

1803

President Thomas Jefferson (right) picks Meriwether Lewis to lead an expedition through the Northwest and gives him the following instructions: "Your mission is to explore the Missouri river & such principal stream of it as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purpose of commerce."

The White House

Lewis invites William Clark to join the expedition and share the command. The news of the Louisiana Purchase is announced. A large keelboat ordered by Lewis is constructed in the Pittsburgh area. Lewis meets Clark at the Falls of the Ohio.



Louisiana Purchase

Lewis and Clark would explore parts of the Louisiana Purchase.



Meriwether Lewis
Born August 18, 1774
Portrait by Charles Wilson Peale, Independence National Historical Park



William Clark
Born August 1, 1770
Portrait by Charles Wilson Peale, Independence National Historical Park

Congress ratifies Louisiana Purchase, doubling the size of the United States. Lewis and Clark establish Camp River Dubois on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River upstream from St. Louis.

Expedition begins and "proceeded on under a gentle breeze up the Missouri."

July 4 Expedition marks first 4th of July west of the Mississippi by firing the keelboat's cannon, and naming Independence Creek near present-day Atchison, Kan.

August 3 An important meeting with the Otoe-Missouria Indians is held near present-day Fort Atkinson State Park, Nebr., upstream from present-day Omaha.

August 20 Near present-day Sioux City, Iowa, Sgt. Charles Floyd dies of a probable burst appendix. Captains name hilltop where he is buried "Floyd's Bluff" and a nearby stream, "Floyd's River."

August 30 Friendly council with Yankton Sioux held.

September 7 The men attempt to flush a never-before-seen prairie dog out of its hole for shipment back to Jefferson.

September 25 Misunderstanding with Teton Sioux leads to a confrontation that is resolved peacefully by Chief Black Buffalo before any fighting. Expedition stays with tribe for three more days.

October 24 Expedition encounters earthlodge villages of the Mandan and Hidatsa Indians. The captains decide to build Fort Mandan across the river from the main village.

November 4 Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian fur trader living with the Hidatsas, is hired as an interpreter. His wife, the "Bird Woman" or Sacagawea, believed to be a Lemhi Shoshone, is also considered an asset as a translator and in obtaining horses from the Shoshones.

December 24 Fort Mandan is completed and the expedition moves in. Mandans provide food and other sustenance during brutally cold winter.

February 11, 1805 Sacagawea gives birth to a boy, Jean Baptiste.

April 7 Lewis and Clark send the keelboat and a dozen men back downriver, with maps, reports, Indian artifacts and other scientific specimens for Jefferson. The permanent party, totaling 33 people, heads west.

April 29 Lewis and another hunter kill a large grizzly bear, a species previously unknown to western science.

June 3 The expedition reaches a fork in the river. Most of the men believe the north fork, now the Marias River, to be the continuation of the Missouri. The captains choose the south fork. Lewis later writes that, while the men are not convinced that he and Clark have made the right choice, "they were ready to follow us any where we thought proper to direct."

June 13 Scouting ahead of the rest of the expedition, Lewis reaches the Great Falls of the Missouri. He also discovers four more waterfalls farther upstream. The expedition will have to portage over 18 miles, taking nearly a month, to get past them.

July Lewis assembles his "iron boat" above the Great Falls, but it sinks and is abandoned. The expedition reaches the three forks of the Missouri River, and names them the Gallatin, the Madison, and the Jefferson after Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin, Secretary of State James Madison, and President Thomas Jefferson. The expedition continues southwest, up the Jefferson.

August 8 Sacagawea recognizes Beaverhead Rock and says they are nearing the homeland of her people, the Shoshones. Lewis and three others scout ahead.

August 12 Lewis crosses Lemhi Pass expecting to find the direct water route to the Pacific that he and Jefferson were seeking but discovers only more and more mountains ahead, creating what he called a "snowey barrier" to the Pacific.

August 15-17 Shoshones lead Lewis to their village where he negotiates for horses. After Clark and the rest of the expedition arrive, Sacagawea meets her brother, Cameahwait, one of the Shoshone leaders. Camp Fortunate is established. On August 20, "Old Toby," an elderly Shoshone, agrees to lead the expedition across the Bitterroots to the headwaters of the Columbia.

September 11 After breaking camp south of present-day Missoula, Mont., the expedition ascends into the Bitterroot Mountains, which Sergeant Patrick Gass calls "the most terrible mountains I ever beheld." A week later, with food running out, the men are forced to eat three colts and a stray horse. Clark names a nearby stream "Hun-grey Creek" to describe their condition.

September 22 Nearing starvation, the expedition emerges from the Bitterroots near present-day Weippe, Idaho, where they are fed and cared for by the Nez Perce.

October 18 Clark sees Beacon Rock and first sign of tidal water, an indication they are near the ocean.

November 7 Clark, who believes he can see the ocean, pens his most famous journal entry: "Oceán in view! O! the joy." The expedition is still a considerable distance from the sea, which Lewis finally reaches on the 15th. Terrible storms halt the expedition for nearly three weeks.

December 8 Construction of Fort Clatsop as winter quarters begins. The fort, says Clark, was built of the "straightest and most buttressed logs." The fort was named after the local Indians.

January 5, 1806 A saltmaking camp is established 15 miles southwest of Fort Clatsop. Salt, an important dietary supplement, was also needed to preserve meat on the return trip.

May-June The expedition reaches the Bitterroot Mountains but must wait for the snow to melt before crossing them. During this time the expedition again stays with the Nez Perce, who Lewis considers "the most hospitable, honest and sincere people that we have met with in our voyage."

July 3 Having recovered their horses from the Nez Perce and buying more, the expedition successfully crosses the Bitterroots, thanks to Nez Perce guides. Once across the mountain the Corps breaks into smaller groups to explore more of the Louisiana Territory. Clark and his group travel down the Yellowstone River, while Lewis and his group take the shortcut to the Great Falls, and then head north along the Marias River.

July 25 Near present-day Billings, Mont., Clark names a sandstone outcrop "Pompey's Tower" (now Pompeys Pillar) after Sacagawea's son, nicknamed Little Pomp. On the rock face Clark inscribes his name and the date.

July 26 On their way back to the Missouri from exploring the Marias, Lewis's party encounters eight young Piegan Blackfeet. The two groups camp together warily. The following morning the Blackfeet attempt to steal the explorers' horses and guns. In the resulting fight—the only act of violence during the entire expedition—two Blackfeet are killed.

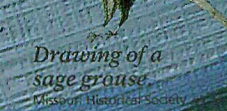
August 11 Lewis is accidentally wounded in the buttocks while hunting just east of present-day Williston, N.D. He survives and proceeds on. The next day the entire expedition is reunited farther downstream.

August 14 The expedition reaches the Mandan villages, where Charbonneau, Sacagawea, and Jean Baptiste say goodbye. John Colter is given permission to return to the Yellowstone to trap beaver.

September 23 After two years and four months, Lewis and Clark reach St. Louis where, according to Lewis, they "received the heartiest and most hospitable welcome from the whole village."

Fall 1806 Lewis and Clark are treated as heroes upon their return to Washington. The men receive double pay and 320 acres of land as reward; the captains get 1,600 acres. Lewis is named governor of the new Louisiana Territory. Clark is made Indian agent for the West and brigadier general of the territory's militia.

Columbia River Gorge
©Michael T. Sedam/Corbis



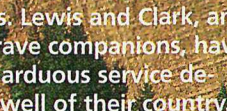
Drawing of a sage grouse
©Glen H. Reed/Corbis



Clark's signature, engraved in sandstone at Pompeys Pillar, is still visible today.
Donnie Sexton/Traill, Montana



Two of the 134 bird species they sighted are named for the explorers: Clark's nutcracker (left), first seen in Idaho, and Lewis's woodpecker, sighted in Montana.
Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia



Clark's drawing of pirogue
Bainbridge Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University



Page from Clark's journal describing the "Handsom falls of the Missouri" (now Rainbow Falls), upriver of Great Falls.
Missouri Historical Society



The ragged robin (Clarkia pulchella) was one of 178 plants new to science that Lewis collected and named.
Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia



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Along the Lewis and Clark Trail

