

Lewis & Clark

in Columbia River Country

VOTE AT STATION CAMP

Introduction

November 1805 was the final stretch of Lewis and Clark's journey across the continent. Raging storms racked the unfamiliar land as the explorers struggled onward. The Corps fought to endure the harsh weather with little food or shelter. "O! how horriable [sic] is the day," Clark wrote in despair. He was terrified that "the bulk of the party will Suffer very much" if cold weather arrived before the expedition was prepared for the change.

The Captains needed to find a safe place to spend the winter. It was important for the party to be able to hunt and to trade with local native peoples. To make their final decision on where to stay, Lewis and Clark decided to take a vote among the whole party.

What was the vote about?

It appears that the Corps voted first on whether to cross the Columbia and examine the South shore or to proceed immediately

to a predetermined location. Everyone except Jo Fields voted in favor of examining the other side.

The second vote was more specific. The choices were to go south, to return upriver all the way to Celilo Falls or go to Sandy River. It looks as though everyone voted to go back upriver after examining the South shore, though they wanted to go up to different locations.

Why was the vote so important?

Normally military captains make decisions on their own but this time, Lewis and Clark decided to let everyone help in making this choice, one that could determine whether people lived or died.

It was also important because of who voted. At a time when neither black people nor women could vote, York and Sacagawea were consulted about which way to travel.

Did York and Sacagawea really cast a vote?

This vote has long been heralded as a great moment in the early history of the United States as a democratic nation because of

the inclusion of a foreign-born person, a woman and an African-American. Is this true? Read on to decide for yourself.

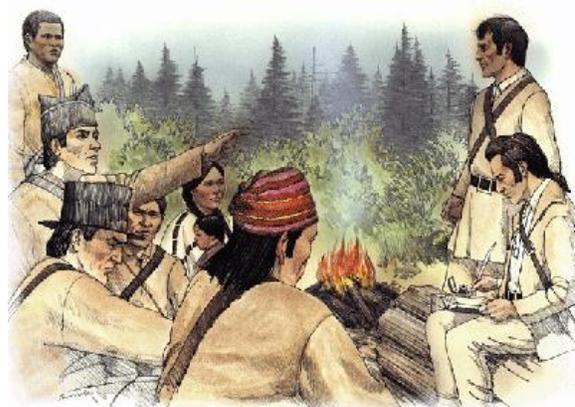
Clark recorded six votes for returning to Celilo Falls, 10 for going upriver to Sandy River and 12 for heading up the Columbia to look for a suitable site. His list showed that only nine people were in favor of going to Sandy River while 13 wanted to go “up” and “lookout.” Clearly, this error did not alter the outcome of the vote but it does make one wonder!

Twenty-nine people are listed in the vote, including two French-Canadian fur traders and York, Clark’s black slave. Only 28 of these votes are counted. One of the French-Canadian fur traders, Toussaint Charbonneau, is listed but does not appear to have voted. Did he choose not to vote, or was he not counted?

Did Sacagawea really vote? A postscript records that “Janey,” or Sacagawea, favored a place near “plenty of Potas,” or wapato. In all the cultures of the Columbia River country, women were responsible for gathering roots. Often, when other sources of food failed, dried roots provided sustenance for the people. It is not surprising that food was Sacagawea’s priority. She was not listed with the rest of the party in this vote, nor recorded in the final tally. However, Clark’s note shows us that her opinion was heard and acknowledged.

What about Lewis and Clark?

Two other names that weren’t recorded are those of Lewis and Clark themselves.



The Corps of Discovery takes a vote in this painting by Roger Cooke. Washington State Historical Society Collections.

We know that Lewis and Clark had strong opinions regarding this decision, as they wrote about it after the final tally. However, they did not put themselves alongside their party members in this vote. Is this because they didn’t feel it necessary because there was a clear consensus to “cross and examine,” or had they already decided that their votes would overrule the popular vote anyway? The captains did not share their thoughts with us about this and so we are left to put the pieces together as best we can.

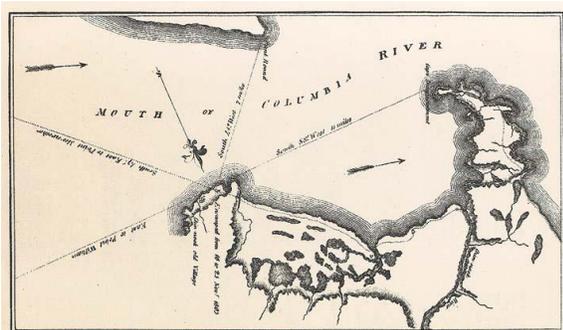
A sign of leadership?

Historian Dayton Duncan points out that the decision to conduct a vote when no vote was officially required was one sign of good leadership. Lewis and Clark were well aware of the state of mind in their party at this time. Weary from travel, hungry, cold and far from home, they rejoiced at having reached the ocean, but were in no mood to spend a winter in a disagreeable location. The morale of the Expedition as well as its survival depended on the choice at hand. The captains, though tending towards

moving on to the coast, knew that the decision to do so would only be well received, and perhaps ultimately successful, if it was made by the group as a whole.

Station Camp Today

The name “Station Camp” was given to this area by historians who studied Lewis and Clark’s journey. It earned the name by the primary survey station for William Clark to produce his map of the mouth of the Columbia River. This map was the most detailed and accurate one he made during the trip.



Detailed map of the mouth and north shore of the Columbia River, originally drawn by William Clark, 1805. Washington State Historical Society Collections.

However, Station Camp is much more than the place where Lewis and Clark called for this historic vote. In 2005, more than 10,000 artifacts were uncovered that revealed the history of this rich and fascinating area as a Chinook trading village. “Middle Village” as it is now known was one of the greatest trading sites of the Lower Columbia. When Robert Gray visited this site, it was one of the earliest basis for the United States to claim possession—earlier, in fact, than the journey of Lewis and Clark.



Pocket inkwell recovered from Station Camp archaeological site and believed to be used during the Lewis and Clark expedition. Courtesy of Lewis and Clark National Historical Park.

Today, Middle Village Station Camp park celebrates both the heritage of the Chinook peoples and the end point of the Lewis and Clark expedition. It is part of the Lewis and Clark National Historical Park sites along the Columbia River and the Pacific Coast. Brave travelers can follow in the Corps’ footsteps on their own journey of discovery.

Article written/adapted by?

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

Find Out More

National Park Service. *Middle Village – Station Camp*.
<http://www.nps.gov/lewi/planyourvisit/stationcamp.htm>

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