



ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827

Introduction

Hiram Abiff Whittington's letters, which he wrote to his brother Granville Whittington in the late 1820s and early 1830s, remain one of the most valuable personal accounts of daily life in Arkansas shortly before Arkansas Territory became a state. Whittington was one of many entrepreneurial men who moved to Arkansas seeking exciting opportunities and new life in what was at the time the frontier of the United States. He was born in 1805 in Boston, Massachusetts, and moved to Little Rock in 1826. He was a skilled printer and book binder and had experience in book trade and publishing. In Little Rock, he worked as a printer with the *Arkansas Gazette* but in 1832 he moved to Hot Springs. He settled there hoping that the spring waters would have a healing effect on his deteriorating health. He opened several businesses, created first lending library in Arkansas, and established a successful political career, eventually serving as a state representative. In 1836, Whittington returned to Boston to marry Mary Burnham. The two moved back to Hot Springs and had six children. Whittington died in 1890 in Hot Springs.

Whittington's letters provide an account into the daily life in Arkansas Territory from a perspective of a white middle class educated man. Access to Whittington's original letters, which are housed at the Special Collections Department of the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, is limited due to the documents' fragility. To make these rare and extremely valuable records more accessible to researchers, educators, and students, Whittington's letters were typed. Activities in "Arkansas Before Statehood" are based on six typescript letters (typed copies of the original letters) selected from a collection of sixteen letters housed at the Center for Arkansas History and Culture in Little Rock (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834, UALR.MS.0157).

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

Little Rock, A.T. April 21, 1827.

Dear Brother:- (Sunday morning)

This morning as I was shaving a letter was landed under my nose, post marked Boston; which surprised me more agreeably than anything which has taken place in this wide world for the last six thousand years, and came within an ace of sending me to the Indian Valley; - just as I was drawing the razor down under my chin I caught sight of the post mark, and the sudden jerk I gave it at that moment raised the skin from my throat at a great rate; however, I believe it will not prove fatal, and you may think yourself a lucky fellow in not cutting my head quite off.

You have received before this I suppose, my letter from me, which was written about 3 months ago, conjointly to you and Alfred, wherein I have answered the questions you have here asked, and given you all the information requested in the letter now before me, with one exception, i.e. as respects the fortifications on beach island, which I must confess I had not thought of since I saw you. The reason you are so particular in reminding me of my "grand project" as you are pleased to call it, is, I imagine, because you are afraid of being superseded in your office of a Governor of the above island; which your modesty forbade you to mention; but you may rest assured that I have not forgotten my promise of making you my Sancho Panzo; and if nothing happens, you shall yet be governor of beach-island, when you may sit in judgment on the sheep with all dignity.

I had a rascally time in getting here from Newburley or rather from the mouth of the Arkansas. The first seven hundred

Hiram Abiff Whittington to his brother Granville Whittington, Little Rock, April 21, 1827 (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834), p. 1

2

History Alive: Virtually!

Supported in part by a grant from the Arkansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities
UA at Little Rock Center for Arkansas History and Culture
ualr.edu/cahc | 501.320.5780

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

miles after leaving New Orleans, was very fine, being on one of the best steamboats on the Mississippi; we stopped at Natchez and about 20 other places before we arrived at the mouth of White River, where we left the boat; two others besides myself. From that time we had to get along the best way we could, some times in a dugout and then afoot, we were 5 days from the mouth of the Arkansas to Little Rock, about 160 miles; at night we slept in log cabins, except one night when we slept on the ground in the woods, by making a good fire and wrapping our cloaks around us we slept very comfortable. In the log huts we were obliged to sleep in the room with the ~~other~~ man and his wife, the first time I slept in the room with the women I felt foolish enough you may be sure; the women would not leave the room to give me a chance to get into bed, and I finally had to go to bed before them; I did not take my pantaloons off, however, until I had got between the sheets. The morning before I arrived at this place we stopped at Mr. Gray's to get breakfast, and on a table within four feet of where we sat to eat, was laid out a young negro, who had died the night before.

In the afternoon of Sunday, the 24th of Dec. we arrived at Little Rock. It is situated on the south bank of the Arkansas, contains about 60 buildings, 6 brick, 8 frame and the balance log cabins, the best building in the place, is the printing office which is built of brick, and is as good an office as any in Boston. The Little Rock Academy is a log hut, and the state house is a little narrow low, wooden building about ten feet by sixteen. The town has been settled about eight years and has improved very slow, the trees are not half cut down in the town yet, instead of

-17-

Hiram Abiff Whittington to his brother Granville Whittington, Little Rock, April 21, 1827 (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834), p. 2

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

streets, we walk in cow-paths from one house to another. The town and I believe the whole Territory, is inhabited by the dregs of Kentucky, Georgia, and Louisiana; but principally from the former, and a more drunken, good for nothing set of fellows never got together.

The Secretary of the Territory and the Judges of the Supreme Court, drink whisky out of the same cup with the lowest vagabond, and roll together in the same gutter. There has been more than a dozen murders committed here, but the murderer was always acquitted. The greatest drunkards fill the most responsible offices. In August the election of a member for congress, and the members of the general Assembly takes place. The opposing candidates never meet in the street without stopping to blackguard each other, and very often fight. Most of the inhabitants carry dirks and pistols in their pockets; but the greater part of them are too cowardly to use them. Mr. Woodruff, my employer, being an honest and a sober man, the majority of the people are his bitter enemies, and he has been frequently threatened; about a month ago these worthies got in such a fury, owing to a piece he published in the Gazette, criticising the conduct of the Secretary, that they threatened to annihilate all the printers, and one of the honorable judges of the Supreme Court.

Of the female part of the community I have not much to say, as their only five grown girls in the township, and they are as ugly as sin, and as mean as the devil. It is a famous place for parties;- I have been to three since I have been here, where they had a violin and danced all night, and as their are not girls to dance a set, all the old women dance, and lie in bed

-16-

Hiram Abiff Whittington to his brother Granville Whittington, Little Rock, April 21, 1827 (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834), p. 3

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

nearly all day. The men get drunk, and generally have a fight before they get sober. Last Sunday I saw two French ladies walking out, each with a young cub in their arms, they are used instead of lap dogs.

The bushes in the woods and likewise in the town are covered with ticks, which are the greatest curse I have yet discovered; I sometimes go into the woods and when I get home I am obliged to strip and pick the ticks off; they are worse than a bed-bug and in a short time get under the skin, and make a very bad sore. If the girls feel a tick biting them at a party, and even if they are on the floor dancing, they immediately stop and unpin, and scratch themselves till they find it; it would do your heart good to see how expert the dear little affectionate good for nothing creatures are at catching ticks. This is a fine country fro peaches, and melons, sweet-potatoes etc.

I think I have written more about this place than you will like to read, and I must now look towards the end. You say Irene has lost two boys, which is the first hint I had of her being a mother. In your next letter I hope you will inform me how many children Mary and Affolia have. I hope you and Alfred have manners enough to wait your turn, and not get married until I shall set the example, which you know will be in due time.

I see by one of the New Orleans papers that _____ has arrived there. I should write to him, but a letter would not reach him until after he had sailed. Three steam boats arrived here last week, which never had been here before, one of them returned to New Orleans yesterday, and the other proceeded up the river with provisions for the garrison.

-19-

Hiram Abiff Whittington to his brother Granville Whittington, Little Rock, April 21, 1827 (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834), p. 4

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

It is altogether uncertain when I shall leave this Territory; probably in the course of a few years. It is fashionable to be sick in the summer, in this town, and most of the people engage a physician by the year. I expect to have the fever soon if nothing worse. We live entirely on corn-bread and salt-pork. The Indians sometimes bring deer meat and buffalo meat to town, and try to sell it, but the folks are such intolerable fools that they seldom purchase any, they think there is nothing like bear meat.

When you write, which I shall expect you to do as soon as you get this, you must fill your sheet, the last I got from you was not more than one quarter filled up. Give my best respects to Father and Mother and all the family. And inform me of Sarah's circumstances, and if she is distressed, by pecuniary embarrassment, to write to me, and although my means are very limited, yet as far as I am able, I will gladly contribute to her relief.

I should heartily rejoice if I could spend another summer at Sandy Cove, go gunning, pick blackberries, and duck little Tommy, but heaven only knows when that will happen. I wish you all possible success in your new avocation, and that you may live a long and a happy life, is the sincere wish of your half-crazy, though, affectionate brother,

H.A. Whittington.

P.S. I wish you would be particular and inform me all about the folks in Cohasset, how the Calvornets get along and whether all the girls are converted yet. And whilst I think it I wish you would pick out one of the handsomest and lay her aside for me. I am not very particular about her qualifications, whether her age

-20-

Hiram Abiff Whittington to his brother Granville Whittington, Little Rock, April 21, 1827 (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834), p. 5

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
HISTORY AND CULTURE
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK

be between 15 or 20, and weight from 50 to two hundred pounds,
and a full compliment of teeth, either natural or artificial,
no matter whether she can read or write, I would not turn a copper
for the colour of her hair, and even if her head is shaved, it
will be no objection. She may go to Church every Sunday and
stay at home all the rest of the week, "talk but very little"
and if you could find one completely dumb, you would make me the
happiest dog in Arkansas. Make all diligent search, and give me
a description of her in your next letter. Tell her I will come for
her in about a year, and that I am one of the cleverest fellows
in the world; when I am asleep, and that she shall have her own
way, in all cases; provided, always, I have no objections. I
would not put you to all this trouble if I could help it, but as
there are no girls here, and it is the duty of every man to get
married and settle himself in life, you can certainly have no
objections.

Your affectionate brother,
H.A. Whittington.

-21-

Hiram Abiff Whittington to his brother Granville Whittington, Little Rock, April 21, 1827 (Hiram A. Whittington Papers, 1824-1834), p. 6

7

History Alive: Virtually!

Supported in part by a grant from the Arkansas Humanities Council and the National Endowment for the Humanities
UA at Little Rock Center for Arkansas History and Culture
ualr.edu/cahc | 501.320.5780

ARKANSAS BEFORE STATEHOOD: LITTLE ROCK, APRIL 21, 1827



Questions:

1. How did Whittington get to Arkansas and eventually to Little Rock? How far did he travel and how long did it take him? Did he travel fast or slow comparing to how we travel today?
2. Where did Whittington and his fellow travelers sleep when they were traveling through Arkansas? Why did Whittington not take his "pantaloons" (pants) off until he was already "between the sheets" (in bed)? What does it tell us about culture and customs in the late 1820s?
3. What was Little Rock like in 1827 according to Whittington?
4. What do we learn about men in Arkansas from Whittington?
5. What do we learn about women in Arkansas from Whittington? See "P.S." of the letter. Why do you think Whittington writes that he is not "very particular" about women's "qualifications" (qualities)?
6. What is "the greatest curse" in Arkansas according to Whittington? Have you ever had a similar experience in Arkansas?
7. Write down what you learned about Arkansas Territory from this letter. Include information about transportation, building new settlements (towns), people, customs, and natural environment.