Thomas Jefferson’s Confidential Letter to Congress (Jan. 18, 1803):

Jan. 18th, 1803.

Gentlemen of the Senate, and of the House of Representatives:

As the continuance of the act for establishing trading houses with the Indian tribes will be under the consideration of the Legislature at its present session, I think it my duty to communicate the views which have guided me in the execution of that act, in order that you may decide on the policy of continuing it, in the present or any other form, or discontinue it altogether, if that shall, on the whole, seem most for the public good.

The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the United States, have, for a considerable time, been growing more and more uneasy at the constant diminution of the territory they occupy, although effected by their own voluntary sales: and the policy has long been gaining strength with them, of refusing absolutely all further sale, on any conditions; insomuch that, at this time, it hazards their friendship, and excites dangerous jealousies and perturbations in their minds to make any overture for the purchase of the smallest portions of their land. A very few tribes only are not yet obstinately in these dispositions. In order peaceably to counteract this policy of theirs, and to provide an extension of territory which the rapid increase of our numbers will call for, two measures are deemed expedient. First: to encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply to the raising stock, to agriculture and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them in this, better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life, will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms, and of increasing their domestic comforts. Secondly: to multiply trading houses among them, and place within their reach those things which will contribute more to their domestic comfort, than the possession of extensive, but uncultivated wilds. Experience and reflection will develop to them the wisdom of exchanging what they can spare and we want, for what we can spare and they want. In leading them to agriculture, to manufactures, and civilization; in bringing together their and our settlements, and in preparing them ultimately to participate in the benefits of our governments, I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good. At these trading houses we have pursued the principles of the act of Congress, which directs that the commerce shall be carried on liberally, and requires only that the capital stock shall not be diminished. We consequently undersell private traders, foreign and domestic, drive them from the competition; and thus, with the good will of the Indians, rid ourselves of a description of men who are constantly endeavoring to excite in the Indian mind suspicions, fears, and irritations towards us. A letter now enclosed, shows the effect of our competition on the operations of the traders, while the Indians, perceiving the advantage of purchasing from us, are soliciting generally, our establishment of trading houses among them. In one quarter this is particularly interesting. The Legislature, reflecting on the late occurrences on the Mississippi, must be sensible how desirable it is to possess a respectable breadth of country on that river, from our Southern limit to the Illinois at least; so that we may present as firm a front on that as on our Eastern border. We possess what is below the Yazoo, and can probably acquire a

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certain breadth from the Illinois and Wabash to the Ohio; but between the Ohio and Yazoo, the country all belongs to the Chickasaws, the most friendly tribe within our limits, but the most decided against the alienation of lands. The portion of their country most important for us is exactly that which they do not inhabit. Their settlements are not on the Mississippi, but in the interior country. They have lately shown a desire to become agricultural; and this leads to the desire of buying implements and comforts. In the strengthening and gratifying of these wants, I see the only prospect of planting on the Mississippi itself, the means of its own safety. Duty has required me to submit these views to the judgment of the Legislature; but as their disclosure might embarrass and defeat their effect, they are committed to the special confidence of the two Houses.

While the extension of the public commerce among the Indian tribes, may deprive of that source of profit such of our citizens as are engaged in it, it might be worthy the attention of Congress, in their care of individual as well as of the general interest, to point, in another direction, the enterprise of these citizens, as profitably for themselves, and more usefully for the public. The river Missouri, and the Indians inhabiting it, are not as well known as is rendered desirable by their connexion with the Mississippi, and consequently with us. It is, however, understood, that the country on that river is inhabited by numerous tribes, who furnish great supplies of furs and peltry to the trade of another nation, carried on in a high latitude, through an infinite number of portages and lakes, shut up by ice through a long season. The commerce on that line could bear no competition with that of the Missouri, traversing a moderate climate, offering according to the best accounts, a continued navigation from its source, and possibly with a single portage, from the Western Ocean, and finding to the Atlantic a choice of channels through the Illinois or Wabash, the lakes and Hudson, through the Ohio and Susquehanna, or Potomac or James rivers, and through the Tennessee and Savannah, rivers. An intelligent officer, with ten or twelve chosen men, fit for the enterprise, and willing to undertake it, taken from our posts, where they may be spared without inconvenience, might explore the whole line, even to the Western Ocean, have conferences with the natives on the subject of commercial intercourse, get admission among them for our traders, as others are admitted, agree on convenient deposits for an interchange of articles, and return with the information acquired, in the course of two summers. Their arms and accoutrements, some instruments of observation, and light and cheap presents for the Indians, would be all the apparatus they could carry, and with an expectation of a soldier’s portion of land on their return, would constitute the whole expense. Their pay would be going on, whether here or there. While other civilized nations have encountered great expense to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge by undertaking voyages of discovery, and for other literary purposes, in various parts and directions, our nation seems to owe to the same object, as well as to its own interests, to explore this, the only line of easy communication across the continent, and so directly traversing our own part of it. The interests of commerce place the principal object within the constitutional powers and care of Congress, and that it should incidentally advance the geographical knowledge of our own continent, cannot be but an additional gratification. The nation claiming the territory, regarding this as a literary pursuit, which is in the habit of permitting within its dominions, would not be disposed to view it with jealousy, even if the expiring state of its interests there did not

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render it a matter of indifference. The appropriation of two thousand five hundred dollars, "for the purpose of extending the external commerce of the United States," while understood and considered by the Executive as giving the legislative sanction, would cover the undertaking from notice, and prevent the obstructions which interested individuals might otherwise previously prepare in its way.
Gentlemen of the Senate and of the House of Representatives.

As the continuance of the Act for establishing trading houses with the Indian tribes will be under the consideration of the legislature at its present session, I think it my duty to communicate the views which have guided me in the execution of that act; in order that you may decide on the policy of continuing it in the present or in any other form, or to discontinue it altogether if that shall, on the whole, seem most for the public good.

The Indian tribes residing within the limits of the U.S. have for a considerable time been opposing more or less animosity at the exertion, diminution of the territory they occupy, the affected by their own voluntary cessions; and the policy has long been gaining strength with them of refusing absolutely, all further cede on any condition, remarked that at this time, it hinders their friendship, and excites dangerous jealousies and perturbations in their minds to make any overture for the purchase of the smallest portion of their land. A very few tribes only are not yet definitely in these dispositions. In order peaceably to counteract this policy of them, and to provide an extension of territory which the rapid increase of numbers will call for too measures am desired expedient. First, to encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply to the raising stock, to agriculture and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that if land and labour will maintain them in this better in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life will then become useless; they will see advantage in exchanging them for the more improving their farms, of increasing their domestic comforts.

Secondly, to multiply trading houses among them, in place within their reach those things which will contribute more to their domestic comfort than the profusion of extensive, but uncultivated wilds. Experience and reflection will show to them the wisdom of changing what they can spare, and want for what we can spare, and the wants in leading them thus to agriculture, to
manufactures of civilization, in bringing together their four settlements, &
in preparing them mutually to participate in the benefits of our govern-
ment, I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good. At these trading posts
we have pursued the principles of the act of Congress, which directs that the com-
mon shall be handled on liberally. I require only that the capital stock shall not
be diminished, we consequently undertake private traders foreign & domestic, drive
them from the competition. I think, with the good will of the Indians, it is
sufficient for a description of men. We are constantly endeavoring to extend the Indian
trade, requiring Jean Vireihan to make use a letter now enclosed the effect
of our competition on the operations of the traders, while the Indian
enjoying the advantage of purchasing from us, are thinking generally on
establishment of trading houses among them.

In one quarter this is particularly interesting. The legislature, reflecting on the late occurrences on the Mississippi, must be sensible how desirable it is to
secure a respectable barrier of country on that river, from our southern limit to the Illinois at least, so that we may present as a barrier on that
as on our eastern border. I suppose that is beyond the Yazoo, I can probably acquire a certain tract of land from the Illinois or elsewhere to the Ohio, but between the Ohio and Yazoo, the country
next belongs to the Chickasaws, the most friendly tribe within our limits, but the
most decided against the allotment of lands. The portion of the country most important for us is exactly that which they do not inhabit. Their settle-
ments are not on the Mississippi, but on the interior country. They have lately
shown a desire to become agriculturists, and this leads to the desire of buying
improvements & comfort, in the strengthening and settling up of these lands. I see
the only prospect of planting on the Mississippi, itself the means of its safety,
Doub, has required me to submit these views to the judgment of the legislature,
but another disclosure might enable me to defeat their effect, they are committed
by the special confidence of the two houses.
While the extension of the public commerce among the Indian tribes may
determine their course of profit and of our citizens as are engaged in it, it might be
profitably the attention of Congress in their care of individuals as well as the general health
to point on another direction the enterprise of these nations, as profitably for their
salvage, and more useful for the public. The river Mississippi, if the Indians inhabiting it,
are not as well known as is evident desirable by their connection with the Mississippi.
Consequently with us, it is however understood that the country on that
river is inhabited by numerous tribes, who furnish great supplies of furs & peltry
to the trade of another nation centered on a high latitude, through an extensive
number of savages and labor, shrewdly by the thorough a long course. The
evidence that these could be no comparison with that of the Mississippi, traversing a
moderate climate. Forbes according to the best accounts a continued navigation from
its source, and, with a single portage, from the Hudson river, and
pointing to the Atlantic, a choice of channels through the Illinois or Wabash, the
Lake and Michigan, through the Hoosic and Schuyler, to the Wabun or Saint river,
and through the Tennessee and Savannah river. An intelligent officer with his
informed observation, yet for the purposes we are willing to undertake it, taken
from our ports, these may be opened without inconvenience, might engage
for the whole line, consequent to the Atlantic ocean, have conferences with the nations on the
subject of commercial intercourse, get assent among them for our traders, whom
are admitted agree on convenient deposits for an interchange of articles, and return with the information acquired in the course of two summer, their
sound orders, and, those instruments of navigation, which are present for the
safety, would be all the assistance they require, and a fair expectation of
considerable part of lands on their return, would constitute the license they
may be in going on, whether here or there. While their satellite nations have
encouraged great expenses to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge, by undertake
voyages of discovery, the otherelman purposes, in various parts and directions,
our nation seems to me to the same extent, as well as to all its interests. To explore this, the only line of easy communication with the continent, and indirectly traversing our own part of it. The interest of commerce was the principal object within the constitutional powers and scope of Congress, and that it should incidentally advance the growth of the West, would be an additional solace for it. The nation claiming the territory, regarding this as a fallacious pursuit which it is in the habit of pursuing within its dominions, would not be disposed to consent to it. It is notorious, even of the aspiring states of the interior, that it would not consent to a venture of indifference. The appropriation of the amount of five hundred thousand for the purpose of adding the national revenue of the West, which is understood and considered by the Executive as being the legitimate devotion, would express the confidence from which, and presents the situation which interested individuals might otherwise previously propose on its way.

J. Jefferson
Jan. 19, 1803