LEWIS & CLARK AND THE INVENTION OF AMERICAN REGIONALISM

By James P. Ronda

EDITOR'S NOTE
This essay was presented as the Curtiss Hill Lecture at the Washington State Historical Society's 2000 Annual Meeting.

Knowing

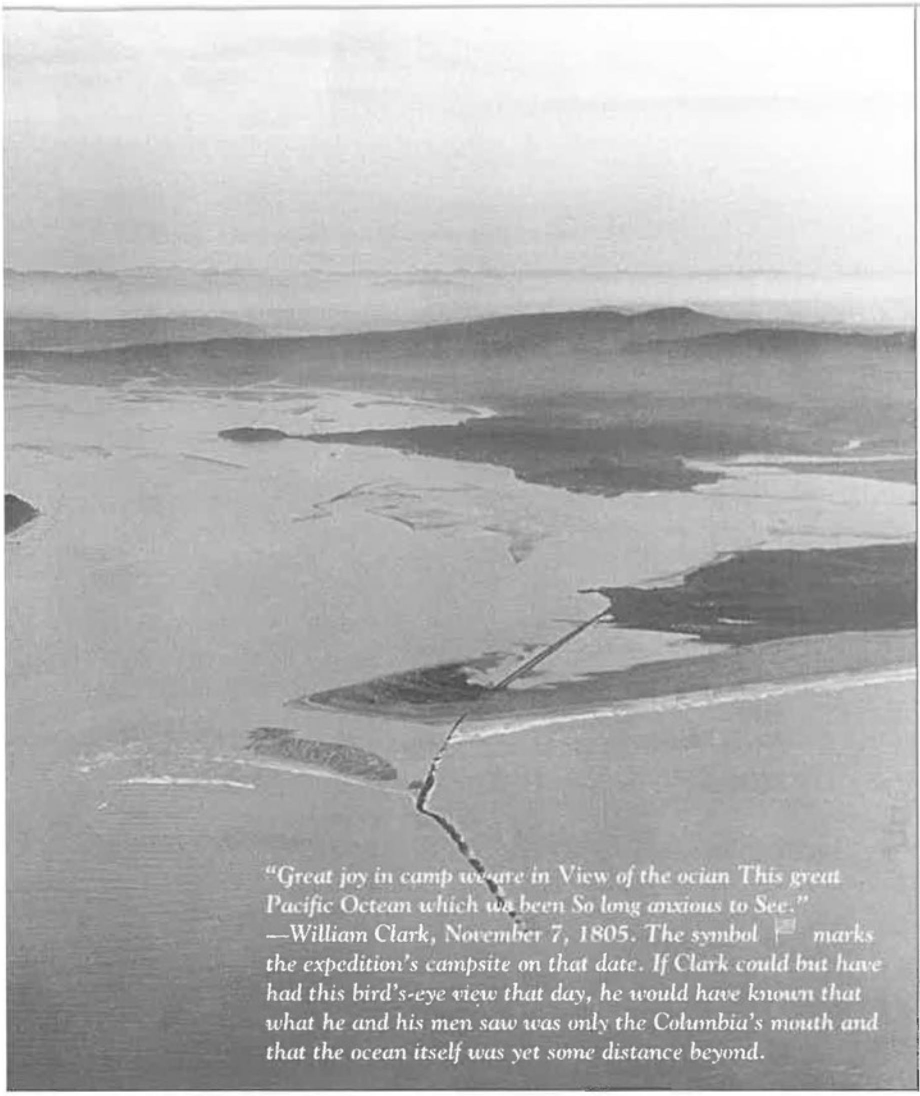
I can still hear my grandmother saying, "Know your place; everything in its place." To which I might now add, "This must be the place; places in the heart; the home place." In all these lines the important word is "place." Like the words "home" and "road," place carries deeply emotional, often profoundly personal meanings. We all live in places; we find identity, both personal and national, in places. Our national history is a kind of symbolic landscape filled with touchstone places: Plymouth Rock, Valley Forge, South Pass on the Oregon Trail, Gettysburg, the Little Bighorn—and the list goes on. For so many of us certain places bear nearly sacred meanings. And we all sense the uneasy fear in the word "displaced." To be displaced is to be disconnected from the very ground of our being. Place—your place, my place, our places—place is at the heart of who we say we are.

I want to share with you an idea that can be simply expressed but one that has had profound consequences for our past and our present. Places and their meanings do not just happen. Whatever place we talk about, that place did not fall from the sky fully grown with its meanings completely developed. Places don't have an independent existence in the landscape like mountains or rivers or forests. What we see in nature is the stuff that places are made of. This is what Willa Cather meant when she looked at the Nebraska prairie and said that it was "not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."

I think that what happens when places are invented is something like this: We are the creators, the inventors, of the places around us. We invest certain parts of the earth as special, set aside, and set apart from other parts. Often we name those places, drawing on experience or desire or personal ambition. Thus we have Cape Disappointment, Cape Flattery, Deception Pass, Bellevue, Longview, Richland, Sunnyside, Vancouver, Mount Adams, and Puget Sound. We do that naming and setting apart on a large scale, and we call those things *regions*. We do it on a small, perhaps more intimate scale, and we use the word *place*. Lewis and Clark did both throughout their journey into the West. They invented places and fashioned regions.

Before we join the Rover Boys in the Wild West, I think it would be good for us to pay attention to the boundaries of place and region. This reminds me of the question I ask my students each year: "Complete this sentence: You know you are in the West when you see. . . ."

Students from Boston, Chicago, St. Louis, and Dallas all have very different answers, but they all know that places and regions have boundaries, lines that when crossed signal the end of one experience and the beginning of something else. An essential part of inventing place is setting those boundaries, drawing those lines. Some of those lines are visible, evident for all to see. They are the boundaries established by war or diplomacy or bureaucracy. There are also features in the natural landscape we declare to be important as lines of demarcation. In our imagination we take hold of mountains or rivers and invest them with boundary mean-



"Great joy in camp we are in View of the ocian This great Pacific Octean which we been So long anxious to See." —William Clark, November 7, 1805. The symbol ⚑ marks the expedition's campsite on that date. If Clark could but have had this bird's-eye view that day, he would have known that what he and his men saw was only the Columbia's mouth and that the ocean itself was yet some distance beyond.

National Archives, Alaska Division

our "Place"

ings. These are the visible borders. But perhaps more significant—and probably more elusive—are those boundary lines that exist only in our minds, our collective memory. This is the line I might draw around what I call my neighborhood. It is a line that bears little resemblance to the one established by the city of Tulsa or our subdivision land developer. The lines in my mind are the boundaries of perception, of memory, of enduring personal meaning. We recognize them without always knowing how they got there, but they are real and they do matter. And perhaps these are the lines that mark our places in the heart.

But what about Lewis and Clark? What about Thomas Jefferson and the invention of those places and that region we now call the Pacific Northwest? How we imagine a place often depends on our vantage point. Remember my students as they sort out where the West begins. Their responses are directly connected to the places they come from. Vantage point means everything. Am I on the far outside looking in; am I on the inside looking out? From Thomas Jefferson's point of view at Monticello in 1803, how did the far Northwest appear? Where were its lines and what was its shape? We can begin to appreciate Jefferson's point of view, his "prospect," by recalling an important map. In 1804 Philadelphia cartographer Samuel Lewis (no relation to Meriwether) prepared a map of Louisiana for a new atlas. That map reflected the best professional understanding of the North American West available to an East Coast audience. More important, it expressed perfectly Jefferson's own hopeful geography—a geography of navigable rivers, gentle mountains, and fertile soil. The map reassured Jefferson and his explorers that a northwest passage just awaited American discovery. And this map said one more thing, something notable for its absence and silence. The far Northwest appeared as an empty place—empty of names, terrain features, and recognizable places. It was, so Samuel Lewis believed, a blank slate on which Americans could inscribe their names and their missions. To be blunt, this map said that there was no "there" in these parts. Instead, the whole West, from the Missouri to the Pacific, was one vast, fertile garden. It was a garden without distinctive features, a garden of sameness, of uniformity. From Monticello the entire West appeared without textures, without wrinkles. Where Jefferson imagined sameness and uniformity, Lewis and Clark would encounter and record difference and diversity.

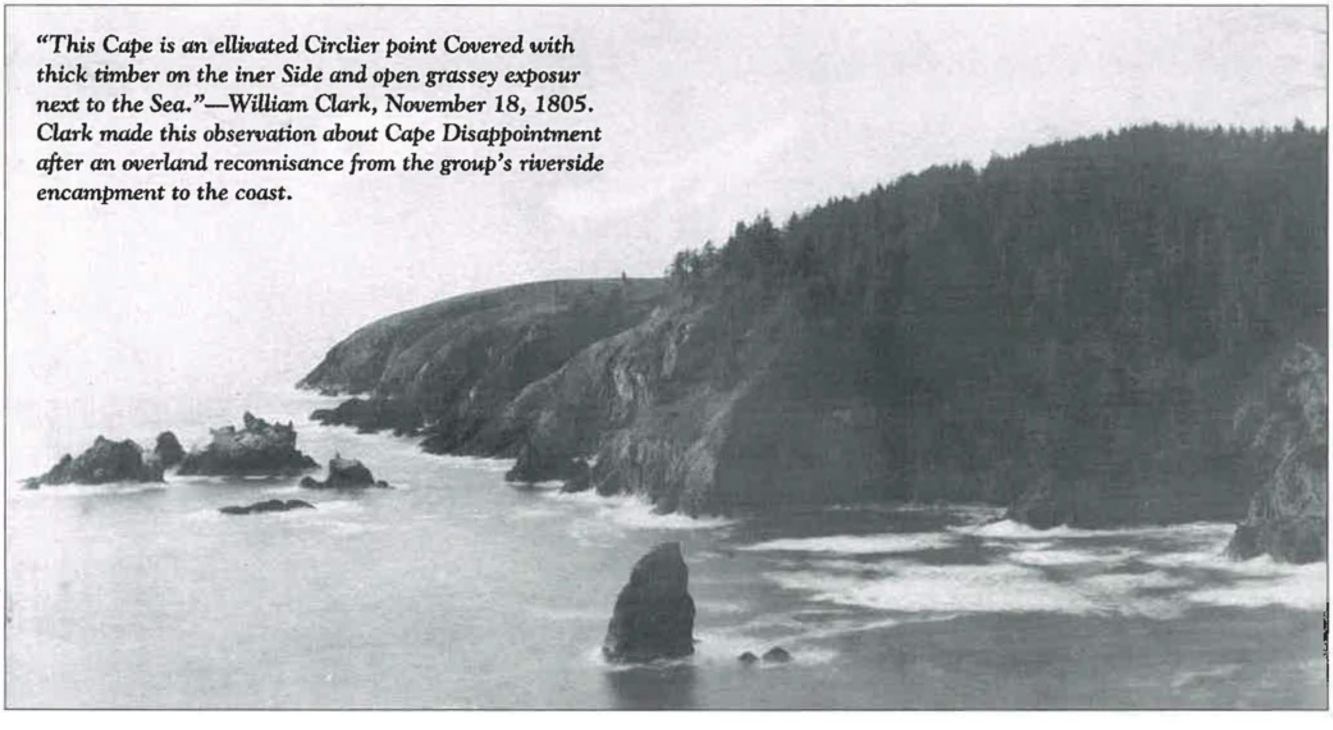
Where to begin as we watch the Corps of Discovery define places and regions in the country west of the Rockies? We might start with the geographic reality that loomed the largest in their minds. If we are going to play fair with Lewis and Clark, we need to make an effort to see the world as they saw it. We should start with the Pacific Ocean, that continent of water spreading over more than a third of the earth's surface. Two centuries before Lewis and Clark, the English essayist Francis Bacon described the Pacific as "the greatest wilderness of waters in the world." From the mid 18th century to the mid 19th, it was the Pacific Ocean that captured the imagination and energy of the great European explorers, scientists, cartographers, and imperial planners. Poets, artists, and playwrights were not immune to the promises and temptations of the Pacific. Paradise, once located in some distant Eden, was now said to be in Tahiti. In terms of exploration history, this was the age of James Cook, George Vancouver, William Bligh, and their patron, Sir Joseph Banks. Meriwether Lewis once likened himself to Cook, and perhaps Jefferson fancied himself an American version of Banks. For all these explorers it was the Pacific that really mattered. The Pacific—not North America—was the last "New World." The Pacific was not only the Lewis and Clark expedition's goal, it served to define both the western edge and perhaps even part of the character of the far Northwest.

William Clark, the expedition's most geographically sensitive journal keeper, understood the defining power of the great western sea. The very idea of the ocean captured Clark's imagination as it had others in the Corps of Discovery. In early November 1805 the expedition was within the Columbia River estuary. Thinking this was the ocean, Clark composed a simple but memorable journal entry. "Great joy in camp we are in View of the ocian This great Pacific Octean which we been So long anxious to See." Here is William Clark, the language magician, conjuring up spirits of awe and desire with words that are almost an incantation. With those few words Clark explained how the explorers understood themselves and their journey. President Jefferson might have grand geopolitical aspirations (as he surely did), but in the day-to-day reality of hard traveling and often mind-numbing routine, it was the dream of reaching the ocean that kept the expedition pushing on. Abstractions like the Northwest Passage and the contest for empire in the West were fine for stay-at-homes and armchair adventurers. It was the promise of seeing the "great Pacific Octean" that kept morale alive.

In whatever landscape he found himself, Clark always sought out some defining mark, some piece of the terrain that might represent both the country and the expedition's experience in it. On various occasions it was the prairie or the Great Falls of the Missouri or the Bitterroot Mountains. But on this gray November day, with the Columbia sweeping out before him, Clark could find no such landmark. His eyes strained to make out something that might symbolize the ocean and all that it had come to mean for the Corps of Discovery, but his eyes failed him. Instead, it was what he heard that now drew his attention. Imagining he could hear the ocean waves pounding on the coast, Clark described not a landscape but a soundscape. Here was the sound of power, the very throb and pulse of Nature. And the unmistakable sound he thought he heard was, so he said, "the roreing or noise made by the waves braking on the rocky shore."

But sound was not enough; surely not enough for those "anxious" to see the ocean firsthand. Despite cold, wet, and uncomfortable November days on the Columbia, the desire to see, to witness, did not lessen. If anything, the passion grew with intensity just knowing that the Great Western Sea was so close at hand. On November 17 Clark organized an exploring party to do just that—to experience the western edge of the continent and the vastness of the Pacific. The following day several members of the Corps of Discovery made such a journey—we might even call it a pilgrimage—to the place that had so long danced in their imaginations. And the Pacific did not fail to satisfy. Returning from this reconnaissance on November 18, Clark reported that his men "appear much Satisfied with their trip beholding with estonishment the high waves dashing against the rocks and this emence ocian."

Now the Pacific was real for the Corps of Discovery, or at least for those who made the trip with Clark. Now the space had become a place—a place that could be fixed on maps and described in expedition journals. No longer was it simply an imagined goal but an actual experience. Whatever the far Northwest was or would become, somehow it was all wrapped up in the very presence of the ocean. Drawing on that



"This Cape is an ellivated Circlier point Covered with thick timber on the iner Side and open grassey exposur next to the Sea."—William Clark, November 18, 1805. Clark made this observation about Cape Disappointment after an overland reconnisance from the group's riverside encampment to the coast.

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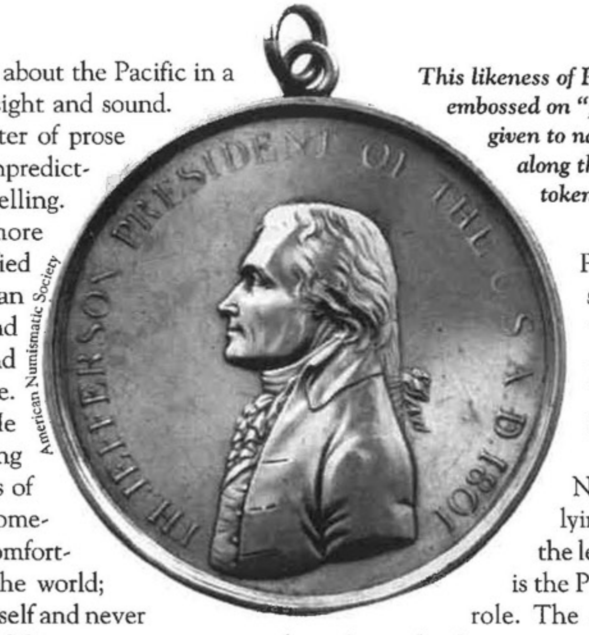


American Numismatic Society

This likeness of President Thomas Jefferson was embossed on "peace medallions," which were given to native inhabitants the corps met along the route of the expedition in token of friendship and cooperation.

experience, Clark set himself to write about the Pacific in a way that might bring together both sight and sound. Few of us think about him as a master of prose expression. Mostly, we laugh at his unpredictable punctuation and unorthodox spelling. Anyone who could spell "Sioux" more than 15 different ways certainly qualified as a creative speller. But far more than Lewis, whose writing is often stilted and cliché-ridden, Clark could often find just the right words to fit the experience. He made no great pretense at style. He just wrote what he saw and felt, leaving the filigrees of philosophy to the likes of Meriwether Lewis. Perhaps that had something to do with Clark being more comfortable with himself and his place in the world; Lewis was never comfortable with himself and never quite sure of his place in the scheme of things.

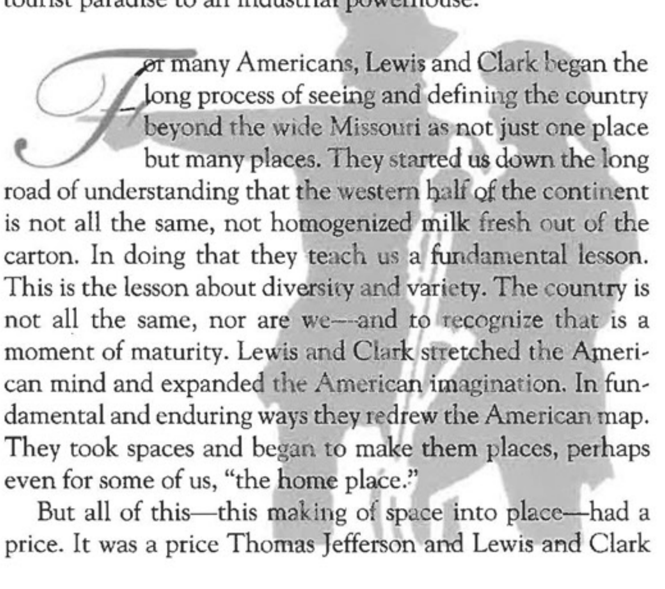
Early in December 1805 Clark tried again to capture the feeling, the very presence of the ocean. He knew that words could be quicksilver slippery. What he sought to capture could be as elusive as the fabled Northwest Passage. But what Clark wrote that day remains a remarkable expression of place—that place where the land meets the sea. These lines are so memorable, so luminous that to paraphrase them seems almost sacrilegious. So, here is the authentic voice of awe, wonder, and astonishment.

> *The emence Seas and waves which break on the rocks and Coasts to the Southwest and Northwest roars like an emence fall at a distance, and this roaring has continued even Since our arrival in the neighbourhood of the Sea Coast. Since we arrived in Sight of the Great Western; (for I cannot say Pacific) Ocian as I have not seen one pacific day Since my arrival in this vicinity, and its waters are foaming and perpetually break with emence waves on the Sands and rocky Coasts, tempestuous and horrible.*

Not more than a month after Clark composed what amounts to a prose map of the coastal Northwest, someone else in the Corps of Discovery let it be known just how much the ocean had become a regional touchstone. It was one of those rare moments when the young woman, Sacagawea, steps out of the shadows and becomes a real person for us—someone with imagination, desire, and a tough-minded will to have her own way. When it became clear to her that she was not being included in trips to the coast, Sacagawea spoke up. What seized her imagination now was word that a great fish had washed up on the beach. It was the combination of the ocean and the whale that proved irresistible. As Clark later recalled, Sacagawea "observed that She had traveled a long way with us to See the great waters, and now that the monstrous fish was also to be seen, She thought it very hard that She could not be permitted to See either." Like all those others on the journey, it was the dream of the Pacific and its creatures that sparked Sacagawea's imagination. For her as well as her companions the ocean was both the goal and the defining imprint of the place.

Imagine with me the Pacific Northwest as the capital letter T, lying on its side. The top part of the letter runs north and south. This is the Pacific, playing its defining edge role. The other part of the letter cuts through our landscape, running east and west. This is the Columbia River. This is Nich'wana, the River of the West, the Oregan, the Columbia. However we name it, this is the river of dreams—dreams of empire builders, fisher-folk at The Dalles, hydroelectric engineers, tourists, and wind surfers. No wonder the Washington State Historical Society calls its distinguished and wonderfully readable magazine *Columbia*. Like the Hudson, the Ohio, the Mississippi, and the Missouri, the Columbia marks the country as part of Nature's survey. Lewis and Clark were not the first to recognize the larger and deeper meanings of the river, but they hammered home the message by their words and in their maps.

Together, the ocean and the river form a kind of framework for the Northwest. They are the outlines without the picture. Writing to his friend William Dunbar, Thomas Jefferson described exploration as filling in the canvas. In the nearly 200 years since Lewis and Clark, Americans have been busy filling in the canvas. The Northwest has been described as everything from the Inland Empire to Cascadia, from a tourist paradise to an industrial powerhouse.



For many Americans, Lewis and Clark began the long process of seeing and defining the country beyond the wide Missouri as not just one place but many places. They started us down the long road of understanding that the western half of the continent is not all the same, not homogenized milk fresh out of the carton. In doing that they teach us a fundamental lesson. This is the lesson about diversity and variety. The country is not all the same, nor are we—and to recognize that is a moment of maturity. Lewis and Clark stretched the American mind and expanded the American imagination. In fundamental and enduring ways they redrew the American map. They took spaces and began to make them places, perhaps even for some of us, "the home place."

But all of this—this making of space into place—had a price. It was a price Thomas Jefferson and Lewis and Clark

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"I...thank providence for directing the whale to us; and think him much more kind to us than he was to Jonah, having Sent this monster to be **swallowed by us** ***in Sted of*** **Swallowing of us** ***as Jonah's did."—William Clark, January 8, 1806. The partially butchered whale that Clark and his companions saw on the coast probably bore a resemblance to the one in this Edward Curtis photo taken farther north a century later.***

exacted without counting the real cost. We can get a sense of that price by looking at place names. What we call a place says something powerful about dispossession, ownership, and expectation. Real estate developers know all about this when they give fanciful names to new subdivisions. I live in Woodland Meadows, and I can tell you that the woods and meadows in my part of Tulsa are long gone. Lewis and Clark studiously recorded Indian place names, perhaps dimly recognizing that what looked like empty wilderness was in fact native homeland. But like so many other European and American explorers, Lewis and Clark were determined to make their mark on the land. Naming meant transforming space into place. On their maps and in their minds, Lewis and Clark erased many native names and replaced them with names that celebrated themselves, their friends, and their official patrons. In doing that, Lewis and Clark were in the vanguard of a large-scale movement to displace (notice that word: *dis-place*) the native presence.

All of this reminds me of the map of my state, Oklahoma. In the Sooner State, Anglo and Indian names are side by side on the map and in the landscape. Here Muskogee, Tahlequah, Okmulgee, and Catoosa live alongside Fort Gibson, Pryor, Collinsville, and Wagoner. This seems to me a lot like the place names in Washington. Your state and mine testify to a long, complex, and profoundly important history. To know our place is to recognize where we have been, where we are now, and where we might yet go.

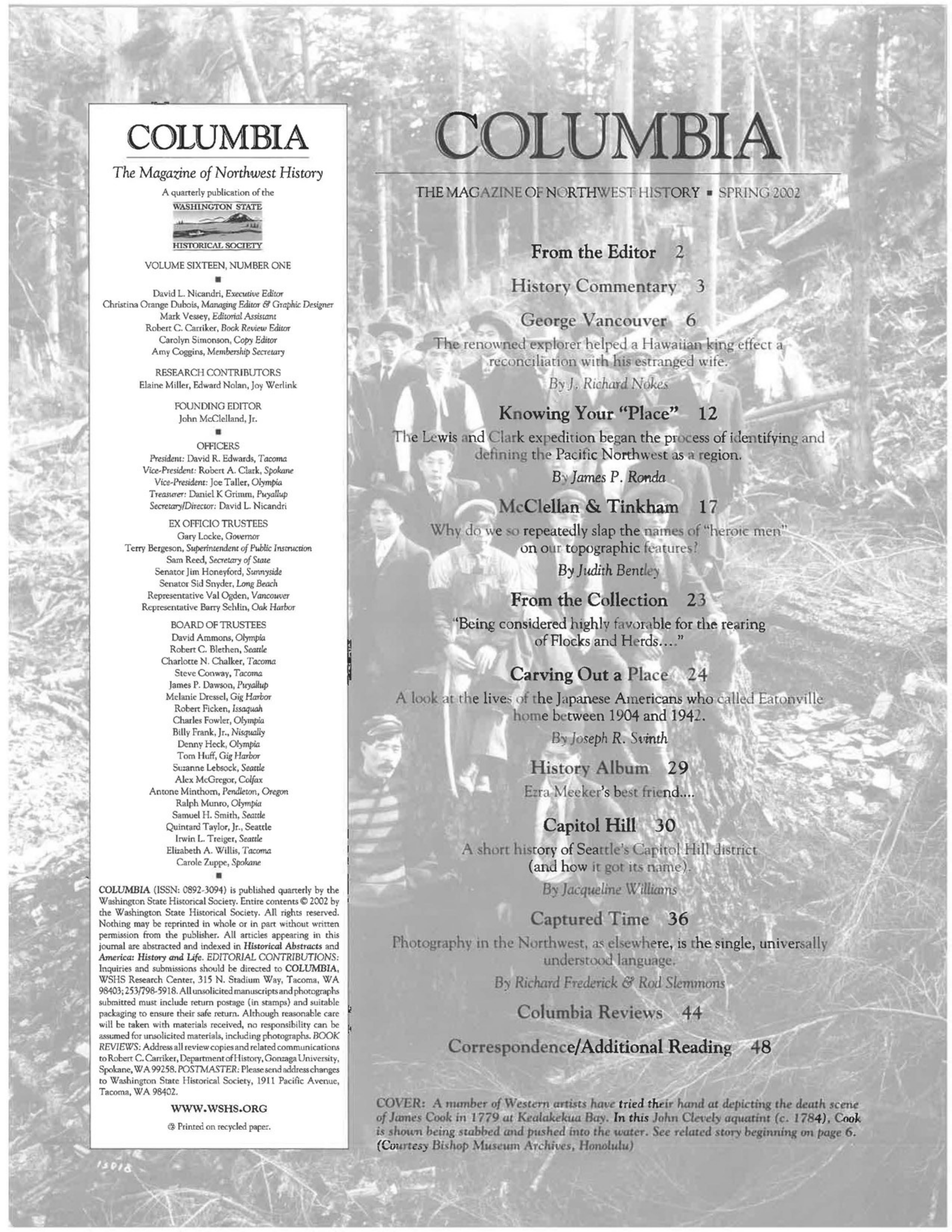
The gifts from the past are never simple, never really clear-cut. The Lewis and Clark story is a fundamental American story because it is complex, ambiguous, slippery, and maybe even troubling. Anyone who suggests that the expedition story is happy-face history is leading us down the primrose path to misunderstanding. Lewis and Clark began the process of defining western regional diversity while at the same time denying and erasing it. What can be more contemporary in the new millennium than to wrestle with a world at once internet-homogenized and yet enduringly diverse. If it was difficult in 1806, little wonder that we struggle today. But Lewis and Clark remind us that we do not struggle alone.

James Ronda is the H. G. Barnard Professor of Western American History at the University of Tulsa and immediate past president of the Western History Association.

NOTICE TO WSHS MEMBERS

On June 1 the next Curtiss Hill Lecture will be presented during the Society's 2002 Annual Meeting, at the Washington State History Museum. "Beneath Tamed Waters: The River Wild and Free," is the title of the address to be given by historian William Layman, of Wenatchee. For nearly 20 years Layman has worked to bring the lost sights and sounds of the mid-Columbia back to public awareness; his work combines diligent research that has uncovered major collections of previously unknown photographs, a flair for drama, and an abiding passion to honor the river's story. Please join us.

Private collection



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COVER: A number of Western artists have tried their hand at depicting the death scene of James Cook in 1779 at Kealakekua Bay. In this John Clevely aquatint (c. 1784), Cook is shown being stabbed and pushed into the water. See related story beginning on page 6. (Courtesy Bishop Museum Archives, Honolulu)