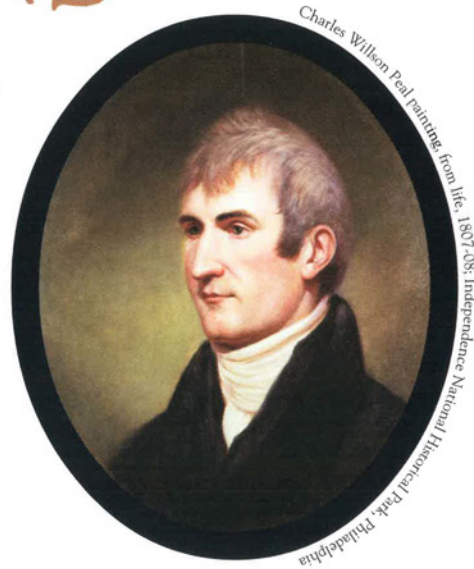


# CAPTAINS WEST

*Lewis & Clark  
in the Vanguard of  
Army Exploration*

BY JAMES P. RONDA



## EDITOR'S NOTE

This essay is an excerpt from *Beyond Lewis & Clark: The Army Explores the West* (Washington State Historical Society, 2003), the companion book to its namesake exhibition.

**T**he story of the United States Army in the American West is often told in a series of freeze-frames from a Hollywood movie. In quick succession there are images of frontier forts, long columns of mounted troopers, desperate encounters with Indians, all culminating in the obligatory scene of George Armstrong Custer's Seventh Cavalry at the Little Big Horn. For all their importance as cultural icons, these powerful pictures obscure a different and perhaps more important story. For nearly a century—from 1803 until the late 1870s—the army led the way in exploring the West. Soldier-explorers—many of them members of the elite Corps of Topographical Engineers—marched into the West, mapping mountains and rivers, collecting plants and animals, and describing native inhabitants and cultures. Their published reports, maps, drawings, and photographs amounted to a grand encyclopedia of the West.

What began with Thomas Jefferson and the Corps of Discovery led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark

became one of the army's most important and influential missions. No story of the American West is complete without recounting the travels of soldier-explorers like Zebulon Montgomery Pike, Stephen H. Long, John Charles Frémont, William H. Emory, and George M. Wheeler. These are names mostly lost to us now. At best we remember Pike for a piece of Colorado mountain geography. And Frémont—once the nation's beloved "Pathfinder"—is now a dim memory from some nearly forgotten history course. But the journeys of the soldier-explorers shaped the course of America's western empire. Following the traces of their journeys, we track the American journey.

Thomas Jefferson was neither a soldier nor an explorer, but as president and commander-in-chief he sent the army into the West with a compelling mission of exploration. Like his contemporaries, Jefferson believed that exploration began with journeys into the country of the mind. Behind every expedition was a whole cluster of ideas, plans, ambitions, and illusions. For Jefferson those ideas and mental excursions were all wrapped up in reading. While he was a voracious reader and once told John Adams, "I cannot live without books," opportunities for read-

ing were often hard to come by in a busy presidency. But one of those came each summer when Jefferson fled Washington's oppressive humidity and political heat for Monticello's mountain coolness. In the summer of 1802 Jefferson spent time reading and studying two new acquisitions—the most recent Aaron Arrowsmith "Map of North America" and the just-published *Voyages from Montreal* by Alexander Mackenzie. *Voyages from Montreal* detailed Mackenzie's searches for an overland water route from Atlantic to Pacific, including his epic journey to the Pacific in 1793. While most of Mackenzie's book recounted his travels, the last pages of the final chapter shocked Jefferson into action. In just a few paragraphs Mackenzie sketched out the dimensions of a new British Empire in North America, a grand domain that swept from ocean to ocean. One sentence summed up Mackenzie's bold Columbia River imperial strategy. "By opening this intercourse between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, and forming regular establishments through the interior, and at both extremes, as well as along the coasts and islands, the entire command of the fur trade of North America might be obtained." But Mackenzie envisioned more than a fur



trade empire. Centering his attention on the world of the Columbia, he urged Great Britain to occupy the West, making it a land of homes and farms.

**F**ew things could anger the president more than the possibility of a British occupation of the West. Mackenzie's proposal touched Jefferson's deep-seated anti-British sentiments at the very time when tensions with Spain and France were mounting. But most important was Jefferson's own vision of the West in the future of the young republic. By the summer of 1802 the president was convinced that the nation's continued political and cultural vitality depended on agricultural settlement in the West. Like many other 18th-century social theorists, he believed that the republican virtues of independence, self-reliance, and civic responsibility thrived best in rural, agricultural settings. Those virtues—and American independence itself—would be in danger should Americans slide into urban, industrial ways. If the British lion seized the West before the American eagle came to nest there, the entire experiment in republican government might ultimately fail. The West was, so Jefferson thought, the nation's insurance policy. The Lewis and Clark expedition and the march of the soldier-explorers began the moment Jefferson read Mackenzie.

This was not the first time Jefferson had cast himself as an exploration patron. In 1783, after hearing rumors about Canadian traders heading into the Far West, he asked Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark to consider leading an American expedition to thwart British ambitions. Clark, already disabled and deep in debt, declined. As historian Donald Jackson writes, this "was hardly a plan; it was merely a suggestion." Three years later, when he was American ambassador in Paris, Jefferson encountered the star-crossed adventurer John Ledyard. Ledyard's self-styled "passage to glory" began when he served as a corporal of marines on board one of the vessels in Captain James Cook's third Pacific voy-

age. On that journey Ledyard became fascinated with the possibilities of the China trade and routes across the American continent. Jefferson provided funds for Ledyard's ill-conceived walk across Siberia and later thought the adventurer might hike the American continent from east to west.

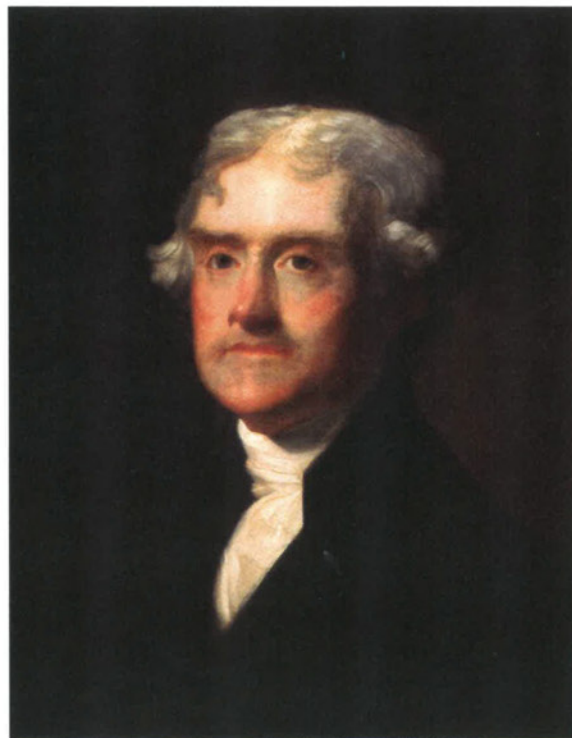
But it was not until 1793—the very year that Mackenzie made his continental crossing—that Jefferson had his first real opportunity to plan a western expedition. When André Michaux—botanist and sometime French secret agent—approached the American Philosophical Society with a plan to cross the continent by way of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, Jefferson was quickly enthusiastic. His reading in exploration and travel literature convinced him that a successful expedition required a comprehensive set of instructions. In many ways the document he drafted for Michaux was the rough draft of what was prepared a decade later for Lewis. Michaux did not get beyond Kentucky, but the whole venture became part of Jefferson's education as an exploration planner.

Wide reading and personal experience joined hands by the end of 1802 as Jefferson made plans for an American

response to Mackenzie and the British challenge. In the long history of Euro-American exploration there were many kinds of expeditions, each with its own set of motives and organizational schemes. Missionaries like the Jesuits made hazardous excursions deep into Indian country, hoping to save souls for the Kingdom of God. Merchants and traders, often representing firms like the Hudson's Bay Company or the North West Company, worked their way into the American interior in a search for fur and markets. Adventurers straight out of medieval romance made epic quests for cities of gold and lost tribes in the land of El Dorado. Land company surveyors looked west and mapped out farms and towns in the Ohio country. And there were the soldiers like young George Washington who explored and described what are now West Virginia and western Pennsylvania. Experience with George Rogers Clark, John Ledyard, and André Michaux made it clear to Jefferson that solitary adventurers stood little chance of accomplishing complex exploration missions. Jefferson had to decide what model to use as he planned his response to Mackenzie. Would he hire civilian traders based in

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**  
*Portraits of William Clark (left) and Meriwether Lewis (right), painted shortly after the expedition.*

**RIGHT:** *President Thomas Jefferson was the galvanizing force behind the Lewis and Clark expedition. His instructions to the explorers became the blueprint for army exploration missions well into the future.*



Virginia Historical Society, Richmond



St. Louis? Could employees from the federally operated fur trading posts lead such a journey? Might his scholarly friends in Philadelphia be willing to venture across the continent?

Faced with this crucial organizational decision, Jefferson fell back on his reading. And the lessons from that reading were plain. The most successful, large-scale expeditions were organized along military lines. This was the age of Captain James Cook and Captain George Vancouver, a time when Great Britain used its navy to map a world empire. And in that enterprise no one was more influential than Sir Joseph Banks. Longtime president of the Royal Society, de facto director of the royal botanical garden at Kew, and informal scientific advisor to the government of George III, Banks was England's foremost exploration patron. For Banks, voyages of scientific discovery were always in the service of empire. And no private or company expedition could possibly marshal the resources necessary to create what British politician Edmund Burke called "the great map of mankind." While historians often point to the personal relationship between President Jefferson and his private secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, as the origin of the American military exploration tradition, we should not overlook the scope of Jefferson's reading and thinking. Jefferson read the English exploration accounts, knew about Banks, and made a clear policy decision. The first American exploring party sent into the West would be a military venture. What Banks and the Royal Navy had done for Great Britain, Jefferson and the United States Army would now attempt for the American republic.

Attorney General Levi Lincoln once told Jefferson that what became the Lewis and Clark expedition was an enterprise of "national consequence." Like Secretary of

the Treasury Albert Gallatin—Jefferson's other trusted exploration advisor—Lincoln understood the importance of placing western exploration in army hands. But it would take more than energetic officers and hard-working enlisted men to succeed at what Jefferson began to call "Mr. Lewis's tour." British explorers always set sail with comprehensive instructions, a kind of program based on Enlightenment ideas about direct observation, detailed record-keeping, and careful classification of plant and animal specimens. Jefferson had made an early attempt at preparing such directions for André Michaux. Now Lewis's journey demanded a far more expansive set of marching orders.

**T**homas Jefferson believed that human history could be shaped by the power of the written word. The Declaration of Independence, the draft Constitution for the State of Virginia, the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, and the Report on Government for Western Territory are all examples of his effort to use words to change history. The explo-

ration instructions prepared for Lewis in June 1803 fit that category. The document was more than just orders from one visionary president to a dutiful young officer. The instructions became the charter for virtually all federal exploration in the 19th-century West. Because the letter played so central a role in the army's exploration mission, we should pay special attention to what Jefferson wrote for Lewis. The president drafted a remarkably flexible exploration plan, one that had a single core mission with many secondary objectives. Jefferson summed up that central mission in one sentence: "...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 and practicable water communication across the continent for the purposes of commerce." This was the elusive Northwest Passage, Jefferson's version of a dream that had tantalized explorers and their patrons since the age of Columbus. Jefferson sent his soldier-explorers in search of a water highway; in the following decades

other soldier-explorers would march west looking for highways suited to the needs of wagons and iron horses. For Jefferson it was not only a route to the riches of India and China but a passage into the fertile lands of the West. This was, as historical geographer John L. Allen has written, "a passage through the garden." Once the passage was found it would be the highway linking American farmers to world markets.

But the president did not intend to march his explorers into the West wearing blinders. Theirs was to be a wide-ranging journey of inquiry.



Sir Joshua Reynolds painting, oil on canvas, 1771-73; National Portrait Gallery, London

*Sir Joseph Banks, for many years president of the Royal Society and a scientific advisor to the Crown, was a great proponent of exploration.*



Like his Enlightenment contemporaries, Jefferson believed that truth came from experience as well as research in libraries and laboratories. Explorers made truth by asking questions. While other kinds of expeditions pursued single goals, the Enlightenment approach championed by Banks and the Royal Navy emphasized a broad study of the physical environment and human cultures. Having put the Northwest Passage at the center of the expedition, Jefferson devoted most of the instruction draft to a host of secondary but vital missions.

Ever the literary stylist, the president composed a series of graceful phrases that served to identify and characterize these objectives. The explorers were to describe and map “the face of the country.” Expedition journals were soon filled with the most remarkable images of western landscapes as men with East Coast sensibilities struggled to make sense of western realities. Jefferson’s travelers were also diplomats and ethnographers, recording “the names of the nations” and acknowledging what William Clark wrote about the expedition’s “road across the continent” leading through “a multitude of Indians.” Jefferson’s instructions contained more questions about native peoples and cultures than any other single topic. After the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson expanded the expedition’s Indian missions to make diplomacy and the presence of a new “Great Father” much more important. And there was the catchall phrase, “other objects worthy of notice”—those objects ranged from astronomy and botany to mineralogy and zoology. All of this was to be written down—“your observations are to be taken with great pains and accuracy”—since knowledge unrecorded could not be shared with a wider world. In retrospect, Jefferson’s phrases might be seen as titles for individual volumes in the library of the American West. In future years other soldier-explorers would fill in the outlines and flesh out the chapters.

By the time Jefferson prepared the final draft of instructions for Lewis in June 1803, it was increasingly clear that a

successful journey of the sort the president envisioned required more than one officer and a handful of soldiers. Even though the instructions still spoke about a single commander and ten or twelve men, Lewis and Jefferson had already agreed on the necessity of a co-commander and more troops to accomplish so ambitious an exploration program. On June 19, the day before the instructions were formally issued, Lewis wrote William Clark, inviting him to join the journey. What had once looked like a squad heading up the Missouri was rapidly becoming an infantry company on the move.

The recruiting and training of what became the Lewis and Clark expedition is a familiar story. What we call “the Corps of Discovery” was drawn from men of many different racial, ethnic, and occupational backgrounds. Some were soldiers from frontier companies, and not always the best men from those outfits, as William Clark soon learned. Others were hunters with useful skills but unaccustomed to the demands of military order and discipline. And there were French boatmen who possessed valuable river knowledge but resented taking orders from any but their own leaders. One was York, Clark’s slave and a man who struggled with his master for freedom in the years after the expedition. Once Sacagawea and her infant son were added to this company, the Corps of Discovery became as diverse as any American community. But making it an effective military community was no easy task.

**T**he winter (1803-04) at Camp Wood outside St. Louis was the expedition’s basic training, a time of frequent insubordination, tough talk, and at least one near-mutiny. The first months pushing up the Missouri provided the expedition’s shakedown cruise—weeks filled



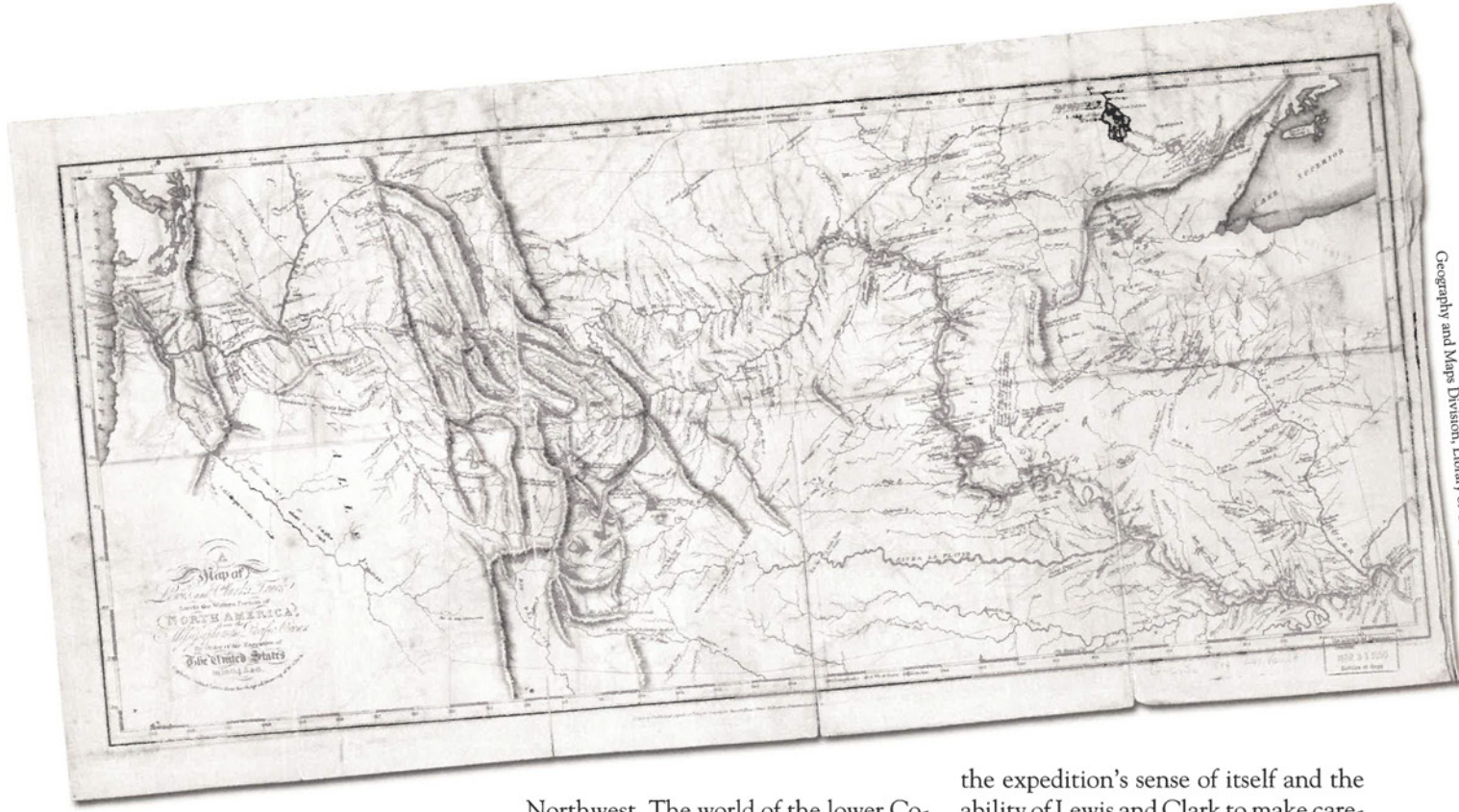
*Surveyor's compass used by William Clark during the Lewis and Clark expedition.*

with unpleasant episodes of grumbling, rule-breaking, desertion, and harsh discipline. But by the time the expedition reached the Mandan and Hidatsa earth lodge villages in present-day North Dakota, the captains and their senior sergeant, John Ordway, had succeeded in creating an orderly military community, one founded on army discipline and custom and bound together by a shared sense of mission. Uniforms, flags, detachment orders, inspections, parades, drills, messes, courts-martial, and company punishment—all these marked the expedition as part of the military world. What the captains accomplished was something modern soldiers call “unit cohesion.” And that unit cohesion would serve Jefferson’s travelers well as they headed across the mountains and down the Columbia to the Great Western Sea.

Nothing tested that unit cohesion more than encounters with strange and often unsettling landscapes. Some of those landscapes were human ones as the expedition met, talked, and traded with a wide variety of native peoples and cultures. Others were all about terrain shapes and weather patterns unlike those in eastern North America. With rare exceptions, the encounters with Native Americans were marked by goodwill and even moments of genuine friendship. At least so it was until the expedition reached the Pacific Coast and spent the winter of 1805-06 among the Clatsops and their neighbors. While

Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of American History





*“Map of Lewis and Clark’s Track, Across the Western Portion of North America, from the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean, by Order of the Executive of the United States in 1804, 5 & 6. Copied by Samuel Lewis from the Original Drawing of Wm. Clark.”*

native peoples living around the mouth of the Columbia River treated the strangers as one more trading party, Jefferson’s travelers viewed those living on the coast with increasing suspicion and hostility. Frustrated by the keen bargaining skills of Chinooks and Clatsops, Lewis and Clark were quick to brand nearby Indians as greedy thieves and untrustworthy neighbors. And difficulties in communication—few members of the expedition learned the Chinook trade jargon—made the cultural distance even greater. Along the Columbia and on the coast, unit cohesion—the powerful sense of community and in-group identity—may have worked against a deeper understanding between Jefferson’s explorers and native inhabitants. By drawing in on themselves in a strange place, the expedition may have shut out its neighbors.

But it was not only the human landscape that challenged the Lewis and Clark exploration community in the

Northwest. The world of the lower Columbia, especially that volatile environment where the river meets the ocean, was like nothing Lewis and Clark had ever experienced. Here wind and rain mixed with ocean currents and river waves to create a swirl of unpredictable weather and hazardous travel. In mid November 1805 the expedition that had survived blistering heat on the upper Missouri and bitter snows on the Lolo Trail was stranded on the rocky north shore of the Columbia in present-day Washington. What had first seemed an easy sprint to the ocean now bogged down in endless days of rain, high winds, and dangerous river swells. Trapped for nearly a week in a place Clark aptly called “this dismal nitich,” getting past present-day Point Ellice seemed almost impossible. Never one to complain, Clark confessed in his journal that these days were “the most disagreeable time I have experienced.” And even the quickest look at this infantry company on the move confirmed his assessment. One of the canoes had been shattered on the rocks, food supplies were short, nearby Chinooks seemed wary of the new arrivals, and the explorers’ leather clothing was rotting and falling to tatters.

This was a study in frustration. These were the moments that tested

the expedition’s sense of itself and the ability of Lewis and Clark to make careful decisions and then take appropriate action. With Lewis and a small party already out on a reconnaissance, Clark watched the weather on November 15, waiting for a break in the wind and rain. After a false start early in the morning the weather brightened and the wind slackened later that afternoon. Seizing the opportunity, Clark ordered the canoes loaded for a quick escape from “the dismal nitich.” After rounding Point Ellice—what Clark dubbed “Point Distress” or “Blustery Point”—the expedition pulled its canoes up on a “butifull Sand beech.” Heading for high ground, Clark established what has come to be called Station Camp. The next day expedition carpenter Patrick Gass noted that “we are now at the end of our voyage, which has been completely accomplished according to the intent of the expedition.”

**T**he westbound voyage may have been over, but there was still much to accomplish. The few days (November 15-24) spent at Station Camp were filled with the sorts of duties and routines that had shaped the expedition from the beginning. Station Camp was as much an experience as a place. Once again unit cohesion proved the glue



that held the expedition community together in a new environment. Hunting had always been an essential part of that community. The first day at Station Camp, Clark reported that “our hunters and fowlers killd 2 Deer 1 Crane & 2 ducks.” York was also out hunting and bagged his share of game. Trading with native peoples, and the personal relationships that grew out of such deals, also quickly emerged at Station Camp, though not without some considerable cultural confusion. Nearby Chinooks had years of experience with white merchants in the maritime fur business. But these Station Camp strangers were different. They came from the wrong direction at the wrong time of year and did not seem to understand the rules of exchange. Even before they were settled in at Fort Clatsop, trade became a source of tension and misunderstanding between the Americans and their native suppliers. But there was one sort of exchange that did go smoothly. On November 21, near the end of the Station Camp sojourn, a Chinook man named Delashelwilt and his wife (a woman Lewis and Clark came to call “the Old Baud”) brought six young women to establish a camp near where the Americans had built temporary huts. A thriving, intimate trade soon developed, one that followed the expedition when it moved across the river to Fort Clatsop.

Hunting and trade were the daily affairs that marked out the days at Station Camp. But these soldier-explorers needed to do more than merely keep body and soul together. Just as at other camps, the explorers busied themselves with the kinds of scientific pursuits that Jefferson’s instructions detailed. There were plants and animals to describe, Indian objects and foods to comment on, and the terrain itself to evaluate. In several long journal entries Clark took careful note of Chinook clothing, baskets, diet, and physical appearance. But nothing occupied him more than exploring, surveying, and mapping the country around Station Camp and toward the ocean. His survey of the Station Camp landscape is a model for the kind of topographic work that Clark did

so well. Beginning on November 18 Clark and 11 men undertook an important reconnaissance from Station Camp to the coast. What the explorers did at Station Camp was a microcosm for its life on the way west. Those few days at camp on the Columbia point us to what future soldier-explorers would do as they marched the West and charted the outlines of an emerging American empire.

**T**he Lewis and Clark expedition stands at the beginning of the American exploration of the West. The details of this emblematic journey are so fascinating, it is easy to forget that the expedition was a military company marching on orders from the commander-in-chief and advancing what became the American empire. In 1802-03 Thomas Jefferson made two fundamental decisions with far-reaching consequences. First, he made exploring the West a federal priority. This was not merely a matter of presidential dreams and congressional funds. Jefferson gave the army its exploration

mission. That decision was based on expediency—there was no other national institution capable of completing such a mission—and a wide knowledge of European exploration strategies. Second, and equally important, the president did not imagine his soldier-explorers as mere scouts reconnoitering the positions held by rival European powers or potentially hostile native nations. Instead, he envisioned them as thoughtful observers and collectors engaged in a series of extensive surveys, all designed to produce many kinds of useful knowledge. Writing in 1805, Jefferson confidently predicted that future American explorers would be like artists “fill[ing] up the canvas we begin.” In the years after Lewis and Clark, soldier-explorers would go a long way toward “filling up” the western canvas.

*A preeminent Lewis and Clark scholar, James P. Ronda, is H. G. Barnard Chair in Western History at the University of Tulsa and former president of the Western History Association.*

## Lewis & Clark Undergraduate Symposium

**April 24, 10 AM to 4 PM**

Tacoma Art Museum and the Washington State History Museum have organized an undergraduate symposium to explore the issues addressed by the exhibitions, *Lewis and Clark Territory: Contemporary Artists Revisit Race, Place, and Memory*, and *Beyond Lewis and Clark: The Army Explores the West*. These exhibitions will act as the starting point for topics and discussions that look deeper into the issues and ramifications of the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-06.

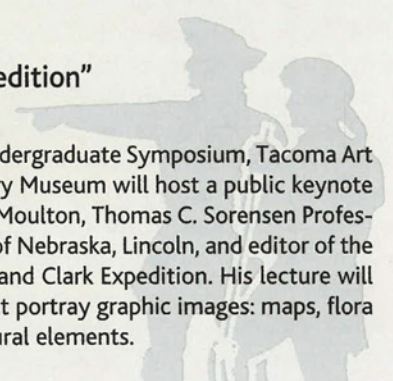
## Public Keynote Lecture

**Gary E. Moulton**

**“Lewis & Clark: Pictures on an Expedition”**

**April 24, 6 PM**

In conjunction with the Lewis and Clark Undergraduate Symposium, Tacoma Art Museum and the Washington State History Museum will host a public keynote lecture at the History Museum by Gary E. Moulton, Thomas C. Sorensen Professor of American History at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and editor of the 13-volume set, *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. His lecture will focus on the categories in the journals that portray graphic images: maps, flora and fauna, and images of people and cultural elements.



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FRONT COVER: Detail from the front of a 1948 promotional booklet published by the Richland Junior Chamber of Commerce. Part of the Hanford Engineer Works Village is depicted, with alphabet houses in the background and Columbia High School in the foreground. The "village" was a hybrid development with combined elements of defense housing and company town, but on a colossal scale. (Special Collections, Washington State Historical Society)