say...my business has been principally with the natives, some of whom are from distant parts of the country and are very intelligent and communicative... I have not neglected to reap every advantage that a participation in their knowledge might afford... At present, I do not know of anything worth your attention, except what may result from the

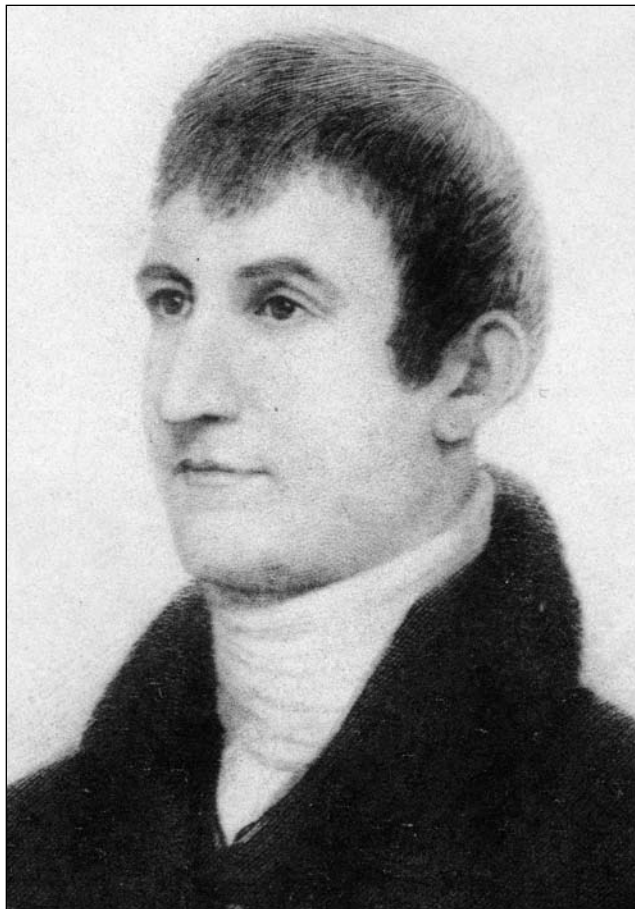
discoveries of Captain Lewis whose safe return you will have heard before this can reach you.<sup>21</sup>

Sibley continued by excitedly referencing likely changes to come and the impending upper Missouri trade:

Perhaps nothing of so great importance has ever happened (as respects the Commercial interests of the United States, & particularly the Western Country) as these discoveries. It would be useless for me now to enter minutely into the subject, the limits of a letter would not allow it. Suffice it to say that in a few years the most Rich & Luxurious field for Young men of spirit and enterprise will be opened. Then we shall see floating down the Missouri, valuable cargoes of merchandise: I need Say no more, this bare hint will be sufficient for you to build on for weeks & months. I cannot predict what effect these things

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A year after he returned from the West in 1806, Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) was appointed governor of Louisiana Territory as a reward for his work sharing command of the Corps of Discovery with William Clark. Lewis, who was a close friend of President Thomas Jefferson, died in 1809 along the Natchez Trace. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)



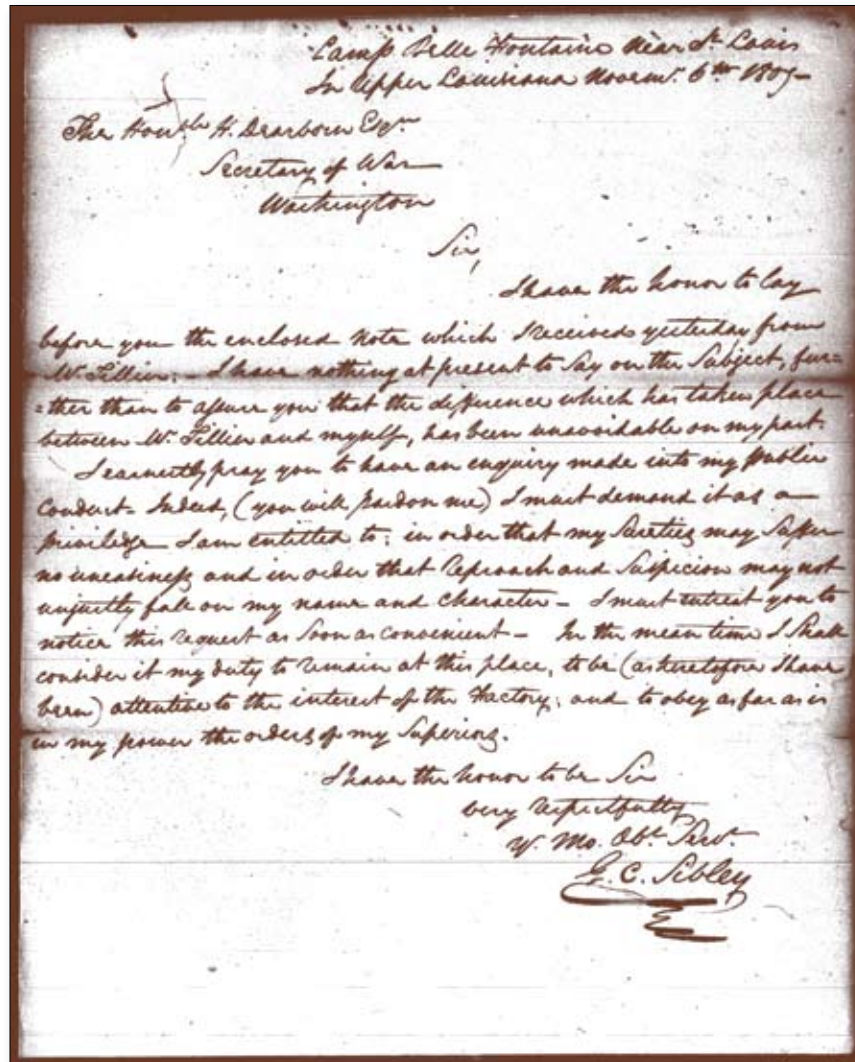
will have on my fortunes, tho' certain it is they will have a material one. It has been hinted by Captain Lewis, who it is supposed will have the management of our Indian Affairs...that several trading houses will be established by Govt pretty high up this river & the Mississippi, next Spring; and that this house will most probably be broken up...<sup>22</sup>

Sibley had recently received a letter from Washington approving his conduct and believed he would be retained in the service and sent upriver. He concluded the letter to his brother by announcing that he had decided not to join the army – a position that his father had disapproved of at an earlier date.<sup>23</sup>

Once the Lewis and Clark entourage departed for the east, winter set in, the river froze, and for a few months the cold weather slowed the pace of St. Louis to a crawl. Virtually no trading occurred at the factory, giving personnel time enough to ready themselves for the upcoming new year of 1807. It was going to be busy: President Jefferson had made sound appointments, with Lewis as the incoming Governor of the Louisiana Territory and William Clark as the Agent of Indian Affairs (excepting the Great and Little Osages) and Brigadier General of the militia.<sup>24</sup> Still acting as partners, Lewis sent Clark to St. Louis while he hurried to Philadelphia to begin implementing the long process of preparing the journals of the expedition for publication.

From the time that the Belle Fontaine factory had officially begun trading, Rodolphe Tillier sent reports and correspondence to John Shee, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, located in Philadelphia. For the year 1806, his reports revolved around the unauthorized sale of liquor to the Indians, problems with interpreters who wanted more pay or who had not been paid for more than a year, and quarterly returns. But beginning in January 1807, a new problem arose that Tillier described as a conflict of “military power & etiquette.” He felt that some of the military “officers have acted with Spite more than with a frank military urbanity toward the Factor and Factory...”<sup>25</sup> The following month he complained that his clerks (not including Assistant Factor Sibley) were “extremely discontented at their present salaries.”<sup>26</sup> His remedy was to deduct \$200 from the trading goods for salaries, but the new Superintendent, intent on recovering the unauthorized deduction, refused to pay two bills sent by Tillier six months later. The two bills added up to two hundred dollars.<sup>27</sup> Several weeks after his first complaints, Tillier complained in another letter about Osage Indian Agent Pierre Chouteau’s conduct toward the factory.<sup>28</sup> Clearly Tillier’s letters reflected his disgruntled attitude.

General William Clark, now Agent of Indian Affairs, arrived in April 1807 to a bustling St. Louis just awakening from the bitterly cold winter. There was still much strife in the region of Upper Louisiana, but Lewis and Clark’s governing of the unruly territory eased President Jefferson’s mind. As Indian agent, Clark spent time at Belle Fontaine readying the members of the

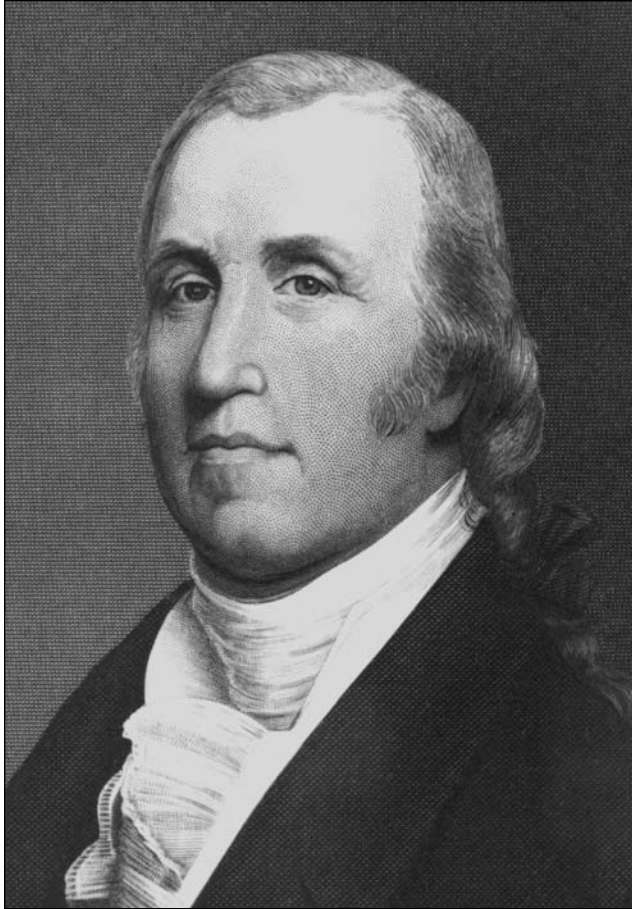


In November 1807, Sibley wrote to war secretary Henry Dearborn to defend himself, noting that the problems “between Mr. Tillier and myself, has been unavoidable on my part.” Sibley requested—demanded, in fact—an inquiry to restore his reputation. (Photo: George Sibley to the Secretary of War, November 6, 1807, National Archives and Records Administration)

Mandan entourage for their return trip up the Missouri River to their home in present-day North Dakota. Clark needed a contingent of soldiers for a military escort, but Col. Thomas Hunt, the commander of Fort Belle Fontaine, was short of manpower. Nevertheless, Hunt lent Clark fourteen men including Ensign Nathaniel Pryor, who had accompanied Lewis and Clark on their expedition. The rest of the escort would have to be recruited from the private sector, which was fortunately accomplished with the help of Pierre Chouteau’s trading party.<sup>29</sup> At the end of May when the escort departed, Clark believed that a total of seventy men would be “fully sufficient to pass any hostile band,” but Clark had no idea that 650 Arikara awaited the party upriver and ambushed them.<sup>30</sup> Ensign Pryor straggled into Belle Fontaine on October 16 with grim news; four men were killed and five wounded. George Shannon was one of the wounded, another Lewis and Clark Corpsman, whom Col. Hunt described to Dearborn

as “a young man by the name of Shannon that went with Mr. Prior and was wounded had his leg taken off a few days since. There are no amputating instruments at this post. I had to borrow.”<sup>31</sup>

General Clark departed St. Louis in July; he was heading east this time to get married. Territorial secretary Frederick Bates was placed in charge until Meriwether Lewis’ arrival. Up to this date, there is no record from Sibley regarding any problems with Tillier, but in September he wrote to his brother stating that he had been thinking once more about joining the army. He really didn’t want to go—he even outlined the positions he would accept and then sent an official request to Secretary of War Dearborn.<sup>32</sup> Two weeks later, he spoke to James House, a captain at the fort, and asked him to speak with Bates about an ongoing dispute he was having with Tillier. House hastily wrote Bates blaming Tillier for the problem:



Soon after William Clark (1770-1838) returned from the West in September 1806, Thomas Jefferson appointed him Indian Agent, overseeing Native American relations in this region. On the way back from the Pacific, the Corps of Discovery invited a Mandan chief Sheheke and his family to travel back with them to meet Jefferson. The captains stopped at Fort Belle Fontaine with the chief's entourage, where they almost certainly met both Rodolphe Tillier and his assistant, George Sibley. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

I have...felt for the age and character of Mr. T. it would be justice to say...that he is extremely subject to gusts of passions and splenetic humours which renders it morally impossible for any young man to be connected with him as Mr. S. was without having his feelings, frequently mortified and I believe, that there are few young men that would have conducted themselves with more discretion, on similar occasions than Mr Sibley has done – I well recollect at the time... Mr. S...apprized me of the storm that was brewing – and expressed his determination... to avoid its effects – and I have reason to believe that he pursued this prudential plan... consistently with his duty -- I cannot withhold my opinion...that there is no young man that can be found, that will fill the situation... [better

than] Mr. Sibles, with more propriety, & with more interest to the factory than he has done –<sup>33</sup>

Less than two weeks passed before Bates wrote to the Secretary of War, siding with Sibley:

I cannot know precisely the causes of misunderstanding; but from the standings, the intelligence, the persevering attention to business...there is no person who is not entirely convinced, that those misunderstandings have arrived solely from the impatient temper of Mr. Tillier.<sup>34</sup>

The smoke these early letters unveiled broke out into fire when Tillier dismissed George Sibley from his position as assistant factor on November 5. Sibley immediately wrote to Dearborn a letter of protest:

I have the honor to lay before you the enclosed note which I received yesterday from Mr. Tillier – I have nothing at present to say on the Subject, further than to assure you that the difference which has taken place between M. Tillier and myself, has been unavoidable on my part.

Sibley asked Dearborn to initiate an official inquiry:

I earnestly pray you to have an inquiry made into my public conduct – Indeed, (you will pardon me) I must demand it as a privilege I am entitled to; in order that my Sureties may Suffer no uneasiness and in order that Reproach and Suspicion may not unjustly fall on my name and character – I must entreat you to notice this request as soon as convenient – In the meantime I shall consider it my duty to remain at this place, to be...attentive to the interest of the Factory; and to obey as far as is in my power the orders of my Superiors.<sup>35</sup>

The correspondence of the day is shrouded in politeness, and the conflict that led to Sibley's dismissal is difficult to discern. Moreover, the one man who was in a position to help Sibley, William Clark, was absent from the territory. Sibley was wise to be cautious when he wrote, "the difference...has been unavoidable on my part." Those words may suggest an internal struggle: his duty to the country and the truth versus his loyalty to his superior. On the one hand, Tillier's bellicose attitude was incongruous with his complaints that everyone around him was not exercising polite etiquette. It is very possible that Tillier used that superficial wording as a diversion so that he could continue his clandestine activity unabated. It was later discovered that Tillier had indeed misappropriated funds during the years that Sibley was the Assistant Factor.<sup>36</sup>

When Dearborn received Bates' letter he immediately

Sundry Charges in Tillier's Day Book which appear to be unauthorized as Sundries furnished Indians as presents

Year	Date	Description	Amount
1807	Nov 9	Factory Capt <sup>o</sup> to R. Tillier, provisions & to Indians	8.50
	20	Do to Do - present to mandan chief. a comb	0.20
	30	Do to Do - Trumillion, Thread, etc <sup>o</sup> present to Indian	4.90
		Do to R. Tillier - for provisions for Do	9.50
1808		Do to Do - present - 1 Bottle	2.50
		Do to Do - as looking shaps	.20
Feb	11	Do to Do - Sundry presents	4.25
	27	Do to Do - Provisions & for extra entertainment feed for Rogers, his son & 6 horses - Indian who came to trader	1.50
	29	Do to Do - feed & for mandan chief &	.50
March	1	Do to Do - Do for Kikapous	1.75
	13	Do to Do - provisions for 8 Kikapous	1.75
	31	Do to Do - Do for sundry Do	5.00
April	8	Do to Do - Do for Do	1.75
	12	Do to Product. & Caly. Brandy for sundry Indians	5.00
	13	Do to Tillier - for 2 <sup>o</sup> & 3 <sup>o</sup> presents &	3.50
	18	Do to Product. for 1 half. Brandy	3.50
	20	Do to Do - Tobacco & presents to Indian	1.75
	30	Do to Do - Provisions & to Do	2.00
May	27	Do to Do - Do	.75
June	2	Do to Do - Do	2.50
	3	Do to Product. 2 3/4 lbs lead present to an Indian	2.75
	6	Do to Do - presents to Do	1.00
	15	Do to Do - feed & presents to Do	10.00
	16	Do to Do - for 2 <sup>o</sup> by Chief & 1 <sup>o</sup> to Indians	1.50
	17	Do to Product - present 12 <sup>o</sup> Honey to price the artificer	.35
	24	Do to Tillier - provision presents to Indian	.75
	29	Do to Do - provision for Do	2.40
July	4	Do to Product. 1 half. Honey, present to Mr. Duman	1.50
	10	Do to Tillier - 2 <sup>o</sup> Bread & for Indian	2.75
	17	Do to Do - Do - Do for Do	1.50
	27	Do to Do - Sundry furnished Do	5.75
Aug	17	Do to Product. Sundries had by Mt. Johnson for Labourers & - tillier receiving this Do	4.50
	18	Do to Tillier - provision for Indian - 2 lbs 10 bottles wine at bot	5.50
		Hunts Funeral	10.00
1809	Mar. 7	Do to Tillier - provision to Indian	14.00

52  
 416  
 797  
 25,822.105,827

List of the "Sundry charges in Tillier's Day Book which appeared to be unauthorized as Sundries furnished Indians as presents, 1807-1809," prepared by government officials in Washington detailing the shady dealings at Fort Belle Fontaine. (Photo: National Archives and Records Administration)



wrote to Bates and Tillier. In his December 9 letter, he asked Bates to forward the letter to William Clark so that Clark could “transmit a full and candid statement of the facts in relation to the dispute between Tillier and Sibley.” Bates replied a month later and said that Clark had not returned from the east, but upon his arrival, Bates would forward “without delay” the statement.<sup>37</sup> Clark arrived in St. Louis on July 1, 1808, but did not subsequently send any report, since Tillier had never cooperated.<sup>38</sup>

John Mason, the new Superintendent of Indian Affairs, previously a lawyer, may not have known what the dispute entailed but he quickly learned about Tillier’s character. His exchanges were direct, and in his April 1808 letter, he acknowledged Sibley’s behavior and also criticized Tillier’s role:

As to the affairs of Sibley, I am satisfied as I have told him that his conduct as a young man and as your Clerk was indecorous toward you. At the same time it is proper...to say that you should not have taken on yourself to dismiss him from the employment of the Government until you had lodged your complaint with the Secretary of War. [Sibley] admitted the correctness of your statements and that you have nothing to charge against his assiduous capability or integrity and he likewise made no charge against you but on the contrary spoke of you with respect and attachment and confined himself to the complaint of personal warmth on your part & haste in withdrawing your confidence from him. From the statements of both of you, it appears that personal differences dictated your disagreement. He will be employed at some other post and is on furlough...<sup>39</sup>

Mason also advised Tillier to start packing his belongings:

From the little business the Factory at Belle Fontaine has done and that its position is not favourable to the Indians the President has determined to break it up and divide the goods to two smaller establishments, one on the Osage and the other up the Mississippi at Le Moin probably in the Spring...<sup>40</sup>

Sibley was transferred to Baltimore to assist at a trade depot and remained there until a position was located for him. Tillier was completely unsupervised for a few months, but received a bombshell when Mason’s May 20 letter arrived:<sup>41</sup>

I have now to inform you that the Sect. of War has made final arrangements on the subject of the Factory in your quarter, and that he has appointed John Johnson of Maryland to carry out & direct that to be established at Le Moin and Mr. Sibley to take charge of that to be located on the Osage...I shall write more fully as to

the distribution of the Goods now under your charge.<sup>42</sup>

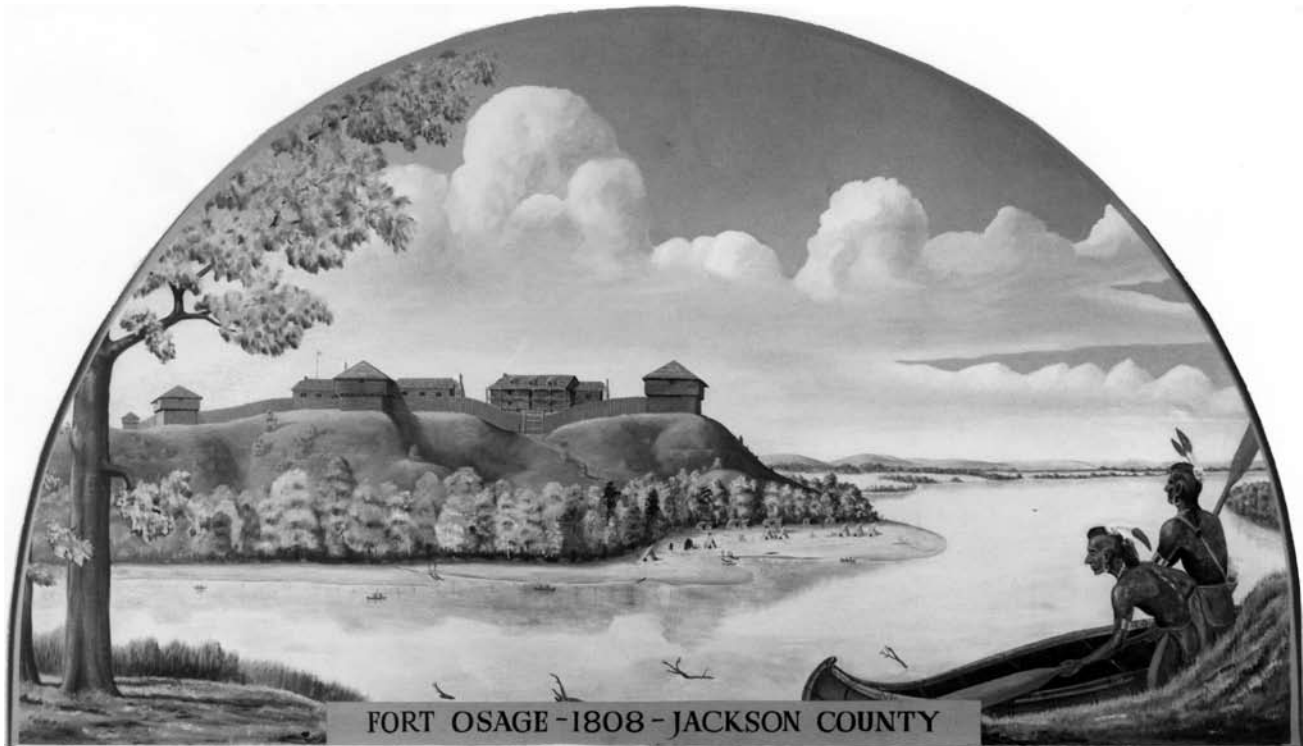
Tillier had asked to be reassigned to the Osage or Le Moin posts, but Mason said the salary was two-thirds of his present salary and there would be no clerks, only an interpreter.<sup>43</sup> A week later, Mason outlined how Tillier should divide the goods and implements between Johnson and Sibley and stated that the two newly appointed factors would arrive in July.<sup>44</sup>

Mason wrote Tillier on July 8 and admonished him for not sending the last quarterly reports as well as the general accounts and inventories. Mason said that this letter was a duplicate, the first was sent on May 20 and again on May 28.<sup>45</sup> In a previous letter dated December 19, Mason acknowledged receiving some of the reports but added they “were so imperfect that I held them a considerable time in the hope I should receive some further evidence from you on the subject.” Mason also charged Tillier with not providing any proof of signature from the persons who took the merchandise from the factory. Mason doubted other transactions, too, and stated that when he closed the factory he must ensure that the accounts were accurate. Mason stated that the Secretary of War had made an exception and allowed Tillier to continue to draw a salary until the end of December.<sup>46</sup>

When Mason did not hear from Tillier for several months, he wrote to General William Clark and informed him of the problem and asked him to intervene and do all that was required. He wanted to spare the feelings of Tillier “who from all accounts I consider a man of great honor and respectability and who has seen better times.”<sup>47</sup> Under pressure to close the Belle Fontaine factory, Mason came up with a work-around: he could store the furs and peltries from the Le Moin and Osage posts there.

But, on May 19, 1809, Mason’s letter to Tillier began with a surprise. “I am really mortified to find...that...no copy of my letter of 19<sup>th</sup> Dec. a triplicate...had reached you.”<sup>48</sup> In short, Mason was obliged to allow Tillier to remain at the fort. Mason’s June 21, 1809, letter was more vehement, and he dropped any niceties owing to Tillier’s relationship to other important personages: “I can’t help expressing my surprise to you Sir, on seeing in your letter of 20<sup>th</sup> April that you...consider yourself...an agent of the United States and on salary from this office.”<sup>49</sup> Mason said that he would reject any bills drawn after December 30. He also referred Tillier to the fact that when he let go of the clerks at Belle Fontaine, Tillier still drew money for them. Moreover, Tillier had been drawing money for rations even though it was not part of his contract.<sup>50</sup> Mason then ordered Tillier to send him all of the accounts.

Reading the exchanges from Mason to Tillier, a reader must conclude Mason avoided charging the latter with embezzlement. And if Mason, the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, could not bring himself to condemn Tillier’s deceit, how much more daunting would such accusations be to young George Sibley, who was merely the assistant factor? To make matters worse, Sibley’s proof of Tillier’s wayward business practices was buried in the factory’s



The site for the future Fort Osage was first identified by Lewis and Clark in 1804. As a Brigadier General in the Missouri Territorial Militia, Clark commanded the group that traveled to the area and constructed the log fort, just east of Kansas City. Sibley arrived in the early fall of 1808 with trade goods valued at more than \$20,000. (Photo: State Historical Society of Missouri Photo Collection)

ledgers. Firing Sibley was Tillier's way of ensuring that proof remained dormant. So does that mean that Tillier was never charged with any crimes? No.

Surprisingly, in May of 1809, Tillier finally sent the ledgers to Mason. Government accountants uncovered his fraudulent bookkeeping records and wrote a report entitled, "Sundry charges in Tillier's Day Book which appeared to be unauthorized as Sundries furnished Indians as presents, 1807-1809."<sup>51</sup> The report showed imbalances in the profit from trade goods. Sibley had purposely pressured Tillier to extricate himself from a bad situation. If Sibley had done nothing to rectify his supervisor's wrongdoings, he would have been implicated in Tillier's crimes, too.

After Sibley's departure, the unrepentant Tillier created a new diversion so that he could continue to reside at Fort Belle Fontaine, free of charge, regardless of Mason's orders. As the records show, Tillier told Mason that he never received his correspondence ordering Tillier to leave his post, but by April 1809, that story was wearing thin, especially when Mason asked Clark to intervene.<sup>52</sup> Unhappy that his empire was dissolving, Tillier struck on a novel idea and wrote several letters to Mason maligning Gov. Meriwether Lewis and Gen. William Clark!

In his April 27 letter, Tillier criticized Clark's role

in the first attempt to take the Mandan chief back to his village:

Two years ago an Expedition [sic] has been made here under the command of Lieut. Pryor to take back the Mandan Chief & family, it failed on account of being coupled with a private expedition [sic], it was attacked by the Riccaras [Arikara]; by this combination the result has been Two Soldiers wounded & four or five lost on board Chouteau's boat & a vast & needless Expencc [sic], as no inquiries have been made of the real cause, tho' the Public has suffered no fault can be laid and ascertained either to the Commander or Chouteau.<sup>53</sup>

Tillier's May 12 letter deplored Lewis' well-thought out plan to safely transport the Mandan family, which was about to depart under the command of Pierre Chouteau but "afearred not a creditable one."<sup>54</sup> Tillier's other letters ran the gamut of accusations, from criticizing Lewis' partial chartering of the Missouri Fur Company with government funds to charging improprieties and rewarding friends with contracts.<sup>55</sup> "Is it proper for the public service that the U.S. officers as a Governor and Super Intendant of Indian Affairs & U.S. Factor at St. Louis should take

any share in Mercantile and private concerns?"<sup>56</sup> Tillier falsely claimed that Lewis threatened "helpless" Indian nations and ordered militia men to defend St. Louis while Colonel Hunt's soldiers dallied.<sup>57</sup> In his final letter, Tillier baited Mason to forward the correspondence to President Madison:

I intended to send the enclosed to his Excellency the Pres. After mature deliberation I have changed my mind, & submit to your judgment if the Facts alledged may be interesting to him, or the U. States or if it will be better to bury them in oblivion in either case, disclaim any personal motive of ill will, or interested motive of courting favour at the expence of another.<sup>58</sup>

Mason dutifully sent the letter to Madison, which may have played a role in the President's decision to reject Lewis' drafts.<sup>59</sup> Tillier was clearly the type of person to

spread ill will, as evidenced by several lawsuits against him that spanned a seventeen-year period; the last suit ended a few months before he departed for St. Louis.<sup>60</sup> Thankfully Sibley's plight was short: since Tillier had lacked authority to fire him, the U.S. government was still bound to pay Sibley a salary. For a few short months Sibley was furloughed, then reappointed as factor for a new fort and trading factory at the confluence of the Missouri and Osage rivers. Sibley had exhibited the type of restraint expected of him and had demonstrated the qualities that were inherent in young, educated gentlemen of that period. As demonstrated by the remainder of Sibley's career, the faith placed in him by influential government officials in this crisis was warranted, and a promising career was not brought to an untimely end by a crooked superior at Fort Belle Fontaine.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Robert L. Fisher, "The Western Prologue to the War of 1812," *Missouri Historical Review* 30 (April 1936). For more information on the Indian Factory System see Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Guarding the Frontier: A Study of Frontier Defense from 1815 to 1825* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1935), 31-54, and Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years, the Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 84-93.
- <sup>2</sup> Jeffrey E. Smith, ed., *Seeking a Newer World: The Fort Osage Journals and Letters of George Sibley, 1808-1811* (St. Charles: Lindenwood University Press, 2003), 6; Wayne Morris, "Traders and Factories on the Arkansas Frontier, 1805-1822," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 28 (Spring 1969), 28-29.
- <sup>3</sup> John Sibley to Benjamin Morgan, October 8, 1803, RG59, Department of State, Letters of Application and Recommendation during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson, 1801-1809, microfilm M418, roll 10, frame 0261, National Archives, Washington, D.C. Hereafter abbreviated as NARA.
- <sup>4</sup> Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*, vols. 13 and 14 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1948), 13: 98. Hereafter cited as Carter, *TP*.
- <sup>5</sup> The House of Representatives condemned the appointment because it was "repugnant to the Constitution" that an Army officer could hold a civil office at the same time. Carter, *TP*, 13: 504-05, n. 6f.
- <sup>6</sup> RG75, Letters sent by the Superintendent of Indian Trade, microfilm M15, roll 2, p. 107, NARA.
- <sup>7</sup> Henry Dearborn to George Sibley, August 17, 1805, Carter, *TP*, 13: 187.
- <sup>8</sup> A surety was a type of bond that guaranteed the payment of Sibley's debts should he fail to pay.
- <sup>9</sup> George Sibley had been living in Fayetteville, North Carolina.
- <sup>10</sup> Alfred Donaldson, *History of the Adirondacks* (New York: The Century Company, 1921); Harold C. Syrett, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-87), vol. 26, 41, n. 4. Tillier defended his administration of Castorland in an 1800 pamphlet he authored, entitled *Memoire pour Rodolphe Tillier, commissaire-gérant de la Compagnie de New-York*. Rodolphe Tillier, *Translation of a memorial of Rodolphe Tillier's justification of the administration of Castorland, County of Oneida, State of New York* (Rome, New York: Thomas Walker, 1800); U.S. Supreme Court, *Tillier v. Whitehead*, 1 Dallas 269 (1788).
- <sup>11</sup> Henry Dearborn to William Davy, September 25, 1805, RG75, M15, roll 2, p. 106; Carter, *TP*, 13: 191.
- <sup>12</sup> William Davy to Rodolphe Tillier, RG75, M15, roll 2, p. 110, NARA.
- <sup>13</sup> James Wilkinson to Secretary of War, November 26, 1805, RG94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, microfilm M566, roll 1, frame 0067, NARA.
- <sup>14</sup> RG107, Records of the Office of the Secretary of War, M22, roll 2, p. 299, frame 0249 and M222, roll 1, T154, NARA.
- <sup>15</sup> James Wilkinson to Henry Dearborn, December 10, 1805, Carter, *TP*, 13: 299.
- <sup>16</sup> RG107, M222, roll 1, T155 and M22, Roll 3, T12, NARA.
- <sup>17</sup> Secretary of War to Governor Wilkinson, October 16, 1805, Carter, *TP*, 13: 239.
- <sup>18</sup> RG107, M22, roll 3, T20, NARA.

- <sup>19</sup> Governor Wilkinson to Secretary of War, July 27 and July 28, 1805, Carter, *TP*, 13: 164-172, 173 -174. Pettifoggers, a generalized term for opportunists, included land speculators, squatters, and persons claiming to be lawyers.
- <sup>20</sup> Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 1: 64.
- <sup>21</sup> George Sibley to Samuel Sibley, October 25, 1806, Sibley Papers, Lindenwood College Collection Transcripts, Missouri History Museum, St. Louis, Missouri.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>24</sup> Commission of Meriwether Lewis as Governor, March 3, 1807, and Secretary of War to William Clark, March 9, 1807, Carter, *TP*, 14: 107-09. Clark's unabridged title as Indian Agent was "Agent of Indian Affairs to the Several Nations of Indians within the Territory of Louisiana excepting the Great and Little Osages and their several divisions and detachments."
- <sup>25</sup> RG107, M221, roll 12, S265, frame 3674, NARA.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, roll 12, S277, frame 3693.
- <sup>27</sup> John Mason succeeded John Shee on November 21, 1806. RG107, M22, roll 3, T39.
- <sup>28</sup> RG107, M22, roll 3, T82 and T119.
- <sup>29</sup> Stan Hoig, *The Chouteaus: First Family of the Fur Trade* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 38-41. George Shannon, a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition, was one of the men from Chouteau's party.
- <sup>30</sup> William Clark to the Secretary of War, May 18 and June 1, 1807, Carter, *TP*, 14: 122 and 126.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas Hunt to Secretary of War, November 20, 1807, RG 107, M221, roll 8, H327, frame 2601, NARA.
- <sup>32</sup> George Sibley to the Secretary of War, September 19, 1807, RG107, M22, roll 3, S420.
- <sup>33</sup> Thomas M. Marshall, ed., *The Life and Papers of Frederick Bates*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1926), 1: 224-25.
- <sup>34</sup> Frederick Bates to the Secretary of War, November 7, 1807, Carter, *TP*, 14: 151.
- <sup>35</sup> George Sibley to the Secretary of War, November 6, 1807, RG107, M221, roll 12, S442, frame 3925, NARA. Sibley expressed concern over his dismissal and the effect it would have on his reputation and the reaction from his Sureties. The Sureties were persons who initially contracted with Sibley when he became employed with the government. Sibley was concerned that the Sureties would wrongfully liquidate his bond unless a full enquiry was initiated.
- <sup>36</sup> RG75, Microfilm T58, roll 1, frame 0083.
- <sup>37</sup> Marshall, *Frederick Bates*, 1: 272.
- <sup>38</sup> Thomas C. Danisi and John Jackson, *Meriwether Lewis* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 2009), 197.
- <sup>39</sup> John Mason to Rodolphe Tillier, April 12, 1808, RG75, M16, roll 1, pp. 154-55, NARA.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, John Mason to George Sibley, 21 March 1808, roll 1, p. 103.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, John Mason to Rodolphe Tillier, 20 May 1808, 155.
- <sup>43</sup> Tillier was paid an annual salary of \$1250 and an additional \$365 for clothing.
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, M15, roll 1, p. 158, NARA.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 287-290.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 377 and 379.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, M16, roll 2, pp. 13-17.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.
- <sup>51</sup> RG75, Microfilm T58, roll 1, frame 0083. Tillier remained in St. Louis until 1811.
- <sup>52</sup> In March 1809, William Clark took an accounting of the factory buildings at Fort Belle Fontaine "on the spot," at Mason's request and noted a dwelling house, store house, two small out houses or kitchens "all in perfect repair." Tillier had estimated their value at \$1000 in his 1808 inventory. RG75, M16, Roll 2, p. 22, Instrument 131.
- <sup>53</sup> Robert J. Brugger et al., eds., *Papers of James Madison*, Secretary of State series, 8 vols. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986), 1: 141; Danisi and Jackson, *Meriwether Lewis*, 280-81.
- <sup>54</sup> Rodolphe Tillier to George Mason, May 12, 1809, RG107, M221, roll 32, T273, frame 0719.
- <sup>55</sup> Danisi and Jackson, *Meriwether Lewis*, 269-70.
- <sup>56</sup> Robert Rutland et al., *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, 5 vols. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1984), 1: 141-42
- <sup>57</sup> Brugger, *Papers of James Madison*, 1: 142.
- <sup>58</sup> Rodolphe Tillier to George Mason, June 9, 1809, RG107, M222, roll 4, T1809, frame 1582, NARA.
- <sup>59</sup> Secretary of War to Governor Lewis, July 15, 1809, Carter, *TP*, 14: 285-86.
- <sup>60</sup> Early American Imprints, first series, 1639-1800 (New York: Readex Microprint, 1955-1969), no. 38637. See the 1799 Gouverneur Morris letter to Tillier from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History: [http://www.gilderlehrman.org/search/display\\_results.php?id=GLC00087.05](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/search/display_results.php?id=GLC00087.05).