

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| Preface | ix |
| How to Use This Book | xiii |
| Research Topics for <i>Defining Moments: The Lewis and Clark Expedition</i> | xv |

NARRATIVE OVERVIEW

| | |
|--|-----|
| Prologue | 3 |
| Chapter 1: The Louisiana Purchase | 7 |
| Chapter 2: The Corps of Discovery | 19 |
| Chapter 3: Up the Missouri River, 1804 | 35 |
| Chapter 4: Across the Continent to the Pacific, 1805 | 51 |
| Chapter 5: The Return Journey, 1806 | 71 |
| Chapter 6: Settlement of the West | 91 |
| Chapter 7: Legacy of the Lewis and Clark Expedition | 105 |

BIOGRAPHIES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Toussaint Charbonneau (c. 1760-1843) | 117 |
| <i>Fur Trader and Translator for the Lewis and Clark Expedition</i> | |
| William Clark (1770-1838) | 121 |
| <i>Co-Captain and Primary Mapmaker of the Corps of Discovery</i> | |
| John Colter (c. 1774-1813) | 125 |
| <i>Explorer, Trapper, and Member of the Corps of Discovery</i> | |

| | |
|---|-----|
| George Drouillard (c. 1774-1810) | 129 |
| <i>Interpreter and Hunter for the Lewis and Clark Expedition</i> | |
| Patrick Gass (1771-1870) | 133 |
| <i>Sergeant, Carpenter, and Journal Keeper for the Corps of Discovery</i> | |
| Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) | 137 |
| <i>President Who Organized the Lewis and Clark Expedition</i> | |
| Meriwether Lewis (1774-1809) | 141 |
| <i>Explorer, Naturalist, and Co-Captain of the Corps of Discovery</i> | |
| Sacagawea (c. 1788-1812) | 146 |
| <i>Interpreter and Guide for the Lewis and Clark Expedition</i> | |
| York (c. 1770-c. 1822) | 150 |
| <i>Enslaved African-American Member of the Corps of Discovery</i> | |

PRIMARY SOURCES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Alexander Mackenzie Inspires American Exploration | 157 |
| President Thomas Jefferson Asks Congress to Fund an Expedition | 160 |
| The Louisiana Purchase Treaty | 164 |
| Jefferson Provides Meriwether Lewis with Detailed Instructions | 169 |
| Lewis Buys Equipment and Supplies for the Expedition | 175 |
| Lewis Scouts the Great Falls of the Missouri River | 182 |
| Sergeant Patrick Gass Crosses Treacherous Mountain Passes | 186 |
| William Clark Searches for Winter Quarters on the Pacific Coast | 192 |
| Sergeant John Ordway Returns to Civilization | 195 |
| Lewis Informs Jefferson That He Completed His Mission | 197 |
| Jefferson Meets with an American Indian Delegation | 202 |
| Native Americans Offer Their Perspective on Westward Expansion | 205 |
| Historian James Ronda Explores the Legacy of Lewis and Clark | 210 |

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Important People, Places, and Terms | 215 |
| Chronology | 219 |
| Sources for Further Study | 227 |
| Bibliography | 229 |
| Photo and Illustration Credits | 233 |
| Index | 235 |

Chapter Four

ACROSS THE CONTINENT TO THE PACIFIC, 1805



We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man had never trodden; the good or evil it had in store for us was for experiment yet to determine.... Entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeeding in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life.

—Meriwether Lewis, April 7, 1805

When Lewis and Clark left Fort Mandan on April 7, 1805, they launched the most challenging and uncertain part of their expedition. They still had to cross half a continent of unexplored territory in order to achieve their goal of reaching the Pacific Ocean. They had no maps and very little word-of-mouth information about the route that lay ahead. They knew that they would have to cross at least one mountain range, however, and they anticipated facing danger and hardship along the way.

Encountering Fearsome Beasts

The permanent party of the Corps of Discovery consisted of thirty-three people, including the two captains, three sergeants, twenty-three privates, two interpreters (George Drouillard and Toussaint Charbonneau), York, Sacagawea, and her two-month-old baby, Jean Baptiste. As they continued up the Missouri River in the two pirogues and six small canoes, Lewis felt great confidence in his crew. “The party are in excellent health and spirits, zealously attached to the enterprise, and anxious to proceed,” he wrote. “Not a whisper or murmur of

discontent to be heard among them, but all act in unison, with the most perfect harmony. With such men I have everything to hope, and but little to fear.”¹

As the Corps of Discovery entered the wilderness of present-day Montana, though, they encountered a fearsome new predator: the grizzly bear. The Mandan Indians had warned Lewis and Clark about the large, strong, and ferocious bears that lived further west. They advised the explorers to avoid the beasts, which they considered too dangerous to hunt except with large groups of warriors.

The expedition’s first encounter occurred on April 29, when Lewis and a companion ran into a pair of grizzlies near the Yellowstone River. They fired their guns and wounded the bears, which caused one of the animals to run away. The other one began chasing the men, but Lewis managed to reload his rifle and kill it. Although the experience was frightening, Lewis expressed confidence that American weapons could meet the challenge. “The Indians may well fear this animal, equipped as they generally are with their bows and arrows,” he noted, “but in the hands of a skillful rifleman they are by no means as formidable or dangerous as they have been represented.”²

On May 5 the expedition got a clearer idea of how tough and resilient grizzlies could be. Upon encountering a large bear near the Milk River, they shot



The Corps of Discovery had many dangerous encounters with grizzly bears, as this sketch from Gass's journal shows.

it multiple times. Still, the wounded bear managed to swim across the river to a sandbar before it finally succumbed. A week later, Private William Bratton shot another grizzly while hunting on shore. He only managed to anger the bear, however, and it chased him for half a mile while he screamed in terror. Bratton finally escaped by leaping off a high bank into the Missouri River. Other expedition members tracked the dangerous creature back to its den, where it continued to fight until they shot it several more times.

By this time, Lewis admitted that he found grizzlies intimidating. “I must confess that I do not like the gentlemen and had rather fight two Indians than one bear,” he wrote. “I find that the curiosity of our party is pretty well satisfied with respect to this animal.”³ He ordered his men to avoid the bears whenever possible and only shoot them in self-defense. When grizzlies prowled around the group’s camp at night, Seaman the dog helped keep them safe by growling or barking in warning.

In addition to bears, the expedition encountered a wide variety of other wildlife as they continued up the Missouri, including buffalo, elk, and bighorn sheep. Many of the animals had not yet developed a fear of humans, and some even showed curiosity toward the explorers. Lewis noted that they were “so gentle that we pass near them while feeding, without appearing to excite any alarm among them; and when we attract their attention, they frequently approach us more nearly to discover what we are.”⁴ In one spot they were surprised to discover dozens of dead buffaloes at the base of a cliff. They guessed that an Indian hunting party must have herded the beasts over the edge in order to harvest the meat. A pack of wolves was feasting on the remains, and Lewis commented that they were fat and gentle.

Approaching the Rocky Mountains

As the group moved further into Montana, the terrain gradually became dry and rugged. The lush, grassy prairies turned into rocky hills dotted with sagebrush, juniper, and other drought-tolerant plant species. The spring weather was unpredictable, and storms and strong winds sometimes occurred with little warning. A squall that blew in on May 14 nearly spelled disaster for the expedition. It was an unusual day because both Lewis and Clark were on shore, and they left Charbonneau—an inexperienced boatman who did not know how to swim—in charge of the white pirogue. A sudden gust of wind ripped the boat’s

“I must confess that I do not like the gentlemen,” Lewis wrote after a frightening grizzly encounter, “and had rather fight two Indians than one bear.”

sail and caused Charbonneau to lose hold of the rudder. The small craft tipped onto its side and started taking on water.

The captains watched helplessly as the pirogue floundered in the waves. The vessel contained “our papers, instruments, books, medicine, a great part of our merchandise [Indian gifts], and in short almost every article indispensably necessary to further the views, or ensure the success of the enterprise,”⁵ according to Lewis. Fortunately, Pierre Cruzatte quickly took charge of the situation and got the boat upright. He confronted the terrified Charbonneau, who was “crying to his god for mercy,”⁶ and threatened to shoot him if he did not resume his place at the rudder. Then he ordered the other expedition members on board to begin bailing water.



Lewis got his first glimpse of snow-capped mountains in the distance on May 26, 1805.

In contrast to her husband, Sacagawea remained calm throughout the ordeal. She collected floating gear with one hand while holding her baby’s head above water with the other. The crew managed to guide the pirogue to shore, where the captains were relieved to find most of their equipment still salvageable. “The Indian woman, to whom I ascribe equal fortitude and resolution with any person,... caught and preserved most of the light articles which were washed overboard,” Lewis wrote, and as a result “the loss we sustained was not so great as we had at first apprehended.”⁷

As the expedition continued moving westward, the Missouri narrowed and flowed more swiftly. Although the captains were thrilled to be nearing the river’s headwaters, the strong current and frequent rapids slowed their progress. The members of the Corps of Discovery were often forced to disembark and trudge along the rocky shoreline, using towropes to drag the boats upstream.

George Drouillard (c. 1774-1810)

Interpreter and Hunter for the Lewis and Clark Expedition

George Drouillard was born near Windsor, Ontario, around 1774. His father was Pierre Drouillard, a French Canadian, and his mother was Asoundechris Flat Head, a Shawnee Indian. Although Drouillard was christened Pierre after his father, he was called George for his entire life. When Drouillard was a boy, he and his mother moved west to be near Shawnee family in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Except for a few visits to his father's family in Detroit, Michigan, he spent the rest of his childhood in Missouri, which was considered the western frontier of the United States at that time.

Drouillard did not receive a formal education while he was living among the Shawnee Indians, but he did learn some very useful skills. He became fluent in several languages, including Shawnee, French, English, and Plains Indian Sign. He also became an excellent hunter and learned to live off the land and survive in the wilderness. As he grew up, Drouillard was described as being courageous, with good judgment and common sense. All of these skills and characteristics would prove very valuable when he met Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1803.



Recruited to Join the Corps of Discovery

In November of that year, Drouillard was working as a translator at Fort Massac on the Ohio River in Illinois. Lewis arrived at the fort seeking recruits for a military expedition that had been specially commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to explore, map, and study the Louisiana Territory—a vast wilderness on the west side of the Mississippi River that the United States had just purchased from France. Lewis was immediately impressed by Drouillard's hunting skills, as well as his knowledge of Indian customs and the sign language typically used by Plains Indians to communicate with members of other Native

Native Americans Offer Their Perspective on Westward Expansion

Lewis and Clark sent a delegation of American Indians from seven nations along the Upper Missouri River back east to meet with President Thomas Jefferson. After hearing a speech by the president on January 4, 1806, they issued the following response. The Native American leaders express affection for the captains and a willingness to accept Jefferson's offers of peace, friendship, and trade. But they also express concerns about whether American traders and settlers on the western frontier will follow through on the president's promises to treat them fairly. As it turned out, their concerns were well founded. In the decades following the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the U.S. government betrayed its promises to the Native Americans countless times by breaking treaties and stealing their land to make room for white settlement.

My Grandfather & My Father

It is with an open heart that we receive your hands, friendship stretches ours in yours & unites them together.

Fathers

We feel entirely our happiness at this day, since you tell us that we are welcome in the grand lodge of prosperity. We perceive that we are numbered among your most cherished children.

Fathers

You observe that we have undertaken a very long journey in order to see our fathers & brethren; it is most true: but fathers, we will tell you that we did not look back for to measure the road, & our sight stretching to the rising sun, discovered every new day the pleasure rising with him, as we were reflecting our daily approach, our hearts were overjoyed, for we were soon to see our new good fathers who wish to pity us.

Fathers

There is a long while that we wish to be acquainted with our fathers & brothers of the rising sun & we hope that, when we will return back, where the sun sets, we will dispel all the thick clouds whose darkness obscures the light of the day.

Fathers

That Great Spirit who disposes of everything, & fixes into our bosom the ardent desire of seeing you, we thank him & we will thank him more when we

IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Bonaparte, Napoleon (1769-1821)

Emperor of France who sold the Louisiana Territory to the United States in 1803.

Cameahwait

Shoshone Indian chief and brother of Sacagawea who provided horses to the Lewis and Clark Expedition in August 1805, allowing the explorers to cross the Rocky Mountains.

Charbonneau, Jean Baptiste (1805-1866)

Son of Sacagawea and Toussaint Charbonneau who accompanied his parents on the Lewis and Clark Expedition as a baby and went on to become an explorer and fur trader.

Charbonneau, Toussaint (c. 1760-1843)

French Canadian fur trader and husband of Sacagawea who served as a translator for the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Clark, William (1770-1838)

Co-captain and primary mapmaker for the Corps of Discovery.

Clatsop

Indian nation with territory near the mouth of the Columbia River in present-day Washington, where the Lewis and Clark Expedition spent the winter of 1805-1806.

Colter, John (c. 1774-1813)

Member of the Corps of Discovery who went on to become a fur trapper, explorer, and legendary mountain man.

CHRONOLOGY

1762

At the end of the French and Indian War, France is forced to turn over control of Louisiana to Spain. *See p. 10.*

1776

The American colonies declare independence from Great Britain. *See p. 7.*

1783

The United States is established following the end of the Revolutionary War. *See p. 7.*

1787

The Northwest Ordinance, which opens the Great Lakes region to white settlement, also includes protections for Native American inhabitants. *See p. 92.*

1792

American sea captain Robert Gray sails into the mouth of the Columbia River on the Pacific Coast of North America. *See p. 16.*

1793

Scottish explorer Alexander Mackenzie, traveling through Canada, becomes the first European to cross North America by land and reach the Pacific Ocean. *See p. 16.*

1795

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark meet when they serve in the same frontier military unit. *See p. 21.*

1799

Napoleon Bonaparte seizes power in France and begins working to reclaim former French colonies in North America. *See p. 10.*

1801

Thomas Jefferson takes office as the third president of the United States. *See p. 7.*

Jefferson invites Lewis to Washington, D.C., to serve as his personal secretary. *See p. 20.*

Mackenzie publishes a book about his North American exploration, which encourages Jefferson to organize a U.S. expedition. *See p. 17.*

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Lewis and Clark: Voyage of Discovery*. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1998. In this beautifully illustrated volume, a leading historian intersperses the history of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with his own modern-day travels in the explorers' footsteps.

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. Although this book is primarily a biography of Lewis, it captures all the excitement and adventure of the journey of the Corps of Discovery.

Discovering Lewis and Clark. Lewis and Clark Fort Mandan Association, 1998-2005. Retrieved from <http://www.lewis-clark.org/>. This extensive, highly informative Web site, maintained by a nonprofit educational foundation, features dozens of essays on the expedition, its natural history discoveries, the members of the Corps of Discovery, the Native American nations of the West, and more.

Duncan, Dayton, and Ken Burns. *Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery*. New York: Knopf, 1997. This companion volume to the PBS documentary is heavily illustrated and provides valuable background on the expedition and its members.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition. Monticello, n.d. Retrieved from <http://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/lewis-and-clark-expedition>. The official Internet site of Thomas Jefferson's historic home covers the president's interest in the West, acquisition of the Louisiana Territory, and decision to mount the expedition. It also provides access to many historic documents.

Lewis and Clark Expedition: A National Register of Historic Places Travel Itinerary. National Park Service, n.d. Retrieved from <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/lewisandclark/index.htm>. This Web site serves as a guide to modern-day travelers on the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, with introductory essays and links to trail sites, maps, and suggested travel itineraries.

Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West. National Geographic, 1996. Retrieved from <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/lewisandclark/index.html>. This informative and entertaining Web site features an interactive journey into the West, games, photos, articles, maps, and more.

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INDEX

A

Adams, John, 138, 140
Age of Reason. *See* Enlightenment
Alaska, U.S. acquisition of, 102
Aldrin, Edwin “Buzz,” 109
Allen, Paul, 85
American Philosophical Society, 9, 21, 85
American Revolution, 137
Apollo 11, 109
Arikara Indians, 151
Armstrong, Neil, 109
Astoria, Oregon, 66, 113

B

Barbé-Marbois, François de, 12 (ill.), 13, 164
Barnum, P. T., 31
Barton, Benjamin Smith, 21
Bears Paw Mountains, 55
Biddle, Nicholas, 85
Big Hidatsa Village Site, 113
Billings, Montana, 78, 113
Bismarck, North Dakota, 44
Bitterroot Mountains, 62-64, 74, 75, 105, 111, 146, 186
Black Buffalo, 42, 81, 212
Blackfeet Indians, 78-80, 126, 127, 131, 132, 143
Bonaparte, Napoleon, 10, 12-14, 164
Bratton, William, 26, 53
buffalo, 53, 78, 88, 100-101, 183, 185
Bush, George W., 110

C

California, U.S. acquisition of, 96, 97
Cameahwait, 61, 148, 212
Camp Chopunnish, 74, 75
Camp Dubois, 28, 195
Camp Fortunate, 61, 76
Camp Wood River. *See* Camp Dubois
Canoe Camp, 64
Cape Disappointment State Park, 113
Catherine the Great, 9
Chapman, Matilda, 212
Charbonneau, Jean Baptiste, 49, 78, 81, 118-20, 123, 147, 149, 212
Charbonneau, Toussaint, 47, 53-54, 76, 81, 117 (ill.), 146-47, 149
 biography, 117-20
Charles IV, King of Spain, 10
Cherokee Indians, 94, 141
Chinook Indians, 66, 212
Clark, George Rogers, 9, 21, 26, 27 (ill.), 85, 121
Clark, William, 22 (ill.), 27 (ill.), 36 (ill.), 48 (ill.), 107 (ill.), 121 (ill.)
 biography, 121-24
 chosen as co-leader of expedition, 9, 21-22, 139, 142
 excerpts from journal, 87, 192-94
 military rank, 32, 84-85
 notable experiences during expedition, 28, 61-62, 65-66, 74-78, 80
 ownership of York, 150-53