

Lewis & Clark

in Columbia River Country

THE GREAT RIVER OF THE WEST

Introduction

The exploits of the Lewis and Clark expedition west of the Continental Divide, in what might be termed "Columbia River Country", were among the most important, vivid, and compelling episodes of the entire journey. Nevertheless, relatively little is generally known about this portion of the trail, which is a function of two factors.

After the expedition emerged from the Bitterroot Mountains of north central Idaho in late September, 1805, Meriwether Lewis ceased keeping a daily journal until January 1, 1806, by which time the party was safely ensconced in the relatively comfortable confines of Fort Clatsop. Lewis, being the more accomplished writer of the two (but not necessarily the better explorer) has become the "voice" of the expedition; and when he has gone silent historians have tended to follow his cue.

Secondly, unlike the long days struggling up the Missouri or over Rocky Mountain

traverses, Lewis and Clark coursed a great distance down the Clearwater/Snake/Columbia river system very rapidly, which allowed less time for reflection about the western topography and its native inhabitants.

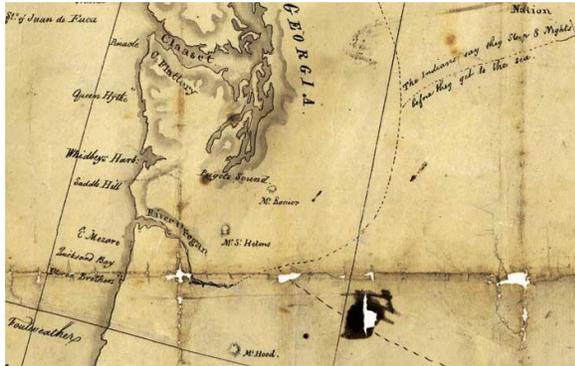
One of the objectives of this website and curriculum, therefore, is to provide resources, and to tell stories, about Lewis and Clark in Columbia River Country. We will address what the explorers knew about the west before they departed on their venture, encounters with vast and somewhat surprising landscapes, their navigation of the turbulent Snake and Columbia Rivers, and the help provided to them by the American Indian tribes they met and traded with almost every day they were in this region.

--David Nicandri, Director, Washington State Historical Society

The Great River of the West

By August of 1805 Meriwether Lewis was desperate to find the Shoshone Indians. Lewis had long deemed the Shoshones and their horses essential for an expected

portage across the continental divide. Once beyond this ridge Lewis expected to find the waters that would take the Expedition for Northwestern Discovery from the Missouri River drainage to their ultimate destination—the Pacific Ocean.



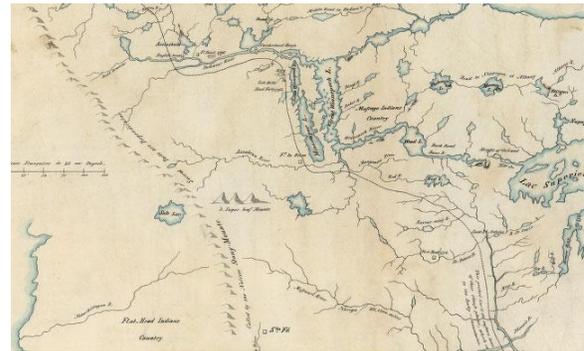
Portion of 1803 map of northwestern territories, untitled, by Nicholas King. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C.

What Lewis could not have known is that coming to understand the complex geography of the Columbia River country would confound him and Clark for the next two months. But before proceeding west with Lewis to the Columbia, it may be best to first explicate the hazy understanding he and Clark had about this Great River of the West on verge of their first physical encounter with it. Phrased in a modern idiom: what did Lewis and Clark know about the Columbia, and when did they know it? (Nicandri:2005)

Peter Pond's Explorations

Peter Pond, an American but one employed by the Northwest Company, a fur trading enterprise with headquarters in Montreal, presented the United States Congress with a map in 1784. This instrument, based on

Pond's travels in the West, adhered to the erroneous French theory about a single range of mountains that did much to mislead a generation or two of armchair and practical geographers about the true complexity of the Rocky Mountain system. Faithful to the reigning theory, Pond's map showed a westward flowing river emanating from a narrow ridge opposite to the headwaters of the Missouri. Remarkably enough, Pond speculatively placed the common wellspring of these great rivers at the 45th parallel -- precisely the latitude of what would later be named Lemhi Pass. (Nicandri:2005)



1785 Peter Pond map presented to Congress: Hudson's Bay's Country. Library of Congress Geography and Map Division, Washington, D.C.

Vancouver & McKenzie

Pond's guess was substantiated over the course of the next seven years via the accidental discovery of the American fur trader Robert Gray and the more purposeful explorations of George Vancouver and Alexander Mackenzie working on behalf of British interests.

Actual geographic definition of the great western river finally began to supplant hopeful theorizing, but only barely. The

Columbia River's mouth was established at the 46th parallel, a propitious finding since that seemed to match the envisioned headwaters of the Missouri, as delineated by Pond and others.

Alexander Mackenzie complicated this core article of geographic faith with the putative discovery of a northern fork of the Columbia River in present British Columbia. Still, the mythic ideal of two great western rivers with adjoining sources held sway as the last great hope for the fabled Northwest Passage.

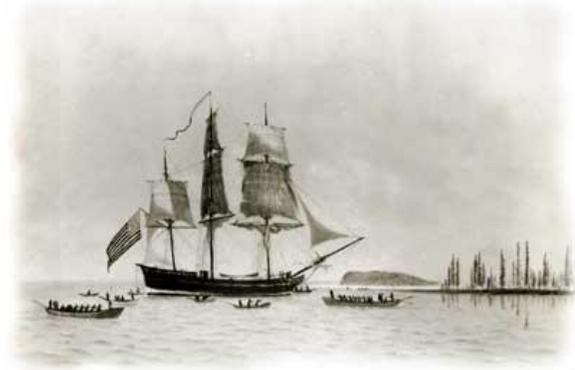


Lewis and Clark in the Columbia valley. This location, which Lewis described as "co[m]petent to the ma[i]ntainance of 40 or 50 thousand souls if properly cultivated and is indeed the only desirable situation for a settlement which I have seen on the West side of the Rock mountains," is now the city of Vancouver. Washington State Historical Society Collections.

Broughton's Insights

Named in 1792 by Robert Gray for his ship, *Columbia Rediviva*, the little that was known of this river was actually attributable to the efforts of an Englishman, Lt. William R. Broughton in service of his captain, George Vancouver, in command of the *Discovery*.

In a cutter (or jolly boat) and a larger launch from the armed-tender *Chatham* anchored at Grays Bay, Broughton and a portion of his crew rowed up the Columbia in late October 1792 as far as Cottonwood Point near present Washougal, Washington.



Discovery of the Columbia by Robert Gray, painting by Fred S. Cozzens. Washington State Historical Society Collections.

Broughton's geographic insights, as conformed and distributed by his fellow Briton, the influential cartographer Aaron Arrowsmith, found their way into the map prepared by Nicholas King at the request of Jefferson's Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, for Lewis's use in the field.

Article written/adapted by?

(note: I'm not sure who wrote these but we probably need a source?)

Find Out More

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

Patent, Dorothy Hinshaw *The Lewis and Clark Trail: Then and Now*. Illustrated by William Muñoz. Dutton Children's Books.