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Remove troops from Fort Gibson

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REMOVE TROOPS FROM FORT GIBSON.

[To accompany bill H. R. No. 457.]

MARCH 21, 1836.

Mr. R. M. JOHNSON, from the Committee on Military Affairs, made the following

REPORT:

The Committee on Military Affairs, to which was referred the memorial of the Legislature of Arkansas, praying for the removal of the United States troops from Fort Gibson to some eligible point on the Arkansas frontier, near the western boundary line of that Territory, beg leave to report:

That before Arkansas was formed into a Territorial Government, the protection of our citizens, and the interest of the United States in that quarter, induced the Government to establish a military post at the junction of the Poteau and Arkansas rivers. This post was called "Fort Smith," and, for several years after its establishment, was on the extreme western boundary line of that Territory, and entirely west of the settlements of the citizens of the United States. By an act of Congress, approved in 1825, the western boundary line of Arkansas was removed forty miles (in a straight line) further west, and after the passage of that act, and after the line had been run, it was deemed expedient by the Government to remove the garrison from Fort Smith to the extreme western boundary line of that Territory. The troops were removed, Fort Smith was abandoned, and Fort Gibson was established, and all the intermediate country thus acquired, or added to Arkansas by the act of Congress aforesaid, was organized into counties by the Legislature of Arkansas, and settled by our citizens. Afterwards, in 1828, the Government, in opposition to the firm and spirited remonstrance of the Legislature of Arkansas, and the strenuous efforts of her delegate, ceded the country, added as aforesaid to Arkansas, to the Cherokee Indians; and by a clause in the treaty with that tribe, the western line of that Territory was brought back, and permanently fixed where it originally was before the passage of the act of Congress of 1825. The garrison, however, has not been brought back with the line; the troops intended for the protection of the citizens of Arkansas are still stationed at Fort Gibson, in the midst of the Cherokee nation, forty miles in a straight line, and about eighty by the military road, from the settlements of our citizens. The garrison, situated where it now is, can afford but little protection to the citizens of Arkansas. It is believed by the committee to be bad policy to have an armed force stationed so remote from the frontier, and in the midst of an Indian country.

As the present western boundary line is fixed by treaty, and probably will never be extended further west, and as the policy of the Government has been, and will be, to settle various tribes of Indians permanently upon that frontier, and as, on that account, there will ever be a necessity to keep up a garrison there for their protection, the committee have no hesitation in unanimously recommending the removal of the garrison from Fort Gibson to some eligible point on the Arkansas river, near the western boundary line of Arkansas. They believe such a disposition of our troops would more effectually protect our citizens, and at the same time bring the troops nearer to the point from which they draw their subsistence and support. The committee refer to the memorial of the Legislature of Arkansas Territory, and make it a part of this report. They therefore report a bill.

To the honorable the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress assembled:

The memorial of the General Assembly of the Territory of Arkansas respectfully represents, to your honorable body, that, from the exposed situation of the western frontier of the Territory of Arkansas, and the want of arms and other munitions of war, to place the country in a state of defence in case of a war with the Indians, located on our western frontier, by the United States. Your memorialists represent, that, in order to remedy this evil, it is absolutely necessary that a fortification, at the expense of the United States, should be established and garrisoned with troops at some point on the western boundary line of the Territory. Your memorialists represent, that Fort Gibson, the only fortification on the west, is situated forty miles within the Indian country, and in the event of a war with any of the tribes of Indians on our west, would afford little or no protection to our citizens. Your memorialists would therefore respectfully request your honorable body to pass a law, making an appropriation for the purpose of erecting a fortification at some point on the line between the Territory of Arkansas and the Indians. And your memorialists, as in duty bound, will ever pray, &c. &c.

JOHN WILSON,
Speaker of the House of Representatives,

CHAS. CALDWELL,
President of the Legislative Council.

Approved, November 3, 1835:

WM. S. FULTON.

WAR DEPARTMENT, *March 4, 1836.*

SIR: In answer to your inquiries in relation to Fort Gibson, I have the honor to remark, that, in the project for the defence of the western frontier, submitted to the chairman of the Committee on Military Affairs of the Senate, and a copy of which was transmitted to you on the 19th ultimo, I suggested the propriety of opening a communication west of Arkansas and Missouri, and running from the Mississippi to the Red river, and of establishing a cordon of posts along this line. I proposed, also, that the

posts now existing in that country, and which would not be found upon this line when established, should be removed to it. Complaints have, for some time, been made of the unhealthful site of Fort Gibson, and an estimate was submitted, at the commencement of this session of Congress, for the amount necessary to rebuild it, either in its present position, or in some other place, as might be found most expedient on an examination of the country.

Should the plan of opening a communication be approved by Congress, and be authorized to be carried into effect, a proper examination of the country will be made in view of all the considerations which ought to weigh in the matter. Wherever this road may pass, in the vicinity of Fort Gibson, the present position ought, no doubt, to be abandoned, and a new and healthful one selected upon the road. I would therefore suggest, that the proposed bill should correspond in its features with this plan, and that the appropriation to be made should be the same as the one before mentioned, to wit, \$50,000.

Very respectfully,

Your most obedient servant,

LEWIS CASS.

Hon. R. M. JOHNSON,

Chairman of Military Committee, House of Reps.

HEAD QUARTERS OF THE ARMY,

Washington, February 12, 1836.

SIR: Your letter of the 5th instant, covering a communication from Capt. Phillips, of the 7th infantry, on the subject of the unhealthiness of the post on the Arkansas, called Fort Gibson, I have attentively perused.

The situation of the troops in that quarter has occupied our attention for some time past, but for want of the necessary information as to the best site on which to erect the proposed barracks for their better accommodation, as well as the want of means, have prevented any definitive measures being taken. We are now better informed, and an appropriation has been asked, with a view for making a new establishment somewhere in that quarter, where it is expected the health of the troops may be insured as well as their comfort.

I have the honor to be,

Very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

ALEX. MACOMB, *Maj. Gen.*

Hon. R. M. JOHNSON,

House of Representatives.

P. S. The letters enclosed to me in your letters of the 17th January and 5th instant, are herewith returned.

A. M.

FORT GIBSON, *January 3, 1836.*

DEAR SIR: I had the honor on the 8th ultimo, to transmit you a letter on the subject of the removal of the seventh regiment of infantry from this frontier, and requesting your aid in behalf of the regiment in the

accomplishment of this object. I send you herewith, a copy of an application which Lieutenant Colonel Whistler, commanding the regiment, has made to the general-in-chief, in order that you may be in possession of all the information in my power to give you on this subject. I beg leave, also, to refer you to a communication from the same source, announcing the death of the late Lieutenant Kinny, of the seventh regiment infantry, which portrays the sentiments and feelings of the officers in regard to this post; which will be found in the Adjutant General's Office.

The principal objection which is urged by General Arbuckle to this measure, I am informed, is that he is afraid *he will die* if the regiment is ordered to the north!

Ought not the deaths of the officers and soldiers who have fallen victims to the diseases of this climate, be considered as a sufficient sacrifice on the altar of personal interest and private welfare to satisfy the selfishness of such a feeling?

For the honor of human nature I fain would forego the pain of recording such a sentiment from any individual, and especially from an officer of the army, and he too a general! I pray that such a sentiment may never be attributed to me while I have the honor to command in the service of my country.

I believe if the President of the United States were advised of our situation, his high sense of justice would prompt him to direct that the necessary orders should be given for our removal from this country.

With high consideration and esteem,

I am, sir, your obedient servant,

J. A. PHILLIPS,
Capt. 7th Infantry.

Col. R. M. JOHNSON,
Member of Congress, Washington.

HEAD QUARTERS, 7th INFANTRY,
Fort Gibson, January 3, 1836.

SIR: Deeming it but a duty I owe to the seventh regiment of infantry (which I command), I have the honor to apply for a removal of it to some other station; and as the regiment has come from the south, that it may be ordered north of the latitude of this place.

I base this application on the extraordinary length of time the regiment has been stationed on the Arkansas and Red rivers, which has been since February, 1822, and the onerous detached duties in the prairies west, and fatigue duties at this post it has to perform incident to the service required by troops stationed on this frontier. But the state of the command as to discipline, instruction, and military knowledge, forms a far stronger reason why I should urge upon you the necessity of a removal. This is owing to the great fatigue duties that the regiment has performed, and still continues to perform.

I need not assure you, sir, that it is from no personal motives that I make this application. I cannot regard this as a question, whether a particular officer likes or dislikes this part of the country, or whether he has been at this post one, two, or fourteen years; but whether this regiment has perfected its title to the same indulgence which has been extended to others;

or whether the condition of the regiment is not such as to make it necessary for the good of the service, that the same military policy should govern in regard to it, which has governed in the changes of other parts of the army.

I am, sir, respectfully,

Your most obedient servant,

WM. WHISTLER,

Lieut. Col. 7th Infantry, Com. Reg.

Major General A. MACOMB,

Com. Chief U. S. Army, Washington.

A true copy.

J. A. PHILLIPS,

Capt. 7th Infantry.

FORT GIBSON, December 8, 1835.

SIR: The friendly interest with which you were pleased to take in my private views in relation to the appointment of paymaster of the army, and your well known reputation for dispensing justice in the administration of public affairs, have induced me to address you on a subject of great importance to myself, as well as the whole regiment to which I belong. I have always felt a reluctance to ask of my friends their political influence in the accomplishment of my wishes, either of a public or private nature; but it does seem, in this instance at least, as if justice is not to be awarded us, and our rights to be disregarded by the general-in-chief or the War Department, without a resort to our friends in Congress.

My object in addressing you is, to ask your influence, either in or out of Congress, as you may deem most advisable, to obtain a *removal of the seventh regiment of infantry from the southwestern frontier*. In asking of you this favor, allow me to give you, as briefly as I can, an outline of the service and duties of this regiment for the last *thirteen* years and upwards, the period of its service (I was about to say *servitude*) in this country; and I have no doubt from its perusal, your sense of justice will induce you to give to this subject, the serious consideration which I think it deserves.

Since the head quarters of the seventh infantry were established at Fort Gibson, the troops have been constantly exposed to a sickly post and climate, engaged in the performance of the most toilsome duties; and especially during the last two years. During this period the soldiers have been employed in building and repairing barracks, (for the quarters, here, began to rot down before they were finished!) cutting roads, and keeping peace among the different tribes on this frontier; and for the last two years (summers) they were cutting roads into the *Indian country*, extending far into the prairies to the west, for the ostensible object of making a treaty of peace with the savage tribes who roam those wilds, from the borders of Arkansas to the Rocky mountains. I do not know what the views of the General Government may be in regard to our relations with *these* Indians, but unless they are of more importance than my penetration has been able to discover, the United States have dearly paid for the sacrifice of so many lives among the troops, and the destruction of the constitutions of many of

those that have survived. The surgeon who accompanied these expeditions, recently informed me, that the health of both officers and men, has become so much impaired by exposure in the *prairie*, that very few would be able to endure the hardships of another campaign: and yet I suppose this is inevitable if the seventh infantry remain in this country! How is it to be expected that soldiers unused to the prairies at any season, could avoid disease and death, when exposed to the scorching rays of a mid-summer sun? The Indians themselves avoid this exposure.

Besides the unhealthiness of this post, there are other reasons which induce the officers to wish for a removal: the fact of some of the most important duties pertaining to a military post (such as drills and the discipline of the soldiery) being neglected at this station, is sufficient, in my opinion, for officers who take any pride in their profession, to desire a change. I have been in the seventh regiment of infantry upwards of twelve years, and I believe I can say it without fear of contradiction, that there has not been a day, not always excepting the *Sabbath*, when the soldiers have not been employed at hard work! And even now, there seems to be as little prospect of getting through it as the day on which it was first commenced! The morning reports of my company generally show about eight or ten for military duty, out of fifty men present; the remainder are on "extra and daily" duty, or, in other words, at hard labor.

This is no new state of affairs here; it has long been so and will continue to be so as long as our regiment remains in this country. We are losing our best men here, in consequence of this incessant labor, who go off to other stations and enlist, to avoid these toilsome duties. In fact, I have almost come to the conclusion that the troops at *this* post, instead of being enlisted as soldiers to perform military duty, are received into service to become only "hewers of wood and drawers of water." Nor are we allowed to have our wood furnished by contract as at other posts; but our soldiers are sent out to cut it in the middle of winter, instead of its being procured in sufficient quantities in the fall, for the use of the garrison during the inclement season!

And now, my dear sir, to what circumstance, or to whom, do you suppose may be attributed the cause of the seventh regiment of infantry having been kept so long on this frontier? and especially when all the other regiments in our service have changed their stations, and most of them, too, have had the advantages of being sent to the "schools of practice" to learn *military* duty. Is it not proper and just that there should be a proper distribution of the arduous duties among the regiments of the same corps? and not suffer all the evils of the service to be forced upon one. There is at this time an order in existence, which I think was published to the army the year before the death of the late General Brown, which directs that *no regiment shall remain more than two years at any one station*; and yet we have been at this post nearly TWELVE years!!

I will not charge the colonel of my regiment with being indirectly instrumental in keeping us here; but I believe if he were to express a desire to have the regiment removed, that it would be acceded to. All his interests, I believe, as an officer and citizen, are in this country: by virtue of the first, he commands the southwestern department, and as he has a plantation on the Arkansas river, which he has under cultivation, I must believe that these have *some* effect in influencing his motives. He who would rise superior to these considerations, is superior to human nature; and he who would be inferior to them is not a man.

I have taken the pains to procure from the public records of the post, a statement of the number of deaths that have occurred among the troops stationed at *Fort Gibson*, from the time of its establishment to the present date, which is annexed. I do not wish you to rely on my information exclusively, but if you will call for the reports made to the adjutant general's and surgeon general's offices, you will find my statement fully corroborated.

As a captain of the seventh regiment, I feel that I should be a recreant to my duty if I did not claim for my company and myself all the rights and privileges which the laws of the country and the orders of the War Department bestow upon us.

May I hope, sir, that you will spare time from your important and various duties to acknowledge the receipt of this communication.

With the highest regard,

I have the honor to be,

Your obedient servant,

J. A. PHILLIPS.

STATEMENT OF DEATHS.

During the two last years, to this date, two hundred and ninety-two soldiers and six officers died.

From the year 1824 (when this post was established) to the 8th Dec. 1835, five hundred and sixty-one soldiers and nine officers died.

During the 3d quarter of the present year, the surgeon reported six hundred and one distinct cases of disease at this post, among the infantry, exclusively.

J. A. PHILLIPS.

Fort Gibson, December 8, 1835.

HEAD QUARTERS OF THE ARMY,

Washington, February 29, 1836.

SIR: In compliance with your instructions, I have examined into the state of the western frontier of the Territory of Arkansas, with a view of reporting on the defence of the same, in conformity with the wishes of the General Assembly of that Territory, as set forth in its memorial to Congress, approved the 3d of November, 1835.

The position of the post on the Neosho, called *Fort Gibson*, has been presented to be very unhealthy, and difficult of access by water, owing to the navigation of the Arkansas, above *Fort Coffee*, being interrupted by difficult rapids and shoals, which only can be passed by steam-boats at high water; and as instructions had been given to the commanding officer and others connected with the service in that quarter, to report as to the best position for the posting of the troops; it is only lately that information has been obtained, by which a judgment could be formed at head quarters, as to the position the best adapted for the protection of the frontiers above named, and for fulfilling the intentions of Government with regard to the Indians established under its auspices west of the Mississippi.

A small post was established some years since on the right bank of the Arkansas, about ten miles beyond the territorial line, called Fort Coffee, which has proved thus far, not only to be healthy, but convenient, it being more accessible than Fort Gibson, and being also on the line of communication between Forts Leavenworth and Towson, possesses many advantages over a position more advanced into the Indian country, and covers more directly the frontier of the Territory from interruption by the Indians, as well as provide the means of preventing any interference with the Indians on the part of the white people.

In establishing a post at this point, which I would respectfully recommend, regard ought to be had to its permanency, and therefore should be built of such materials as would insure its durability and strength, as well as the comfort of the troops that may occupy it. Indeed a general system ought to be adopted for all the forts which may be established on the frontiers. This system should possess the essential qualities of strength, durability, and comfort, with a capacity not only sufficient for the accommodation of a large garrison, say of a regiment at least, but also for the supplies of provisions, arms, and ammunition, which may be proper to be deposited on the frontiers. By pursuing such a system, it is believed that the health of the troops will be insured, and the frontiers in consequence will be better protected; nor is it believed that the expense of the system will materially differ from that incurred by temporary, weak, and uncomfortable establishments, when the health of the troops, the expense attending the hospitals, and the constant repairs are considered, to say nothing of the moral effect which a respectable establishment may be expected to produce on the minds of the Indians, as well as the pride of the troops, which cannot be too highly estimated, and ought not to be lost sight of in the construction of new establishments on the frontiers.

I have the honor to be,

Most respectfully,

Your obedient servant,

ALEXANDER MACOMB,

Major General, Commander-in-Chief

Hon. LEWIS CASS,
Secretary of War.

The Inspector General accords generally in the views as entertained by the Major General in the above communication. The present position of the seventh regiment unquestionably ought to be changed. Whether the position as designated by the Major General would be the best he is not prepared to say—he presumes it is. He would not however establish any post as a permanent post in the Indian country. Every post thus established, must necessarily be temporary in its character, and to be changed according to circumstances. Whether the buildings and defences of a post so established should be of permanent materials, or otherwise, should entirely depend upon the expense of procuring the materials and construction. All posts in the Indian country should be established some ten, fifteen, or more miles from the line separating the Indians from the whites.

JOHN E. WOOL,

Brig. General, U. S. Army