

**Fort Dearborn : letter from the Secretary of War, relative, to the sale of Fort Dearborn, or for the conversion of the same into a marine hospital : in compliance with a resolution of the House of Representatives of the 12th of February last.**

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FORT DEARBORN.

LETTER

FROM

THE SECRETARY OF WAR,

RELATIVE

*To the sale of Fort Dearborn, or for the conversion of the same into a marine hospital; in compliance with a resolution of the House of Representatives of the 12th of February last.*

MARCH 10, 1846.

Read, and referred to the Committee on Commerce.

WAR DEPARTMENT, March 7, 1846.

SIR: In answer to the resolution of the House of Representatives of the 12th ultimo, requiring the Secretary of War to communicate to the House "all information in his possession respecting the present condition and use of Fort Dearborn, at Chicago, Illinois; and whether, without injury to the public service, said fort could not be converted into a marine hospital for the benefit of seamen upon lake Michigan; and that he procure from the officers in charge an estimate of the expense thereof, with an opinion whether lands reserved for military purposes near said fort could not be sold without public inconvenience or detriment, to raise the amount necessary to meet such expense; and also as to the expediency of establishing a marine hospital at that place; and also as to the expediency of selling the site of said fort entirely, for the purpose of applying the proceeds to the purchase of grounds further without the business portion of said city," I respectfully transmit, herewith, reports from the Surgeon General and the Colonel of the Corps of Topographical Engineers, containing all the information required by the resolution, so far as it can now be furnished by this department, and expressing the opinion, in which I concur, that it would be inexpedient to sell the reserve. This small tract formed a part of the large reservation attached to old Fort Dearborn, and was selected and withheld from sale by order of the Secretary of War when the remainder of that reservation was sold in June, 1839, for the purposes explained in the enclosed extract from the report of Matthew Birchard, esq., the agent by whom the sale was conducted.

This department is not sufficiently familiar with the particular wants of commerce on the lakes in this respect, to determine whether the establishment of a marine hospital is required at Chicago. Except so far as regards

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the selection and purchase of the sites, this subject has been under the direction of the Treasury Department.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

W. L. MARCY,

*Secretary of War.*

Hon. J. W. DAVIS,

*Speaker of the House of Representatives.*

SURGEON GENERAL'S OFFICE, February 24, 1846.

SIR: In reply to the resolution of the House of Representatives of the United States of the 12th instant, asking information "respecting the present condition and use of Fort Dearborn, at Chicago, Illinois," and "whether, without injury to the public service, said fort could not be converted into a marine hospital for the benefit of seamen upon lake Michigan," and that "he procure from the officers in charge an estimate of the expense thereof, with an opinion whether lands reserved for military purposes near said fort could not be sold without public inconvenience or detriment, to raise the amount necessary to meet such expense;" also, "as to the expediency of establishing a marine hospital at that place;" and also "as to the expediency of selling the site of said fort entirely, for the purpose of applying the proceeds to the purchase of grounds further without the business portion of said city," I have the honor to make the following statement:

I have not been at Chicago since 1833, and of course do not know personally to what extent the officers' quarters, barracks, hospital, storehouses, &c., &c., then standing in Fort Dearborn, have deteriorated, or what improvements or additions have been made to the original buildings of late years. From information derived from other persons, however, it appears that the buildings are in good condition, and are at this time occupied by persons employed by the topographical engineer department in the construction of harbor works, or works intended for the improvement of the harbor of Chicago.

The fort, or the buildings in it, could not just now, it would seem, be converted into a marine hospital establishment without injury, or at least inconvenience to the public service, for they are required for offices, storehouses, and for the quarters and other accommodations of the men employed upon the public works at Chicago.

I could not, myself, without inspecting the premises, give an accurate estimate of the expense that would attend the conversion of Fort Dearborn into a regular hospital establishment; but as all the buildings are reported to be in good order, little or no expense would necessarily have to be incurred in altering such of them as required it into suitable accommodations for sixty or eighty sick men.

As to the propriety of disposing of, by sale, the lands reserved for military purposes near Fort Dearborn, I am decidedly of opinion that they could not be sold without manifest inconvenience now, and great detriment perhaps to the public service hereafter.

In time of peace, the fort and the lands attached thereto may be made available for various public purposes; they may be required for the accommodation, as now, of the officers and men engaged in improving the harbor of Chicago; and also as a resting place for troops *en route* from the lakes to the Mississippi, and farther westward, and from the west and southwest to



our frontiers on the lakes. They may be applied, too, to the purposes of a custom house, &c., or may be taken up as the site of a permanent marine hospital.

And in the event of war with Great Britain, they will be indispensable to the government as a military station and for a naval depot.

I am not sufficiently acquainted with the extent of the commerce of Chicago, or the number of seamen and boatmen engaged in the navigation of the lakes to that point, to speak understandingly upon the necessity or the expediency of establishing a marine hospital at that place. Should it be determined, however, to establish a marine hospital at Chicago, there is no necessity for selling the public ground in and adjacent to Fort Dearborn, for the purpose of applying the proceeds to the purchase of other grounds; for that site I believe to be as good as any other position in the city for the location of a marine hospital.

Under no circumstances, in my opinion, should Fort Dearborn and the grounds thereto attached be sold; for if once parted with, they can never be regained except at an exorbitant price.

Should they not be required for any of the public purposes mentioned, just now, or for some few years hence, it will be better (rather than dispose of them for ever) that the houses and the grounds should be rented or leased out, or given up, if you please, gratuitously, to the temporary use of the authorities of the city of Chicago, with the perfect understanding that they should revert to the United States whenever required for any public purpose, whether civil or military.

All of which is respectfully submitted.

TH. LAWSON, *Surgeon General.*

Hon. W. L. MARCY,

*Secretary of War.*

BUREAU OF TOPOGRAPHICAL ENGINEERS,  
Washington, February 24, 1846.

SIR: I have the honor to submit the following report upon a resolution of the House of Representatives of the 12th instant.

The resolution involves the following inquiries:

1. Respecting the present condition and use of Fort Dearborn, Illinois.

Answer. The buildings are in good order. They are occupied as offices, workshops, storehouses, mess-halls, and places of accommodation for persons employed upon the harbor works at Chicago; are very convenient thereto, and seriously lessen the expenses which would otherwise attend the construction of these works.

2. Whether, without injury to the public, the said fort could not be converted into a marine hospital for the benefit of the seamen upon Lake Michigan.

Answer. It may be proper to remark, that "Fort Dearborn" is no fort. It consists merely of the buildings once erected for the accommodation of the garrison formerly stationed there. The injury to the public service by converting it into a marine hospital, would be equivalent to the hire of the accommodation it now affords. What this hire would be cannot be stated, but it is well known that rents are high at Chicago.

3. That an estimate of the expense of converting the same into a marine hospital be obtained.



Answer. As this inquiry refers itself more particularly to the Surgeon General's office, the answer is left for that office to make. But before it could be made, it would probably be necessary for some surgeon of the army to visit the post, and examine the present buildings.

4. Whether the lands reserved for military purposes near said fort could not be sold without public inconvenience or detriment, to raise the amount necessary to meet such expense.

Answer. The only lands reserved were a few lots for the convenience of the light-house, and the few lots occupied by the public buildings for the convenience of the harbor works, as before stated. These lots are valuable, but they could not be sold without serious detriment to the service for which they are now appropriated. Whether the sale would meet the expense of establishing a marine hospital or not, is more than I can say, and would depend upon the estimate from the Surgeon General's office in reference to the cost of such an establishment.

5. As to the expediency of establishing a marine hospital at that place.

Answer. This question refers itself particularly to the office of the Surgeon General.

6. As to the expediency of selling the site of said fort, entirely, for the purpose of applying the proceeds to the purchase of grounds further without the business portion of said city.

Answer. The expediency of selling, as proposed, will depend entirely upon the object for which any other position shall be wanted. The only object stated in the resolution, is that of a marine hospital. I do not pretend to possess the information necessary to decide upon the best position for such an establishment, but I deem it a duty to say that great public inconvenience would result in depriving the War Department of the possession of these lots, as they are essential to the duties of the War Department at that place. The lots are valuable, but, being government lots, I doubt if they would sell for near their value; and as they are essential to the War Department duties, it is respectfully recommended that no disposition of them, by either sale or transfer, should be made.

Respectfully, sir, your obedient servant,

J. J. ABERT,

*Col. Corps Top. Eng.*

Hon. W. L. MARCY,

*Secretary of War.*

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*Extract from the report of M. Birchard, esq., agent of the War Department, for the sale of the Fort Dearborn reservation, dated*

NOVEMBER 21, 1840.

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By the official plat herewith enclosed, it will be seen that block 1, and lots 8, 9, and 10 in block 2, lots 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 in block 4, and lots 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 in block 5, are colored blue. These were reserved from sale, and embrace all the ground occupied by the light-house keeper's dwelling and fortress of Fort Dearborn within the pickets, including the officers' quarters and barracks. This ground is all very valuable. My object in reserving so much property was to secure and protect the light, which is



situated on lot 8 of block 2, from obstruction by private building, which otherwise might have been erected between its present position and Lake Michigan; also to afford room and shops for the superintendent of the public works at the harbor. Ultimately it may, and doubtless will, be found necessary to remove the tower for the light on to higher and more permanent ground nearer to the entrance of the harbor. A suitable spot for this purpose will be found in block 1, which should have been retained for this if for no other purpose. The property thus reserved, aside from the buildings and other structures erected upon it, would, at the rate at which other lots sold, have brought from thirty to forty thousand dollars. I have no doubt but that in a few years the United States, if disposed to sell it, will be able to realize from it twice or thrice that amount.

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