From 1789 until the Bureau of Indian Affairs was established in 1824, such affairs were under the control of the secretary of war, except for a government-operated factory system of trade with the Indians begun in 1795.

A November 1800 fire in the War Department destroyed most of its previous records; therefore, the records of the Office of the Secretary of War during its period of direct administration of Native American affairs exist only from late 1800 until 1824. During this period the department kept most of its incoming correspondence in one series. Copies of outgoing letters were recorded in several sets of letter books, one of which was for Native American affairs.

The War Department and Indian Affairs, 1800-1824 consists of letters to and from the War Department, including many sent to the superintendent of Indian trade, Treasury Department officials and persons having commercial dealings with the War Department. Some letters were signed by department clerks or by the president.

Scholars will find speeches to Native Americans, proceedings of conferences in Washington, licenses of traders, passports for “Indian country,” and instructions to commissioners, superintendents, agents and other officials. With its scope and depth of primary sources, the collection supports research in Native American studies, political studies, social history and more.

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The War Department and Indian Affairs, 1800-1824

The correspondence in this collection covers a range of key subjects:

- The establishment and maintenance of peace and friendship with Native Americans
- Proposal to remove Native Americans to west of the Mississippi River following the War of 1812
- Land-related topics such as roads across Native American land, land reserves for individual Native Americans, and boundaries and surveys
- Complaints from Native Americans about violations of terms of treaties
- The purchase and distribution of annuity goods, including complaints of late deliveries
- Discussion of “civilizing” Native Americans and educating them in the “useful arts”: raising crops and livestock, smithery and carpentry, and sewing, spinning and weaving
- Mission schools and the use of the Civilization Fund to support such schools; plus allowing missionaries to reside on Native American land to spread Christianity

Other subjects include:
- Office of Indian Trade and the government factories
- Private trade, with frequent mention of the legislation regulating trade with Native Americans
- The sale of liquor to Native Americans
- The issuance of passports
- Horse-stealing and other depredations committed by and against Native Americans
- Slaves held by Native Americans
- Visits of Native American delegations to Washington
- Disputes between tribes and states
- The investment of Native American funds
- And much more