

## WHEN HISTORY WAS NEWS: LEWIS AND CLARK

### They Were Not Legends in Their Own Time

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In the 20th century Meriwether Lewis and William Clark have enjoyed a degree of fame surpassed by few Americans other than war heroes and a few presidents. But for nearly a century after their epochal journey of exploration from St. Louis to the mouth of the Columbia River and back, in the years 1804-06, they were not similarly acclaimed, principally because of the long delay before their full story was told.

Facilities for reporting the news, as well as conceptions of what constituted news, were primitive through most of the 19th century. On these pages are two examples. One is a news story from 1803 reporting the imminent departure of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The other, from 1806, reports its return.

These accounts were typical of what appeared in the press of the time, so it is little wonder that the public was not overwhelmed by the importance of what had taken place. Not even the government was sufficiently impressed to bear the cost of publishing the journals of the explorers. It was not until 1814 that the first abbreviated account of the journey, edited by Paul Allen of Philadelphia, was published privately in a slim edition. Soon thereafter, the journals of Patrick Gass, an army sergeant who had made the trip, were published in several editions. But not until 1893, when Elliot Coues found the all-but-forgotten journals of the expedition in the library of the American Philosophical Association, was much of the text of what Lewis and Clark had written published, along with their maps and drawings. This several-volume edition was followed by an even more extensive and authentic version by Reuben Gold Thwaites in 1904.

These inspired numerous other books, fictional and otherwise, about the two who were sent off on a grand adventure by President Thomas Jefferson to discover what lay far up the Missouri River, over the mountains and beyond. They carried out their assignment so well that they deserved the widespread acclaim that, sadly, did not come until long after they were gone.

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