

LEWIS & CLARK IN COLUMBIA RIVER COUNTRY



STUDENT READING: THE MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF MERIWETHER LEWIS

Time has not diminished the public's interest in the mysterious death of Governor Lewis. Two hundred years later, it still has the power to inspire heated debates among historians, forensic scientists, and even the general public.

Meriwether Lewis was only thirty-two years old when he returned from his great western adventure. The first days and weeks back "home" must have been exhilarating. The triumphant explorers were national heroes. Being a national hero in 1806 was probably a lot different from today—no high-speed communication systems to quickly spread the news, no motorcades or ticker tape parades down the main streets of America. But there were plenty of celebrations, mostly receptions and dinner parties at the homes of St. Louis' leading citizens—at least for the captains. Crew members undoubtedly had their own ways of celebrating.



This painting by Roger Cooke shows Thomas Jefferson giving instructions for the expedition to Meriwether Lewis. Washington State Historical Society Collection.

A little later, when Lewis and Clark

traveled east to report to President Jefferson, they were "wined and dined" and treated like heroes wherever they went. To officially reward their accomplishments, both men were appointed to high offices. In February, 1807, Lewis was named Governor of the Upper Louisiana Territory, and Clark was appointed Brigadier General of the Militia and Superintendent of Indian Affairs for the same region. Frederick Bates, a Washington official, was appointed secretary of the Upper Louisiana Territory to serve under Governor Lewis.

In the spring of 1807, Clark and Bates left for St. Louis to take up their new duties, but Lewis had business in Philadelphia before heading west. He arrived in that city around the first of April, 1807. His first concern was publication of the journals he and Clark kept during their Voyage of Discovery, so he busied himself finding a publisher and contacting artists to illustrate them. The actual journals and field notes were still in St. Louis and it was Lewis' responsibility to get them ready for publication as soon as possible after he returned to St. Louis.

Lewis was warmly received by the Philadelphia elite. He renewed an old friendship with a prominent Philadelphian, Mahlon Dickerson. Judging from a letter he later wrote to Dickerson, Lewis enjoyed the social scene very much during his stay in Philadelphia. Lewis' letter also indicates that he became attracted to a young lady there, and may have proposed marriage to her.

After almost four months in Philadelphia, Lewis returned to Virginia, still unmarried. He visited President Jefferson, his mother (Lucy Lewis Marks), and other friends, but there is little information about how he

occupied his time otherwise. Some scholars say he attended the treason trial of Aaron Burr in Richmond, Virginia at Jefferson's request, but there is no documentation to prove this. Finally, in February 1807, he set out for St. Louis accompanied by his brother, Reuben. They arrived on March 8, 1807, one year and eight days after Lewis was appointed Governor of Upper Louisiana. During this time, Secretary Bates had been in charge of the office in St. Louis.

Lewis' long absence from his new post has never been fully explained or understood. Thomas Jefferson's letters to him during this time show a growing anxiety—even impatience with his delays. In a letter to Lewis on July 17, 1807, Jefferson's first sentence was, "Since I parted with you from Albemarle in Sep. last [1806] I have never had a line from you nor I believe has the Secretary of War with which you have much connection through the Indian department."¹ Jefferson's closing sentence was about the journals. He wrote, "We have no tidings yet of the forwardness of your printer. I hope the first part will not be delayed much longer."²

Back in St. Louis, Lewis took up his official duties as Governor of Upper Louisiana. The position was a great honor, of course, but probably not a wise career choice for a young, hardy outdoorsman. It certainly didn't help matters that Secretary Bates was jealous of Lewis and never lost an opportunity to undermine him whenever and however he could. In spite of this distraction, Lewis apparently tackled the governor's job with determination. It was an uphill battle, however.

¹ Jackson, Donald, ed. *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents 1783-1854*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1962, p. 445.

² Jackson, pp. 467-68. (Same as footnote 1)

References to Lewis in the letters of Jefferson and other friends suggest Lewis was having a difficult time adjusting. He seems to have developed a drinking problem, usually referred to discreetly as "his habit" or "indisposition." Another matter of concern among Lewis' friends was his tendency toward "melancholia," or depression as it is commonly referred to today.

The last straw came when James Madison became president in 1809 and replaced Jefferson's cabinet members with those of his own. Right from the start, the new Secretary of War, William Eustis, refused to pay Lewis' vouchers for legitimate expenses. Lewis had used his own money for certain expenses, and Eustis' refusal to reimburse him put him in a precarious financial situation.

In the fall of 1809, Lewis decided he had to go back to Washington to work out his problems with the War Department and to attend to the long-neglected publication of the journals. Taking the journals and the unpaid vouchers with him, he left St.



Roger Cooke's painting "Meriwether Lewis, Field Botanist" shows Lewis examining a plant with white flowers, probably a cow parsnip. Such work was also documented in his journals. Washington State Historical Society Collection.

Lewis by keelboat on September 4, 1809. His plan was to travel down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and then take a sea-going vessel up the east coast to Washington D. C. However, by the time Lewis reached Fort Pickering (near Memphis, Tennessee), he was quite ill and acting irrationally. Crew members of the boat on which he was traveling reported that he had twice attempted to kill himself.

The commander at Fort Pickering, Captain Gilbert Russell, was so alarmed at Lewis' condition (which Russell attributed in part to Lewis' "indisposition") that he refused to let Lewis leave until his health improved. During this time, Lewis changed his plans. He decided to strike out across country from Fort Pickering, intersect the Natchez Trace (a wilderness road that stretched 450 miles from Natchez, Mississippi to Nashville, Tennessee), then continue on well-traveled roads to Washington.

While Lewis was still recovering at Fort Pickering, Major James Neelly, agent to the Chickasaw Nation, arrived at the fort. Neelly was on his way to Nashville and he agreed to travel with Lewis, whose health had substantially improved. The party that left Fort Pickering consisted of Governor Lewis, Major Neelly, and two servants. One of them, John Pernier, was Lewis' personal servant who had been with him for a long time. The other, an unnamed black man, was traveling with Major Neelly. Some sources say the group also included some Chickasaw Indian chiefs

traveling back to their villages.

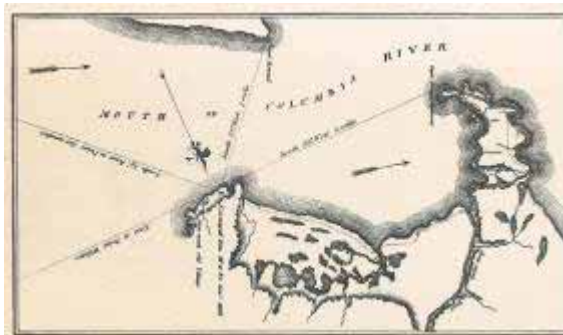
The overland trip was grueling and Neelly reported that after a few days on the trail, Lewis' health began to deteriorate once again. They rested a couple of days at the Chickasaw Indian agency, and then pushed on toward Nashville. On the morning of October 10, Major Neelly stayed behind to look for some horses that had strayed while Lewis and the two servants went ahead. That evening Lewis' party arrived at a roadside inn to spend the night and wait for Major Neelly. The inn, called Grinder's Stand, was about seventy miles southeast of Nashville. It was actually a crude log house built

beside the road where travelers could get food and lodging.

Early the next morning (October 11) Governor Lewis died in his room from two gunshot wounds. Major Neelly arrived at the inn later on the same day, but Lewis was already dead. Several days later, Neelly wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson telling him

what had happened-or at least what Mrs. Grinder and the servants told him had happened.

The little that is known about the events of that night comes mainly from Neelly's letter and two or three other documents, none of which tell exactly the same story. These documents are presented exactly as they were written. The spelling and punctuation of the original documents has been retained.



This detailed map of the mouth and north shore of the Columbia River was originally drawn by William Clark in 1805.
Washington State Historical Society Collections.

This excerpt was provided courtesy of the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial/National Park Service website (March 21, 2006).