

## HISTORY COMMENTARY

### The Legacy of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: The following remarks were presented at Vancouver Barracks on October 29, 1997, at a public planning process meeting for the proposed Vancouver National Historic Reserve.*

In the fall of 1805—192 years ago—Lewis and Clark, with their Corps of Discovery and other members of their party, had just passed through the long narrows of the Columbia River. They were pushing hard to the Pacific Ocean, which lay just days ahead. Clark's journal for October 29th opens with what became a common lament during their time in the Northwest: "a cloudy morning wind from the west..."

Clark also listed the expedition's food purchases from the Indians that day: 12 dogs, 4 sacks of fish, and a few berries—not exactly what we would consider a hearty repast, but for members of the expedition this was a great meal. He then went on to describe the mountainous, heavily timbered terrain of the gorge they were traveling through. They passed three large rocks in the river, he wrote: "The middle rock is large, long and has several square vaults on it, we call this rocky island the Sepulchar [sic]." In the following days they identified many now-familiar landmarks: Castle—or Beacon—Rock, Mount Adams and Sauvie Island, among others.

Even with the journey's geographic goal almost in sight, there remained ahead wet, stormy days, neatly insufferable encampments on the Columbia River, and difficult decisions. But the members of the Lewis and Clark expedition had pushed farther into the North American continent and across its Northwest region than any white men had done previously—thus were realized President Jefferson's instructions given in 1803 to Meriwether Lewis.

What were those instructions and what relevance does the journey of Lewis and Clark have today, for this place in time? For us? The relevance lies in the story of the expedition and the legacy of the people—those undertaking the journey as well as those met along the way.

That legacy, left to us through the journals, is the discovery and recording of a storehouse of knowledge that embraced an archive of cultural and ethnological information, a new depth of scientific inquiry, and the highest standards for respect, excellence and ingenuity that nearly two centuries later continue to astound and enlighten us.

President Jefferson instructed Lewis in a number of tasks the object of which was to "explore the Missouri River and such principal stream of it...that may offer the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent, for the purposes of commerce."

This remarkable yet simple vision compelled Jefferson to specifically ask of Lewis that: 1) His observations and measurements be taken with "great pains and accuracy...for others as well as yourself," and 2) He endeavor to develop a knowledge of and become acquainted with the

Native Americans, their culture, customs, laws and languages—and in this Jefferson decreed that Lewis and company were to "treat the natives in a friendly and conciliatory manner."

In following these instructions and carrying out the work of the expedition, Lewis and Clark laid the groundwork for securing the Northwest territories, establishing commerce, and embedding here the bold frontier ethics that established the Vancouver Historic Reserve and ushered in the military presence at Fort Vancouver.

In fact, it is arguable that Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery set the mark for what would be one of the army's most lasting contributions to this area—exploring a vast part of the Northwest; recording its topography, natural history and environmental features; surveying and mapping the area and developing an infrastructure; and, for the state of Washington, adding to the complexly rich historical legacies of this place.

But the journey was more than the story of an expedition; it was also an intensely personal drama in which individuals were valued and respected for themselves as well as their skills, culture, language and customs—whether members of the expedition or Native Americans met along the way. It was about making democratic decisions and giving an African American man and a Native American woman a vote decades before it was even imagined to enfranchise those groups.

It was also about earnestly listening to each other, whether using spoken language—often nearly indecipherable or translated through multiple, sometimes unreliable channels—or sign language.

The following passages were written in mid-August 1805 near the headwaters of the Lemhi River. Upon sighting three Shoshone women, Lewis set down his pack and rifle and pursued them. The women fled while he repeatedly called after them, "*Tab-ba-bone*," which is to say, "*Look, I'm white. I am not your enemy.*" The women eventually escorted Lewis into camp. Of this encounter he wrote:

*These men then advanced and embraced me very affectionately in their way...while they apply their left cheek to yours and frequently vociferate the word ah-hi-e, ah-hi-e, that is I am much pleased. We were all caressed and besmeared with their grease and paint till I was heartily tired of the national hug...I now had the pipe, lit it and gave them smoke ; they seated themselves in a circle around us and pulled off their moccasins before they would receive or smoke the pipe. This is a custom among them as I afterwards learned indicative of a sacred obligation of sincerity in the profusion of friendship.*

From Lewis's diary we learn that communication that day was via sign language, which Sergeant Drewyer's command of "seems to be universally understood by all the nations we have yet seen . . . it is true that this language is imperfect and liable to error but is much less so than would be expected."

In this exchange Lewis and Clark had just met Chief Cameahwait, who was revealed a few days later to be Sacajawea's brother. We learn that, in the days ahead, Sacajawea served as an interpreter, along with Drewyer, while negotiations proceeded over the provisions and horses needed to complete the next leg of the journey: crossing the Bitterroot Mountains and reaching "the Great Divide," as they called it.

Without calling upon every available form of communication and intensely listening to capture all of the complexities of the negotiations, the expedition might not have successfully

weathered the severe crossing of the mountains and reached the continental divide. And so, once again, we are reminded by the legacy of the expedition of how much we have at stake in speaking the truth and listening carefully to one another.

In closing, I will go back to an opening question: what is the relevance of the Lewis and Clark expedition for us here today? Relevance can be found in the story of the journey and the legacy of the people involved—a legacy we can nearly touch when we realize that as of today, 192 years ago, the expedition was literally in our backyards, just up the Columbia River, with the end nearly in sight.

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