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(Frontier Expansion) [Manuscript report on the Western Frontier by confidential U.S. agent John McKee, to Secretary of War James McHenry; intelligence on Spanish Borderlands, Natchez District, Pensacola, Native Americans and Panton, Leslie & Co.]

Stock#: 91706
Map Maker: McKee

Date: 1799
Place: Philadelphia
Color: Uncolored
Condition: Fine
Size: 7.75 x 9.75 inches

Price: SOLD



Description:

Important Manuscript Report by Confidential American Agent in the Western Borderlands

John McKee Summarizes His Activities in the Louisiana Frontier of 1797

Intelligence Concerning Status of Spanish Forts, Unsettled Frontier Loyalties (especially in Natchez District), and Panton, Leslie & Company as Conduit to Native American Lands in Spanish Florida

A remarkable and revelatory unpublished manuscript report by John McKee, written in Philadelphia in 1799, summarizing from still-fresh memory his activities of 1797 while exploring the western frontier as a special agent of the U.S. government. The document serves as a kind of précis on the state of the Spanish Borderlands and can be seen as a precursor of future exploration reports informing the government on western expansion - à la Lewis & Clark - particularly in terms of the status of the Spanish forts in the wake of Pinckney's Treaty, the unstable loyalties of frontier settlements, and relations with southern Native Americans. McKee, a known associate of William Blount, of Blount's Conspiracy fame, was at the time still in the early stage of a career that would include stints as Indian Agent to the Choctaw and, intriguingly, as a special executive agent in Florida under President James Madison. McKee's report includes a detailed description of the Natchez District, especially the frontier people who inhabited this borderland area on the verge of American takeover - which has been described as a kind of proto-Texas by at least one historian. He also reports on the role of the powerful trading firm of Panton, Leslie & Co., the British trading operation that held sway over the Native Americans in Spanish Florida. This fascinating and



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detailed original historical document can be seen as a "taking of the pulse" of the western frontier of the United States in the shadowy but pivotal period of 1797-1799, before the Louisiana Purchase, when intrigue and rumor pervaded the region, and the exact nature of western expansion in the trans-Appalachian West, yet in its nascent stage, was far from certain.

John McKee as Special Agent

Historian J. C. A. Stagg counts John McKee among a select group of four special "executive agents" of the United States government who worked under President James Madison. The present report shows that McKee was already working as an agent of the War Department in 1797, under President Adams' Secretary of War, James McHenry. According to Stagg, such agents were sent on secret errands to help determine the future of United States relations with the Spanish provinces of West Florida, East Florida, and Texas: "the outcomes of these errands into the borderlands have yet to be properly understood by historians... in no small part because these agents had their own agendas, which conflicted with that of Washington."

While McKee may have had his own agenda - a role in William Blount's plot has not been refuted or proved by historians - his 1797 activities were an integral part of McHenry's western policy. McHenry, an Irish-born surgeon and veteran of the Revolution, was appointed Secretary of War during Washington's second term, and remained in the cabinet during the Adams administration. Rumors of plots in the west, often based in reality (e.g. Blount's Conspiracy), combined with concerns about France's growing designs on the interior of North America and the generally unsettled nature of the region, caused McHenry to focus much of his time on western matters. In fact, McHenry's biographer, Karen Robbins, plainly states that he "decided to give special attention to the West." As part of his focus on the West McHenry engaged special agents to collect intelligence about the status of the borderlands. John McKee was one of the most informative of these agents. Andrew Ellicott, who was sent out the year before McKee to conduct a survey between Native American and white settlers' lands proved to be another source for McHenry.

McKee's Report as Intelligence for Western Expansion

McKee's report comprises a concise, chronological reporting of his movements in the West, with much information about the conditions of the places he visited. Following McHenry's instructions McKee left Knoxville in February 1797, proceeded down the Tennessee into the Mississippi. Notably he delayed for a time at New Madrid and Fort Massac, the latter an important fort on the Ohio River in what was then the western United States and where six years later Lewis and Clark would stop to recruit volunteers before



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embarking on their famous western explorations. On March 19 McKee landed at Chickasaw Bluffs, where he spoke to the Spanish commandant Captain Bellechasse. He noted that the Spanish "burned to the ground" the public buildings at Chickasaw Bluffs as part of their evacuation. At Walnut Hill he reported that he "saw no disposition to evacuate the post" on the part of the Spanish. On March 29 he landed at Natchez where he remained a month. Here he noted that Governor Gayoso was not disposed to honor Pinckney's Treaty.

The reason for the above has to do with a change in situation for Spain. Initially against revolutionary France in 1792, Spain would make a separate peace treaty with France some three years later. Spanish emissaries encouraged new settlements in the American West, with the hope that such settlements would eventually secede from the United States. In other letters to McHenry, McKee reported how the Spanish had given presents to the Creeks, Cherokees, and the Choctaws, and urged them to oppose the United States' boundary survey.

Karen Robbins' summary of McHenry's western policies underscores the crucial nature of McKee's intelligence reporting, which underpinned McHenry's decisions on western matters; in very real sense, McKee's intelligence informed the American position about western expansion in 1797-1799:

The Spanish presence in the American West could not simply be ignored, however, so McHenry developed a carrot-and-stick policy to separate the Spanish from the land. As an enticement, the Spanish could destroy their forts and their settlers could petition Congress to keep their homes and count on an equitable adjustment of their claims. McHenry also ordered more gifts to the Indians, with the injunction that they not be seduced by the other countries. Then he ingratiated the most important trading firm in the area, Panton, Leslie & Co., ordering McKee to allow the company unidentified "indulgences" when collecting their debts from the area Indians. This would strengthen American influence in the area without physically threatening the Spanish and risking an unnecessary incident.

...the "stick" portion of McHenry's policy commenced, involving a "hardening of the American position" against the Spanish. McHenry commanded Wilkinson to remind the Spanish governor of Pinckney's Treaty and of the need to abandon their forts. Further, McHenry ordered the arrest of any anti-American agitators found among the Indians, and the Indians were to be rewarded for informing. More soldiers were being sent to increase American strength on the Mississippi. This would place the United States in an optimal position both to keep present territory and, if necessary, to create a "new frontier" - that is, to obtain the Spanish Floridas and control of the Mississippi



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"should hostile acts on the part of France + Spain render a new frontier a just + necessary measure." McHenry's policy now required time to work. No more could be done, short of war. By the following April, the policy worked - the Spanish left their forts. - Robbins, pages 181-182.

McKee's comments on the unstable loyalties of the people in the Natchez district, whose "love of change" outweighed their sense of patriotism, deserve comment. While on the surface the description can be seen as an alarm bell about the susceptibilities of the frontier population, this information could also have influenced the highest level of the government on the importance of co-opting western interests. Historian David Narrett, in his recent book, *Adventurism and Empire: the Struggle for Mastery in the Louisiana-Florida Borderlands, 1762-1803*, has described the Natchez District as "the first Anglo-American 'Texas' - a locale where a permissive colonial order allowed foreigners to take control from within while the U.S. government generated growing pressure from without." One might also see in McKee's description the seeds of a future generation's political power base:

This district is composed, as most new settlements are, principally of men of desperate fortunes there are here many tories who, after the revolution, made it their asylum, not daring to return, there are also many men of broken fortunes who had retired here to spend the remainder of their days, and there unfortunately are too many who have fled from the United States to evade the punishment that there awaited their crimes. From the variety of different characters from different Nations of different political opinions that compose this small District, it is impossible to form any correct or just estimate of their agregate value to our Government - they may be good or bad citizens as they are wisely or injudiciously treated and much will depend on those immediately administering the Government to them. - the germ of faction has already taken root among them and if it is not checked it may grow to a formidable stature.

On May 1 McKee arrived in New Orleans, which he described as a city of some 8,000 inhabitants, "principally French and people of color." He details the fortifications at New Orleans and environs, noting the presence of "not more than five hundred soldiers." From New Orleans he continued on a small schooner to Mobile, noting that the Choctaws there were supplied by the firm of Panton, Leslie & Co.:

At this post the Choctaws are supplied with their trade by Panton, Leslie & Co. and here they annually receive their presents from the Spanish Government, and while they are dependant on this post for their trade they will be the tools of Spanish Agents, for tho' a great part of the Nation inherit a strong hatred to the name of Spaniard yet their interest will lay them under the control of the only source of their supplies. - I have before suggested the necessity of establishing trading houses on the



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Mississippi for the Chickasaws and Choctaws, and of placing the latter on a footing with other Nations as relates to annual presents, and I hazard a prediction that some such regulation will soon become essential to the preservation of peace between those Indians and the Mississippi Territory.

In June McKee went from Mobile to Pensacola, where he noted the Creek Nation was also being supplied by Panton, Leslie:

Pensacola is a small town & from the present appearance of the buildings is declining, it is situated on a beautiful bay affording I suppose the best harbour in the Gulf of Mexico to all vessels drawing no more than twenty two feet water - the entrance of the Bay which is narrow and winding is guarded by a pretty strong fort, at that time not quite completed garrisoned by about three hundred and fifty soldiers with some slaves and others engaged in finishing the works. On a hill overlooking the town to the North are two forts now almost intirely neglected in one there is a non commissioned officer and about twelve soldiers, the other is intirely [sic] abandoned.

At the end of July he returned to Mobile, planning to pass through Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Cherokee territories, only to be arrested by the Spanish Commandant there, who eventually (November 1) ordered him to New Orleans, with apologies for the inconvenience. In early January McKee left New Orleans, traveling by land to Natchez, remaining there until July 10, "when I set out for this place [Philadelphia] by way of Orleans."

In the penultimate paragraph of his report McKee concludes by emphasizing the importance of the Indian trade in enlisting the southern tribes to one's side in the event of war with Spain or France, strongly recommending that the United States take on the mantel of influence already established by the virtual monopoly built over many years by Panton, Leslie & Company:

I cannot conclude without observing that from the observation I had in my power to make of the conduct of the Spanish Officers on the Mississippi and Florida, either as related to their internal regulations, then intercourse with the Indians, or their frivolous pretexts for delaying to execute the treaty, I have not a doubt but war with the United States was then (in 97) contemplated, and I believe it is yet considered as an eventual consequence of a war between the United States and France, and their means will be exerted to gain all possible influence with the Southern Indians for the purpose of inlisting them on their side, this they can effect only by means of their trade - take that from them and you will have taken from them the only weapon they have in those provinces to goad us. The trade I have before observed can only be wrested from them by the establishment of



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trading houses on the Mississippi, and offering to the house of Panton, Leslie & Co. such protection and encouragement, as will induce them to remove their Books, &c. to those trading houses - the influence of that house which is greater than that of any other set of men would instantly be transfered to the United States.

Panton, Leslie & Company

The so-called "indulgences" extended to Panton, Leslie & Company described by historians involved the large debts owed the firm by the southern tribes. The influence of these debts has been recognized a major thread running through Southern borderlands history from 1794 to 1812:

...the huge effort to collect from the southern Indians the trading debts which they had contracted to Panton, Leslie and Company, the famous British firm which dominated the Indian trade in the Floridas and adjoining areas during the closing years of the eighteenth century. The collection campaign was long and persistent, and in its final ten years it had the co-operation of the United States government... It is a thread running through southern history from 1794 to 1812 and touching in its course foreign policy, Indian administration, frontier defense, and private intrigue. - Robert S. Cotterill

McKee and McHenry were clearly alive to the possibility of using such debts as leverage to extract land cessions from Native Americans. In time this strategy, with the government paying the debts in exchange for lands, would be seen as a means to dispossess Native Americans of their lands in other parts of the Spanish Borderlands, including strategically important lands on the eastern banks of the Mississippi. Thus, it is interesting to see that McKee might have been the architect of the plan, given his first hand experience in the region and interactions with both William Panton and with Native Americans as Indian agent.

Conclusion

One may speculate on the exact reasons for the creation of McKee's 1799 report on his 1797 western borderland activities. As an analog to Andrew Ellicott's work on surveying the Spanish borderlands, McKee's report is a very interesting source document on what was then the western frontier, certaining dovetailing with Ellicott's work. Within the larger historical context of western expansion, given its significance in informing western policy through a key cabinet figure concerned with western matters, McKee's report can be seen as a foundational predecessor, albeit in condensed form, to the famous western exploration reports of Lewis and Clark (1804-1806), Zebulon Pike (1806-1807), and James



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Long (1819).

Rarity

The papers of James McHenry were dispersed in a two-part Parke-Bernet auction in 1944. Individual items from his papers appear in the market from time to time. The present, unpublished substantial report by John McKee, not part of the Parke-Bernet sale, would seem to be one of the most important items to surface from McHenry's papers in decades.

Several institutions hold items relating to McHenry, including the Clements Library and the Library of Congress. There are also significant holdings of his official correspondence in the Papers of the War Department.

Provenance

Dr. Herbert Ernest Klingelhofer (1915-2015), collector and former President of the Manuscript Society.

Here follows a complete transcription of the text:

Philadelphia January 1st 1799

Sir,

On the 18th February 1797 I left Knoxville under your instructions of the 21st December 1796 and proceeded down the Tennessee into the Ohio and Mississippi delaying a few days at Fort Massac and two days at New Madrid this post has for some time past been the rendezvous of all Indians disaffected to the United States travelling down the Mississippi, and when I was there I was informed by a Cherokee who knew me that five or six Creeks were uncamped near the village with the scalp of a whiteman they had lately killed on Cumberland.-

On the 19th March I landed at the Chickasaw Bluffs, and found the Spaniards in the last stage of evacuating that post, they had almost all their moveable articles on board their boats ready to be transported across the river to a little redoubt they had erected there. - The Commandant Captain Bellechasse told me if I would stay a few hours, I would be a witness to the evacuation of the Fort in a way which tho not agreeable either to his wishes or expectations had been ordered. - I remained there that night, and in the evening saw all the public buildings burned to the ground -- A few hours



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after they were consumed, a perogue arrived express from New Orleans, which it was said brought orders countermanding the evacuation of the Bluffs - but they arrived too late -- Some of the Chickasaw Chiefs had been sent for to witness the good disposition of the Spaniards towards their nation, in thus not only abandoning but demolishing the works erected on their grounds. -- There is no other post betwixt this and the Walnut Hills. -- there was indeed at that time a Corporal and four or five soldiers in a little hut on the point of an Island that covers the mouth of White River for that purpose, they told us, of purchasing flour for the Garrison at Aux Arcs a small post about 20 Leagues up the Arkansa River. - When I arrived at the Walnut Hills I saw no appearance of a disposition to evacuate that post - it is true they had some time before burned a redoubt of some strength, but soon after I reached the Natchez several galleys passed up with troops and engineers to refit and strengthen the works, and the only fort that is now of any strength at that post has been almost entirely new built between that time and the taking possession of it by the troops of the United States.

About the 29th March I landed at Natchez and immediately waited on the Governor (Gayoso) who treated me with every possibly mark of attention and politeness but found by an order requiring every person coming there from the United States to settle immediately to take an oath of fealty to his Catholic Majesty, that there then existed but little disposition on his part or that of his superiors to execute the treaty. - I remained here near a month and made several excursions into the country. - The Militia of this District may probably consist of about 1,800 or 2,000 men, and, with very few exceptions, they expressed the greatest anxiety that the United States would immediately extend a Government to them -- this anxiety I doubted, and doubt still, was not, as some pretended, from the oppression the[y] experienced from the Spanish Government, for I could hear of but few cases where the inhabitants of this district had been treated severely without just cause, nor as others avowed from a predilection for our Government, for many of them had already left it either because they disliked or because they had violated it, but from a love of change too common to all I believe who having left their own country cease to feel the generous influence of patriotism - they wish the world to be like their minds in a continued state of revolution. - This district is composed, as most new settlements are, principally of men of desperate fortunes there are here many Tories who, after the revolution, made it their asylum, not daring to return, there are also many men of broken fortunes who had retired here to spend the remainder of their days, and there unfortunately are too many who have fled from the United States to evade the punishment that there awaited their crimes. From the variety of different characters from different Nations of different political opinions that compose this small District, it is impossible to form any correct or just estimate of their aggregate value to our Government - they may be good or bad citizens as they are wisely or injudiciously treated and much



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will depend on those immediately administering the Government to them. - the germ of faction has already taken root among them and if it is not checked it may grow to a formidable stature. Many of the settlers on the Mississippi below the thirty-first degree of North Latitude are men who have been raised genteelly in France and have come over encouraged by the hope of vast wealth to be easily acquired, and being disappointed in their extravagant expectations, they too are dissatisfied and restless, and to shake off the Spanish Government would rally round any foreign standard. I have heard some of them declaring they wished the United States would send down an army and take possession of New Orleans, but their affections are chiefly for the French, and should that nation ever land troops on the Mississippi they would find a great proportion of the Inhabitants ready to imbrace their most absurd political heresies.

About the 1st May I arrived at New Orleans. - This City contains about 8,000 Inhabitants, principally French, and people of color, there are a few Catalonians engaged in the lower branches of trade, the principal Merchants being English or from the United States. It is surrounded by a ditch and pickets, guarded by five small Forts and as many batteries, there are here not more than five hundred soldiers, and no place of Strength higher up the Mississippi - there are some preparations making for fortifying at Baton Rouge about thirty leagues above New Orleans, and the first high land above the mouth of the river, about thirty pieces of Cannon and as many soldiers had been moved up in June last. - About fifteen leagues below Orleans and eight above the Balize there is Plackaman the strongest Fort on the River, it is generally garrisoned by sixty to eighty soldiers but is capable of containing 6000. - it is intended and well calculated to command the river. There is also an inconsiderable fort about a league from New Orleans on the border of Lake Ponchartrain where the Boyo St. John empties into the Lake, thro' this Bayo and a Canal of about a mile cut from it to the City most of the trade is carried on to Mobile and Pensacola in small vessels drawing but six or seven feet water, the Canal was cut under the direction of the late governor the Baron de Carondelet whose name it bears. -- From New Orleans I passed over in a small schooner to Mobile about the last of May. At this post the Chocktaws are supplied with their trade by Panton, Leslie & Co. and here they annually receive their presents from the Spanish Government, and while they are dependant on this post for their trade they will be the tools of Spanish Agents, for tho' a great part of the Nation inherit a strong hatred to the name of Spaniard yet their interest will lay them under the control of the only source of their supplies. - I have before suggested the necessity of establishing trading houses on the Mississippi for the Chickasaws and Chocktaws, and of placing the latter on a footing with other Nations as relates to annual presents, and I hazard a prediction that some such regulation will soon become essential to the preservation of peace between those Indians and the Mississippi Territory. -- They already say that other Indians have been paid for fighting



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against the United States, whilst they who have never shed their blood, but on the contrary have fought by their side are disregarded.

In June I went from Mobile to Pensacola (about twenty leagues by land) here a part of the Creek Nation is supplied also by the house of Panton, Leslie & Co. and here too they receive their annual presents from the Spanish Government, there were then at that place a large number of Guns for the purpose of presenting to the Indians, some of them had been offered to the lower Creeks (so one of their Chiefs stated at Mr. Panton's table) for the purpose of defending themselves against the English and Americans. - Pensacola is a small town & from the present appearance of the buildings is declining, it is situated on a beautiful bay affording I suppose the best harbour in the Gulf of Mexico to all vessels drawing no more than twenty two feet water - the entrance of the Bay which is narrow and winding is guarded by a pretty strong fort, at that time not quite completed garrisoned by about three hundred and fifty soldiers with some slaves and others engaged in finishing the works. On a hill overlooking the town to the North are two forts now almost intirely neglected in one there is a non commissioned officer and about twelve soldiers, the other is intirely abandoned.

About the last of July I returned to Mobile with a view of returning by that way thro the Chocktaw, Chicksaw and Cherokee Nations, and was there arrested by the Commandant and informed that he held the Governor's order not to suffer me to leave the place, and here I remained in a state of arestation till after writing to Governor Gayoso, and demanding the cause of my confinement he ordered me about the 1st November to New Orleans on board a Galley and informed me he had been misinformed and was sorry for the inconvenience I had suffered.

Some time early in January I left Orleans and went by land to Natchez where I remained till about the 10th July when I set out for this place by way of Orleans.

I cannot conclude without observing that from the observation I had in my power to make of the conduct of the Spanish Officers on the Mississippi and Florida, either as related to their internal regulations, then intercourse with the Indians, or their frivolous pretexts for delaying to execute the treaty, I have not a doubt but war with the United States was then (in 97) contemplated, and I believe it is yet considered as an eventual consequence of a war between the United States and France, and their means will be exerted to gain all possible influence with the Southern Indians for the purpose of inlisting them on their side, this they can effect only by means of their trade - take that from them and you will have taken from them the only weapon they have in those provinces to goad us. - The trade I have before observed can only be wrested from them by the establishment of



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The necessity I was under of destroying my memoranda when arrested at Mobbille, I hope will be considered an excuse for not presenting you a complete journal of my voyage - what I have the honor of now offering you is intirely from memory, and tho' with the letters I have heretofore written it contains the principal occurrences, it is yet far from what I wished and what (had it not been for the necessity I was under of burning my papers) I would have had it in my power to offer you.

I have the honor to be with sincere esteem & respect your obedient Servent,

John McKee

To the Honorable James McHenry Esq. Secretary of War

Detailed Condition:

3 bifolia, stitched. 11 pages of manuscript text. Condition is excellent, the leaves fresh and crisp. Docketed on verso of final page: "Mr. McKee."