

Guide to a Microfilm Edition of

*The Lawrence Taliaferro Papers*

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*LAWRENCE TALIAFERRO (1794-1871). This oil portrait, probably painted about 1835 by an unknown artist, was presented to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1947 by Mrs. Virginia Bonner Pesch and John F. Bonner, Taliaferro's grandniece and grandnephew.*

## *The Lawrence Taliaferro Papers*

THE MANUSCRIPTS of Lawrence Taliaferro in the Minnesota Historical Society measure two linear feet and include correspondence and miscellaneous papers (1813-68) arranged in chronological order as well as nineteen volumes.

A few of the papers relate to the War of 1812 and Taliaferro's experiences in the army between 1813 and 1819. The bulk of the collection documents his career as United States Indian agent from 1820 to 1839 at the St. Peters Agency near Fort Snelling in present-day Minnesota. Copies of letters sent are missing for much of the period between 1829 and 1836. Financial records, lacking for the years from 1823 to 1829, are far from complete for the rest of the period. Only a few items cover Taliaferro's life after leaving the Indian service in 1839.

The manuscripts have been copied on four rolls of microfilm in the order in which they are arranged at the society. An inventory of the contents of the collection and the roll appears at the beginning of each film roll, and descriptive targets provide useful information for the study of individual records or groups of records within the rolls.

This handbook provides biographical data on Lawrence Taliaferro, information on the Minnesota Historical Society's acquisition of the collection, and an analysis of the content of the microfilm. It also includes an inventory of microfilm rolls, a selected bibliography on Taliaferro, and a list of author and subject entries the society used in cataloging the papers (see pages 11 and 12).

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Taliaferro (pronounced Tol'-li-ver) was born in Whitehall, King George County, Virginia, February 28, 1794, the fourth son of James G. and Wilhelmina Wishart Taliaferro. His mother was the daughter of a Scottish clergyman. His Italian ancestors on his father's side had emigrated to Virginia by way of England in the early 1600s. Their descendants were prominent landed gentry in the colony and state, and Taliaferro's uncle, John Taliaferro, served for many years as a United States Congressman from Virginia.

After being educated at home by tutors, Taliaferro embarked upon a military career. At the outbreak of the War of 1812, he enlisted in a company of volunteer infantry where he served for three months. Then he enrolled in a grammar school to prepare himself for an appointment in the regular army. In June, 1813, he

received a commission as ensign in the First Infantry Regiment and a promise of help from James Monroe, a "patron friend" who was then United States Secretary of State.

Taliaferro rose to the rank of first lieutenant. Serving in a company commanded by Lieutenant Linai Taliaferro Helm, a distant relative, and then by Captain John Cleves Symmes, Taliaferro saw duty on the Niagara frontier in 1814. During his early army career, he was also a recruiting officer in Ohio and New Jersey, commanded a detachment stationed near Detroit, and was a quartermaster and ordnance officer at Fort Dearborn (Chicago).

In 1818 Taliaferro was granted a leave of absence because of ill health, and after several months at the mineral springs near Bedford, Pennsylvania, he visited Washington to pay his respects to James Monroe, then President of the United States. At the President's urging, he resigned from the army to accept appointment as an Indian agent.

In December, 1819, Taliaferro was ordered by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, in whose department the Office of Indian Affairs was located, to establish an agency among the Sioux (Dakota) and Chippewa (Ojibway) at the junction of the St. Peters (now the Minnesota) and Mississippi rivers. "Major" Taliaferro (his honorary military title) arrived at his destination in July, 1820. He had been preceded by the Fifth Infantry, which had been ordered to build a military post at this location. Commanded by Colonel Henry Leavenworth, the force had reached the St. Peters in August, 1819, and before the summer of 1820 was over, Leavenworth's successor, Colonel Josiah Snelling, began building the post that later bore his name. Within the walls of this fort Taliaferro had his first office. Gradually he established his headquarters in nearby buildings where he carried out his duties during the rest of his nineteen-year career at St. Peters.

Some time in the 1820s Taliaferro formed a liaison with an unnamed Sioux half-breed woman. During the summer of 1828, their daughter Mary — Taliaferro's only child — was born at St. Peters. She seems to have grown up near the agency and Taliaferro sent her to the Lake Harriet Mission School. Taliaferro represented her claim as a half-breed for annuities and land under the treaty of 1837, and after he left the agency arranged for her to live in the home of missionaries. She later married Warren Woodbury, a Fort Snelling soldier who was killed in the Civil War.

Although Taliaferro acknowledged his daughter, he never married her mother. While he was in the East on furlough in 1828, at the time of Mary's birth, he married Elizabeth Dillon, daughter of a Bedford hotelkeeper. He returned with his wife to the agency that year, and her brother, H. N. Dillon, visited there a number of times. In 1835 Dillon prepared a brief Sioux dictionary which is part of the Taliaferro Papers.

Taliaferro, who was reappointed to his position at St. Peters six times during four different presidential administrations, resigned his post in 1839. He retired to Bedford, where he became for a time treasurer of Bedford County. In 1857 he rejoined the army and served in the Quartermaster Corps until 1863. He died at Bedford in 1871.

## ORIGIN OF THE COLLECTION

Shortly after Taliaferro's retirement in 1863, the Reverend Edward D. Neill, an officer of the society, asked permission to "peruse" any records the agent had kept of his years of service on the upper Mississippi. Taliaferro sent Neill many of the items now in the Taliaferro Papers. Neill used them in preparing an article on "Occurrences in and around Fort Snelling, from 1819 to 1840," which was published in the society's *Collections* in 1864 (vol. 2: 102-142).

In response to a suggestion from Neill in 1864, Taliaferro wrote the autobiography which appears in the papers. He sent the manuscript to the White House, where Neill was then employed as a secretary to President Lincoln. Neill kept the autobiography and the other manuscripts hoping to prepare a biographical sketch of Taliaferro.

Although the agent had given away to libraries and collectors many of his manuscripts bearing famous autographs, he must have had a large collection of papers in his home at Bedford when fire destroyed his library there in March, 1865. Those which survived the fire, including one of the journals (vol. 13), were presented to the society in the next three years. During this time, Taliaferro authorized J. Fletcher Williams, the society's secretary, to procure the records which had been entrusted to Neill. Williams, it appears, later cataloged the collection and prepared Taliaferro's autobiography for publication in the society's *Collections* in 1894 (vol. 6:189-255).

In 1915 another Taliaferro journal (vol. 8) turned up in a pile of old books in a cellar in St. Louis. The volume was purchased by W. M. Nisbet, a book dealer, who sold it to Edson S. Gaylord of Minneapolis; Gaylord then gave it to the society. In 1927 Taliaferro's grandniece, Mrs. Virginia Bonner Pesch of St. Louis, presented photocopies of an 1861 letter to Taliaferro from James Buchanan and two newspaper clippings of the 1860s about Taliaferro. In the 1960s copies of two letters, from Josiah Snelling and John C. Calhoun to Taliaferro, were presented by Floyd Risvold of Minneapolis, and an 1814 letter from John O'Fallon, the gift of George Flaskerd of Minneapolis, completed the society's Taliaferro Papers.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE PAPERS

Following two undated fur trade invoices, the papers begin with a copy of Taliaferro's memorandum of the advice given him by James Monroe on June 2, 1813. Information on the first period of his service with the army (1813-19) is found in a few miscellaneous papers (Roll 1) and in the autobiography (Roll 4). Two order books for 1813 and 1815 (Roll 2) do not relate directly to Taliaferro's army experience, except for brief notes he made at the end of the second, but they do contain details of army life on the Niagara frontier.

That for 1813 includes orders for the First Brigade of the army at Cantonment Saranac, New York, where troops of the Sixth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Infantry regiments were encamped early in the year. It was this brigade that marched to Sackets Harbor, where with other troops it prepared for the invasion of

Canada. Orders for this period describe plans for the invasion and record events following the capture of York (Toronto) and Fort George.

The 1815 book contains orders for the combined First and Twenty-First Infantry regiments stationed at Sackets Harbor. When the army was reorganized after the end of the war, the Twenty-First became a part of the Fifth Infantry, and was ordered to Detroit. Joining it was a detachment of the old First Infantry, Taliaferro's regiment, which was then a part of the Third. Some orders for this detachment appear in the book. It also contains a few miscellaneous records kept by Taliaferro after the troops reached Detroit. Presumably both order books came into his possession at that time.

For Taliaferro's service as Indian agent at St. Peters (1820-39), there are correspondence and miscellaneous papers for the entire period (Rolls 1 and 2), three letter books for the years 1820-29 and 1836-39 (Roll 2), twelve journals for intermittent dates between 1821 and 1839 (Rolls 3 and 4), an account book, 1830-34 (Roll 4), and the autobiography (Roll 4).

The latter contains the only information on Taliaferro's trip to St. Peters. On his way west he stopped at St. Louis where he met General William Clark, superintendent of Indian affairs who was to be his superior officer until 1836, when the St. Peters Agency was shifted first to the Wisconsin and then to the Iowa superintendencies. Here, too, he met the amiable old French-American gentleman, Nicholas Boilvin, Indian agent at Prairie du Chien (Wisconsin), who traveled with him up the Mississippi. Letters from Boilvin in his amusing colloquial French and highly individual spelling recall the pleasant association between them during the next seven years.

In the papers for the agency period there is data, too, on Taliaferro's relations with the commandants at Fort Snelling. Drafts of several tart letters to Colonel Leavenworth reveal how the agent immediately asserted his authority over Indian affairs. Taliaferro respected the brisk, efficient Colonel Snelling who assumed command in August, 1820, and Snelling readily deferred to Taliaferro in all matters respecting the Indians. Significant letters from Snelling to Taliaferro between 1820 and 1827 reveal the friendly relationship between the two men which lasted throughout Snelling's tour of duty at the post. There is routine correspondence with most of the other commandants of the post.

In his relationships with the Indians as well as with the command, Taliaferro revealed himself a proud and patriotic man who demanded respect for himself and his government. Honorable in his dealings with the Indians, he was intolerant of trickery and deceit, and he demonstrated a sensitivity to their self-esteem by meeting them with all the pomp and ceremony he could muster.

The Sioux tribes under his jurisdiction included the Mdewakanton, Wahpeton, Wahpekute, Sisseton, and Yankton. Chippewa bands at the headwaters of the Mississippi River, as well as those in the St. Croix Valley of present-day Minnesota and Wisconsin, were also under his charge until 1827 when they were assigned to the agency at Sault Ste. Marie (Michigan) and the subagency at La Pointe (Wisconsin). But it was easier for them to come down the river to the St. Peters than to go overland to Lake Superior, and they continued to visit Taliaferro in large numbers. Although he was proud of their loyalty and highly indignant at the



officials whom he considered responsible for trying to detach the Chippewa from his agency, Taliaferro was nevertheless harassed by the problems of caring for them without the necessary authority or funds.

Set down in detail in Taliaferro's journals are the names of the Sioux and Chippewa Indians who visited him; their numbers; tribes; bands; chiefs; the gifts, gorgets, medals, trade goods, and annuity payments they received; their health; personal idiosyncrasies; and day-to-day relationships with the agent, the fur traders, and the army. Particularly in the 1830s, the journals give evidence of Taliaferro's attempts to promote education and agriculture among the Sioux. He encouraged missionaries to come into the region to teach secular subjects and agriculture as well as religion. As a result, the government and the missionaries co-operated to establish an Indian school and an agricultural colony (both within present-day Minneapolis).

The journals offer a fascinating dialogue between white man and Indian. Included are transcriptions of Indian speeches (most of them probably translated by the agency's talented interpreter, Scott Campbell) and reports of Taliaferro's diplomatic replies. Although he never became conversant in the Indian languages and knew little of tribal history, Taliaferro seems to have possessed an intuitive understanding of Indian character. The truce he attempted to enforce between traditional enemies, the Sioux and Chippewa, was frequently broken, but the peace he maintained between white men and Indians lasted for the full period of his service.

Taliaferro's journals contain almost nothing on the Indian treaties negotiated with the Sioux and Chippewa of the region in 1825, 1830, 1836, and 1837. Taliaferro outlined the terms of the latter treaty with the Sioux and took a delegation to Washington to sign it. He thought it honorable both to the Indians and the whites, and he considered its successful negotiation a proud moment in his career.

Although the agent's journals for the treaty years are either missing or fragmentary, those for 1838 and 1839 record the unhappy sequel to the treaty of 1837. Taliaferro's pride in the agreement turned to bitterness when the government did not satisfactorily carry out the provisions of the treaty. He felt that government commissioners — particularly William L. D. Ewing — and other white men such as Samuel C. Stambaugh, sutler at Fort Snelling, were attempting to exploit the Indians and half-breeds for their own ends. He recorded the discourtesies and small indignities at the hands of these men and others that were undermining his position of power and authority among both whites and Indians.

Taliaferro's assistants in the work of the agency are named in the papers — the blacksmiths who made and repaired traps, spears, and other implements for the Indians, the interpreters, and guides, as well as subagents Miles M. Vineyard, Horatio Grooms, Elias T. Langham, and Muscoe G. Taliaferro, the agent's younger brother. A few letters and journal entries are in the handwriting of Grooms and Langham. There are also letters from John Marsh, the Fort Snelling tutor and temporary agency employee who later went on to a colorful career in California.

The papers are rich in details of daily life of the white man on the Minnesota

frontier. In his journals Taliaferro notes weather conditions, births, deaths, marriages, steamboat arrivals, the coming of missionaries, emigrants from the Red River settlements, lumbermen, artists, adventurers, and explorers who were attracted to the upper Mississippi wilderness. Of the explorers, Taliaferro was particularly drawn to Joseph N. Nicollet, who spent the winter of 1836 at the agency. He felt that Nicollet rather than Henry R. Schoolcraft should have been credited with the discovery of the true source of the Mississippi. In lengthy comments in his journals, Taliaferro also blamed Schoolcraft for trying to take the Chippewa away from the St. Peters Agency.

Other white men with whom Taliaferro corresponded or with whom he had more than a routine association included Zachary Taylor (1817, 1830), Wiloughby Morgan (1830, 1831) at Fort Crawford, and Joseph Montfort Street, the controversial journalist who succeeded Boilvin as Indian agent at Prairie du Chien. A noteworthy series of letters from Street between 1827 and 1832 provide observations on national politics, postal service in the upper Mississippi Valley, the Black Hawk War, and life in the French-Indian-military community at Prairie du Chien. Also included is correspondence with Jonathan L. Bean, a subagent on the upper Missouri River who came to St. Peters in 1835 on a government survey of the boundary line between the Sioux and Chippewa. A few records relating to the survey also appear in the papers.

Correspondence, drafts of letters to newspapers, and journal entries reveal Taliaferro's growing dissatisfaction with his position at St. Peters. The climate, recurring illness, an ineffective Indian policy in Washington, and his unhappy relationships with the local fur traders were responsible for his disaffection. His hopes for a transfer centered in the political influence of his uncle, Congressman John Taliaferro; and such friends as Samuel L. Southard, his former tutor who was a Senator from New Jersey (1821-23), Secretary of the Navy (1823-28), and acting Secretary of War (1828); and Colonel John Miller, his former commanding officer in the Third Infantry who was serving as a Congressman from Missouri (1839). Even with such powerful support, however, the agent was not able to secure a transfer.

In the end his embittered relationships with the fur traders were his undoing. He crossed swords with them early in his career at St. Peters. Required to issue licenses for their trade with the Indians, Taliaferro soon raised objections to many of the traders' methods. He protested against their practice of issuing goods and supplies to the Indians on credit and then presenting inflated accounts for payment out of treaty funds. He waged war, too, against the unscrupulous traders who corrupted the Indians with whisky. He was particularly hostile toward those of the American Fur Company. Alexis Bailly earned his special scorn, and the feud between them was to outlast his service at the agency. Although Bailly was ousted from his post near St. Peters and Taliaferro established a more dignified relationship with his successor, the agent's distrust of the company remained, and the company, in turn, tried unsuccessfully to have him removed from office.

But the agent's position of respect among white men and perhaps among some of the Indians was gradually eroded, and in 1839 he presented his resignation. Shortly afterward, he was physically assaulted by a disgruntled trader with whom

he had quarreled. After suffering this indignity, he tried to withdraw the resignation so that he would not appear to be leaving under fire, but it was too late. In October, 1839, he left the St. Peters Agency and the Indian service.

The papers after 1839 are slight. There is a document dealing with the slaves Taliaferro brought to the agency in the mid-1820s which supplements the brief, contemporary journal entries concerning them. It is a list of those whom he freed between 1839 and 1843, recorded on the back of a document in miscellaneous papers dated 1813. Among the slaves was his servant Harriet Robinson, the wife of Dred Scott, who later achieved fame in his fight for freedom. Several items of the 1850s record Taliaferro's attempts to obtain sums he claimed were due him from the government. A copy of a letter from James Buchanan (1861) testifies to a long acquaintance between the former President and the Taliaferros. Copies of two clippings (1861) and letters (1868) from Taliaferro to Alfred J. Hill of the Minnesota Historical Society recall events of Taliaferro's career in the army and at St. Peters. A few letters, including one by Winfield S. Scott, appear to have no relation to Taliaferro and were probably kept for their autographs.

## A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

The William Clark Papers in the Kansas State Historical Society, the Joseph Montfort Street Papers in the Iowa State Department of History and Archives, and the papers of Alexis Bailly, Henry H. Sibley, and Edward D. Neill in the Minnesota Historical Society contain useful information about Taliaferro, as do the society's own archives and the records of the American Fur Company of which the society has photographic and typed copies. The records of the Indian Office in the National Archives contain official correspondence and reports from Taliaferro. An unpublished thesis by Paul Zylla, "Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian Agent in Minnesota, 1819-39," at Catholic University, Washington, D.C. (1948) is based largely on a study of these archival records. Willoughby M. Babcock utilized the Taliaferro collection here microfilmed for his authoritative article entitled "Major Lawrence Taliaferro, Indian Agent," in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 11: 358-375 (December, 1924).

## THE MICROFILM

- Roll 1. Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, undated and 1813-35
- Roll 2. Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers, 1836-68; Vol. 1 Order Book, 1813; Vol. 2 Order Book, 1815; Vol. 3 Letter Book, 1820; Vol. 4 Letter Book, 1820-29; Vol. 5 Letter Book, 1836-39
- Roll 3. Vols. 6-14 Journals, 1821-36, and Financial Records, 1819-22
- Roll 4. Vols. 15, 16 Journals, 1838-39, and Financial Records, 1835-39; Vol. 17 Account Book, 1830-June, 1834; Vol. 18 H. N. Dillon, "Dictionary of the Sioux Language," 1835; Vol. 19 Lawrence Taliaferro, "Autobiography," 1864

## SELECTED LIST OF AUTHORS

- Bailly, Alexis, 1798-1861  
 Bean, Jonathan L.  
 Boilvin, Nicholas, 1761-1827  
 Buchanan, James (United States President), 1791-1868  
 Calhoun, John Caldwell, 1782-1850  
 Campbell, Scott, 1790-1850  
 Cass, Lewis, 1782-1866  
 Clark, William, 1770-1838  
 Dillon, H[oratio?] N.  
 Dodge, Henry, 1782-1867  
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 O'Fallon, John  
 St. Peters Agency  
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 Vineyard, Miles M.

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