

LEWIS & CLARK IN COLUMBIA RIVER COUNTRY



THEORIES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF MERIWETHER LEWIS' DEATH

SUICIDE

Those who believe Meriwether Lewis took his own life have differing theories about why he did it as follows: (1) He was subject to periodic spells of depression and overwhelmed by personal problems after the expedition. (2) He had a debilitating physical disease that caused

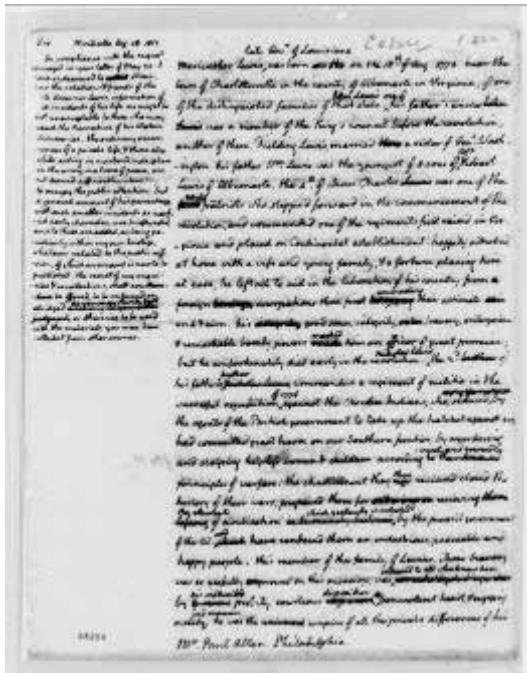
death as a suicide in letters and statements written after Lewis' death.

Neely and Russell based their conclusions on personal observations of Lewis' strange behavior shortly before his death, while Wilson accepted Mrs. Grinder's story two years after the event.

In addition, three men who were probably closest to Lewis—Thomas Jefferson, William Clark, and Mahlon Dickerson immediately assumed that Lewis had taken his own life when they heard the news. In a letter to his brother Jonathan, William Clark wrote, "I fear O! I fear the weight of his mind has overcome him." Dickerson lamented Lewis' death in his diary and did not question that his death was by suicide.

Jefferson wrote a short biography of Lewis in which he wrote, "While he lived with me in Washington, I observed at times sensible depressions of mind . . . During his western expedition the constant exertion which that required of all the faculties of body & mind, suspended these distressing affections; but after his establishment in St. Louis in sedentary occupations they returned upon him with redoubled vigor, and began seriously to alarm his friends. He was in a paroxym of one of these when his affairs rendered it necessary for him to go to Washington."

Much later in time, several other prominent writers and scholars took firm stands that Lewis' death was suicide due



The image above is of a letter written to Thomas Jefferson to Paul Allen on August 18, 1813. This letter contains a short biography of Meriwether Lewis.

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

both his mind and body to deteriorate.

(1) Overwhelmed by personal problems

Major Neely, Major Russell, and Alexander Wilson all reported Lewis'

to depression and personal problems. Two such authors are Paul Russell Cutright and Donald Jackson.

(2) Overcome by a physical disease affecting mind and body

Two disease theories have recently been proposed that attribute Lewis' strange behavior and eventual self-destruction to debilitating diseases.

Paresis Theory: Reimert T. Ravenholt, a physician and epidemiologist, believes Lewis was suffering from paresis which is defined medically as, "a disorder characterized primarily by impaired mental function, caused by damage to the brain from untreated syphilis." Ravenholt thinks Lewis probably contracted syphilis, a venereal disease, while on the western expedition. He sees a distinct similarity between Lewis' behavior shortly before he died and clinical studies of persons afflicted with paresis. Ravenholt also believes that Lewis realized what was happening to him, and rather than cast a shadow upon those who loved and respected him, he ended his life.

Malaria Theory: A long-time Lewis and Clark scholar, Thomas C. Danisi has also proposed a disease theory, but he believes the disease afflicting Lewis was malaria. Most people who lived in the Mississippi River Valley in the early nineteenth century contracted malaria, which was spread by mosquitoes. Malaria was a recurring disease which once caught could reappear periodically. Some people were affected more strongly by malaria symptoms than others.

Danisi cites historical accounts and clinical studies of malaria patients whose behavior resembled that of Lewis. In severe cases of malaria, unbearable pain periodically afflicts certain parts of the patient's body. To get relief, patients have been known to inflict harm on the parts of their bodies that are causing

pain. In other words, they try to "kill" the pain and in the process they sometimes kill themselves.

MURDER

The belief that Meriwether Lewis was murdered is not just a recent phenomenon. Rumors about murder were circulating as soon as Lewis' death was made known. It is easy to see why people could reach such a conclusion- the violent death of a prominent young man on a wilderness road where robbers were not uncommon--no eyewitnesses, etc.

Just as the suicide theorists offer differing motives for Lewis' death, so do the murder theorists. Motives that have been put forth are: (1) murder by a jealous husband (2) murder for greed, i.e. robbery, and (3) political assassination.

(1) Murder by a jealous husband

The problem for amateur detectives today is to separate fact from folklore. Many widely-circulated versions of Lewis' death at the time it happened cannot be backed up by documentation. One of these is the story that Mr. Grinder killed Lewis when he came home and found Lewis and Mrs. Grinder together. Grinder was tried for murder, the story goes, but was acquitted because everyone was afraid of him. No documents of the alleged trial have ever been discovered, however.

(2) Murder motivated by robbery

For most proponents of the murder theory, the most plausible explanation, given the time and place, is that unknown "bandits" killed Governor Lewis while robbing him. The Natchez Trace was a long and lonely stretch of road-a path, really, through deep woods. It was a fact that robberies and murders took place along the Trace from time to time.

For others, however, the robbery theory hits closer to home. Just about everyone

who was in Lewis' vicinity on the night he died has been accused of robbing and murdering him at one time or another. These include Mr. and Mrs. Grinder, John Pernier (Lewis' servant), Major Neelly, a local renegade named Runion, and even the Indian chiefs who reportedly had been traveling with Lewis and Neelly. A lot of these accusations were, and still are, part of the regional folklore. In 1893, a distinguished scholar, Dr. Elliott Coues (pronounced "cows"), took up the cause for murder motivated by robbery. Coues was a physician, ornithologist, and historian who edited a three-volume edition of the expedition journals in 1893. Coues' murder theory appears in a short article in volume I of the journals entitled "A Memoir to Meriwether Lewis"

A much later robbery theory, Suicide or Murder? The Strange Death of Governor Meriwether Lewis, was written by journalist and historian Vardis Fisher in 1962. Although Fisher frames his title as a question, he comes down firmly on the side of murder. Fisher suggested several possible scenarios to support the murder theory. For example, he cited a widely circulated rumor that Lewis had discovered a gold mine out west. Upon his return Lewis allegedly told friends about the mine and that he had drawn a map of its location.

Fisher admitted the story was probably just another "lost gold mine" tale, but that was not important. What mattered was that some people believed it was true. Fisher wrote, "If the story had gone abroad that on his journey to the ocean he [Lewis] had found a mine, and had made a map of its situation, this could well have been in the consciousness of his servant, of Neelly, and possibly of the Indian chiefs [Chickasaw chiefs were said to be traveling with the party] not to speak of all the bandits on the Trace and in the wilderness who knew that the Governor was coming."



This monument was erected in honor of Meriwether Lewis on the Natchez Trace Parkway. Courtesy National Park Service.

(3) Murder by Assassination

Theory of David Leon Chandler: For a while it seemed as if every possible motive for murder had been considered, but that changed in 1994 when a book was published entitled *The Jefferson Conspiracies: A President's Role in the Assassination of Meriwether Lewis*. The author, David Leon Chandler, contended that Lewis was the victim of an assassination conspiracy set in motion by none other than his erstwhile friend and mentor, Thomas Jefferson.

But why would Jefferson want Lewis dead? According to Chandler, Lewis discovered certain secrets about General James Wilkinson, his predecessor as Governor of Upper Louisiana. If revealed, these secrets would destroy not only the reputation of Gen. Wilkerson, but of Jefferson as well. Chandler believed the real reason for Lewis' trip to Washington was to "blow the whistle," The only way to kill the scandal was to kill Lewis before he could talk. Those who supposedly were helping Lewis in his final days (Major Neelly, Major Russell, etc.) were also part of the conspiracy.

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