VOTE AT STATION CAMP

Introduction

November 1805 was the final stretch of Lewis and Clark’s journey across the continent. Raging storms racked the unfamiliar land as the explorers struggled onward. The Corps fought to endure the harsh weather with little food or shelter. “O! how horriable [sic] is the day,” Clark wrote in despair. He was terrified that “the bulk of the party will suffer very much” if cold weather arrived before the expedition was prepared for the change.

The Captains needed to find a safe place to spend the winter. It was important for the party to be able to hunt and to trade with local native peoples. To make their final decision on where to stay, Lewis and Clark decided to take a vote among the whole party.

What was the vote about?

It appears that the Corps voted first on whether to cross the Columbia and examine the South shore or to proceed immediately to a predetermined location. Everyone except Jo Fields voted in favor of examining the other side.

The second vote was more specific. The choices were to go south, to return upriver all the way to Celilo Falls or go to Sandy River. It looks as though everyone voted to go back upriver after examining the South shore, though they wanted to go up to different locations.

Why was the vote so important?

Normally military captains make decisions on their own but this time, Lewis and Clark decided to let everyone help in making this choice, one that could determine whether people lived or died.

It was also important because of who voted. At a time when neither black people nor women could vote, York and Sacagawea were consulted about which way to travel.

Did York and Sacagawea really cast a vote?

This vote has long been heralded as a great moment in the early history of the United States as a democratic nation because of
the inclusion of a foreign-born person, a woman and an African-American. Is this true? Read on to decide for yourself.

Clark recorded six votes for returning to Celilo Falls, 10 for going upriver to Sandy River and 12 for heading up the Columbia to look for a suitable site. His list showed that only nine people were in favor of going to Sandy River while 13 wanted to go “up” and “lookout.” Clearly, this error did not alter the outcome of the vote but it does make one wonder!

Twenty-nine people are listed in the vote, including two French-Canadian fur traders and York, Clark’s black slave. Only 28 of these votes are counted. One of the French-Canadian fur traders, Toussaint Charbonneau, is listed but does not appear to have voted. Did he choose not to vote, or was he not counted?

Did Sacagawea really vote? A postscript records that “Janey,” or Sacagawea, favored a place near “plenty of Potas,” or wapato. In all the cultures of the Columbia River country, women were responsible for gathering roots. Often, when other sources of food failed, dried roots provided sustenance for the people. It is not surprising that food was Sacagawea’s priority. She was not listed with the rest of the party in this vote, nor recorded in the final tally. However, Clark’s note shows us that her opinion was heard and acknowledged.

What about Lewis and Clark?

Two other names that weren’t recorded are those of Lewis and Clark themselves.

We know that Lewis and Clark had strong opinions regarding this decision, as they wrote about it after the final tally. However, they did not put themselves alongside their party members in this vote. Is this because they didn’t feel it necessary because there was a clear consensus to “cross and examine,” or had they already decided that their votes would overrule the popular vote anyway? The captains did not share their thoughts with us about this and so we are left to put the pieces together as best we can.

A sign of leadership?

Historian Dayton Duncan points out that the decision to conduct a vote when no vote was officially required was one sign of good leadership. Lewis and Clark were well aware of the state of mind in their party at this time. Weary from travel, hungry, cold and far from home, they rejoiced at having reached the ocean, but were in no mood to spend a winter in a disagreeable location. The morale of the Expedition as well as its survival depended on the choice at hand. The captains, though tending towards
moving on to the coast, knew that the
decision to do so would only be well
received, and perhaps ultimately successful,
if it was made by the group as a whole.

**Station Camp Today**

The name “Station Camp” was given to this
area by historians who studied Lewis and
Clark’s journey. It earned the name by the
primary survey station for William Clark to
produce his map of the mouth of the
Columbia River. This map was the most
detailed and accurate one he made during
the trip.

However, Station Camp is much more than
the place where Lewis and Clark called for
this historic vote. In 2005, more than
10,000 artifacts were uncovered that
revealed the history of this rich and
fascinating area as a Chinook trading village.
“Middle Village” as it is now known was one
of the greatest trading sites of the Lower
Columbia. When Robert Gray visited this
site, it was one of the earliest basis for the
United States to claim possession—earlier,
in fact, than the journey of Lewis and Clark.

Today, Middle Village Station Camp park
celebrates both the heritage of the Chinook
peoples and the end point of the Lewis and
Clark expedition. It is part of the Lewis and
Clark National Historical Park sites along the
Columbia River and the Pacific Coast. Brave
travelers can follow in the Corps’ footprints
on their own journey of discovery.

Article written/adapted by?
(note: I’m not sure who wrote these but we probably need
a source?)

**Find Out More**

National Park Service. *Middle Village –
Station Camp.*
http://www.nps.gov/lewi/planyourvisit/stationcamp.htm

Nicandri, David L. *River of Promise: Lewis and Clark on the Columbia.*
University of Oklahoma Press.

Pocket inkwell recovered from Station Camp archaeological
site and believed to be used during the Lewis and Clark
expedition. Courtesy of Lewis and Clark National Historical
Park.