



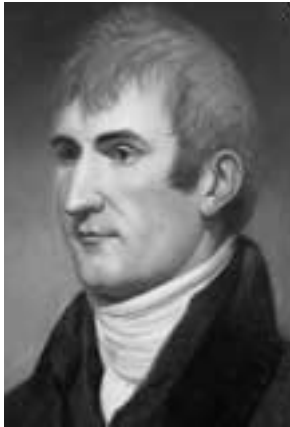
Meriwether Lewis, the President's Secretary

When the contentious election of 1800 had been decided and Thomas Jefferson prepared to assume the office of president, he knew whom he wanted as his private secretary. Within days of the final balloting in February 1801, Jefferson posted a letter to Gen. James Wilkinson, commander of the U.S. Army, and under the same cover one to "Lieut. Meriwether Lewis, not knowing where he may be." Jefferson gave specific reasons for seeking the young Lewis: his knowledge of the frontier and the military, and "A personal acquaintance with him, owing from his being of my neighborhood."

Indeed, Meriwether Lewis and the extensive Lewis and Meriwether families were from Jefferson's "neighborhood" in the central Piedmont














region of Virginia. Meriwether Lewis was born on his father's farm, Locust Hill, located approximately 10 miles west of Monticello, on Aug. 18, 1774. His father, William Lewis, and mother, Lucy Meriwether, were second cousins, and by naming their eldest son for his mother's family, they signaled his association with two very prominent families of Central Virginia. Both families were well known to Jefferson. Two of Jefferson's siblings had married into a line of the Lewis family, and Nicholas Lewis, Meriwether's uncle and guardian, was a close friend who adeptly managed Jefferson's affairs during his years in Paris.

Independence National Historical Park



Meriwether Lewis from a portrait by Charles Willson Peale, circa 1807.

This Issue's Other Stories

-  BLOCKBUSTER WINE
-  CHILDREN'S OUTREACH
-  HONOR ROLL 2000
-  INTERNATIONAL CENTER
-  JEFFERSON INAUGURATION
-  JEFFERSON'S CABINET
-  JULY 4 ENDOWMENT
-  KITCHEN RESTORATION
-  LECTURE SERIES
-  LEWIS & CLARK ON WEB
-  MONTICELLO CABINET 2000
-  NEW MONOGRAPHS
-  NEW TRUSTEES
-  PRESIDENT'S LETTER
-  PRITZKER PRIZE

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

© Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2001

MONTICELLO



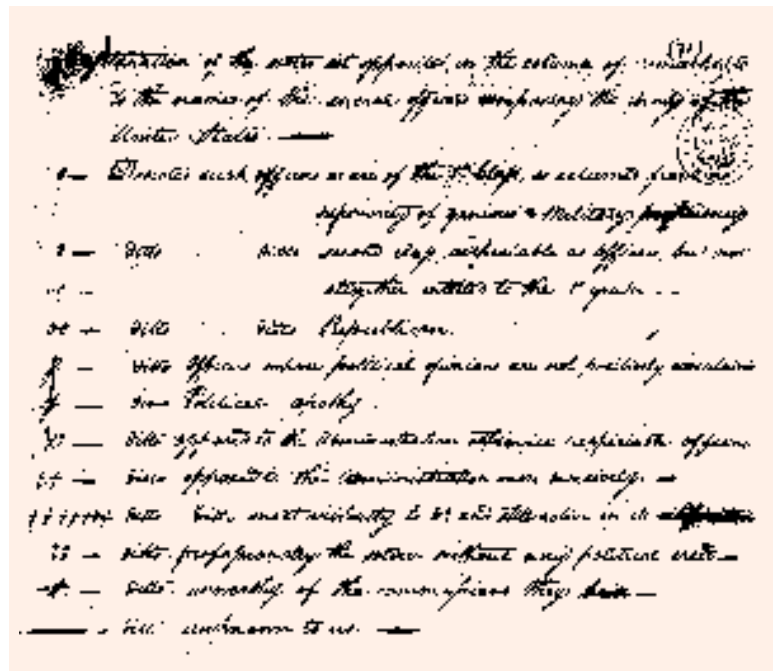
Meriwether Lewis

CONTINUED, PAGE **TWO**

Familiarity and trust were apparent on both sides. Meriwether Lewis accepted the president's offer immediately and "with pleasure," even though Jefferson's letter contained no job outline, only assurances that it would be an "easier office" than military life and that he could retain his rank and right for promotion in the army. Jefferson offered also that the position "would make you know & be known to characters of influence in the affairs of our country, and give you the advantage of their wisdom."

In addition to trusted familial connections, Meriwether Lewis had other qualifications that interested Jefferson: "a knowledge of the Western country, of the army & it's situation." Today, Meriwether Lewis' name is irrevocably linked to that of William Clark and the exploratory expedition that traveled to the Pacific Ocean and back. It is easy to assume that exploration was Jefferson's prime motive in hiring someone with knowledge of the West, but in his letter Jefferson also emphasized Lewis' familiarity with the state of the U.S. Army – an important consideration at the time.

In 1801 the country had survived a shift of political power from the Federalists to the Republican Party through the electoral process, but the campaign had been extremely bitter. The new Republican administration was committed to reducing the standing army, and Jefferson needed to know which officers were superior, which inferior, and in light of the recent election, which would be likely to support or oppose the current administration. The roster of all commissioned officers, dated July 24, 1801, that was supplied to Jefferson



Key to symbols found on 1801 list of U.S. Army officers written by Meriwether Lewis.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

© Thomas Jefferson Foundation, Inc., 2001



Meriwether Lewis

CONTINUED, PAGE **THREE**

featured curious symbols beside each officer's name. Historians have identified an accompanying key that gives a meaning to each symbol as being written in the hand of Meriwether Lewis. From this it has been concluded that one of Lewis' first duties was to assist Jefferson in determining the worthiness or unworthiness of officers, and in some instances their political leanings as well.

So whether Jefferson sought out Lewis to meet the immediate need of evaluating the officer corps or for more ambitious exploratory undertakings in the future – or both – Lewis retained Jefferson's confidence during his two years as secretary. In selecting a leader for what he called an “exploring party” and that history would record as the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Jefferson wrote of his former secretary, “I could have no hesitation in confiding the enterprise to him.”

– GAYE WILSON

Gaye Wilson is a research assistant at Monticello.

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org