

## HISTORY COMMENTARY

### Self-Destruction on the Natchez Trace: Meriwether Lewis's Act of Ultimate Courage

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In his comprehensive biography, *Meriwether Lewis*, Richard Dillon in 1965 detailed the extraordinary behavior of Lewis during his last days, enabling me to provide a scientific solution (*Epidemiology*, May 1994) to the 184-year mystery concerning the underlying cause of his untimely death on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee on October 11, 1809. The nature of Lewis's death was so bizarre that Dillon and many others have persistently refused to believe that Lewis committed suicide, despite incontrovertible evidence that he did.

According to James Neely and Alexander Wilson, three persons—Mrs. Robert Grinder, keeper of Grinder's Stand; John Pernia, trusted servant of Lewis; and Neely's servant—were eye-witnesses to his death and reported that Lewis spoke to them as he lay dying at dawn. When Pernia came up from the barn, Lewis said, "I have done the business, my good servant. Give me some water." He also begged them to take his rifle and blow out his brains. And his last words, just as the sun tinged the treetops, were, "I am no coward, but I am so strong. It is hard to die."

Major James Neely, Lewis's traveling companion, who had remained behind at Dogwood Mudhole the previous morning to find two strayed horses, arrived at Grinder's Stand within hours of Lewis's death and had ample opportunity to question each witness and examine the mortal wounds before burying the body. On October 18 from Nashville, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson: "It is with extreme pain that I have to inform you of the death of His Excellency Meriwether Lewis, Governor of Upper Louisiana who died on the morning of the 11th Instant and I am sorry to say by Suicide." Pernia carried the letter to Thomas Jefferson and some personal effects to Lewis's mother, Lucy Marks, in Virginia. Hence, both had ample opportunity to question Pernia closely concerning not only the terminal events on the Natchez Trace but also Lewis's behavior while in St. Louis, and the details of his two attempts at suicide on the riverboat before reaching Chickasaw Bluffs. It is most telling that Meriwether's mother, Lucy Marks, and his closest friends, Thomas Jefferson and William Clark, sadly but readily accepted the diagnosis of suicide. Presumably they knew something about his state of health and mind not known by many others.

At the end of his excellent book Dillon concludes: "Was Meriwether Lewis murdered? Yes. Is there proof of his murder? No. Could Lewis's death have been a suicide? Yes." Deeply empathetic to this man whose life's history he had researched so thoroughly and well, and yet unable to understand why Lewis would self-destruct, Dillon opted for a diagnosis of murder, despite the compelling evidence for suicide.

Necessitated by the eminence of the deceased, and by rumors that he might have been murdered at Grinder's Stand, a coroner's inquest was held nearby in 1809 and a verdict of "death by suicide" rendered by the jury.

Nevertheless, 187 years later, June 4-6, 1996, another coroner's inquest into the death of Meriwether Lewis was held in Hohenwald, Lewis County, Tennessee, in which I participated. This coroner's jury did not vote for murder or suicide but recommended that the remains be exhumed for examination. In January 1998 the request for exhumation was turned down by Jerry Belson, regional director, Southeast Region, National Park Service.

From my background as a very experienced physician/epidemiologist, when reading Richard Dillon's biography it came clearly to mind that Lewis's terminal illness leading to suicide was a classic case of neurosyphilis. I then researched this matter in the Lewis and Clark *Journals* by Moulton, *Letters* by Jackson, other relevant Lewis and Clark literature, and in the medical literature, finding strong support for my diagnosis that Lewis did suffer from neurosyphilis, leading to his suicide. And by backtracking in the diaries I discovered when and where he acquired his syphilis. In brief, there is compelling evidence that Lewis did suffer from syphilis acquired on the Voyage of Discovery, as here described:

While voyaging across the Louisiana Territory and to the Pacific Ocean, the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery encountered a half dozen Indian tribes suffering from syphilis. Sexual intercourse with women of these tribes was commonplace. If not initiated by members of the corps, it was commonly urged by the Indians as a gesture of friendship and respect; and according to the diaries, numbers of corpsmen did develop syphilis and were treated by Lewis with mercury.

When encountering the Shoshoni tribe on the continental divide, along the Lemhi River, August 13-14, 1805, Lewis and three companions had both a propitious opportunity and a compelling need for sexual intercourse: to ingratiate themselves with Chief Cameahwait and the tribe, and to bargain for needed horses. As noted by Lewis, the Indians entertained them with dancing and partying during those two nights.

Several days later, on his 31st birthday, August 18, 1805, Lewis wrote, "I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence." The following day, August 19, Lewis recorded in his diary: "I was anxious to learn whether these people had the venereal, and made inquiry through the interpreter and his wife [Sacagawea]; the information was that they sometimes had it but I could not learn their remedy; they most usually die with its effects. This seems strong proof that these disorders bothe ganaraehah and Lues venerae are native disorders of America."

A few weeks later, on September 19, 1805, Lewis noted in his diary, "several of the men are unwell with the dysentary, brakings out, or irruptions of the skin have also been common with us for some time." Such skin manifestations occurring about a month after sexual exposure and infection with syphilis are characteristic of the secondary stage of syphilis and supportive of the view that Lewis and some of the men acquired syphilis about mid August. After a diary entry on September 22, Lewis ceased writing during several months; but entries by Clark record the initial severity of Lewis's illness:

September 24, 1805: "Capt Lewis Scercely able to ride on a gentle horse which was furnished by the Chief, several men So unwell that they were Compelled to lie on the Side of the road for Some time others obliged to be put on horses." September 25: "Capt Lewis verry sick . . . A verry hot day most of the party complaining and 2 of our hunters left here on the 22nd verry sick." September 27: "Capt Lewis very Sick nearly all the men Sick." October 4: "Capt Lewis still Sick but able to walk about a little."

The entry by Lewis on September 19 stating that "brakings out, or irruptions of the skin, have been common with us for some time"; and the entries by Clark documenting the seriousness of Lewis's illness, which incapacitated him from writing during several months; plus the fact that neither Lewis nor Clark described his illness further, all suggest that he suffered an unmentionable disease, probably syphilis, affirmed by the downward course of his health during the next four years, with development of classic signs of neurosyphilis.

Soon after the syphilis spirochete enters the new host and begins multiplying in the chancre (site of infection), large numbers of organisms enter the blood stream and are conveyed throughout the body. When the spirochetes multiply extensively in the brain, neurons are destroyed, resulting in the illness known as paresis. According to Charles Dennie (in *Syphilis*, Harper & Brothers: New York and London, 1928):

*The relation of a paretic to the other members of society is almost diagnostic of his disease. . . . There is often a loss of memory for recent events, although past events are fairly well recounted. There will be slight or glaring mistakes in his business correspondence. . . . Mistakes in business will be found to have crept into this man's dealings for quite a little while before recognizable symptoms appear. . . . In the depressed type of paresis the symptoms are apt to come on quite suddenly. The patient becomes melancholy and has ideas of self-destruction. In distinction to other types, he often realizes what his trouble is, and he can see his vitality becoming less day by day. Unfortunately, this realization of his condition stimulates his notion of self-destruction. While these people are as a rule harmless to other members of society, they are quite often successful in doing damage to themselves.*

This description of paresis fits the development of Lewis's illness: Soon after his return to Washington, while staying several months with Jefferson in the White House, he manifested lessened judgment when dealing with matters relative to publication of the diaries. And after moving to Philadelphia at the end of March 1807 he was unable to advance his priority task, the preparation and publication of the trip memoirs. In late July, Lewis journeyed to Washington and visited the War Department before proceeding to Albemarle County where his mother, Lucy Marks, and siblings lived, and where Jefferson was during August. There he remained during six months, when he should have been in St. Louis handling his duties as governor of the Louisiana Territory.

A likely reason for this delay is that his neurosyphilis had progressed and he underwent an intensive course of mercury treatment for syphilis—perhaps under the care of his mother and brother, Reuben Lewis, both medical practitioners. In any event, by March 1808 he was well enough that he proceeded to St. Louis and took up his duties as governor. During some months matters seemed to go fairly well there, except that he and his secretary, Frederick Bates, wrangled severely and Lewis was living far beyond his income, which led to increasing financial difficulties for Lewis in 1809. In August, to do justice to his creditors, Lewis handed over to them as security what land he had acquired in Louisiana; and as he hurriedly prepared for travel to Washington he gave his three most intimate friends his power of attorney so they could sell any of his properties to settle bills.

On September 4, 1809, attended by his servant, John Pernia, Lewis departed St. Louis by riverboat, intending to travel by water to Washington via New Orleans and the Atlantic Coast. On September 11, en route, perhaps at New Madrid, Lewis made out his will, witnessed by F. S. Trincharde: "I bequeath all my estate, real and personal, to my mother, Lucy Marks, after my private debts are paid, of which a statement will be found in a small minute book deposited with Pernia, my servant."

On September 15 the boat reached Chickasaw Bluffs (Memphis) and Fort Pickering, where the fort's commandant, Captain Gilbert Russell, met Lewis who had commanded a company at Fort Pickering in 1797 and was a friend of Captain Russell. According to Russell's statement, made in 1811,

*On the morning of September 15th, the boat in which he was a passenger landed him at Fort Pickering in a state of mental derangement, which appeared to have been produced as much by indisposition as other causes. The subscriber being then the commanding officer of the Fort on discovering his situation, and learning from the crew that he had made two attempts to kill himself, in one of which he nearly succeeded, resolved at once to take possession of him and his papers, and detain him until he recovered, or some friend might arrive in whose hands he could depart in safety.*

Russell forbade Lewis all grain spirits, confining him to claret and light wine while he was at the fort. Lewis remained in bad mental and physical health for five days, but on the sixth day, according to Russell, "All symptoms of derangement disappeared and he was completely in his senses and this continued for ten or twelve days."

Captain Russell took appropriate precautions to protect his friend Lewis during two weeks, until he could entrust him to the care of Major James Neely, United States Agent for the Chickasaw Tribe, who arrived on the 18th. As Lewis prepared for departure from Fort Pickering with Major Neely, he borrowed \$100 from Russell and secured a saddle horse and two pack animals from Neely and Russell. On September 29 he set out with Neely and Pernia, *et al*, proceeding southeasterly toward the Chickasaw Agency and the Natchez Trace.

It took the party three days' travel to reach the Chickasaw Agency. Upon their arrival Neely thought Lewis deranged again, hence they rested there two days until he had recovered sufficiently. They then proceeded up the Natchez Trace to the Tennessee River, which they crossed either that evening or the morning of the 8th by means of a ferry, operated since 1801 by George Colbert. The night of October 9 they camped at Dogwood Mudhole, about 40 miles from the ferry. The next morning two horses were missing, and it was agreed that Neely would stay behind to find them while Lewis proceeded on with the two servants, "with a promise to wait for me at the first house he came to that was inhabited by white people."

About 18 miles above Dogwood Mudhole, at a clearing, Lewis turned off the Natchez Trace to a pair of rude cabins joined by a dogtrot. He greeted a lone woman there and learned that this was Grinder's Stand, 72 miles from Nashville. Lewis asked for lodging, to which Mrs. Grinder assented, then asked, "Do you come alone?" To which Lewis replied that his servants would be along shortly, and took his saddle into the cabin the woman said would be his. He asked for whiskey, but drank little of what she gave him. When the servants came up, according to Alexander Wilson,

*Lewis asked them about some powder for his pistols, saying he was sure he had some in a cannister, to which the servant made indistinct reply. Lewis then began pacing forth and back before his cabin, obviously upset, talking to himself. At times he would walk up almost to his startled hostess, then wheel away, wrapped in thought and anger.*

Supper being ready, the governor sat down at the table but did not lose his agitation. After eating a few bites he started up, face flushed with anger, speaking to himself in a violent manner. Finally he lit his pipe and drew a chair close to the door, remarking, "Madam, this is a very pleasant evening." He smoked for a time, then got up and resumed his impatient pacing,

traversing the yard for a time. Then, regaining his composure, he took his seat, filled his pipe and lit it. Blowing clouds of smoke and staring toward the west, he observed, "What a sweet evening this is."

Mrs. Grinder began preparing a bed for Lewis in the cabin, but Lewis stopped her, explaining that he preferred to sleep on the floor. He sent his servant for his bearskins and buffalo robe, which were spread on the floor. She then proceeded to make a bed for her children and self in the kitchen cabin, while the servants went to sleep in the barn 200 yards away. But Mrs. Grinder did not sleep, according to Alexander Wilson, who interviewed her exhaustively 18 months later:

*Being considerably alarmed by the behavior of her guest [she] could not sleep but listened to him walking backwards and forwards, she thinks for several hours, and talking aloud, as she said, "like a lawyer." She then heard the report of a pistol, and something fall heavily on the floor, and the words, "Oh Lord!" Immediately afterwards she heard another pistol, and in a few minutes she heard him at her door calling out, "O madam! Give me some water, and heal my wounds." The logs being open, and unplastered, she saw him stagger back and fall against a stump that stands between the kitchen and room. He once more got to the room, afterwards he came to the kitchen door, but did not speak; she then heard him scraping the bucket with a gourd for water, but it appears that this cooling element was denied the dying man! As soon as day broke and not before, the terror of the woman having permitted him to remain for two hours in this most deplorable situation, she sent two of her children to the barn, her husband not being at home, to bring the servants; and on going in they found him lying on the bed; he uncovered his side and shewed them where the bullet had entered; a piece of the forehead was blown off, and exposed the brains, without having bled much. He begged they would take his rifle and blow out his brains, and he would give them all the money he had in his trunk. He often said, "I am no coward, but I am so strong, so hard to die." He begg'd the servant not to be afraid of him, for that he would not hurt him. He expired in about two hours, or just as the sun rose above the trees."*

The many bewildering aspects of Lewis's terminal behavior become readily understandable when viewed from the perspective that he was suffering from neurosyphilis: each successive attack of feverish spirochetal inflammation of his brain was driving him ever closer to complete and permanent madness; and, despite his fraying intellect, Lewis realized that if he continued on to Washington his syphilitic condition would become apparent to everyone, whereupon he would become an object of pity and scorn, an embarrassment to his family and friends, and the lustrous reputation gained by his great Voyage of Discovery would be wasted.

Increasing awareness of the relentless nature of his illness and his dire future no doubt oppressed him while still in St. Louis; but full realization of its malignant implications occurred en route—resulting in his making a will on September 11 followed by two suicide attempts on the riverboat, both foiled by the crew. His decision to leave Chickasaw Bluffs by land rather than by water was probably dictated by the fact that his suicide would be facilitated—he needed the freedom offered by land travel to kill himself. He may have engineered the straying of two horses the night of October 9-10, so that Major Neely would have to stay behind to find them, thus freeing himself for performance of the desperate task he had in mind. Mrs. Grinder's reports of his distraught, peculiar behavior the evening of the 10th reveal the intense ambivalence and disinclination he felt as he neared the fateful moment when he must end his life. It was the ultimate measure of Meriwether Lewis's "Undaunted Courage" that he had sufficient fortitude and determination to end his life when and where he did.

Stephen Ambrose's book *Undaunted Courage* is a good read, except for the ending where he opts for Lewis's death having been due to "depression" and dismisses the diagnosis of neurosyphilis as "more intriguing and speculative than convincing." But this throwaway quip is not in accord with his 1994 letter to me, nor is this statement from his book: "Nearly all of them suffered from 'brakings out or irruptions of the skin,' probably caused by venereal disease contracted from the Shoshoni women." (p. 292)

By avoiding the diagnosis of syphilis—which fits perfectly well with all the evidence—and attributing Lewis's suicide to depression, Ambrose unfortunately impugns his courage by implying that Lewis was such a weak character that he would self-destruct simply because he was psychologically depressed. And Ambrose has not answered the crucial question: Why was Lewis so utterly depressed that he wanted to kill himself? Of course Lewis was depressed, as any man would be if suffering successive attacks of syphilitic brain fever and seeing his life slip away. The diagnosis of neurosyphilis answers the crucial question perfectly well.

From their reactions to his death, it is apparent that Lewis's family and closest friends knew why he killed himself. And when we now realize that he was suffering the ultimate agony of advancing neurosyphilis—losing his mind and verging on utter madness—then we can truly empathize with him and fully admire his ultimate courage in facing the facts squarely and doing what had to be done to protect his reputation and his family and friends. Ambrose is not a physician and offers no judgment of a panel of expert physicians as the basis for his preferred diagnosis of depression rather than syphilis as the cause of Lewis's death. But the consensus of world-class epidemiologists at the Centers for Disease Control and elsewhere is that neurosyphilis is the most probable diagnosis for the underlying cause of the death of Meriwether Lewis. It fits all known facts and gives sensible meaning to many events otherwise unintelligible.

As Winston Churchill wrote of his father, who also died of syphilis: "It seemed incredible that this man...could be the same brilliant audacious leader who in the flush of exultant youth had marched irresistibly to power....What experience can be more painful than for a man who enjoys the fullest intellectual vigour, and whose blood is quite unchilled by age, to feel the whole apparatus of expression slipping insensibly from him?"

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