

LEWIS & CLARK IN COLUMBIA RIVER COUNTRY



TESTIMONY II: Letter From Alexander Wilson to a Friend Reveals New Details About the Death of Governor Meriwether Lewis May 28, 1811

(Editor's Note: *The author of the following letter was a prominent ornithologist and friend of Governor Lewis. In fact, Wilson had agreed to do the bird illustrations for the journals. While traveling on the Natchez Trace two years after Lewis' death, Wilson had the opportunity to interview Mrs. Grinder, proprietor of the inn where Governor Lewis died. After speaking with her, Wilson recounted their conversation in a letter to Alexander Lawson, a well-known engraver and a mutual friend of Lewis and himself. In the course of the conversation, Mrs. Grinder added details that were not included in Major Neelly's letter to President Jefferson.*)

...Next morning (Sunday) I rode six miles to a man's of the name of Grinder, where our poor friend Lewis perished. In the same room where he expired, I took down from Mrs. Grinder the particulars of that melancholy event, which affected me extremely. This house or cabin is seventy-two miles from Nashville, and is the last white man's as you enter the Indian country. Governor Lewis, she said, came there about sun-set, alone, and inquired if he could stay for the night; and, alighting, brought his saddle into the house. He was dressed in a loose gown, white, striped with blue. On being asked if he came alone, he replied that there were two servants behind, who would soon be up. He called for some spirits, and drank a very little. When the servants arrived, one of whom was a negro, he inquired for his powder, saying he was sure he had some powder in a canister. The servant gave no distinct reply, and Lewis, in the mean while



This picture from the Historic American Buildings Survey shows the front detail of an early log cabin near the Meriwether Lewis National Monument in Tennessee. This style of cabin would have been similar to Grinder's Stand, the site of Lewis' death. This was taken by the photographer, A.A. Gustafson in August, 1937. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

walked backwards and forwards before the door, talking to himself. Sometimes, she said, he would seem as if he were walking up to her; and would suddenly wheel round, and walk back as fast as he could. Supper being ready he sat down, but had not eat but a few mouthfuls when he started up speaking to himself in a violent manner. At these times, she says, she observed his face to flush as if it had come on him in a fit. He lighted his pipe, and drawing a chair to the door sat down, saying to Mrs. Grinder in a kind tone of voice, "Madam this is a very pleasant evening." He smoked for some time, but quitted his seat and traversed the yard as before. He again sat down to his pipe,

seemed again composed and casting his eyes wishfully towards the west, observed what a sweet evening it was. Mrs. Grinder was preparing a bed for him; but he said he would sleep on the floor, and desired the servant to bring the bear skins and buffaloe robe, which were immediately spread out for him; and it being now dusk the woman went off to the kitchen, and the two men to the barn, which stands about two hundred yards off. The kitchen is only a few paces from the room where Lewis was, and the woman being considerably alarmed by the behaviour of her guest could not sleep but listened to him walking backwards and forwards, she thinks for several hours, and talking aloud, as she said, "like a lawyer," She then heard the report of a pistol, and something fall heavily on the floor, and the words "O

Lord!" Immediately afterwards she heard another pistol, and in a few minutes she hear him at her door calling out "O madam! Give me some water, and heal my wounds. " The logs being open, and unplastered, she saw him stagger back and fall against a stump that stands between the kitchen and room. He crawled for some distance, raised himself by the side of a tree, where he sat about a minute. He once more got to the room; afterwards he came to the kitchen door, but did not speak; she then heard him scraping the bucket with a gourd for water, but it appears that this cooling element was denied the dying man! As soon as day broke and not before, the terror of the woman having permitted him to remain for two hours in this most deplorable situation, she sent two of her children to the barn, her husband not being at home, to bring the servants; and



This trunk is similar to the one which Lewis had in his possession at the time of his death. Washington State Historical Society Collection.

on going in they found him lying on the bed; he uncovered his side and shewed them where the bullet had entered; a piece of the forehead was blown off, and had exposed the brains, without having bled much. He begged they would take his rifle and blowout his brains, and he would give them all the money he had in his trunk. He often said, "I am no coward, but I am so strong, so hard to die " He begg'd the servant [John Pernier] not to be afraid of him, for that he would not hurt him. He expired in about two hours, or just as the sun rose above the trees. He lies buried close by the common path, with a few loose rails thrown over his

grave. I gave Grinder money to put a post fence round it, to shelter it from the hogs, and from the wolves; and he gave me his written promise he would do it. I left this place in a very melancholy

mood, which was not much allayed by the prospect of the gloomy and savage wilderness which I was just entering alone. . . ¹

This excerpt was provided courtesy of the [Jefferson National Expansion Memorial/National Park Service website](#) (March 22, 2006).

¹ "Alexander Wilson to Alexander Lawson, Natchez, Mississippi Territory, May 28th, 1811." *Port Folio*, Vol VII, No. 1 (Jan 1812). *Port Folio* was a magazine published in Philadelphia.