

President Jefferson's Letter to William Henry Harrison

February 27, 1803

Jefferson to Harrison
Washington February 27, 1803
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Dawson, Harrison 35-38

Dear Sir:

While at Monticello in August last I received your favor of August 8 and meant to have acknowledged it on my return to the seat of government at the close of the ensuing month, but on my return I found that you were expected to be on here in person, and this expectation continued till winter. I have since received your favor of December 30.

In the former you mentioned the plan of the town which you had done me the honour to name after me, and to lay out according to an idea I had formerly expressed to you. I am thoroughly persuaded that it will be found handsome, & pleasant, and I do believe it to be the best means of preserving the cities of America from the scourge of the yellow fever which being peculiar to our country must be derived from some peculiarity in it, that peculiarity I take to be our cloudless skies. In Europe where the sun does not shine more than half the number of days in the year which it does in America, they can build their towns in a solid block with impunity; but here a constant sun produces too great an accumulation of heat to admit that. Ventilation is indispensably necessary. Experience has taught us that in the open air of the country the yellow fever is not only not generated, but ceases to be infectious. I cannot decide from the drawing you sent me, whether you have laid off streets round the squares thus or only the diagonal streets therein marked. The former was my idea, and is, I imagine, more convenient.

You will receive herewith an answer to your letter as President of the Convention; and from the Secretary at War you receive from time to time information and instructions as to our Indian affairs. There communications being for the public records are restrained always to particular objects and occasions. But this letter being unofficial, and private, I may with safety give you a more extensive view of our policy respecting the Indians, that you may better comprehend the parts dealt out to you in detail through the official channel, and observing the system of which they make a part, conduct yourself in unison with it in cases where you are obliged to act without instruction. [The] system is to live in perpetual peace with the Indians, to cultivate an affectionate attachment from them, by every thing just & liberal

which we can [offer?] them within the bounds of reason, and by giving them effectual protection against wrongs from our own people. The decrease of game rendering their subsistence by hunting insufficient, we wish to draw them to agriculture, to spinning and weaving. The latter branches they take up with great readiness, because they fall to the women, who gain by quitting the labours of the field [for] these which are exercised within doors. When they withdraw themselves to the culture of a small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from time to time in exchange for necessaries for their farms & families. To promote this disposition to exchange lands which they have to spare and we want for necessaries, which have to spare and they want, we shall push our trading houses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what the individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands. At our trading houses too we mean to sell so low as merely to repay cost and charges so as neither to lessen or enlarge our capital. This is what private traders cannot do, for they must gain; they will consequently retire from the competition, and we shall thus get clear of this pest without giving offence or umbrage to the Indians. In this way our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States or remove beyond the Missisipi. The former is certainly the termination of their history most happy for themselves. But in the whole course of this, it is essential to cultivate their love. As to their fear, we presume that our strength and their weakness is now so visible that they must see we have only to shut our hand to crush them, and that all our liberalities to them proceed from motives of pure humanity only. Should any tribe be fool-hardy enough to take up the hatchet at any time, the seizing the whole country of that tribe and driving them across the Missisipi, as the only condition of peace, would be an example to others, and a furtherance of our final consolidation. Combined with these views, and to be prepared against the occupation of Louisiana by a powerful and enterprising people, it is important that setting less value on interior extension of purchases from the Indians, we bend our whole views to the purchase and settlement of the country on the Missisipi from it's mouth to it's Northern regions, that we may be able to present as strong a front on our Western as on our Eastern border, and plant on the Missisipi itself the means of it's own defence. We now own from 31 to the Yazoo, and hope this summer to purchase what belongs to the Choctaws from the Yazoo up to their boundary, supposed to be about opposite the mouth of Acanza [Arkansas]. We wish at the same time to begin in your quarter, for which there is at present a favorable opening. The Caskias [Kaskaskias] being extinct, we are entitled to their country by our paramount sovereignty. The Peorias we understand have all been driven off from their county, and we might claim it in the same way; but as we understand there is one chief remaining, who would, as the survivor of the tribe, sell the right, it will be better to give him such terms as will make him easy for life, and take

a conveyance from him. The Kaskaskias being reduced to a few families, I presume we may purchase their whole country for what would place every individual of them at his ease, and be a small price to us: say by laying off for each family wherever they would chuse it as much rich land as they could cultivate, adjacent to each other, inclosing the whole in a single fence, and giving them such an annuity in money or goods for ever as would place them in happiness; and we might take them also under the protection of the United States. Thus possessed of the rights of these three tribes, we should proceed to the settling their boundaries with the Poutawatamies and Kickapoos; claiming all doubtful territory but paying them a price for the relinquishment of their concurrent claims, and even prevailing on them if possible to cede at a price such of their own unquestioned territory as would give us a convenient Northern boundary. Before broaching this, and while we are bargaining with the Kickapoos, the minds of the Poutawatamies and Kickapoos should be soothed and conciliated by liberalities and sincere assurances of friendship. Perhaps sending a well qualified character to stay some time in Decaigne's village as if on other business, and to sound him and introduce the subject by degrees to his mind and that of the other heads of families, inculcating in the way of conversation all those considerations which prove the advantages they would receive by a cession on these terms, the object might be more easily and effectually obtained than by abruptly proposing it to them at a formal treaty. Of the means however of obtaining what we wish you will be the best judge; and I have given you this view of the system which we suppose will best promote the interests of the Indians and of ourselves, and finally consolidate our whole country into one nation only, that you may be enabled the better to adapt your means to the object. For this purpose we have given you a general commission for treating. The crisis is pressing. Whatever can now be obtained, must be obtained quickly. The occupation of New Orleans, hourly expected, by the French, is already felt like a light breeze by the Indians. You know the sentiments they entertain of that nation. Under the hope of their protection, they will immediately stiffen against cessions of land to us. We had better therefore do at once what can now be done. I must repeat that this letter is to be considered as private and friendly, and not to controul any particular instructions which you may receive through an official channel. You will also perceive how sacredly it must be kept within your own breast, and especially how improper to be understood by the Indians. [For] their interests and their tranquility it is best they should see only the present [stat]e of their history. I pray you to accept assurances of my esteem and consideration.

TH: JEFFERSON