

# Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea

Have you ever been lost before? Perhaps you have been separated from your parents at the store? Or maybe you couldn't find your classroom on your first day at a new school?

Nothing quite scares us like the unknown. It can be frightening to have to travel to a place that we are unfamiliar with.

But everything that is now known to us was once unknown. If those who came before us did not venture out to explore the world (and how it works) at large, then very little would be known about it.

Exploration has always been a core part of the American spirit. From the arrival of the pilgrims at Plymouth to Neil Armstrong's landing on the moon, Americans have always been explorers. There are many other varieties of exploring as well. One can engage in scientific, geographical, or ideological exploration alike. A yearning for discovery—to know what is unknown—has always been at the center of the American experience.

America's first states were located along the eastern side of North America, but to many of the earliest Americans, westward expansion presented great opportunities. As Americans moved west into the Tennessee River and Ohio River valleys beginning in the late 1780s, the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans were important for the transportation of goods and the prosperity of early Americans.<sup>1</sup>

However, in 1800, Spain and France secretly signed the Treaty of San Ildefonso, giving the Louisiana territory to France (and Napoleon Bonaparte authority over New Orleans and the Mississippi River). The treaty didn't remain a secret for long, as rumors of the transaction circulated in Washington. Napoleon Bonaparte, as a next-door neighbor limiting American opportunity, greatly concerned President Thomas Jefferson.<sup>2</sup> The situation escalated in 1802 after Americans were prohibited from storing their goods in New Orleans.<sup>3</sup>

President Jefferson tasked U.S. Minister to France Robert Livingston and future president James Monroe with negotiating the purchase of New Orleans and land east of the Mississippi from France (or at the very least, access to the port and the Mississippi River). Its importance could not be understated, as Jefferson said, "All eyes, all hopes, are now fixed on you, ... for on the event of this mission depends the future destinies of this republic."



To the surprise of the Americans, France offered to sell all of Louisiana. It was a deal they couldn't refuse.

The Louisiana Purchase was finalized in 1803. For \$15 million, the United States acquired 827,000 square miles of territory, which doubled the size of our young nation.<sup>4</sup>

The Louisiana Purchase was one of the most significant achievements of Thomas Jefferson's presidency – but not just for economic and security reasons.

To Jefferson, the survival of our new nation depended on ensuring an independent and virtuous society. In his view, owning one's own land was essential to securing this freedom and encouraging such morality. "Those who labor in the earth," Jefferson wrote, "are the chosen people of God."<sup>5</sup> Maintaining and supporting your own land was a lot of work and required discipline, responsibility, care, and strength – all admirable qualities!

Even before he became president, Jefferson supported the exploration of the West. He had long dreamed of sending pioneers across the continent.<sup>6</sup>

At the time, the vast interior of the American continent was still very much uncharted. After all, the majority of the population in America in the early 1800s lived within 50 miles of the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, before America acquired Louisiana, President Jefferson confidentially asked Congress to fund an expedition to the Pacific Ocean to find a water route to get there and establish trade with Native Americans. Jefferson was a curious and avid learner who also wanted to gain more knowledge about the West, its people, animals, and plants.

On February 28, 1803, Congress agreed to fund the expedition, and with the purchase of the territory from France, Jefferson was presented with an enormous and important opportunity for exploration and discovery of these unknown lands.<sup>8</sup>

But there was only one man whom Jefferson trusted and thought capable of charting this new territory – Meriwether Lewis, his former secretary and close friend.<sup>9</sup> Lewis already had significant knowledge of the West, had a great amount of military discipline from his experience as a captain in the U.S. Army, and spoke several Native American languages.<sup>10</sup>

Lewis selected his former superior in the army, William Clark, to help lead the U.S. Army expedition, now known as the "Corps of Discovery."

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for what lay ahead. But although their military training would be indispensable, it was not enough to prepare them for what lay ahead. Lewis was tutored by leading scientists in Philadelphia, where he learned mapmaking and surveying, botany, mathematics, anatomy, and medicine.

Lewis recruited men to join the expedition and gathered supplies. Among his equipment were scientific instruments (e.g. a chronometer and a sextant), arms and ammunition, ink and writing materials, 193 pounds of portable soup, mosquito netting, a corn mill, candles, tools, blankets, and reference books.

Lewis also knew he would meet Native Americans throughout the journey. Giving gifts was a way to symbolize friendship in native cultures. Following Jefferson's instructions to treat the natives "in the most friendly and conciliatory manner," Lewis bought gifts such as glass beads, mirrors, and peace medals to give.<sup>11</sup>

On May 14, 1804, after gathering enough supplies, Lewis, Clark, and more than 40 men set off from Camp Dubois (near St. Louis). In a large keelboat and two smaller pirogues, they started their journey up the Missouri River.<sup>12</sup>

They studied their surroundings carefully, wrote in their journals, and drew maps. They collected samples and specimens (such as skins and skeletons of new animals, soil samples, seeds, and minerals), and named new rivers, streams, plants, and animals they discovered (sometimes after famous Americans or their friends).<sup>13</sup>

Imagine the longest car trip you have ever taken. Did you notice a change in what you saw outside the window? Maybe a big city that slowly turns into farmland as you travel down the highway? When the Corps of Discovery was traveling across North America, they too saw a change in landscape, from forests to plains and prairies to tall mountains.

After travelling nearly 1,600 miles, in November 1804, the Corps of Discovery began building Fort Mandan in present-day North Dakota to camp for the winter. The site was across the Missouri River from the earth-lodge villages of the Mandan and Hidatsa tribes.<sup>14</sup>

While there, Lewis and Clark worked to establish a friendship with the native tribes. They met a trader, Toussaint Charbonneau, who agreed to work for the expedition as a translator, but it would be his pregnant wife who would be of greater importance.

Charbonneau was married to Sacagawea, a Native American woman of the Lemhi Shoshone tribe who had been captured by the Hidatsa. She would be the only woman to join the expedition, and her knowledge of the land and native tribes would be invaluable.<sup>15</sup>

With the arrival of spring, on April 7, 1805, the Corps of Discovery, which now included Sacagawea, her newborn son Jean Baptiste (later nicknamed Pomp, or Pompy, by Clark), and Charbonneau set off again from Fort Mandan. They journeyed into present-day Montana, where they encountered herds of more than 10,000 buffalo and grizzly bears.<sup>16</sup>

As the expedition continued on, Sacagawea spotted a land feature that she recognized and realized they were near the home of her family, the Shoshone people. With seemingly endless mountains lying before them, the explorers came upon a Shoshone village. Sacagawea came to help translate, and on August 17, 1805, was reunited with her brother, the Shoshone chief, Cameahwait.<sup>17</sup>

With Sacagawea's help, the Shoshone provided the expedition with horses and a Shoshone guide named Old Toby. They continued on their journey across mountains and rivers and finally, on November 7, Clark wrote in his journal that the Pacific Ocean was in view – even though it was still about 20 miles away.

After sheltering for the winter, the Corps of Discovery offered their winter quarters to a local native chief, and on March 23, 1806, began their journey home. In August, Sacagawea, Charbonneau, and Jean Baptiste returned to the Mandan villages. The remaining members of the Corps of Discovery returned to St. Louis on September 23, 1806, marking the completion of their remarkably successful journey.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the expedition, the Corps of Discovery had traveled over 8,000 miles through much of what would become the American Midwest and Northwest. Even though they didn't find a direct water route to the Pacific Ocean, they produced maps and identified at least 120 new animal specimens as well as 200 new botanical samples. Also, the expedition opened the door for peaceful relations with dozens of Native American tribes.<sup>19</sup> In fact, before Lewis and Clark returned, President Jefferson was visited by a delegation of Native American chiefs who had previously met the expeditioners on their travels.<sup>20</sup>

The groundbreaking expedition of Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea would become one of the defining moments in American history. Their journey had demonstrated to many Americans in the East that the unknown was nothing to fear. In fact, the American West held great potential for settlers to achieve wealth and prosperity. The Corps of Discovery had shown that the American West was filled with interesting people, animals, and plants, full of bountiful opportunity, and covered in breathtaking beauty.

## Footnotes

1. <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/louisiana-purchase>
2. <https://www.loc.gov/collections/louisiana-european-explorations-and-the-louisiana-purchase/articles-and-essays/the-louisiana-purchase/>
3. <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/louisiana-purchase>
4. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/the-louisiana-purchase/>
5. <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/westward-expansion>
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7. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/origins-of-the-expedition/>
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12. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/#timeline>
13. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/the-journey-west/>
14. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/#timeline>
15. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/the-journey-west/>
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19. <https://www.history.com/topics/westward-expansion/lewis-and-clark>
20. <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/#timeline>