

The Lewis and Clark Trail

Winding from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean, the route taken by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark between 1803 and 1806 has become synonymous with American destiny and national sovereignty. Though the river routes and mountain passes taken by the expedition leaders and their Corps of Discovery had been travelled for millennia by many cultures, this epic journey at the behest of President Thomas Jefferson fired the imagination of the American people and opened the Rocky Mountain and western fur trades. These in turn ultimately spurred the settlement of the Oregon Territory and helped to establish the U.S.–Canada border on the 49th parallel, rather than farther south along the Columbia River.

Even prior to 1803, Jefferson had apparently contemplated a western expedition. As a member of the American Philosophical Society, he had been involved in at least three plans to send Americans to the Pacific coast between 1783 and 1800. His election as president, followed by the rather unexpected sale of the enormous Louisiana Territory, which effectively doubled the land at least nominally under American control, gave him both the means and new reasons for going ahead. It also seems that his

choice for the initial leader of the expedition was decided well in advance, perhaps as early as 1801. Early that year, as he was about to be inaugurated, Jefferson wrote to the 26-year-old Lewis, offering him a position as secretary-aide. In his letter, he made references to Lewis's knowledge of the "Western country", as well as his army training.

Less than two years later, on February 28th, 1803, as Congress appropriated funds for the expedition, Lewis was commissioned as its leader. He in turn asked William Clark, his friend and former commanding officer, to be his co-leader. It turned out to be a partnership made in heaven (see page 239).

In addition to geographic information, which was basically nonexistent as far as the territory between the head of the Missouri and the coast was concerned, Jefferson was interested in the resources and inhabitants of the territory. He asked the party to observe and collect, if possible, plant, animal and mineral

specimens, to record the weather, to give detailed information on the people they met, to map the permanent features of the route and to keep a daily journal. The co-captains were meticulous about doing this, often both writing in the journal and sometimes spelling one another off.

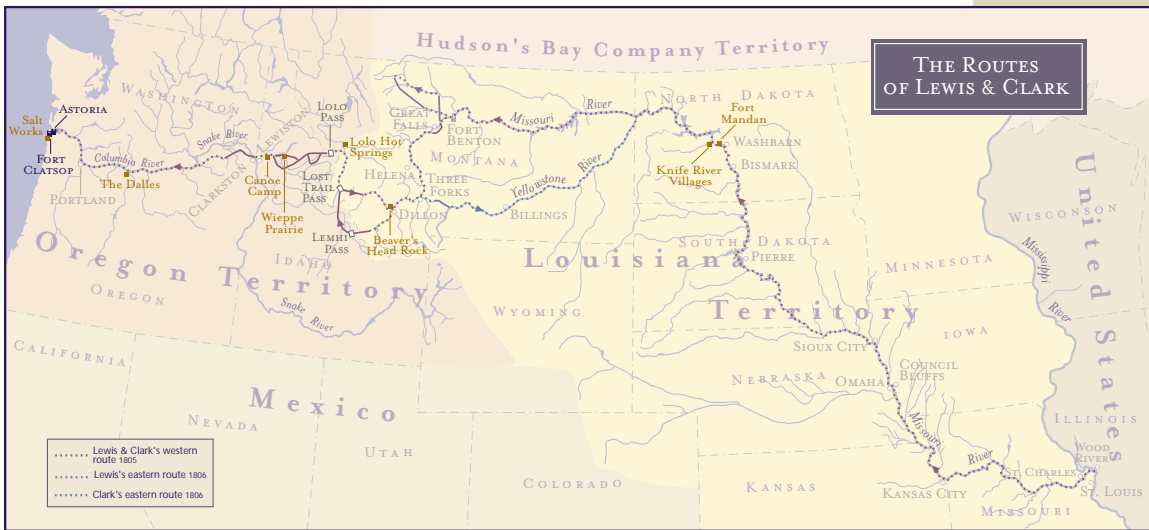


LINDA FAIRFIELD

Reed grasses (Calamagrostis spp.) are tall, slender perennials with jointed stalks and long, narrow leaves. There are many species worldwide and all reach optimum height in moist areas and wetlands.

Imagine the emotions at the first sight of the mighty Columbia River, pictured here near Washington's Maryhill State Park.

JERRY KAUTZ



For Lewis, the expedition began in mid-1803, when he started collecting the various supplies that would be needed in Washington, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. In a specially-built keelboat, with 11 men, he sailed from Pittsburgh down the Ohio River, collecting other recruits along the way. After meeting Clark and his black servant York at Clarksville, the party made camp at Wood River, on the east side of the Mississippi above St. Louis, opposite the mouth of the Missouri. They were there from December 12th, 1803, to May 14th, 1804. Though urbanization and river migration have destroyed the site of this camp, a model of the expedition's route can be found at the Lewis and Clark Center on Riverside Drive in near-by St. Charles. And the Confluence Greenway, a 40-mile trail, connects key sites along both rivers.

In May 1804, the expedition camped at St. Charles for five days before heading upstream on a trip that would last two years, four months and nine days. During the first season of travel, as the party traversed territory that was relatively well known, they discovered (as would many others after them until the invention of the steamboat) how arduous was the business of towing a keelboat against the powerful current of the Missouri. They also suffered the only death the entire expedition would experience when Sergeant Charles Floyd

suddenly became ill near present-day Sioux City, Iowa. Modern physicians, reading the journals, believe Floyd likely died of appendicitis. Today, an obelisk marks his grave and a welcome center and small museum interpret the site.

Following the route the party took to its first remote wintering site is easy and enjoyable today. Between St. Charles and the site of Floyd's death are more than a dozen recognized sites on the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. All provide information and often add exhibits or interpretive programming that enhance the experience for modern travellers. A National Parks brochure is also available.

Having covered approximately 1,500 miles in 164 days, the party arrived at the Mandan-Hidatsa villages (see page 238), clustered around the Knife River near today's Washburn, N.D., north of Bismark. With autumn progressing rapidly, the co-captains decided this was the right place to winter and on November 3rd, the men began constructing a triangular post across the river from the Mandan villages. The choice was fortuitous, for it was here that a 16-year-old named Sakakawea (or Sacagawea or Sacajawea – the Shoshoni teenager's name was spelled more than 10 different ways in the journals and continues to be spelled in three ways in different parts of the U.S. today) joined their party.

William Clark gave Hat Rock its name in October 1805, as the Corps of Discovery travelled along the south side of the Columbia River just east of today's Umatilla, Oregon.



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