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Letter from the Secretary of the Interior, in answer to a resolution of the House of the 4th instant, relative to certain wagon roads in the western Territories.

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WAGON ROADS IN WESTERN TERRITORIES.

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR,

IN ANSWER TO

A resolution of the House of the 4th instant, relative to certain wagon roads in the western Territories.

MAY 10, 1866.—Referred to the Committee on Territories and ordered to be printed.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
Washington, D. C., May 10, 1866.

SIR: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of the following preamble and resolution of the House of Representatives, dated May 4, 1866:

“Whereas an act of Congress was passed March 3, 1865, entitled ‘An act to provide for the construction of certain wagon roads in the Territories of Idaho, Montana, Dakota and Nebraska;’ and whereas, by said act, the sum of \$20,000 was appropriated for the construction of a wagon road from a point at or near the mouth of the Big Sioux river, *via* Yancton, Dakota Territory, to a point at or near the mouth of the Big Sheyenne river, thence up said river to its main fork, thence up the north fork to a point of intersection with the road from Niobrara; and whereas the work on said wagon road is reported to have been commenced, and far advanced in 1865, by orders from the Secretary of the Interior, during the prosecution of which work treaties are claimed to have been made with the Indian tribes occupying the country through which said road is located, by which the right of way was secured to the United States; and whereas the Secretary of the Interior is represented to have ordered a suspension of work upon said Sheyenne road, and required the superintendent having charge of the construction of the same to turn over all of the stock, implements, and money appropriated and purchased for the said road to the superintendent of the Niobrara road, whereby the opening and construction of the Sheyenne road are prevented, to the great injury of the Territory of Dakota: Therefore,

“Resolved, That the Secretary of the Interior be requested to inform this house whether the work on said road has been arrested or interrupted by his orders; and if so, for what reason the same has been done; whether any of the moneys appropriated thereto have been diverted to the uses of the Niobrara or any other road mentioned in said act, with the authority, if in any case, for said diversion.”

In compliance with said preamble and resolution, I have the honor to state that the survey and construction of the wagon road from the mouth of the Big Sheyenne river to its intersection with the road from Niobrara was suspended by my orders:

1st. On account of the advice of Major General Curtis, Brigadier General Sibley, H. W. Reed, and Colonel B. F. Taylor, superintendent of Indian affairs, commissioners appointed by the President to treat with Indians on the Upper Missouri river, based on reasons stated by them orally, and afterwards reduced to writing in letter of February 20, 1866, a copy of which is herewith enclosed, marked A.

2d. Because Colonel Brookings, superintendent and disbursing agent, had informed the department that said work could not be prosecuted safely without a military guard of two hundred men and two pieces of artillery. The pay, subsistence, transportation, &c., of troops in that part of the country, it is known, cost the government, on an average, over \$1,000 each per annum. Such a military expedition could not, therefore, have cost less than a quarter of a million of dollars, while the unexpended balance of appropriation for the construction of said wagon road was but about \$13,400.

3d. Because it is doubted by the best engineers and topographers whether the contemplated route can ever be opened through the so-called Bad Lands, over which it is expected to pass, as no practicable route has ever yet been discovered; and it is deemed probable that said road must diverge either to the north, and then follow the valley of the Missouri river, or to the south to the vicinity of the Niobrara route, now in course of construction, which would render this expenditure comparatively useless.

The department did not, therefore, deem it wise to attempt to disburse so trivial a balance on a work of doubtful utility, at so great a cost of treasure for military guard, and considerable peril to life, in the face of the remonstrance of the commissioners above named, until these obstacles should be removed, which it was hoped would occur in the course of a year.

I enclose copies of instructions from Colonel Simpson to Colonel Brookings, dated February 17 and 23, 1866, marked B and C. From these instructions it will be seen that the property of the said Big Sheyenne road, ordered by my direction to be turned over to Colonel Sawyers, superintendent of the Niobrara and Virginia City wagon roads, to be credited to the Big Sheyenne road.

I need only add that no part of the balance unexpended of said appropriation has been diverted to any other purpose.

I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant,
JAMES HARLAN, *Secretary.*

HON. SCHUYLER COLFAX,
Speaker of the House of Representatives.

A.

WASHINGTON CITY, D. C.,
February 20, 1866.

SIR: The undersigned commissioners to treat with the hostile Indians of the Upper Missouri last autumn have the honor to state, that, in their judgment, it would be highly impolitic and dangerous to make any further survey of routes through the country inhabited by the Teton bands of Sioux Indians before the negotiations contemplated with the bands and tribes, as well as those already consummated, have been fully completed, and the annuities under the latter fully paid as stipulated. There is serious doubt on the part of all the savages heretofore hostile as to the good faith of the government towards them, and it is

therefore highly desirable that the treaties already made be ratified, and the annuities provided paid to the several bands with the least practicable delay.

We have the honor to be, very respectfully, your obedient servants,

E. B. TAYLOR,
S. R. CURTIS,
H. H. SIBLEY,
HENRY W. REED.

Hon. JAMES HARLAN,
Secretary of the Interior.

B.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENGINEER OFFICE,
Washington, D. C., February 17, 1866.

SIR: I am instructed by Hon. James Harlan, Secretary, for reasons of pending unfinished negotiations with the hostile Indian tribes inhabiting the regions through which the road from the mouth of the Big Sheyenne river to its intersection with the road from Niobrara will run, to direct you to suspend, for the present, all operations on said road. You will, therefore, suspend all expenditures, and close your accounts on said road and on the road from the western boundary of Minnesota to the mouth of the Sheyenne river, sending the same, as soon as practicable, to this office.

I am, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. H. SIMPSON,
Lieut. Col. Engineers, Chief Engineer.

W. W. BROOKINGS, Esq.,
Sup't and Disb'g Ag't, &c., Yancton, D. T.

P. S.—The property belonging to the expedition you will have secured, subject to the orders of this department, reporting the fact of your having done so, and rendering the proper receipts for the same to this office.

J. H. S.,
Lieut. Col. Eng's.

C.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, ENGINEER OFFICE,
Washington, D. C., February 23, 1866.

SIR: The Hon. Secretary of the Interior instructs me to direct, in view of the suspension of operations on your roads on account of pending unfinished Indian negotiations, of which you were advised on the 17th instant, that you turn over to James A. Sawyers, superintendent and disbursing agent Niobrara and Virginia City western road, on demand, all the property belonging to said roads, taking his receipts for the same, and placing opposite the several items the fair value of each, which you and Mr. Sawyers may agree upon, so that on rendering the receipts the roads may have the amount credited properly on the books of this office.

I am, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. H. SIMPSON,
Lieut. Col. Engineers, Chief Engineer.

W. W. BROOKINGS, Esq.,
Sup't and Disb'g Ag't, &c., Yancton, D. T.