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Finley Letters

James B. Finley Letters

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8-22-1825

## Letter from Thomas McKenney to James B. Finley

Thomas McKenney

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DEPARTMENT OF WAR.

OFFICE OF INDIAN AFFAIRS, August 22, 1825.

To Rev. James B. Finley.

SIR:

Doctor RAFINESQUE, a scientific and enterprising citizen of Kentucky, and one of the Professors in the Transylvania University, is engaged in the very laudable enterprise of rescuing from oblivion—so far as it may be possible to do so—whatever may tend to throw light upon the hitherto unexplained and very dark subject of the *origin* of the Aborigines of this country. In his opinion (and I agree with him) the most certain data upon which to rest a conclusion in this matter, is their *language*. However impenetrable this subject has hitherto proved, it is hoped enough of connecting and enlightening materials may yet be collected to enable Dr. RAFINESQUE to work his way into it, and bring out for our information and gratification, if not enough of certainty to clear up our doubts altogether, at least so much as will reward the labour that may be bestowed upon it, and give to the learned the materials for ingenious and interesting, if not useful speculation. The subject increases in interest as time removes us from those to whom it relates; and posterity will feel in it even a greater interest than we do. There is an imposing character about it, even now; but how will this be increased when antiquity shall invest it with its charms, and when the race of human beings who preceded us in the occupancy of this vast continent, will be known no more. It is for us of the present generation, if possible, to put it in the power of history to say something more of these wonderful people, than that "*they once lived.*" Their mounds declare this much of their history, and for aught we know were intended by them to do so—and they will perpetuate this intelligence to the latest posterity. But in what age of the world were these erected? By whom? For what objects? And whence *originated* the race who expended such a world of labour in throwing up monuments so vast and so everdaring? It is for us, I say, if it be possible, to answer those questions—questions which even ourselves are asking; and not to refer the duty to posterity, whose means will have diminished in proportion as they recede from the period in which this once powerful, but now feeble and hapless race, lived.

I will not suggest to you the course which it may be most proper for you to pursue in collecting the information asked for—but it may be important to call your attention—should there be any such isolated being known to you, as the "*last man*" of his Tribe—to get from him the words called for. Such a one may be looked upon as the connecting link between time and eternity, as to all that regards his people; and which, if *it* be lost, all that relates to his Tribe is gone forever! When a preservation of it might lead to the most enlightening and gratifying results.

It being in accordance with the views of the Government, and I have no doubt with yours also, I have to request that you will transmit to me, as soon as you conveniently can, the information requested by Dr. RAFINESQUE, upon the several points suggested in the enclosed letter.

I am, very respectfully, your obedient servant,

Thos. L. McKenney

Dear Sir,  
a Request of the W  
Dept. to collect  
for Dr. Rafinesque