

Zachary Taylor and Old Fort Snelling

THE NAMES of the great and near great who are in some manner associated with the history of old Fort Snelling are legion. But only one future president lived and worked there—Zachary Taylor, who as lieutenant colonel of the First United States Infantry commanded the post from May 24, 1828, to June 12, 1829. The country round about the post was then an unorganized area; by a coincidence it attained territorial status and identity as Minnesota Territory during Taylor's brief term as president of the United States.

For Minnesotans the finding of a hitherto unknown autograph Taylor letter with a Fort Snelling date line is something of an event. Such a letter recently was added to the Taylor Papers in the Library of Congress, which made a photostatic copy for the Minnesota Historical Society. Permission to publish it in this magazine was given by Dr. Luther H. Evans, librarian of Congress. Written only three months after Taylor took command of Fort Snelling, the letter that follows contains fresh impressions of the colonel's new environment, as well as a vivid picture of the fort itself and significant comments about national and army politics.¹ B.L.H.

ZACHARY TAYLOR TO DR. THOMAS LAWSON,² August 28, 1828

FORT SNELLING 28th of Augt. 1828

MY DEAR DR.

Your kind letter of May last has only this moment reached me for which, be pleased to accept my very best thanks. I must acknowledge that I was not a little mortified at the order removing me so far from the south, & can truly say that among the causes of regret was that it at least for a time will prevent the possibility of

¹ The letter is listed among recent additions to "Papers of the Presidents" in the Library of Congress, *Quarterly Journal of Current Acquisitions*, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 38 (May, 1946).

² When this letter was written Dr. Lawson was the senior surgeon in the army medical department. He became surgeon-general in 1836. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 11:59.

our again serving together [*sic*], which I calculated would have been the case before a great while, had I been continued on the N. Orleans station,³ and what is particularly mortifying to me is, that I have recently understood that you have been ordered to that station, Dr. [Benjamin F.] Harney to Jefferson Barracks, & Dr. [John] Gale to Ft Le[a]venworth,⁴ this arrangement I flatter myself will meet your wishes, & that you will pass a very pleasant time while you are continued in that section of country. I can assure you that neither time, place or circumstance, can impair my friendship & esteem for you, or can deface the recollection of the pleasure I have enjoyed in your society, & I still look forward with much satisfaction for the time to arrive when we will be associated in the same command, for I have no doubt if the present system is continued of removing the troops, that we will be brought together some where before ma[n]y years, perhaps at Jefferson Barracks

I left N. Orleans the first day of May, & reached here the 23^d.⁵ Owing I presume to the change of climate the day we passed the mouth of Ohio Mrs. Taylor had a severe attack of chill followed by fever, so much so, that she was unable to leave her birth [*sic*] without assistance during the trip, since we have been here, her health has been re-established or is as good at present as it has been for some time; whether this climate will agree with her as

³Taylor reported at New Orleans in February, 1827. In the summer of that year he "transferred regimental headquarters" to Baton Rouge, but from November until his departure for Fort Snelling on May 1, 1828, he was again stationed in New Orleans. Holman Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor, Soldier of the Republic*, 72, 77 (Indianapolis, 1941).

⁴Both Harney and Gale were surgeons in the regular army with the rank of major. The posts mentioned had been newly established — Jefferson Barracks, near St. Louis, in 1826, and Fort Leavenworth, near the western boundary of Missouri, a year later. Thomas H. S. Hamersly, ed., *Complete Regular Army Register of the United States*, 452, 493 (Washington, 1880); James Truslow Adams, ed., *Dictionary of American History*, 3:170, 258 (New York, 1940).

⁵Taylor's predecessor, Major J. H. Vose, relinquished his command on May 24, 1828. See a list of commanding officers of the post in Richard W. Johnson's article on "Fort Snelling from Its Foundation to the Present Time," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:430. Taylor apparently did not travel the entire distance to Fort Snelling by steamboat, since he states later that the first boat of the season reached the post on May 26. Major Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at St. Peter's, whose detailed journals usually may be relied upon to confirm dates of arrivals at and departures from the fort, unfortunately was absent from his post from May 10 to November 18, 1828. The first mention of Taylor in the journals, which are owned by the Minnesota Historical Society, is in the entry for February 6, 1829.

well as that of Louisiana, time alone must determine but I hope for the best. The weather was so cold when we arrived, & continued so for near a month, that I could not divest myself of the opinion that it was the commencement of winter instead of summer.

Fort Snelling is situated between the Mississippi & St Peters [*Minnesota*] rivers immediately at their junction, on an elevated bluff about 100 feet above those Rivers, in latitude 45 d. north, the quarters are very comfortable & well constructed & are sufficiently spacious for the accommodation of six or eight full comp^s with the necessary store houses, hospital & the whole surrounded by a substantial stone wall which is com^d by two block [houses] & two towers, all of stone.⁶ The country for some hundred of miles around us is mostly prairie, what little timber there is, is mostly confined to the margin of the water courses, a large portion of the soil is tolerable & if there was wood sufficient for fuel or a substitute for it, would admit of a pretty dense population. [Now] it is inhabited entirely by Indians, who are the most misir[able] set of beings I have ever been among, & I suppose will continue to be so, for the next century. We are eight miles below the fall of St Anthony, which whould [*sic*] be somewhat of a curiosity if there was no falls of Niagara, they are several miles in extent, the principal cascade being about ten feet perpendicular & which extends quite across the river;⁷ the Mississippi here is however nothing in comparison to size to what it is, where you have seen it. The country is filled with small lak[e]s, from six to twenty miles in circumference, which are well stocked with the best fresh water fish.

The order changing the station of the 1st Regt. was so unexpected that I was under the necessity of leaving N. Orleans without being able to arrange my private affairs; a short time before leaving there an order was rec^d from the late secretary of war, directing the Engineer, & ordnance officers to discharge forthwith all slaves employed on the public works, & at ordnance depots,

⁶ The towers, one round and one octagonal, are still standing. For a diagram of the old fort, see Johnson, in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 8:430.

⁷ Taylor described the Fort Snelling vicinity in much the same vein in a letter of April 12, 1830, quoted in Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 79.

belonging to officers,⁸ & I presume his successor will not countermand that order, although I consider it a very singular one, I cannot myself conceive any good reason why officers should be debarred privileges enjoyed by other citizens; But I sincerely hope the days of the present dynasty are numbered, & that the 4th of March 29 will bring about a complete change.⁹ I left my negroes in N. Orleans in charge of L^t [Pitcairn] Morrison with a request if they could be employed at the Navy Yard at Pensacola to send them there, since I have been here he informed me by letter, that there was more hands already there than could be employed, consequently he had made other arrangements with them. I feel much indebted [sic] to you for the trouble you were so good as to take in trying to get them employed there.

We are here entirely out of the world, & very seldom hear from the civilized part of our country, as we have no regular mail; it was the 26 of May this year, when the first Steam Boat reached here, at which time they first heard of the death of Genl. [Jacob] Brown.¹⁰ Although this is unquestionably the most exposed post in the nation, & farthest from supporting distance, there are only three comp^s assigned to it, which are reduced to less than 100 men, & I calculate before we receive a re-enforcement I shall not have men enough to mount a guard sufficiently strong to post the centinels [sic] at hailing distance around this extensive work. The apt. of Genl [Alexander] Macomb as Commander of the Army astonished me not a little¹¹ & I have no doubt it will produce considerable alterations in the organization of the Army before a great while,

⁸ The order was issued by James Barbour, who was secretary of war from March, 1825, until May, 1828, when President Adams appointed him minister to Great Britain. He was succeeded by Peter B. Porter. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 1:591.

⁹ Taylor's hopes were realized when Andrew Jackson took office. Word of his election reached Fort Snelling on January 21, 1829. There is evidence that the little group living at the frontier post received the news with satisfaction, for on January 22 there was a ball "in consequence of the Election of Genl Jackson." Taliaferro considered Jackson's election a "good thing for the nation, altho all my friends loose their places by it," and he predicted that the new administration would result in "much good." Taliaferro Journals, January 21, 22, March 4, 1829.

¹⁰ General Brown, who had been commanding general of the United States army since 1821, died on February 24, 1828. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 3:125.

¹¹ Macomb was head of the corps of engineers when he was designated to succeed Brown. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 12:156.

perhaps at the next Session of Congress, if it should prove for the better I should have no objection

I think it not unlikely that it will have the effect of causing B[reve]^t rank to be abolished, as no B^t commissions were conferred at the last Session, & if a stop is put to them, they must take away those that have been already conferred.

I understand that Genl [Winfield] Scott intends contesting the legality of Genl M^s right to com^d him. All I wish now on the subject is that he will take no step in the business that will injure him. I am clearly of opinion that him, or Genl [Edmund P.] G[aine]^s should have been ap^t instead of M.¹²

M^{rs} Taylor joins me in wishing to be particularly remembered to you, & accept my best wishes for your health & prosperity

Your Friend Sincerely

Z TAYLOR

DR THO^s LAWSON Surgeon US Army

¹² Scott was generally considered the "logical successor to Jacob Brown as commanding general of the army." When Macomb received the appointment, Scott tendered his resignation, but it was not accepted. He "protested in vain against being placed under the command of a former junior." Gaines commanded the Western Division of the Army, to which Taylor was attached. *Dictionary of American Biography*, 7:93, 16:507; Hamilton, *Zachary Taylor*, 70.



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