TWO LETTERS OF MERIWETHER LEWIS TO MAJOR WILLIAM PRESTON

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Among the many manuscripts possessed by The Filson Club are two recently acquired letters written by Meriwether Lewis, one of the leaders of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, to Major William Preston, an early settler of Jefferson County, Kentucky. Both letters are part of the Preston Family Papers given to The Filson Club by Mr. Preston Pope Joyes, Sr.

William Preston and Meriwether Lewis were both Virginians by birth and served together as officers in the Second Sub-Legion of the United States Army in 1795.[1] Both had lands in Kentucky and many mutual friends and acquaintances. Interestingly, Major William Preston and Captain William Clark, Lewis' associate in exploration, were brothers-in-law, Preston marrying Caroline Hancock in 1802 and Clark marrying her sister Julia Hancock in 1808.[2]

The letters which follow have been transcribed exactly, preserving the spelling, punctuation and other stylistic peculiarities contained in the original manuscripts. The original pagination is indicated by slashes where one page ends and a new one begins.

THE LETTERS

St Louis 3d May 1804[3]

Sir,

This will be handed you by my Friend Mr. Peter Choteau,[4] an Inhabitant of this Place, a Gentleman deservedly Considered among the most respectable and influential Citizens on Upper Louisiana. Since the Cession of this Country to the U'States Mr. Choteau's zeal to promote the public welfare, has induced him at the Instance of our Government, to visit the Osage Nation with a view to prevail on some of their most important Chiefs, to accompany him to the Seat of Government, in order to form a Treaty of Alliance with the U'States; in this mission Mr. Choteau has been completely successful, and is now on his rout to the City of Washington in Charge of the Deputation from that Nation, consisting of their King, And a number of their Chiefs of the first respectability and Consideration.

The promptitude and Fidelity with which Mr. Choteau has executed the wishes of the Government on this Occasion, as also the personal

Danger to which he has been exposed in the course of this Transaction, entitles him in an eminent Degree to the particular Attention and best Services, not only of yourself, but of his fellow Citizens generally. Therefore any services which you may have in your Power to render him, either in his private or public Capacity, will be gratefully acknowledged/ acknowledged by,

Your sincere friend and
Obedt. Servt.
Meriwether Lewis Capt
1st U'S. Regt. Infty.

Majr. William Preston
[address leaf]
Majr. William Preston
Fincastle
Capt. Choteau Virginia.
[docketed]
Cap. Merr. Lewis
3d May 1804

St. Louis July 25th. 1808.[5]

My Dear Friend.

Your favor of the 11th. inst. from Nashville has been duly received.[6] — how wretchedly you married men arrange the subjects of which you treat. I am induced to believe from the date of your letter and the arrangement of the subject matter, that you must have been engaged in compiling toasts for the fourth of July, in which, the great dirth of gallantry among our countrymen has very uniformly consigned the recollection of the fair, to the *last glass*, and the *last haza!* — you have gained that which I have yet to obtain, *a wif*;[7] pardon me therefore for begining where you left off. you run through a sheet of paper about your musty fusty trade, your look out for land speculations without locallity or interest in your old friends, a flimsy excuse about the want of money to enable you to come and see us &c &c before you came to the point. then *she*[8] *is off*, passed — off the hooks, I mean in a matrimonial point of view; be it so, the die is cast, may god be with her and her's, and the favored angels of heaven guard her bliss both here and/ and hereafter, is the sincere prayer of her very sincere friend, to whom she has left the noble consolation of scratching his head and biting his nails, with ample leasure to ruminate on the chapter of accedents in matters of love and the folly of castle-building. well, I find it an amusing study notwithstanding admirably calculated to kill time, and when I find myself without imployment I will begin again.

— Gamble is a good tempered, easy honest fellow, I have known him from a boy; both his means and his disposition well fit him for sluming away life with his fair one in the fassionable rounds of a large City. such is the life she has celected and in it's pursuit I wish she may meet all the pleasures of which it is susceptable. I consider Miss E — B —[9] a charming girl, but such was my passion for her sister, that my soul revolts at the idea of attempting to make her my wife, and shall not consequently travel that road in quest of matrimony. so much for *love*, now in order I shall take up *friendship*, then treat of land speculations money making and other matters of minor importance. —

Brady[10] is a man for whom I entertain a very/ sincere friendship and rispect and would rejoice were it in my power to serve him in any way. if he was here at this moment I could give him the appointment of surveyor of the mines under the regulations which I am about forming on that subject. this appointment would be worth about 450 or 500 Dols pr. year and increasing; but as he is not here I shall be obliged to make the appointment of some person in this country. next spring I expect several trading establishments will be formed on the Missouri, to each of which, there must be an agent appointed, their sallaries will be most probably equal to the pay and emoluments of Captains. except these, I know not of any appointments worth his acceptance in this quarter which I have it in my power to bestoe [the word *such* crossed out] as could procure for him from the general government. If he was in this country without any appointment he could do much better in my opinion than he can in any other part of the U'States, under similar circumstances, and something in new countries is always turning up by which I might have it in my power to serve him and I assure you that I should not omit any occasion to do so. — / In my opinion — Louisiana, and particularly the district of St. Louis, at this moment offers more advantages than any other portion of the U'States to the farmer, the mechanic, inland merchant or the honest adventurer who can command money or negroes. in point of soil and climate it is inferior to none; it is calculated to produce a greater variety of valuable articles for export than any other portion of the continent and those too in great abundance. The cash articles are Salt, Lead, Iron, Saltpeter, hemp & cordage, tobacco furs and peltry; beside such other articles as are common to Kentucky and Tennesse which are usually shiped to New Orleans (viz) Flour whiskey beef pok apple cyder pittatoes &c &c. over those states we possess a very decided advantage which is that the Missippi furnishes us at all seasons of the year with the means of conveying our productions to market whereas most of the articles exported from Kentucky & Tennessee ly on the hands of the farmer or merchants untill the spring after they have been produced; we shall consequently

in all those articles necessary for the subsistence of man be enabled to forestall the market of Orleans. From Cape Girardeau to the lower limit of this territory or the 33d. degree of N. Latitude it is a delightfull cotton country. this is an extent of upwards of 400 miles./

From Cape Girardeau upwards I do not cosider it a good cotton country; saving crops might be made but there is much greater profit to be obtained by cultivating other articles, even as great or greater than can be obtained by cultivating cotton and we are certain of enjoying what we make as there is not a healthyer contry than upper part of Louisiana. Cotton about St. Louis grows as well as in the lower counties of Virginia and North Carrolina, and all those [the word *families* is crossed out] who manufacter it in their families find no difficulty in raising an abundant supply for their own consumption. were I to dwell on the advantages of this country I might fill a volume. you would in my opinion do well to come and see us from the Falls of the Ohio, it will only take you a few weeks longer and you can then be a more competent judge, and can make your arrangements accordingly; if you do not celect Louisiana as your place of residence I will wrisk my existence that you will at some future period regret having chosen any other. you have no time to loose. lands are rising fast, but are yet very low; the choise positions/ which I could have purchased when I was last in this country, or about 16 months before my return, at one dollar pr. Arpent[11] I have been obliged to give two dollars for. excellent land can be had within six eight & ten miles of St. Louis at 50 Cents pr. Acre, with a general warrentee as to tittle against all claims except the U'States, and with a condition also that if the lands are not confermed to you that the money shall be returned with interest from the date of the decesion of the Commissions should they decide against the claim. many of these claims are good, and there is [the word *but* is crossed out] no risk in purchasing with the conditions I have mentioned. I will now tell you what I have done in the way of land purchases since I came here last — I have purchased seven thousand four hundred and 40 Arpents of land for five thousand five hundred and thirty dollars, all of it lying in the nighbourhood of St. Louis in situations as eligible as I could have wished with an excellent mill seat on one of the tracts. if you would sell that fort of yours within the mountains at half price,[12] and bring your money or negroes with you to this country you might purchase a princely fortune; but to do this as I have before/ told you there is no time to be lost. The Genl.[13] has informed me of the mode he has proposed to you for bringing on your family to this country which I think is the best that can be devised. —

The Indians have been exceedingly troublesome during the last winter and spring, but I have succeeded in managing those on the

Mississippi; they have delivered three murderers to a party which I sent with a strong talk to them, they are now under trial will no doubt be streched. the Osage and others on the Missouri are yet in a threatening position but the arrangements which have been made and the steps we are now about to take I feel confident will reduce them to order. —

Your sincere friend
Meriwether Lewis.

Majr. William Preston

FOOTNOTES

[1] For the lives and military careers of these men see: article on Meriwether Lewis in the *Dictionary of American Biography*; Richard Dillon, *Meriwether Lewis A Biography* (New York, 1965), *passim.*; entries for Meriwether Lewis and William Preston in Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, From Its Organization, September 29, 1789, To March 2, 1903* (Washington, 1903), I, pp. 631, 806; Preston Family Papers-Davie Genealogical Collection, folder 190, The Filson Club; Preston Family Papers-Joyes Collection, correspondence, military papers, certificates and grants sections, The Filson Club.

[2] William Preston Johnston, comp., *The Johnstons of Salisbury, with a brief supplement concerning the Hancock, Strother and Preston Families* (New Orleans, 1897), pp. 192-193.

[3] This manuscript, a letter signed, has been printed previously in Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents 1783-1854* (Urbana, Illinois, 1962), p. 179. Jackson's text is based on a typed copy of this letter in the Manuscript Division, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. The Alderman Library owns typed copies of both the Meriwether Lewis letters here printed; the typescripts were obtained by the University of Virginia in 1954. Letter of Miss Anne Freudenberg, Assistant Curator of Manuscripts, University of Virginia Library to the author, 5 February 1970.

[4] John Pierre Chouteau (1758-1849), fur trader and Indian agent. The son of Pierre Laclede, founder of St. Louis, Missouri, by Marie Chouteau, he associated with the Osage Indians from his early youth and engaged in trade with them. When the United States gained control of Louisiana, Chouteau welcomed American control and President Jefferson appointed him United States Agent for the Osages. He was "the dominant influence among the Missouri Osages." Biographical article on Chouteau in the *Dictionary of American Biography.*

[5] This letter, fully in the writing of Lewis, apparently has never been published and has escaped the notice of Lewis' biographers. It has been in private ownership from the day it was written until given to The Filson Club. It is here printed for the first time.

[6] Preston's letter of July 11, 1808 to Lewis apparently has not survived. An attempt to locate the original of the letter in several libraries and historical societies was unsuccessful.

[7] William Preston married Caroline Hancock at her father's home, "Fotheringay," Botetourt County, Virginia on March 24, 1802. A daughter of Col. George Hancock and Margaret (Strother) Hancock, Caroline (Hancock) Preston was born March 25, 1785 and died December 19, 1847 in Louisville, Kentucky. Preston Family Papers-Preston Davie Genealogical Collection, folder 190, The Filson Club.

[8] This passage refers to the marriage on 2 June 1808 of Letitia Breckinridge to Robert Gamble of Richmond, Virginia and later of Tallahassee, Florida. Letitia was the daughter of General James Breckinridge (1763-1833) of Fincastle, Botetourt County, Virginia. She was born October 26, 1791 in Fincastle and died March 10, 1866. Meriwether Lewis had met Letitia Breckinridge while visiting in Botetourt, the home county of his

friends Major William Preston and the Hancock family. According to his latest biographer, Lewis was "smitten" by her and his brother, Reuben Lewis, who was with Meriwether Lewis, "approved highly of the comely, 'accomplished, and beautiful' Letitia" and wrote that "she was 'one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, both as to form and features. She is a very sweet looking girl and I should like to have her as a sister.'" Dillon states further that Letitia "panicked at the attentions of the Governor and fled to Richmond. Lewis did not follow her. This love affair, if it was that, may have been Meriwether Lewis's last. . . ." The marriage of Letitia Breckinridge is recorded in the *Virginia Argus*, Richmond, Virginia, 5 July 1808; Orlando Brown, *Memoranda of The Preston Family* (Frankfort, Ky., 1842), p. 4; Mary Selden Kennedy, comp., *Seldens of Virginia and Allied Families* (New York, 1911), I, pp. 96, 455; Richard Dillon, *Meriwether Lewis A Biography* (New York, 1965), p. 286.

[9] Elizabeth Breckinridge, sister of Letitia and younger daughter of General James Breckinridge. Born March 31, 1794, in Fincastle, Botetourt County, Virginia. She married General Edward Watts, a lawyer and Speaker of the Virginia Legislature on 7 May 1811, and died July 8, 1862. Orlando Brown, *Memoranda of The Preston Family* (Frankfort, Ky., 1842), p. 4; Mary Selden Kennedy, *Seldens of Virginia and Allied Families* (New York, 1911), I, pp. 99, 455; the marriage of Elizabeth Breckinridge is recorded in the *Virginia Patriot*, Richmond, Virginia, 4 June 1811.

[10] Hugh Brady, born 27 July 1768; died 15 April 1851 at Detroit, Michigan. Brady served in the United States Army from 1792, becoming a captain in 1799; he was honorably discharged in 1800, but served again in the War of 1812 and by 1848 had risen to the rank of Major-General. Preston had corresponded with Brady about the possibility of his assuming a position in the Louisiana Territory. On January 10, 1808, Brady had written Preston "the plan that you submited to my Consideration I have thougt seriously of and have Come to the detarmination of Acepting of aney apointment that my frendes may think I am adequat to provided I can Support a small famaly by It without difficuty as I am perty Scertin that I should be but little more then able to mov from this country unto that but It is not in my power to say at this time positivly what would Induce me to mov to the nabeourhood of St Lewis as I know not the price of living in that Country but as those Gentlemen Lewis and Clark that will hav the appointments to make are acquinted with the Country to them and you I Rest the matter." Francis B. Heitman, *Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, 1789-1903* (Washington, 1903), I, p. 239; Belle McKinney Hays Swope, *History of The Families of McKinney-Brady-Quigley* (n.p., 1905), pp. 155, 175-180; see letters of H. Brady to William Preston, 3 January 1808 and 10 January 1808 in Preston Family Papers-Joyes Collection, folder 18, The Filson Club.

[11] An arpent is a French unit of land measurement used in those areas of the United States and Canada once controlled by France; it is the equivalent of about .85 acre.

[12] "Robinson's Tract," near Fincastle, Botetourt County, Virginia, located on Peeks Creek, a branch of New River. William Preston inherited this property from his father, Col. William Preston, in 1783. Preston Family Papers-Davie Genealogical Collection, folder 190, The Filson Club.

[13] Probably General John Preston (1764-1827), eldest brother of Major William Preston. John Preston was commissioned Brigadier on January 26, 1799 and resigned as Major-General of the 3rd Division of the Virginia militia on January 17, 1809 upon his appointment as Treasurer of the State of Virginia. His home was "Greenfield," Botetourt County, Virginia, which he had inherited from his father. *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (Richmond, 1892), IX, p. 4 and X, p. 42; Preston Family Papers-Davie Genealogical Collection, folder 179, The Filson Club.