Lewis and Clark Trail

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
National Historic Trail
Illinois to Oregon

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 as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river may offer the most practicable passage across this continent for the purposes of commerce."

Spring/Summer

Lewis invites William Clark to join the expedition and share command. The news is published when the expedition is announced. A large keelboat ordered by Lewis is constructed in Pittsburgh, Pa.

Lewis meets Clark at the Falls of the Ohio.

Louisiana Purchase

Lewis and Clark issued "Indian Peace Medals" during the Louisiana Purchase.

Meriwether Lewis, U.S. Army colonel, in honor 1814, 1792

Fall/Winter

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

May 14, 1804

Expedition begins and "proceeded on under a Salute from the Missouria."

July 4

Expedition marks first 4th of July west of the Mississippi by firing the keelboat's swivel gun, naming independence creek (now present-day Atchison, Kan.

Prence mentioned like this seven times in contrast to Indian chiefs, to establish friendly relations.
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Among the keepsakes Lewis took back with them were 15 medals of 1792 and 1795 militia rifles (bottom) obtained from the Harpers Ferry armory and an gun Lewis bought in Philadelphia. Lewis fired 40 rounds before the expedition.
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

August 3

An important meeting with the Otoe-Missouria Indians is held at present-day Fort Atkinson State Park, Neb., upstream from present-day Omaha.

August 20

Near present-day Sioux City, Iowa, Sgt. Charles Floyd dies of a ruptured bursst appendix. Captain Lewis has hill-top where he is buried named "Floyd's Bluff" and a nearby stream "Floyd's River."

August 30

Friendly council with Yankton Sioux held.

September 1

The men successfully flush a prairie dog out of its burrow to present back to Jefferson.

September 25

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

October 24

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

Lewis called prairie dogs "barking squirrels" because of the sound they made when alarmed. In 1806, Lewis and Clark wrote the first report on 122 animals previously unknown to western science.

November 4

Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian fur trapper living with the Hidatsas, is hired as an interpreter and his wife the "Bird Woman" or Sacagawea, who is frequently referred to be a Shoshone, is also considered an asset as a translator and in obtaining horses from the Shoshones.

Animal skin depicting tents and tribal buildings. Mandan and Hidatsa. Lewis and Clark acquired the skin while wintering at the Mandan village and sent it back to President Jefferson in April 1805.
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

December 24

Fort Mandan is completed and the expedition moves in. Mandan and Hidatsa, who lived on an adjacent bluff, nicknam the "Bird Woman" or Sacagawea, who is frequently referred to be a Shoshone, is also considered an asset as a translator and in obtaining horses from the Shoshones.

April 7

The Lewis and Clark send the keelboat and 12 men back downriver, with maps, reports, specimens, plants, 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.

May 29–30

Clark names the Judith River in honor of Julia (Judy) Hancock, a girl in Virginia whom he hopes one day to marry. Lewis classifies the White Cliffs area as another of the never-ending "scenes of visionary enchantment" the expedition has encountered in its journey.

The "very large and terrible" grizzly bears were an occasional threat to the expedition.

June 3

The expedition reaches the point where the North fork of the Missouri joins the main stem. Now the Marias River, to be their 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 anywhere 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 waterfalls farther upstream. The expedition will have to portage over 18 miles, taking nearly a month, to get past them.

July

Boat assembles his ironframe boat above the Great Falls, but it sinks and is abandoned. The expedition reaches the three forks of the Missouri, and Lewis 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.

Beaverhead Rock
MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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

Clark's drawing of a bumble bee.
SOMERSET HOUSE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION, THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

August 8

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

August 12

Lewis and Colter meet 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 "tremendous 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 chiefs. Chief Cameahwait agrees to sell the most terrible mountains I ever beheld." A week later, with food running out, the party is forced to eat three colts and a large dog they have taken from a nearby stream "Hungry Creek" to describe their condition.

September 11

After breaking camp on Missouri, Mont., the expedition reaches the Continental Divide, Lewis and Clark met Sacagawea's relatives (the first Indian contact since they left Fort Mandan), who provided the expedition with horses and guided them over the difficult mountain ranges of Idaho to

September 22

Leaving starvation, the expedition emerges from the Bitterroot Mountains near today's Weippe, Idaho, where they find and cared for by the Nez Perce.

October 16

The expedition reaches the confluence of the Columbia and Snake rivers and Clark notes some population of tribes.

October 31

Clark sees Beacon Rock and first sign of tidal water, indicating they are near the ocean.

November 7

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

November 24

Steersmen of the expedition, including York and Sacagawea, vote to establish winter quarters on the south side of the Columbia River rather than cross it. Lewis told them they would find plenty of elk for food and clothing.

December 8

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

January 5, 1806

A salmonaking camp is established 15 miles southwest of Fort Clatsop. Salt, an important preservative, is manufactured also needed to preserve meat on the return trip.

March 23

With little ceremony, the Corps of Discovery departs Fort Clatsop and begins its long journey home.

May–June

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

July 25

Near present-day Billings, Mont., Clark names a sandstone outcrop "Pompy's Tower" in honor of Sacagawea's son, Jean Baptiste. Pompy, Lewis' party encounters eight grizzly bears. Clark's journal mentions Blackfeet. The two groups camp together, warily. The following morning the Blackfeet attempt to steal the expedition's horses and guns. In the resulting fight—the only act of bloodshed during the entire expedition—two Blackfeet are killed.

July 26

Another way back to the Missouri from Montana's Marias River, Lewis' party encounters eight grizzly bears. Clark's journal mentions Blackfeet.

August 11

Lewis is accidentally wounded in the buttocks by a Blackfeet while hunting just east of present-day Shelby, N.D. He survives and recovers in the next few days the entire expedition reunites.

September

Leaving home with one Missouri's current, one mile wide, Lewis is day stopping at the falls of the Ohio River.

September 23

After two years and six months, Lewis and Clark reach St. Louis. Jefferson, who sent them, never learns of their success. Lewis and Clark are most remarkable for what they accomplished.

Fall 1806

Lewis and Clark are treated as heroes upon their return to Washington. The men receive double pay for 320 acres of land as promised, the captains get 1,600 acres. Lewis is appointed governor of the new Louisiana Territory. Clark is named agent for the West and superintendent of the territory's militia.

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.

Lewis's signature, engraved in sandstone at Pompey's Pillar, is still visible today.
LEWIS SIGNATURE, COURTESY OF MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Columbia River Gorge

Drawing of a noisy grouse.

They Journeyed On

The Lewis and Clark expedition is the most universally known event of American exploration and discovery. Because of its unparalleled success and the seeming ease with which it was carried out, we tend to overlook or to underrate the hardships and dangers that confronted the Corps of Discovery. The explorers, however, met these circumstances with determination and good sense. Never the foolhardy adventurers, Lewis and Clark were deliberate and quick-witted, and as inventive and creative as situations demanded.

For 28 months the Corps of Discovery faced many challenges. There were dramatic incidents with Indians, notably a face-down with Teton Sioux and a bloody encounter with Piegan Blackfeet. At times, circumstances taxed the morale of the party, and the many references in the journals kept by Lewis and Clark reflect their concern about the men's spirit. As the strain of physical exertion mounted, so did the likelihood of accidents and illness. Exhaustion led to mishaps and mistakes. Burdened by arduous tasks, hampered by inclement weather, and slowed by the hardships of the terrain, everyone begins to feel the stress of time.

Clark's journal was part of expedition member's duties.

Confluence of the Marias and Missouri rivers
PHOTO BY LARRY MAYER

While Lewis and Clark's captains' cool-headedness in the face of such challenges accounts for much of the success of the expedition, Probably the challenges that Lewis and Clark faced were not entirely new to them. Both had met hardships and dangers during their years of military service. Leading men on dangerous missions in wilderness settings against potentially hostile Indians was, after all, a task of most young officers of that era. But crossing a continent challenged them in ways that earlier experiences had not entirely prepared them for. The ex-

> pedition called for them to make different decisions in circumstances previously unmatched and not encountered by their contemporaries. Cut off from the support and reliable advice of European professionals, Lewis and Clark had to depend on their own judgment. In this they proved themselves entirely worthy of President Jefferson's trust, and they are still to be admired for their resourcefulness and ingenuity. Jefferson could not have wanted better leaders for the young nation's first great venture into western exploration.
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> —Gary E. Moulton, editor, The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, An American Epic of Discovery

The Corps of Discovery

Meriwether Lewis began preparations for the Corps of Discovery in March 1803. From the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va., he ordered custom-made weapons and a collapsible iron boat frame, designed to be covered with animal skins, that he thought might prove useful. In Pittsburgh, Pa., he ordered construction of a keelboat and purchased a black Newfoundland dog he named Seaman. In Philadelphia he took crash courses in medicine, natural history, and the use of scientific instruments. He also bought clothing, trade goods, paper, medicines, and other supplies. In Lancaster he was taught how to use celestial navigation tools.

From Philadelphia Lewis wrote to William Clark, a fellow Virginian under whom he had served, asking him to join the expedition as co-commander. Clark, the younger brother of George Rogers Clark of American Revolution fame, accepted and began to recruit "some good hunters, stout, healthy, unmarried men, accustomed to the woods, and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree."

The expedition's eliakin-bound journals record daily activities and a wealth of botanical and geographical information.

As finally assembled for the journey, the Corps of Discovery numbered 44 men of diverse backgrounds. Most were U.S. Army enlisted men. Others were backwoodsmen. A few were French boatmen who were hired to pilot the keelboat up the Missouri and who also knew how to handle the smaller boats called pirogues. Most Corps members were young, single, accustomed to hard labor, and possessed of varying skills. One, a black man named York, was held in slavery by William Clark. Two men had blacksmithing experience, and one knew carpentry. Others knew Indian languages, and some were outstanding hunters. All demonstrated an ability to bear extreme hardship.

One of the most valuable members, George Drouillard, an outstanding scout, hunter, and interpreter, spoke several Indian languages. Thirty of the men were designated the "permanent party" and intended to make the entire journey. Six were designated the "return party," to be sent back down the Missouri midway through the voyage, with maps, notes, and specimens of plants, animals, and minerals they had so far collected.

To the Shore of the Pacific

The journey began on May 14, 1804, as the Corps of Discovery left Camp River Dubois in the Illinois and two pirogues, crossed the Mississippi River, and headed up the Missouri. Over the next 28 months they would traverse 8,000 miles of land and water, about which they knew next to nothing, in search of a fabled Northwest passage that had eluded explorers for hundreds of years.

The 2,540-mile Missouri was not an easy river to travel. The Corps tried to maintain 14 to 20 miles a day, but some days conditions limited them to four or five miles. At times the men battled powerful currents and turbulent waters that brought trees or branches into the river and caved in riverbanks with little or no warning. Summer heat was unbearable, and they were often plagued by insects.

Lewis, who had received some medical training, treated many illnesses, injuries, and ailments such as sore feet, boils, toothaches, and snakebites. Remarkably, only one member of the expedition died during the entire trek—Sgt. Charles Floyd on August 20, 1804.

Both captains kept journals, meticulously recording the distances they traveled, navigational measurements that would later form the basis for maps of the journey, and observations of topography, ethnography, mineral resources, and hundreds of plants and animals previously unknown to western science.

In November the expedition set up winter quarters near the junction of the Knife and Missouri rivers, in present-day North Dakota, 1,609 miles from Camp River Dubois. They built Fort Mandan near the village of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes, who provided valuable knowledge of the country west to the Rocky Mountains. Here Lewis and Clark recruited Toussaint Charbonneau, a 44-year-old French-Canadian trapper, and his 16-year-old Shoshone wife Sacagawea, as interpreters. In February 1805 Sacagawea gave birth to a boy she and her husband named Jean Baptiste. Her presence, and the sight of a woman and child, the expedition's friendly intentions to all tribes.

York fascinated the Hidatsa, who offered one a Mach man.
SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Lewis and Clark would not have made it to the Pacific and back without the help of Indian tribes such as the Mandan and Hidatsa, Shoshone, Nez Perce, and Clatsop. Over the course of the expedition the Corps came into contact with nearly 50 different tribes. The tribes provided the Corps with knowledge of the land ahead, food, trading opportunities, and experienced guides. Only once, in July 1806 with a party of Piegan Blackfeet, did the expedition have an encounter that led to violence.

In early April 1805 Lewis and Clark sent the keelboat—too large to navigate the Upper Missouri—back to St. Louis with letters, reports, dispatches, and maps and a large collection of zoological, botanical, and ethnological specimens and artifacts for President Jefferson. The rest of the Corps continued up the Missouri in two pirogues and six recently built canoes.

Over the next several months they would encounter danger, fatigue, privation, and sickness as they forged westward past the mouth of the Yellowstone and into what is now Montana, then on to the Great Falls. It took three weeks to portage around the falls.

At the Three Forks of the Missouri, they followed the western, or Jefferson, fork. In the Salmon River and to the Bitterroot Mountains. At that point, they called "Travelers' Rest," near present-day Missoula, Mont., they crossed over, via Lolo Pass, to the Kooskooskie River, which flowed into the Snake and thence the Columbia. The Corps then reached the Pacific in mid-November 1805. They were 4,134 miles from Camp River Dubois, according to William Clark.

At the mouth of the Columbia they built Fort Clatsop, named after a local Indian tribe, and settled into winter quarters. Rainy weather, tainted food, and insects plagued the expedition all winter.

Fish and buffalo weather in the Missouri River.

Hidatsa dancer
PHOTO BY EDWARD S. CURTIS, COURTESY, NORTHWEST MUSEUM OF ARTS & CULTURE/MUSEUM OF HISTORY & INDUSTRY, SEATTLE

Salmon fishing in the Columbia River.

Return to St. Louis

The Corps of Discovery left Fort Clatsop on March 23, 1806. Drouillard and a party of hunters were sent ahead while the rest of the group traveled up the Columbia. A Shoshone leader showed them a shortcut, enabling them to bypass the Snake River and Lewis's

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Columbia River Gorge

Drawing of a noisy grouse.

Lewis and Clark spent the winter of 1805–1806 at Fort Clatsop on the Pacific Ocean.
PHOTO BY LARRY MAYER

Lewis and Clark's journals and maps, the rest of the Corps of Discovery's records, were lost by boiling ocean water for salt, hunting, and preparing elk hides from which to make moccasins and clothing.

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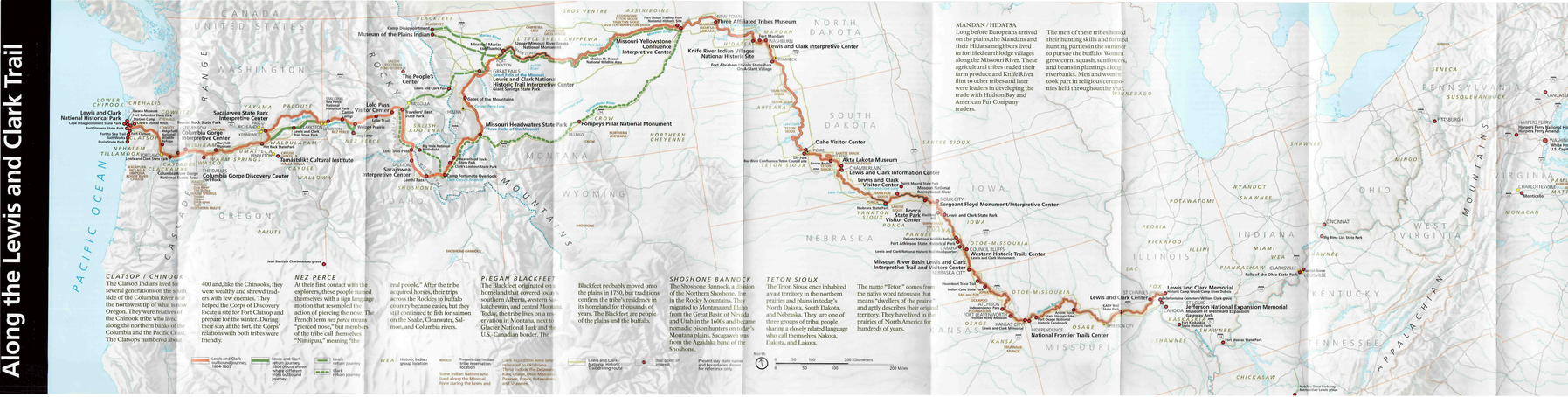
Salmon fishing in the Columbia River.

Columbia River Gorge

*Drawing of a noisy grouse

Along the Lewis and Clark Trail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Lewis and Clark National Wildlife Refuge
Sacajawea State Park Interpretive Center
Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center
Columbia Gorge Discovery Center
Celilo Falls
Lolo Pass Visitor Center
Travelers' Rest State Park
Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center
Great Falls
Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center
Great Falls State Park
Three Forks
Missouri Headwaters State Park
Three Forks of the Missouri
Pompeys Pillar National Monument
Three Affiliated Tribes Museum
Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site
Fort Abraham Lincoln State Park
Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center
Oahe Visitor Center
Akta Lakota Museum
Lewis and Clark Information Center
Lewis and Clark Visitor Center
Ponca State Park Visitor Center
Sergeant Floyd Monument/Interpretive Center
Lewis and Clark State Park
Missouri River Basin Lewis and Clark Interpretive Trail and Visitors Center
Western Historic Trails Center
Lewis and Clark Memorial
Jefferson National Expansion Memorial
National Frontier Trails Center
Lewis and Clark
Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail
Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail driving route
Trail point of interest
Historic Indian group location
Present-day tribal reservation location
Present-day state name and boundaries shown for reference only.
Clark expedition were later relocated to Oklahoma. They include the Delaware, Kaskaskia, Peoria, Miami, Wea, Piankashaw, Potawatomi, Kickapoo, Sac, Fox, Illinois, Shawnee, Wyandot, Mingo, Seneca, Susquehannock, Monacan, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Cherokee, Chickamauga