DR. JOHN SIBLEY OF NATCHITOCHES, 1757-1837

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When John Sibley crossed the Charleston Bar in July, 1802, bound for the Spanish Possession, Louisiana, he started on a journey to a new country where he expected to better his condition in many ways. He little expected that he would simply immigrate from one part of the United States and take up his residence in another, for this didn’t seem to be his idea. He seemed to be trying to get away from conditions in North Carolina and wife number two.

His move to Louisiana was just at the time when the change of ownership was about to take place; he was familiar or represented himself to be very familiar with the whole section of what is now the State of Louisiana, and to know all of the Indian tribes residing therein. He had traveled up Red River to the neighborhood of the present City of Shreveport. He knew something of the lands around Natchitoches and there he settled and made his home. He profited by his appointments, and also by his business and trading ability. He was therefore successful. Being successful he made some very close friends and some very bitter enemies, the latter seemed to be in the majority or to have the most influence.

Dr. John Sibley was born in Sutton, Massachusetts, on the 19th day of May, 1757. He was a descendant of a long line of old rock-ribbed New Englanders, his ancestors having moved to America about the middle of the seventeenth century. His father was an ardent patriot, and the son followed in his footsteps and joined the Continental Army and served through the Revolutionary War. He held the position of a Surgeon’s mate.
After independence was accomplished Sibley moved to Great Barrington, Massachusetts, where he entered upon the practice of his profession. It was while here that he married Miss Elizabeth Hopkins, about 1780. From this marriage there were two sons born, George C. Sibley, April 1, 1782, and Samuel Hopkins Sibley, 1784. How happy this marriage was seems to be doubtful, but in 1784, Dr. John Sibley left his wife and two children in Great Barrington, Mass., and journeyed to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he took up his residence and began to build his fortune. He established a newspaper in North Carolina, and was soon engaged in acquiring farm lands and town property. His wife and family joined him in Fayetteville, where they made their home until the death of Elizabeth Hopkins Sibley on October 25, 1790.

Many charged that Dr. Sibley deserted his family in Massachusetts and that his wife never saw him after he left that State. This does not seem to be the facts, for this little newspaper clipping now in the possession of Lindenwood College, seems to tell a different story:

Died. This morning, Mrs. Elizabeth Sibley, the wife of Doctor John Sibley and daughter of Reverend Samuel Hopkins of New Port, Rhode Island. She has left a husband with two little sons to lament her death. As a wife, a Christian and friend she was exceeded by few: but as a mother, by none. The inhabitants of Fayetteville are requested to attend her funeral tomorrow at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, from the house of Doctor Sibley to the place of interment. 25th October, 1790.

Dr. Sibley remarried on November 10, 1791; this time he married a widow, Mrs. Mary Winslow, born White, widow of Edward Winslow. She died October 25, 1811, at Fayetteville, North Carolina.

Sibley says that he lost his home and newspaper at Fayetteville, just before he moved to Louisiana, and in Louisiana he suffered a similar loss. Whether it was the loss of the house and printing office, or the hopes of going to new fields where he could better his condition, or whether it was family troubles, we do not know, but we do know that he moved to Louisiana and we find in his diary statements that would lead one to believe that all was not as nice at home as should be, such as, January 1st, 1810—“I wrote Mrs. Sibley a New Year’s letter and sent her a draft for $100.00.”

January 1st, 1811—“Sent Mary Sibley a draft for $100.”

There were two children born of this marriage, one was Henry Robert Sibley, who became a Doctor and resided in the Parish of Rapids; the other was a daughter, Ann Elizabeth Sibley, who married Josiah Stoddard Johnston, United States Senator from the State of Louisiana, and after his death she married Henry D. Gilpin of Philadelphia.

Dr. Sibley contracted a third marriage in November, 1813. By this wife (Eudalie Maligue) he had four children. The descendants of these three marriages were numerous, and are scattered over the United States.

All of the children of Dr. Sibley either lived near him or kept in close touch with him by letter, as we find today by the numerous letters written by him to his sons George C. and Samuel Hopkins Sibley, and the numerous references made in these various letters to other members of the family.

Dr. Sibley arrived in New Orleans about the 18th day of September, 1802, and here remained until the first of October. During his stay in New Orleans he busied himself visiting various people of standing in the community and forming an opinion of the City, its people and their customs. All of this he confided to his diary and today it makes interesting reading and affords a view of society, business and conditions different from any others that we possess.

On the first of October he embarked upon a barge for Bayou Sara and from that place he expected to travel by land to Natchez. He was armed with letters of introduction to nearly all of the people of importance residing along the Mississippi, in West Florida, and in the part of the present state of Mississippi south of Natchez. Among the number were Major Stephen Minor, Governor Winthrop Sargent, Sir William Dunbar, Philip Hickey, David Bradford, Dr. Young of Pointe Coupee, and Isaac Johnson. He arrived at Washington, Mississippi, on October 17th, and called on his old friend and former acquaintance Judge David Ker. It was at Washington and in the home of Judge Ker, that Sibley met William Charles Cole Claiborne, the territorial Governor of Mississippi, the future territorial Governor of Orleans Territory and the first Governor of the State of Louisiana. This
meeting resulted in the formation of a friendship that lasted during the life of the Governor.

When the United States purchased Louisiana, and the President was seeking information from any one who might give him detailed description of the territory that had been recently purchased, the character of the territory, the Indian Tribes existing within its borders, and above all, Indian vocabularies, he appealed to Governor Claiborne, Daniel Clark, Sir William Dunbar, and many others. Claiborne knew Sibley, and Sibley had impressed him with his knowledge of Louisiana, the Indians, and the worth of the new country, and he in turn brought Sibley to the attention of the President and a correspondence was opened that resulted in Sibley being an officer holder and political factor in the new territory.

Dr. Sibley made a journey up Red River in March, 1803, and as was usual with him, kept a diary or journal of his trip. A copy of this journal was furnished General Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War and was published in the Annals of Congress, Ninth Congress, Second Session, and in American State Papers (Gale & Seaton Edition), Vol. 1, Indian Affairs. He also prepared and furnished the President with "Historical Sketches of the Several Indian Tribes in Louisiana South of the Arkansas River, and between the Mississippi and the River Grande." This was published in the same publication as the journal above referred to. Sibley was requested by the President to obtain for him vocabularies of the Indian Tribes residing in Louisiana, other than the Attakapas and Chitimacassas, for these he had. These vocabularies were promised; whether the promise was ever fulfilled, I am unable to say.

Sibley went to Natchitoches in 1803, and made it his home. When the United States took charge of the purchased territory, a detachment of troops was sent to Natchitoches and stationed in the fort to protect the citizens and country against the Indians and to keep the Spanish out. The Doctor received his first reward for information given, by being employed or appointed as a contract surgeon to care for the troops stationed at Natchitoches. This position he held off and on until 1807 or 1808. He was requested to do such work as he could among the Indians, to keep them friendly with the United States, and in 1805 he was commissioned as Indian Agent for Orleans Ter-

The Sibley Papers, Journal and Letters
springs to make salt. The Indians before the coming of the white people had a regular salt trade with the other tribes beyond the Mississippi.

Sibley was a successful business man and when he died in 1837, he left a large estate to be divided among the three sets of children that resulted from his three marriages.

Dr. Sibley aside from the journal and the sketch of the Indians above referred to made many reports of his activities as an Indian Agent in the State of Louisiana. One of these reports has been printed under the title of "A Report from Natchitoches in 1807, by Dr. John Sibley," (Museum of the American Indian, New York, 1922). He wrote many letters that are now in the possession of the Missouri Historical Society, the American Antiquarian Society of Worcester, Mass., and Lindenwood College, St. Charles, Mo. This college also owns the journal that is published in this number of the Quarterly.

This journal was found among the papers of Major George C. Sibley of St. Charles, Missouri. Major Sibley was the eldest child of Dr. John Sibley. He was appointed Indian Agent in Missouri in 1808, and was located at Fort Osage. In 1827, Major George C. Sibley and his wife, Mary Easton Sibley, established a school for girls at St. Charles, Missouri, which they called Lindenwood. Major Sibley left all of his property to this little college, and this journal was found among the papers left by Major Sibley and forms a part of what is known as the Lindenwood Collection of Sibley Manuscripts.

When preparing for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of this college, the journal was found by Miss Lucinda de L. Templin and brought to my attention. I am under obligations to her for having obtained the copy from the college and for having obtained their permission to publish same.

There appears to have been several copies of this diary made by Dr. Sibley and I believe that each member of his family was furnished with a copy of the seven little books. George C. Sibley had two copies of Number 1 and 5. These memorandum books are marked "Memorandum Book. Dr. John Sibley, No. 1, in 7 Numbers," the other is marked "Memorandum Book. Dr. John Sibley, No. 5, In 7 Numbers." In a letter written to his son, Hopkins, February 28, 1803, he said: "I keep a journal of my travels with pretty lengthy remarks
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1757-1837

SKETCH OF HIS LIFE
BY
G. P. WHITTINGTON

The Journal of Dr. Sibley, July-October, 1802. Covering Visit to New Orleans and up the Mississippi River to Natchez
Letters of Dr. Sibley to His Son, 1803-21
Letters of Dr. Sibley to Christopher C. Baldwin of Massachusetts, 1832-35

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