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**Letters Sent by
the Superintendent
of Indian Trade
1807-1823**



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Record Group 75
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LETTERS SENT BY THE
SUPERINTENDENT OF INDIAN TRADE
1807-1823

On the six rolls of this microfilm publication are reproduced six bound volumes of handwritten copies of the outgoing correspondence of the Superintendents of Indian Trade from 1807 to 1823.

The Office of Indian Trade was formally established in 1806 by an act (2 Stat. 402) that authorized the President to appoint a Superintendent of Indian Trade who would "purchase and take charge of all goods intended for trade with the Indian nations," and, in general, assume responsibility for the execution of the Government's program of conducting trade with the Indian tribes on the frontier by means of Government-owned and operated trading houses or "factories." The factory system itself was established in 1795 as an attempt to attach the tribes more closely to the Federal Government, to exclude British and Spanish subjects from the trade, and to protect the Indians from being cheated by unscrupulous private traders. The trade with the Indians was not intended to be a profitmaking enterprise. It was hoped, however, that by selling goods to the Indians at cost, plus expenses, the Government would be able to establish more harmonious relations with them and possibly make them even more dependent upon the Government.

General supervisory control of the factory system rested with the Secretary of War. The immediate responsibility for purchasing goods for the factories and for disposing of the furs and other commodities received from the factories originally was assigned to the Purveyor of Public Supplies. In 1796 the Keeper of Military Stores at Philadelphia was designated to receive goods and money from the factories and to dispose of the goods. The Purveyor of Public Supplies continued to purchase goods for the factories. In 1801 the Superintendent of Military Stores was also appointed Agent for the Indian Factories. In addition to receiving and handling the goods from the factories, he was to furnish the Secretary of War with estimates of goods needed for the factories. A Principal Agent for Indian Factories was appointed in 1805. He was responsible for both the purchase of goods for the factories and the disposal of goods received from the factories, thereby assuming the former duties of both the Superintendent of Military Stores and the Purveyor of Public Supplies concerning the factories.

John Shee was appointed the first Superintendent of Indian Trade on July 8, 1806, and assumed the functions previously exercised by the Principal Agent for Indian Factories. Following the example of the predecessor offices, Shee established his office at Philadelphia. When it was determined that the office should be headquartered in the District of Columbia, he decided to remain

in Philadelphia. His replacement was Gen. John Mason who, in 1807, moved the Office of Indian Trade to Georgetown in the District of Columbia. During his tenure the Office of Indian Trade was made responsible for purchasing and transmitting goods for annuity payments and presents to Indians. Mason served as Superintendent until 1816 when he was replaced by Thomas L. McKenney who held the position until the closing of the Office of Indian Trade in 1822.

From its beginning the factory system was regarded by the Congress as an experiment and its continuation was dependent upon periodic legislative enactments. The tenure of the factory system grew increasingly precarious when war and diplomacy eliminated the fear of foreign competition in the trade and when powerful private trading interests secured the backing of influential elements in the Congress. On May 6, 1822, the Congress authorized the closing of the Office of Indian Trade and the factories (3 Stat. 679). George Graham was appointed Principal Agent and placed in charge of the liquidation of the factories under the direction of the Treasury Department. After a short period of time required to dispose of peltries and trading goods on hand, the office of the Superintendent of Indian Trade ceased to function.

The six volumes of letter books reproduced in this microfilm publication contain transcripts of the outgoing letters of the Superintendents of Indian Trade (Mason from 1807 to 1816 and McKenney from 1816 to 1822). The volumes do not include letters written by Shee during his brief term as Superintendent. Occasionally there are letters signed by assistants, particularly Jeremiah W. Bronaugh. Letters were sent to the Secretary of War, factors and other representatives of the Office of Indian Trade, Indian agents, the Secretary of the Treasury and other Treasury officials, the President, merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and others. The contents of the letters reflect the duties of the Superintendents and their administrative methods. They concern the purchase of goods for the factories, the disposal of furs and other commodities received from the factories, the operations of the factories, annuity payments, accounts, appointments, and Indian trade and Indian affairs in general. McKenney was much interested in Indian education and civilization, and some information on these subjects is found among his letters.

Each volume is arranged chronologically, but there is some overlapping between volumes since each succeeding Superintendent kept separate letter books. The volumes are indexed by name of addressee. For many of the index entries the date of the particular letter is shown above the page number. In accordance with the practice of the period, I and J entries were made under I.

Notations are found in the margin beside many of the letters. Two numbers, one above the other with a line between, are aids in

locating other letters to the same correspondent within the volume. The upper number indicates the next subsequent page on which a letter to the same correspondent is recorded; the lower number indicates the last preceding page on which such a letter appears. Other marginal notes indicate, for purposes of record, the identity of the person mailing the letter when money enclosures were involved, while still others that explain peculiarities of particular communications occasionally appear.

The letter books reproduced in this publication are part of the records in the National Archives of the United States designated as Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75. National Archives and Records Service (NARS) microfilm publications containing related records from the same record group are: T58, *Letters Received by the Superintendent of Indian Trade, 1806-1824*; M15, *Letters Sent by the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1824*; and M271, *Letters Received by the Office of the Secretary of War Relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1823*.

Records also have been microfilmed for some U.S. Government trading houses, and these are available as NARS microfilm publications M142, *Letter Book of the Arkansas Trading House, 1805-1810*; T500, *Records of the Choctaw Trading House, 1803-1824*; M4, *Letter Book of the Creek Trading House, 1795-1816*; and T1029, *Letter Book of the Natchitoches-Sulphur Fork Factory, 1809-1821*.

Also in this record group, but not available on microfilm, is one volume of letters sent by the official in charge of the liquidation of the factories, 1822-30.

These introductory remarks were prepared by Robert M. Kvasnicka.

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