

Jefferson welcomes the successful return of Lewis and Clark

By Gaye Wilson

I received, my dear Sir, with unspeakable joy your letter of Sep. 23 announcing the return of yourself, Capt. Clarke & your party in good health to St. Louis.”

Relief and joy were obvious in the note Thomas Jefferson dashed off in response to Meriwether Lewis’ letter announcing the safe return of the “Corps of Volunteers for North West Discovery” to St. Louis in 1806, nearly two and half years after they had set out on the Missouri River.

President Jefferson was far more candid than usual in his message to Lewis, as he admitted, “The unknown scenes in which you were engaged, & the length of time without hearing of you had begun to be felt awfully.” It had been over a year since Jefferson had received any direct communication from the explorers – a shipment sent by Lewis and Clark in April 1805 when they left their winter base in what is now North Dakota had reached Washington on Aug. 12 – and his anxiety reflected both his personal and political commitment to the expedition.

Lewis’ letter gave Jefferson his first glimpse of America beyond the Great Plains. It began modestly: “In obedience

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Independence National Historical Park

The expedition led by William Clark (left) and Meriwether Lewis made it back to St. Louis in September 1806.

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Monticello

Lewis and Clark

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to your orders we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean.” The expedition had achieved its major goal and reached the western rim of North America. But then Lewis delivered the bad news: The long and arduous trip had been made without the aid of a direct water route. They had not found the legendary Northwest Passage.

Lewis had followed the Missouri to its source. His journal entry for Aug. 12, 1805, had jubilantly described one of his men standing “bestride the mighty & heretofore deemed endless Missouri.” But on that same day he had observed “immense ranges of high mountains still to the West of us with their tops partially covered with snow.” It was not a “single portage” from the Missouri to the Columbia River, as Jefferson had postulated in his January 1803 letter to Congress requesting funds for the expedition. Rather, Lewis had to inform the president that a long and dangerous overland passage through these mountains had to be completed to reach navigable points on the rivers emptying into the Pacific.

Jefferson would have immediately recognized that this contradicted the theory of symmetrical geography which had been widely accepted since the early 18th century and had informed his own theories. The Rockies did not mirror the eastern Appalachian chain. Lewis had to admit that his route did not offer a truly viable shortcut to the East Indies and China, but he did maintain that his party had found “the most practicable rout” across the continent.

Lewis could be more optimistic, however, about the potential for an American fur trade through the West. Along the Missouri the corps had observed an abundance of beaver, otter, bear, marten and fox, and valuable sea otter on the Pacific coast. He envisioned a fur trade beginning along the Missouri that eventually would spread to the mouth of the Columbia. From here, he believed,

A Northern Plains Indian lance made by Butch Thunder Hawk of Bismarck, N.D., using traditional methods and materials. This lance and other Native American objects commissioned by Monticello for the Lewis and Clark bicentennial are on display in the Entrance Hall, where Jefferson created an “Indian Hall” with items obtained by the explorers.



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Lewis and Clark

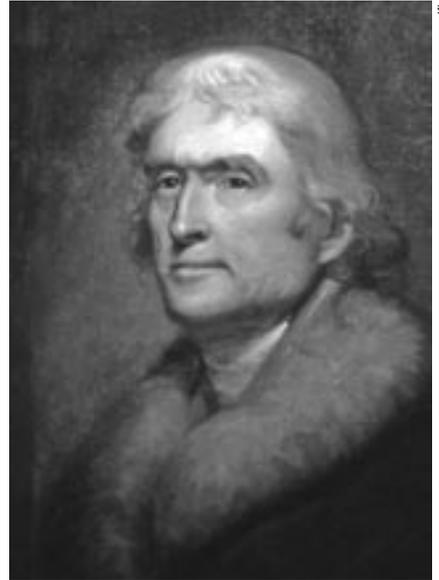
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the export of furs directly to the Orient was feasible. This could place the United States in a position to challenge the British fur trade in Canada.

While finding the most direct water route across the continent and assessing commercial possibilities were the expedition's primary charges, there were other aspects to the mission. In his request to Congress, Jefferson noted that if the journey "should incidentally advance the geographical knowledge of our own continent, cannot be but an additional gratification." And in his June 1803 instructions to Lewis he included a section, "Other objects worthy of notice," that specified attention to the soil, plants, animals, minerals, climate, and topography. No doubt Jefferson was pleased that Lewis concluded his letter from St. Louis with the promise that he would bring to Washington animal skins and skeletons and examples of plants and seeds.

Jefferson had also directed Lewis to "make yourself acquainted" with the Indian nations and tribes of the West. Lewis' letter mentioned nine Indian vocabularies and a map, and that the president would have the opportunity to welcome the Mandan chief Sheheke and his family, who would be accompanying Lewis on his journey east. "Tell my friend the Mandan also that I have already opened my arms to receive him," Jefferson wrote in response. "Perhaps while in our neighborhood, it may be gratifying to him and not otherwise to yourself to take a ride to Monticello and see what manner I have arranged the tokens of friendship I have received from his country particularly as well from other Indian friends; that I am in fact preparing a kind of Indian hall."

While in St. Louis, Lewis and Clark had the business of discharging the members of the corps and organizing their travel to the East. Before leaving, they were honored by a grand dinner and ball. Among the many toasts, the final was to "Captains Lewis and



President Jefferson received Lewis and Clark in Washington and praised them for their "arduous service."

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Clark – their perilous services endear them to every American heart.”

The expedition leaders traveled to Washington in two separate parties, as each wanted to visit friends and family along the way. Lewis reached Washington first, in late December. (While Lewis and the Mandan party did stop in Charlottesville on their way to Washington, it is not known if they made it up to Monticello.)

The mood in the nation’s capital was jubilant, and The National Intelligencer newspaper provided details of the dinner given for Lewis by the citizens of Washington. The dinner was delayed several days hoping for the arrival of Clark, but finally was held on Jan. 14 with a “general regret” at Clark’s absence. He was not forgotten in the many toasts, which extended to members of the expedition as well: “Their patriotic and manly perseverance entitles them to the approbation of their countrymen.”

Clark arrived in Washington after the formal celebration and stayed seven weeks. In addition to accolades, both he and Lewis received commissions from Jefferson, Lewis as governor of Upper Louisiana and Clark as brigadier general of militia and Indian agent for the vast territory.

Lewis’ return to Washington was not greeted with particular excitement by Jefferson’s political opposition. Pro-Federalist newspapers more quietly reported the event, and could not resist an opportunity to snipe at Jefferson. A Massachusetts paper resurrected a report he had given to Congress in November 1803 on the newly purchased territory of Louisiana, in which the president described a great salt mountain 1,000 miles up the Missouri River. The opposition had scoffed then, and now their press could gleefully report: “We do not learn that he [Lewis] confirms the account given by the president a few years since, of the huge mountain of salt, therefore conclude it has dissolved.”

The great salt mountain did not exist, nor the fabled Northwest Passage. There had been no sightings of the great mammoth, either. But the “Corps of Discovery” had crossed the continent and returned



American
Numismatic
Society

A Jefferson Indian Peace Medal. Lewis and Clark gave many of these medals to Native Americans they encountered on their journey.

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with an incredible amount of information. Perhaps Jefferson's greatest disappointment regarding the expedition was the delay in the publication of the journals kept by Lewis and Clark. He felt strongly that these accounts could gain recognition for the new United States in the world's scientific community.

Lewis was charged with the task but made little progress. After Lewis' untimely and mysterious death in 1809, Clark took up the responsibility of publication and worked with Jefferson and writer Nicholas Biddle on a narrative of the expedition that was finally published in 1814. Jefferson still hoped for full publication of the journals and supporting scientific data, but this would not happen in his lifetime.

Still, Jefferson likely would never have retracted his words to Congress in December 1806, when he announced the successful completion of the expedition, that "Messrs. Lewis and Clarke, and their brave companions, have by this arduous service deserved well of their country."

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