

# LEWIS & CLARK IN COLUMBIA RIVER COUNTRY



## James E. Starrs: Can The Truth Ever Be Known?

Two centuries after the death of Governor Lewis, the interest in what happened to him that night on the Natchez Trace has ebbed at times, but never died out completely. But with all the conflicting testimonies, the passage of time, and the lack of documentation, can the truth ever be known? Forensic scientist James E. Starrs of George Washington University thinks so-if the National Park Service will allow him to exhume Lewis' remains.

Starrs leans toward the assassination theory, maintaining that the description of Lewis' wounds do not suggest suicide. "It is implausible that someone as deftly experienced with firearms as Meriwether Lewis would have failed twice to kill himself with such a deadly and destructive weapon," he says. (Lewis was killed by lead balls fired from two flintlock pistols.)

As the first step in getting permission for an exhumation Starrs filed an affidavit to convene a coroner's jury in the Tennessee county where Lewis was killed. The jury met on June 3, 1996 in Hohenwald, Tennessee to hear testimony from historians, forensic scientists, and experts on subjects from firearms to handwriting analysis.

After the inquest was held, participants (nearly all of whom believed Lewis was murdered), recommended that Lewis' remains be exhumed on the premise that recently-developed forensic techniques may be able to solve the mystery. The decision to exhume or not lies with National Park Service officials who now administer the section of the Natchez

Trace where Lewis' gravesite is located. The Park Service maintained that the witnesses who appeared at the inquest presented a one-sided view of Lewis' death. Few witnesses appeared who believed Lewis committed suicide or who could argue strongly that physical remains of Lewis surviving after two hundred years would do little to prove either the suicide or murder theories.

The Park Service maintained that the sanctity of Lewis' burial site was more important than the small amount of information likely to be gained from examining a body that had not been buried in a coffin and had been deteriorating for nearly two hundred years. Robert C. Haraden, former superintendent of the Natchez Trace Parkway & Meriwether Lewis National Monument writes:

". . . There are people who believe that Lewis committed suicide and others who believe he was murdered. Both groups are well intentioned. However, the mystery, the fascination, and the lore of Lewis and Clark and their heroic expedition is that we do not know every detail about them. Nor do we need to know-that's what keeps the story alive. . . There is a high potential for damage to the monument and gravesite [from exhumation] and only a forlorn hope that anything positive can be learned after 190 years. . . Let's not dwell on Meriwether Lewis' death. Instead, let us celebrate his life and great accomplishments and let the mystery remain."

## Exhume the Remains of Meriwether Lewis? Park Service Denies Explorer's Exhumation

Reuters News Service - Atlanta

The body of explorer Meriwether Lewis will remain in its grave, the National Park Service said Monday. The Park Service rejected the request of a forensic scientist, James Starrs, to dig up the remains of the nineteenth explorer to try to prove a theory that Lewis was assassinated. The agency said it had a duty to protect burial sites.

"The proposed excavation and exhumation is inconsistent with National Park Service management policies, which prohibit the disturbance of burials in national park lands unless threatened with destruction," Jerry Belson, director of the National Park Service's southeast region, wrote to Starrs.

"In our opinion national parks throughout the country entrusted with the stewardship of burial sites could be affected if this project were allowed . . ."  
Starrs' exhumation request had the backing of more than 160 of Lewis' descendents who disagree with history books that claim the explorer committed suicide in 1809. Starrs, a professor at George Washington University, said he thought Lewis was the first assassination victim in U. S. history.



The photographs on this page are images of the marker placed above the spot of Meriwether Lewis' grave.



*This information only scratches the surface of the massive amount of material written about Meriwether Lewis' mysterious death. Magazines and newspapers of that day carried stories about the tragedy, of course, and references to Lewis' tragic end often appeared in letters among those who knew him. In the 1930s, extensive interviews were conducted with elderly people around the area in Tennessee where Lewis died. Many of them remember hearing their elders talk about it when they were children. As you do your research, look for other leads to follow in this most enduring of American mysteries.*

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