

A LETTER FROM JAMES McBRIDE  
REGARDING THE EARTHQUAKE OF 1811-1812\*

To Miss Mary M. Roberts

(Copy)

Mississippi River — April 1, 1812

Dear Aunt,

About the first of March last I received a letter from you, and omitted answering it until now, which was not occasioned, or owing to negligence, but because I thought the intelligence I would have to give, if I wrote truly, would occasion you some little uneasiness, as at that time I was engaged in making preparations to make a voyage to New Orleans and am now so far on my way. Last winter I entered into a co-partnership with Joseph Hough of Hamilton with the intention of carrying on the business of merchandizing, we purchased a quantity of flour and whiskey in the Miami Country and loaded two flat boats on the Miami river which we have brought out of that stream, and are thus far on our voyage, when we go to New Orleans, we shall sell our cargo, go round by sea to Philadelphia and purchase goods, and return with them to Hamilton.

As you had no doubt heard very alarming accounts about the Earthquakes and other dangers of descending the Mississippi river, I suppose you would have looked upon me as going to certain destruction. Thank kind providence I think we have now passed those dangers, and if some untoward accident does not overtake us, shall pass safely to New Orleans, and if flour bears the price, which I understand it does, we shall make something very handsome. Our cargoes consist of seven hundred barrels of flour and some whiskey and pork which we purchased in the Miami Country on very reasonable terms, as the reports prevailing, of the dangers to be encountered from the Indians, and the Earthquakes had so much frightened the people that none would venture to encounter them. These stories I considered improbable: but have since found too much reality to exist in them, particularly those relating to the Earthquakes.

\* This copy has been presented by the Cincinnati Historical Society.

I shall give you some little account of what I saw and experienced although it must be a very cursory account, as I was only on shore at certain points, and then but a short distance from the river. The following is extracted from the Journal which I kept.

Soon after entering the Mississippi River we began to discover the effects of the Earthquake the region of which we were now approaching. Above New Madrid on the west side of the river is a grove of cotton wood and willow trees, two or three miles long these were all bent up stream and stripped of their leaves and branches in a singular manner. It is said that at the time of the most violent shock the river at this place for some time ran up stream with great velocity, and from the appearance I have no doubt of the fact, as I know of nothing else that could have produced the appearance here exhibited. We were now experiencing considerable shocks every few hours.

We passed New Madrid in the afternoon, intending to land before night. Mr. Hough had command of one boat and myself of the other, we each steered our own boat and had only two other hands, on each boat to row. Mr. Hough was rowing to shore to land on the west side of the river, discovering that the landing place would be a critical situation by signs, motioned me to keep out, I immediately turned my boat and rowed for the middle of the river again. I made every effort to land on the other shore but was unable, at dark I made a willow island in the river and fastened to the willows, where we remained all night in a very exposed situation. The island was all overflowed, but barely sufficient where we lay to float our boat which drew somewhat over three feet of water. The river was falling and myself and hands were obliged frequently during the night to jump overboard into the water, cold as it was, to push off the boat and prevent her getting fast aground. As soon as day dawned we put off from our dangerous harbor, in a dull rainy morning and at ten o'clock landed at the Little Prairie about        miles below New Madrid. Here had been a small village of some twenty houses and a settlement extending back six or eight miles from the river, principally French and Spaniards. On landing we soon discovered that the place

where we were moored had been part of the town, now the bed of the Mississippi river, a considerable portion, several acres, on which part of the town had stood had sunk down, with the building and the river flowed over the place. The place where we made fast our boat was a burying ground, part had sunk into the river, and coffins were exposed along the bank. The tenants had been Roman Catholics, as the cross was erected at the head of each grave. A large cross made of strong cyprus wood placed, no doubt at the grave of some pious Christian, was broken and prostrated to the earth. Although it rained considerably after securing our boat I wrapped myself in my great coat and went on shore to see what discoveries I could make. Of about a dozen houses and cabbins which I saw, not one was standing, all was either entirely prostrated or nearly overturned, and wrecked in a miserable manner, the surface of the ground cracked and fractured in every direction. At the back part of the village I found three French men who were sheltering themselves in a temporary booth of boards, taken from some of the desolate houses. They informed me in broken English that the late beautiful village and settlement was now wholly destroyed. The inhabitants had fled with what property they could take with them. They, and only they, were left, to tell the passing stranger of the melancholy fate of the place. I continued my excursion about two miles back from the river, although it was with considerable difficulty and at every step witnessed some new phenomena of the desolating effects of the Earthquakes. The surface of the ground was cracked in almost every direction and stood like yawning gulphs, so wide that I could scarcely leap over them, at other places I came to spaces of ground several poles in width sunk down two or three feet below the common level of the ground. But what particularly attracted my attention were circular holes in the earth from five or six to thirty feet in diameter, the depth corresponding with the diameter so as to be about half as deep as wide, and surround with a circle of sand two or three feet deep and a black substance like stone coal but lighter, probably carbonized wood. I took some pieces of them to the boat on putting them on the fire I found they would burn at the same time producing a strong and disagreeable sulphurous smell. These holes I

presume must have been produced by a strong current of air issuing from the bowels of the earth throwing up sand and water, and this black substance, which was perhaps wood long imbedded in the earth, prostrating the trees, and every thing else where they happened and producing the most horrible disorder. I observed in several instances where small explosions had occurred under large trees, that the trunk of the tree was split up ten or twelve feet and separated two or three feet wide at the ground and thus remained standing. The day was dark and gloomy with light, I heard and felt from time to time the rumbling noise of these explosions, all nature around me had the most melancholy appearance. A sudden dread came over me all at once and I returned to the boat. I lay at Little Prairie until the afternoon of the next day during which time we experienced eight or ten shocks, some of them severe, so as to shake from their places loose articles in the boat. Each shock continued about two minutes and was preceded by a rumbling noise like distant thunder or the discharge of a cannon at a great distance. We experienced slight shocks at intervals for the distance of one hundred miles above and below Little Prairie. The shores of the river in the region presents a most melancholy spectacle, the banks cracked and fractured, trees broken off and fractured, and in many places acres of ground sunk down so that the tops of the trees just appeared above the surface of the water. All nature appeared in ruins, and seemed to mourn in solitude over her melancholy fate.

In the afternoon of the next day, Mr. Hough with the other boat made his appearance. The place where he had to land was in the head of an outlet so far down that he was unable to put out and gain the channel of the river again from that place, but the next day with great labor and the aid of some friendly Indians who came along they towed the boat some twenty or thirty rods up stream, from whence they were able to regain the channel.

I am now lying at shore on the bank of the Mississippi river, I suppose about one hundred miles above Natchez. Yesterday a violent storm compelled us to land here, it continued all night so violent as required us to be up to prevent the waves from

dashing our boats on shore. The high wind still continues to-day, and the river so rough that we cannot pursue our voyage. I therefore devote the day to writing you this letter intending to put it in the Post office when I arrive at Natchez. You may suppose that I am not in a very comfortable situation for writing, nor do I feel in a mode for writing after the fatigue I have undergone. I have brought a boat loaded with 350 barrels of flour from the Miami to this place with only two hands. Labor, watching and anxiety has at times reduced me to almost exhaustion. Dear Aunt, your affectionate Nephew

James McBride