

LEWIS & CLARK IN COLUMBIA RIVER COUNTRY

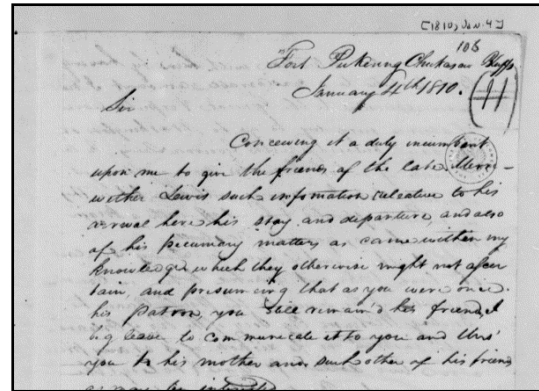


TESTIMONY III: Captain Gilbert Russell Gives New Information About the Death of Governor Lewis In a Public Statement, November 26, 1811

(Editor's Note: *Captain Gilbert Russell was commander of Fort Pickering on the Mississippi River near Memphis, Tennessee when Lewis arrived there on September 15, 1809. (This region was also known as Chickasaw Bluffs.) According to Russell and other witnesses, Lewis was in very poor health when he arrived, both mentally and physically.*

About three months after Lewis' death, Captain Russell wrote two letters to Thomas Jefferson. In the first letter, dated January 4, 1810, Russell wrote briefly about Lewis' unstable condition when he arrived at the fort. He said he had detained Lewis at the fort for his own protection until he was well enough to resume his journey. The rest of the letter concerned the sale of some land Lewis owned and some baggage that he had left with Russell at the fort.

The second letter, dated January 31, 1810, was much more personal. Russell wrote that he believed Lewis' main problem was excessive drinking and that when hard liquor was denied him at the fort, he quickly improved. Russell then accused Major Neelly of encouraging Lewis to drink again after the two of them left the fort. ". . . instead of preventing the Govr from drinking or putting him under restraint advised him to it," Russell wrote, "& from everything I can learn gave the man every chance to seek an opportunity to destroy himself. And from the statement of Grinder's wife



The image above is a detail of the letter written to Thomas Jefferson by Captain Gilbert Russell on January 31, 1810.

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, the Thomas Jefferson Papers.

where he killed himself I can not help believing that Purney [John Pernier, Lewis' servant] was rather aiding and abetting in the murder than otherwise."

Keep this letter in mind while reading Russell's formal statement about Lewis' death written two years after the fact.)

On November 26, 1811, Russell wrote:

Governor Lewis left St. Louis late in August, or early in September 1809, intending to go by the route of the Mississippi and the Ocean, to the City of Washington, taking with him all the papers relative to his expedition to the Pacific Ocean, for the purpose of preparing and putting them to the press, and to have some drafts paid which had

been drawn by him on the Government and protested. On the morning of the 15th of September, the Boat in which he was a passenger landed him at Fort Pickering in a state of mental derangement, which appeared to have been produced as much by indisposition as other causes. The Subscriber being then the commanding Officer of the Fort on discovering his situation, and learning from the Crew that he had made two attempts to kill himself, in one of which he had nearly succeeded, resolved at once to take possession of him and his papers, and detain them there until he

recovered, or some friend might arrive in whose hands he could depart in safety. In this condition he continued without any material change for about five days, during which time the most proper and efficacious means that could be devised to restore him was administered, and on the sixth or seventh day all symptoms of derangement disappeared and he was completely In his senses and thus continued for ten or twelve days. On the 29th of the same month he left Bluffs, with the Chickasaw agent the interpreter and some of the Chiefs, intending then to proceed the usual route thro' the Indian Country, Tennessee and Virginia to his place of destination, with his papers well secured and packed on horses. By much severe depletion during his illness he had been considerably reduced and debilitated, from which he had not entirely

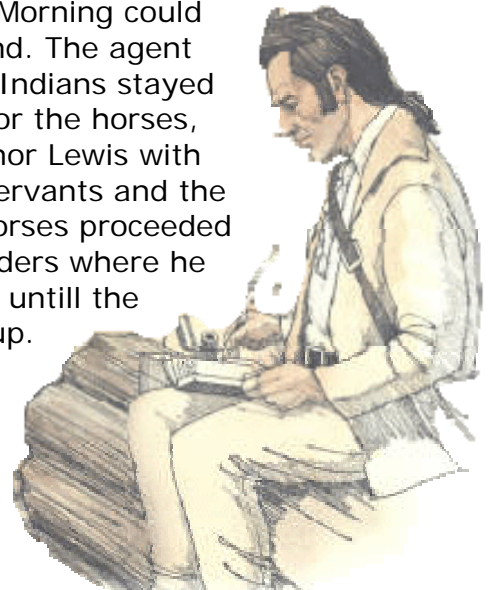
“...he destroyed himself, in the most cool, desperate and Barbarian-like manner...”

recovered when he set off, and the weather in that country being yet excessively hot and the exercise of traveling too severe for him; in three or four days he was again affected with the same mental disease. He had no person with him who could manage or controul him in his propensities and he daily grew worse until he arrived at the house of a Mr. Grinder within the Jurisdiction of Tennessee and only

Seventy miles from Nashville, where in the apprehension of being destroyed by enemies which had no existence but in his wild imagination, he destroyed himself, in the most cool

desperate and Barbarian-like manner, having been left in the house entirely to himself. The night preceding this one of his Horses and one of the Chickasaw agents [Major Neelly] with whom he was traveling strayed off from the camp and in the Morning could not be found. The agent with some Indians stayed to search for the horses, and Governor Lewis with their two servants and the baggage horses proceeded to Mr. Grinders where he was to halt until the agent got up.

After he arrived there and refreshed himself



The picture of Meriwether Lewis to the right is from Roger Cooke's *The Vote*.
Washington State Historical Society Collections.

with a little Meal & drink he went to bed in a cabin by himself and ordered the servants to go to the stables and take care of the Horses, least they might loose some that night; Some time in the night he got his pistols which he loaded, after every body had retired in a seperate Building and discharged one against his forehead without much effect—the ball not penetrating the skull but only making a furrow over it. He then discharged the other against his breast where the ball entered and passing downward thro' his body came out low down near his back bone. After some time he got up and went to the house where Mrs. Grinder and her children were lying and asked for water, but her husband being absent and having heard the report of the pistols she was greatly allarmed and made him no answer. He then in returning got his razors from a port folio which happened to contain them and siting up in his bed was found about day light, by one of the servants, busily engaged in cutting himself from head to foot. He again beged for water, which was given him and so soon as he drank, he lay down and died with the declaration to the Boy [his servant] that he had killed himself to deprive his enemies of the pleasure and honor of doing it. His death was greatly lamented. And that a fame so dearly earned as his should finally be clouded by such an act of desperation was to his friends still greater cause of regret."



GILBERT RUSSELL

(The above was received by me from Major Gilbert Russell of the [blank] Regiment of Infantry U.S. on Tuesday the 26th of November 1811 at Fredericktown in Maryland. J. WILLIAMS)

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