

PROVISION CAMP

The Lewis & Clark Expedition, March 31 to April 6, 1806

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At one o'clock in the afternoon on March 23, 1806, the Corps of Discovery departed their winter camp at Fort Clatsop near present-day Astoria, Oregon. It was a typical coastal day—cloudy and raining. Twenty-nine members of the original party from St. Louis had made it to the Pacific Coast, along with four more who had joined them at the Mandan Camp where they wintered the first year. Those who joined the party were a Shoshone Indian woman named Sacagawea, her newborn baby, Jean Baptiste, and her common-law husband, Toussant Charbonneau. They were hired to serve as interpreters. Another who was enlisted to serve as a military member of the expedition was Jean Baptiste LePage. Journal entries indicate that during their four months at Fort Clatsop there were only 12 days of sunshine. Before they left the safety of their winter camp, men carved their names into trees to both celebrate the success of their journey and leave a permanent record of their discovery—in the event they might perish during the dangerous homeward journey.

Eager to return home, the men rowed their dugout canoes with determination. The Columbia River was slightly higher in elevation than it had been the previous November when they descended the river, but it was not at flood stage, which typically occurred in late May and early June when a quick rise in temperature would melt winter snow and abruptly raise the volume of water that drained the region. So, as the journal entries once more stated, they "proceeded on."

The Corps of Discovery typically rowed as far as they could each day. Near sunset the company would look for a comfortable beach by a small stream to bed down for the night. They made their biggest meal of the day in the evening and often cooked leftovers the next morning for breakfast. As they ascended the Columbia they observed and encountered many natives along the way. Some wanted to engage in conversation with them, but they were persistent about getting back to the Nez Perce, in present-day Idaho, who had been caring for their horses over the winter. As they moved against the current they recorded the estimated number of miles the men rowed each day: March 23, 16 miles; March 24, 15 miles; March 25, 15 miles; March 26, 18 miles; March 27, 20 miles. Since the day they left Fort Clatsop the skies had been overcast and it rained almost constantly. On March 28 it stopped raining and the clouds abated. The expedition members took advantage of the fair weather to dry their bedding, and they built a fire to dry out their canoes so that they could apply pitch to cracks in the wood. They spent the evening of March 28 on Deer Island (near present-day Rainier, Oregon) after having traveled only five miles that day.

On March 29 the corps pressed on again. They traveled close to 17 miles before they came upon a large native village called Cathlapotle (near present-day Ridgefield, Washington) at three in

the afternoon. The village consisted of 14 large wooden houses. The natives were friendly and offered them anchovies (smelt) and wappato to eat. The villagers appeared eager to trade, so the company purchased a large quantity of wappato, 12 dogs, and 2 sea otter skins. Determined to continue on, they returned to their canoes two hours later and resumed their journey.

Since it was late in the afternoon, the group traveled only two miles and then set up camp in a prairie on the main shore near present-day Bachelor Island, west of Vancouver. They found it difficult to rest that night, however, due to loud calls from nesting swans, geese, and ducks in nearby ponds that lasted throughout the night. They got up early the next morning and rowed five miles until they reached the site where they had prepared a meal during their descent of the river on the previous November 4. They made breakfast and were visited by several canoes of natives from nearby villages. At about ten o'clock they set out again and continued another 18 miles, then set up camp in present-day Vancouver at Ryan Point. From their encampment they could clearly see Mount Hood and Mount St. Helens. Earlier in the day they had seen a taller mountain in the southeast, which they named Mount Jefferson to honor the president and sponsor of their journey. At this encampment Meriwether Lewis wrote in his journal: "This valley would be copetent to the maintainance 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 Rocky mountains." Lewis's words were prophetic—the area he described is now home to close to a million people in the metropolitan area of Portland/Vancouver.

When the corps awoke on the morning of March 31, they had traveled eight days and covered approximately 131 miles (a little over 100 nautical miles). It was raining again, and the current was noticeably stronger. They left early in the morning and traveled along the north side of the river, rowing between White Brandt Island (what we now know as Lady Island) and the Washington shore. They passed by where the Camas paper mill now stands and then came upon a small river (about 80 yards wide) entering the Columbia. They asked natives in the area what they called the river but could not discern its name, so they decided to call it Seal River after the number of seals they observed swimming in its mouth (it is now called the Washougal River). From Seal River they continued to row along the north bank for about two miles until they reached a "handsome prairie" directly across from the mouth of the upper Quicksand River.

The Sandy River once had two channels that emptied into the Columbia from opposite sides of a mudflow deposited at its mouth by an eruption of Mount Hood that occurred in the late 18th century (see *Fire Mountains of the West: The Cascade and Mono Lake Volcanoes*, by Stephen L. Harris, 1988). Lewis and Clark were amazed by the land formation at the mouth of Quicksand River, as they commented about it in both their outward and homeward-bound journals. No vegetation was growing on the Quicksand delta and it must have looked similar to how the Toutle River appears today. Two decades after the eruption of Mount St. Helen's, the Toutle River still reveals a massive mud flow at its delta. The mud and sand deposit at the mouth of this river was very soft, and from its unstable condition Lewis and Clark dubbed the river "Quicksand." Up until c. 1950 when a permanent barrier dam was constructed, the upper channel emptied the greatest quantity of water. It was directly across from this channel that Lewis and Clark camped on the Washington side of the river. Historians and geologists agree that this area is very close to present-day Cottonwood Beach in Washougal. (The Army Corps of Engineers built a dike around Steigerwold Lake in the 1960s to create an industrial park but fortunately did not enclose Cottonwood Beach). The company intended to spend one night and move on early in the morning, as they had done during their first nine days on the river. But they

did not anticipate what they were about to encounter, which would make the Washougal campsite their second longest encampment in present-day Washington and a strategic site in preparation for their return east.

As the corps settled down to eat dinner that evening, three Indians camped near them and visited their fire. William Clark engaged in a conversation with them about the region and its rivers. They learned that Seal River headed into the mountains to the northeast and that Quicksand River's headwaters originated from the Cascade Mountains as well. The Indians also spoke of another river that drained the large valley to the south. This puzzled William Clark because they had not seen any large tributary entering the Columbia from the south during either their westward or return trips near Image Canoe or Wappato Islands (what we now know as Hayden and Sauvie Islands). Lewis and Clark both assumed that Quicksand River drained the large valley to the south (what we know as Willamette Valley). That evening William Clark wrote in his journal: "This information if true will render it necessary to examine the river below on the South Side...for some river which must water the Country west of the western mountains to the Waters of California." He also noted: "The Columbia is at present on a Stand [strong current] and we with diffiuelty made 25 miles today."

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were men of compatible yet different interests. Lewis was intrigued with the indigenous animals and plants he observed throughout their expedition. Clark, on the other hand, was preoccupied with map-making and recording the dress and customs of the natives they encountered along the way. In fact, Clark's maps have been used by many Native Americans to provide proof of where their ancestors lived. He used a teepee symbol to identify where Indian villages were located and also made entries in his journals about the names of these Indian tribes. On March 31 Lewis wrote in his daily journal:

The summer or wood duck has returned. Butterflies and Several Species of insects appear. Musquitoes are troublesome this evening.... Encamp opposite Quick Sand River.... The waterfowls are much plentyer about the enterance of Quick Sand river than they were below. Observed a species of small wild onion growing among the moss of rocks, they resemble the Shives of our gardins and grow remarkably close together forming a perfect tuft; they are quite as agreeably flavoured as the Shives.

On the morning of Tuesday, April 1, Sergeant Pryor and two others were dispatched to take a small canoe up the Quicksand River to investigate whether it did, in fact, turn to the east and drain Mount Hood. They also dispatched three men to hunt game at a large bottom of woodland and prairie above the entrance of Quicksand River. The rest of the hunters were sent out in different areas on the Washington side of the river to pursue deer and elk. The remaining men in camp were directed to make rope out of elk skin to be used for pulling their large canoes over the rapids once they entered the Columbia River Gorge. That evening Sergeant Pryor returned and reported that he had ascended the river six miles and found that it did turn to the northeast and that the main channel was only 50 yards wide and 6 feet deep. This confirmed what the Indians had told them the night before.

Another issue soon diverted their attention: the number of Indians who were descending the river from the Cascade region in search of food. Lewis's journal reported:

We were visited by several canoes of natives in the course of the day; most of whom were descending the river with their entire women and children. They informed us that they resided at the great rapids and that their relations at that place were much streightened [starving] at that place for the want of food; that they had consumed their winter store of dried fish and that those of the present season [spring salmon] had not yet arrived.... They informed us that the nations above them were in the same situation & that they did not expect the Salmon to arrive untill the full of the next moon which happens on the 2nd of May. We did not doubt the varacity of these people who seemed to be on their way with their families and effects [belongings] in surch of subsistence which they find it easy to procure in this fertile valley. This information gave us much uneasiness with respect to our future means of subsistence.

Lewis went on to comment about the lack of antelope and elk east of the mountains and even suggested that if the spring salmon had not returned, then the natives' dogs must also be starving, which was another food source the corps relied upon. Furthermore, the horses were probably underfed during this season as well. Lewis further wrote: "Under these circumstances there seems to be a gloomy prospect for subsistence on any terms; we therefore took it into serious consideration what measures we were to pursue on this occasion."

During the night of April 1, Lewis and Clark very likely discussed these recent developments. Lewis was certainly concerned about their means for subsistence once they made it beyond the great rapids in the Columbia River Gorge, and Clark was undoubtedly preoccupied with the possibility that they had missed a major tributary that drained the Willamette Valley. Both wanted to press on and to make it to the Nez Perce as soon as possible, but unforeseen circumstances were now preventing them from continuing their uninterrupted journey east.

The following morning Lewis and Clark informed the company that they had decided to remain at their present encampment to hunt deer and elk and dry enough meat to last them as far as the Nez Perce. Lewis would later write in his journal about this decision:

The men who were sent in quest of the elk and deer that were killed yesterday returned at 8 A.M. this morning. We now enformed the party of our intention of laying in a store of meat at this place, and immediately dispatched two parties consisting of nine men to the opposite side of the river. Five of those we sent below the Quicksand river and 4 above. We also sent out three others on this side, and those who remained in camp were employed in collecting wood making a scaffoald and cutting up the meat in order to dry it.

Shortly thereafter several canoes of Indians arrived at their camp and two of them were Cash-hooks who resided at a great falls at the river that drained the Willamette Valley—the same river that had eluded Lewis and Clark on both their outward and return voyages. Clark was eager to learn more about this mysterious river, so he gave the Indians a mat and piece of coal and motioned to them to draw a map. They drew a map that clearly marked where a river they called Multnomah (what we now know as the Willamette) entered the Columbia behind present Hayden Island, not far from where they had camped on March 30. Clark became curious with this revelation and offered one of the natives a magnifying glass in return for serving as a guide to lead a party to the Multnomah. An Indian who lived just downriver near Diamond Island on the south side of the Columbia agreed to perform the task.

The captain later drew a map of the area showing Diamond Island and two other islands close to where Government Island is now located. It is very possible that volcanic sand and ash from the Quicksand River delta washed downriver over time and filled in between these three islands to create the larger Government Island we know today.

Clark immediately assembled a group of seven men (Thompson, Potts, Cruzatte, Wiser, Howard, Whitehouse, and York), and they departed from their provision camp at half past 11, headed downstream. Shortly after departing the camp Clark looked back to see several more canoes rowing toward the encampment where only Lewis and ten corpsmen remained. For a moment Clark considered returning, but he felt that the Indians had been friendly and that Lewis had proven to be resourceful in similar situations during their journey, and so he proceeded on.

The Indian guide took Clark's party down the inside of Diamond Island along the south shore of the Columbia (near present-day Government Island and Portland International Airport). The Indian lived in a lodge near the upper end of Diamond Island, close to a small lake (now known as Blue Lake). The company continued downstream past this village. At three in the afternoon Clark had his crew row to shore near a large double house of the Ne-er-cho-ki-oo tribe of the Shah-ha-la nation (a branch of the upper Chinook). Clark's journals describe how he presented himself boldly to the natives, entered one of the rooms of their house and offered several articles in exchange for wappato roots. The natives appeared wary of his presence and were reluctant to sell any of their roots. But William Clark knew what amazed and frightened Indians about European inventions, so he removed a piece of port fire (a flare used by ships when entering a port—ostensibly used by Lewis and Clark to ignite wet material), cut off an inch of it, and placed it in the fire. He also removed his compass and a small magnet, placed the compass on his ink stand, then sat down on a mat in front of the fire. He later described what followed:

The port cougth and burned vehemently, which changed the Colour of the fire; with the Magnit I turned the Needle of the Compas about very briskly; which astonished and alarmed these nativs and they laid Several parsles of Wappato at my feet & begged of me to take out the bad fire; so I consented.

Clark's display of magic alarmed the natives. The children took shelter in their beds and the women hid behind the men. While this occurred a very old blind man prayed out loud for his spirits to remove the evil from their presence. Clark must have been a bit amused, but he did not want to leave on a negative note, so he lit his pipe and offered them some smoke and then returned the full amount of wappato that they had placed at his feet. At this point the Indians seemed "some what passified," and Clark left the village to continue his voyage downstream.

As Clark's party descended the river on the south side of Image Canoe Island they discovered that three small islands concealed the entrance to the Multnomah. Clark was impressed with what he saw:

Multnomah discharges itself in the Columbia on the S.E. and may be justly Said to be 1/4 the size of that noble river...from the enterance of this river, I can plainly See Mt. Jefferson which is high and Covered with snow...Mt. Hood East, Mt. St. Hellans a high humped Mountain...I also saw Mt. Raneer Nearly North.... The current of the Multnomah is as gentle as that of the Columbia glides Smoothly with an eavin surface, and appears to be Sufficiently deep for the largest Ship.

Clark attempted to measure the depth of the river by using a hand line that was five fathoms long (30 feet), but he could not detect the river's bottom. From its mouth the party continued up the Multnomah. They soon encountered an elder native who was descending and learned that he was a member of the Clarka'mas Nation (Clackamas), which resided at a branch of the Multnomah not far from the great falls. Through later discussions with natives Clark learned that this nation inhabited 11 villages and that their language and dress were very similar to the Cathlapotle and other tribes on Wappato (Sauvie) Island. The party continued upstream several miles and camped by a large, vacated Indian lodge near present-day St. John's, Oregon.

While Clark was off exploring the Multnomah, Meriwether Lewis was busy gathering provisions for their return voyage to the Nez Perce. The hunters brought back deer, elk, and some bear. The deer were very skinny; in some cases the hunters only took the hides and left the lean meat behind. The deer hides were valuable not only for making clothes but also for trading with Indians who lived in the East. The men kept their fires burning hot under the scaffolds to dry the meat as well as they could in the misting rain.

Had the weather been drier they would have pounded the moisture from the meat to preserve its freshness. They did not use the salt they brought from the coast to cure the meat but preferred to season the meat with it when they ate it. Typically, the meat was boiled to soften it for consumption. Hides were also dried near the scaffolds. Several were used as wrappings to protect the meat from insects, birds, and rodents. The men knew that the meat might be their only source of sustenance (besides dogs and horses) between this fertile valley and the Nez Perce, so they worked hard to gather a substantial store of food.

Throughout the day Indians visited the provision camp where the corpsmen were drying meat and braiding rope. In fact, at one point Meriwether Lewis took out his air rifle and shot it into the air to alarm the natives and indicate to them that the Corps of Discovery was a powerful group. The Indians remained friendly and soon departed camp after satisfying their curiosity about these strange men. Besides, most were starving and eager to dig the wappato and camas roots that were abundant in the area. Lewis's journal entries report that ten canoes of Indians descending the river visited them throughout the day. All of them gave the same account—that there was a "scarcity of provision above." And Lewis, true to his inquisitive and scientific nature, made several entries in his journals about the habitat while camped at present-day Washougal.

On the morning of Thursday, April 3, William Clark awoke to find that it had rained heavily throughout the night. His party continued up the Multnomah River a short distance and he tried again to measure the depth of the river, but again his rope was not long enough. The mist was so thick that they could not see very far upstream, so they terminated their exploration of the Multnomah and began the return trip to the corps' provision camp. Clark once again visited the natives of the Ne-er-cho-ki-oo, whom he had visited the day before, and sought to buy wappato, but his presence alarmed them once again—the children fled to their beds, the women hid behind the men, and the men even hung their heads. Observing their behavior, Clark decided to leave without any further conversation.

They encountered other natives descending the river who showed an interest in communicating with the group, but Clark's guide said in a quiet tone that these were bad people, so the party pressed on. At midafternoon they reached the guide's residence near the upper end of Diamond Island on the Oregon side. This consisted of one long house that contained seven apartments.

Clark described the house as being built of white cedar, with stiff poles resting on the ends of broad boards to form the rooms. Each apartment was about 30 feet square, and a long hallway about 4 feet wide extended down the length of the structure, providing a passage to each of the apartments.

What William Clark saw behind the building puzzled him. He observed the remains of five large houses in what appeared to be a very large village. The houses were built in the same form as his guide's residence, and Clark wondered where the people were who once occupied these homes? His journal entry reveals a shocking answer:

I endeavored to obtain from those people of the Situation of their nation, if scattered or what had become of the natives who must have peopled this great town. An old man who appeared of Some note among them and father to my guide brought forward a woman who was badly marked with the Small Pox and made Signs that they all died with the disorder which marked her face, and which She was verry near dieing with when a girl. From the age of this woman this Distructive disorder I judge must have been about 28 to 30 years past, and about the time the Clatsops inform us that this disorder raged in their towns and destroyed their nation.

Historical records do indicate that a smallpox epidemic raged through the lower Columbia River basin in the 1770s. Interestingly, this occurred before Captain Robert Gray discovered the mouth of the Columbia River in May 1792. It is entirely possible that the pathogen arrived overland from the southwest.

Clark continued to converse with members of his guide's family for an hour. An old man drew him a map of the Multnomah River and provided him with the names of the Indian nations that inhabited its upper reaches. He observed that the people at this village spoke a different language from the natives at Cathlapotle and the women wore larger and longer robes made from deerskins. He also observed that they cared for their elderly and that several of the people in the village had lived to a great age. They appeared healthy, he noted, though several were nearly blind. The caring nature of these people must have impressed William Clark since he made a special note of it in his journals. At four in the afternoon Clark thanked his guide and gave him the magnifying glass as payment for his services; then he headed back to rejoin Lewis.

The small party returned to the camp by six o'clock and found Lewis nearing completion of his objective "to obtain as much dryed meat as necessary for our voyage to the Nez Perce." That night Lewis took a compass reading from their campsite and identified Mount Hood as being "S. 85 degrees E." at an estimated distance of 40 miles. Indians continued to visit the camp for the fifth consecutive day, all descending the river in search of food. Many of them were nearly starved, and they continued to report the "scarcity of provision among the natives above."

Lewis and Clark surely must have felt their six-day encampment near present-day Cottonwood Beach was time well spent. They had obtained a substantial supply of meat for their trip through the Columbia River Gorge and east of the mountains. Meanwhile, Lewis had made several scientific observations about wildlife and indigenous vegetation, and he collected several plant specimens to take back east. Clark had led a special expedition to discover an important tributary to the Columbia River that they had twice missed. He gathered valuable information about Indian nations and with native help prepared an accurate map of the region. He also

made notations on his map of their permanent villages and wrote descriptions in his journals about their dress, language, and customs. All this was made possible because of the unique circumstances that the Corps of Discovery encountered as they entered the entrance to the Columbia River Gorge on their return voyage.

On the eve of April 6 William Clark wrote in his journal:

This supply of Elk I think by using economey and in addition to roots and dogs which we may probably precure from (t)he Nativs on Lewis' river (Snake) will be Sufficient to last us to the Chopunnish where we Shall Meet with our horses and near which place there is Some deer to be precured.

And they proceeded on....

Roger Daniels, a resident of southwest Washington for almost half a century, enjoys reading local history and has focused his research on early Columbia River explorers. An administrator at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington, for the last 25 years, Daniels has also been working with citizens in Camas and Washougal this past year to organize an East Clark County Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Planning Committee.