

*“Lewis and Clark / said “Come! Let’s embark!”*

from A Book of Americans

by Rosemary and Stephen Vincent Benet (1933)

It was October 10, 1809, and despite what some of my students might believe, I do not have first-hand knowledge of the events of that night. It has merely fascinated me for over forty years - since I first heard about it from a great teacher: Dr. Brooks Major at HCC. I hope that it will hold your attention for the next few minutes.

As Mr. Cavanaugh noted in his excellent paper in January, everyone is always familiar with the “Big Story” - John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre in Washington City on Good Friday, 1865, but not everyone is aware of the equally fascinating story of the manhunt for the assassin orchestrated by the Secretary of War that followed the tragic event.

So, too, we are all aware of the monumental success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition - the “Big Story” - how following the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France, thirty plus men, known as the “Corps of Discovery”, a Kentucky slave, a teen-aged Native American mother and her baby, a black Newfoundland dog, and various interpreters and the occasional hangers-on deployed from Louisville, Kentucky, (granted, historians in the other forty-nine states will say that they deployed from St. Louis, Missouri, but you and I know better!) in the spring of 1804, traveled about eight thousand miles round trip to the Pacific and back to St. Louis, returning on September 23, 1806, 864 days after their departure from that city, with but the loss of one man, Sgt. Charles Floyd, one of nine Kentuckians on the expedition, who died in modern-day Iowa from an apparent attack of appendicitis, an attack that would probably have been equally fatal had he been in a Philadelphia hospital. Along the way, they met with numerous Native American tribes encountering varying degrees of hospitality, established trading posts, distributed medals bearing the image of President Thomas Jefferson, and brought back descriptions of 178 plants and 122 animals encountered on the journey. They did not find a direct water route to the Pacific, but neither has anyone else!

Their return to St. Louis in 1806 set off a flurry of nationwide celebrations and observations as the heroes, presumed by many to be long dead, basked in the glow of their celebrity status. Two nights after their arrival in St. Louis, the citizens there feted the two captains at an elaborate dinner at William Christy’s inn. They raised toasts to, among others, President Jefferson (calling him “the polar star of discovery”); to Christopher Columbus (for “his hardihood, perseverance, and merit”); and to Agriculture and Industry (proclaiming “The farmer is the best support of government”). On the eighteenth and final toast, the captains were saluted for “their perilous services (that) endear them to every American heart”.

But what happened after the last glass of champagne was drained? After the last piece of paper floated down from the last ticker-tape parade? Therein lie stories filled with the drama and pathos equal to the remarkable journey itself.

## The Men

Following their return to what passed for civilization in the early 19th Century, Congress awarded 1,600-acre land grants to Lewis and to Clark as well as 320-acre grants to each enlisted man along with back pay for the expedition. Some of the men continued to pursue careers in the military; some returned to the Great Northwest to become the first of the Mountain Men. Others simply faded into obscurity.

Sgt. Patrick Gass, a Presbyterian from Pennsylvania, and the man elected to the rank of "sergeant" following the death of Sgt. Floyd and the first member of the Corps to publish a journal of the expedition, served nobly in the War of 1812. Following the war, he farmed, ran a ferry, and worked in a brewery. In 1831, at the age of sixty, he married twenty-year-old Maria Hamilton and settled in western Virginia. They had three sons and four daughters. He died on April 2, 1870, two months short of his ninety-ninth birthday, the last survivor of the expedition.

## Sacajawea

There was no land grant for one of the most historically popular members of the expedition. She was not a soldier, but a pregnant, seventeen year-old Shoshone girl who joined the Corps on November 11, 1804, along with her husband French Canadian trader Toussaint Charbonneau and his other wife at Fort Mandan, a triangular shaped stockade made from cottonwood trees on the east bank of the Missouri River, seven miles below the mouth of the Knife River and three miles downriver from the lower Mandan Indian Village. Her name meant "Bird Woman" and she had been captured about four years earlier by the Hidasta Indians. Charbonneau may have bought the two women or acquired them by gambling. Charbonneau spoke French and Hidasta; Sacajawea spoke Hidasta and Shoshone. To the aloof Virginian Captain Lewis, she was always "the Indian Woman". Captain Clark nicknamed her "Janey".

On February 11, 1805, Sacajawea delivered a son, named Jean Baptiste. Captain Clark called him "Pomp" or "Pompy". On May 14, 1805, one of the expedition's boats capsized. It was Sacajawea who rescued the journals of Lewis and Clark following the potential disaster. For her efforts, less than one week later, the Captains named the Sacajawea River in her honor.

Following her arrival in St. Louis in 1806, Sacajawea's story begins to fade into legend. In 1812, she had a daughter whom she named Lisette. Many accounts say that Sacajawea died that winter and is buried in Missouri. Rumors persist, however, that she left her husband, moved to Wyoming, and died there in 1884. This was the theme of a popular 1933 work of fiction that has managed to wind its way into tradition and legend. It is known, however, that, in 1825-26, William Clark wrote a list of the members of the expedition and their last known whereabouts. In the list he recorded "Se car ja we au - Dead".

Sacajawea is remembered for her contributions to history with numerous statues and parks honoring her throughout the nation. She was a popular symbol to the Suffragette movement of the early 20th Century; had a tugboat named by the U.S. Navy for her in 1942; and, in 2000, had her and her son's image struck on a U.S. coin, known to many as the "Golden Dollar". It did not, however, prove popular with the American public. In 2001, President Clinton awarded her the title of honorary sergeant in the U.S. Army.

Sacajawea's children, too, remain a part of the historical landscape of our nation. According to the Orphans Court Records of St. Louis, Missouri, on August 11, 1813, William Clark became the guardian of 'Tousant Charbonneau (age about ten) and Lisette Charbonneau (age about one). It is believed that Lisette died in infancy, but that Clark treated "Pompy" as his own son, sending him to the exclusive and expensive St. Louis Academy, a school established in 1818 by the Jesuit

clergy of that city. He later studied in Europe and rubbed elbows with the crowned heads there. He returned to the U.S. where he worked as a fur trapper, guide, judge, and interpreter for explorers and soldiers. He served honorably in the Mexican-American War and eventually settled in Oregon where he died on May 16, 1866.

### York

Like Sacajawea, York, William Clark's childhood companion, a slave, did not receive a land grant. He was, after all, property. Despite being a part of the incredible journey, little changed for York after his return to the east. Various accounts have York living in bondage in Louisville, Kentucky; returning to St. Louis with Clark; being sold to another master and eventually freed. In 1832, Clark told American author Washington Irving that he had, indeed, freed York, but that York hated freedom and died trying to make his way back to his old master. Another story has York living out his life among the Crow Indians. Like Sacajawea, York, too, was made an honorary sargent in 2001. In 2002, the city of Louisville, Kentucky, commissioned Louisville native and internationally recognized sculptor Ed Hamilton to create a bronze statue of York. Using a cousin as the model, Hamilton's statue stands today at Fifth and Main Streets in Louisville overlooking the Ohio River. It was dedicated on October 14, 2003, the 200th anniversary of the meeting of Lewis and Clark in Louisville.

### Captain Clark

William Clark, co-captain of the expedition, though actually holding only the rank of lieutenant, enjoyed a rich and rewarding life following his adventures with the Corps of Discovery. The youngest of five brothers, the second eldest being the indomitable George Rogers Clark, he served under General Anthony Wayne at the 1794 Battle of Fallen Timbers before resigning his commission in the U.S. Army. At the request of his friend Captain Meriwether Lewis, he joined the expedition to which he gave his name. Following the mission, President Jefferson appointed him the agent for Indian Affairs in the Louisiana and later Missouri Territory as well as a brigadier general of the militia. As superintendent of Indian Affairs, he was noted for his fair treatment of the Native Americans and was considered by the Indians to be the most respected white man of his time.

Upon his return to the east, Clark made haste to visit family and friends in Kentucky before heading to Virginia to marry his fiancée, Julia Hamilton. He had met her years earlier when he had rescued her from a runaway horse. At the time of their marriage, she was 16; he was 37. They would have five children prior to her death in 1820. Their eldest son would be named Meriwether Lewis Clark. (An entire paper could easily be devoted to the life and exploits of this young man!) A few years later, Captain Clark would wed his wife's first cousin, the widowed Harriet Kennerly Radford. They would have three children. As noted earlier, he would also raise the son of Sacajawea.

It would be unforgivable not to note the "local connection" to the life of Captain Clark. According to a letter to the editor of *Kentucky Explorer* magazine written by another one of Hopkinsville's outstanding educators and historians, Miss Marion Adams, Captain Clark and his family did, indeed, while in route through Kentucky, spend the night of October 2, 1809, at the Allsbury Tavern in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. He paid \$1.75 for room and board and, in his expense account journal, pronounced it a "good house". The tavern was owned and run by Thomas Allsbury and is believed to have stood on what is now Weber Street behind the courthouse. Allsbury would later serve in the War of 1812 as a captain in the First Regiment of Kentucky Mounted Militia.

It would be the responsibility of Captain Clark to organize, edit, and publish the journals and scientific discoveries of the Corps of Discoveries. Aware of his limited education regarding English grammar and spelling (in the journals, Captain Clark spelled the name of the Sioux Indian tribe twenty-seven different ways!), he would enlist the aide of Nicholas Biddle, the Philadelphia-born financier who would later butt heads with no less than Andrew Jackson over the charter of the Bank of the United States. (I'll leave it up to you to figure out who won that battle!).

Captain William Clark died on September 1, 1838, in St. Louis, Missouri, at the home of his son Meriwether Lewis Clark. He was sixty-eight years old.

### Captain Lewis

And so that brings us to October 10, 1809, a cool, crisp autumn evening in middle Tennessee, at a rural inn about 150 miles southwest from where we sit tonight, just about dusk. It would be Captain Meriwether Lewis's last sunset. Was it murder or suicide that took the life of this most promising young man? It has been evaluated, discussed, and dissected by Captain Lewis' contemporaries and countless historians and writers for over 200 years now...so don't expect any revelations or resolutions here...just a rehashing of the story!

The fates had not been as kind to Captain Lewis as to Captain Clark. Oh, he had enjoyed the same hero worship as his partner. His trip back east had brought him considerable adulation. He spent time in Philadelphia partying with his popular, in-crowd friends; courting pretty girls. He spent time with his mentor, President Jefferson, in the nation's capital and attended three meetings of the elite American Philosophical Society; he visited his mother and family in Albemarle County; he even attended part of Vice-President Aaron Burr's conspiracy trial in Richmond, possible as President Jefferson's secret envoy. A great job offer came, too, and an entire year later, he arrived on the job site!

It is here that Captain Lewis' life appears to begin to unravel and, with the incredible blessing of hindsight, we can follow the steps that led to the story's sad ending. Captain Lewis arrived to begin his new job as governor of the Louisiana Territory on March 8, 1807, replacing in that position the nefarious General James Wilkinson, an associate of Aaron Burr and an alleged spy for the Spanish government. Lewis' underling secretary would be Frederick Bates, a Lewis rival from the time that he, Bates, had applied for the job as Jefferson's personal secretary, only to lose out to Lewis. Bates felt that the job of governor of Louisiana rightfully belonged to him, and he did his best to undermine Lewis frequently.

Unhappy in love, suffering from writer's block regarding the editing of his journals (anyone who has ever tried to write an Athenaeum paper can appreciate his writer's block), and not really comfortable with a desk job, the new presidential administration brought additional problems. Recently elected President James Madison's newly appointed Secretary of War William Eustis refused to reimburse Lewis for his personal expense vouchers, demanding more evidence and proverbial paperwork from Governor Lewis. Determined to resolve the dispute with the War Department and to reinvigorate the publication of his journals, in the fall of 1809, Lewis determined to make the trip from St. Louis to Washington City once again. Suffering from the affects of malaria and, according to some accounts, drinking heavily, he abandoned his plan for a route down the Mississippi to New Orleans, and from there to the nation's capital by ship. Instead, he disembarked at Fort Pickering, the site of modern-day Memphis, Tennessee. Here he began the overland route that will take him via an Indian trail to a desolate inn on the Natchez Trace.



Captain Lewis arrived at Grinder's Station accompanied by his personal servant, a free black man named John Perier, and an unidentified slave belonging to Indian Agent James Neeley with whom Lewis had been traveling since leaving Fort Pickering. Two of their horses had wandered away during the night and Neeley had stayed behind to catch them, planning to catch up with Lewis the next day. Lewis was greeted by Mrs. Priscilla Grinder, the proprietress who offered him a bed in one of two log cabins on the place. Captain Lewis chose to sleep on his buffalo blankets. The servants slept in the barn. Mrs. Grinder reported that Captain Lewis ate and drank very little that evening. Although there was no moon in the sky and it was not yet cold enough for a fire, Mrs. Grinder later stated that she heard Captain Lewis talking animatedly and saw him crawling about on his hands and knees. In the wee hours of the morning, she heard two gunshots, but did not investigate for several hours. She awakened the servants and they found Captain Lewis with two bullet wounds, one to the head, slicing off a part of his forehead exposing his brain, and another to his abdomen. His chest and upper arms were covered with slash marks. He allegedly begged the servants to help end his misery, telling them "I am so strong, it is hard to die". Shortly before daybreak, Captain Lewis died. Shortly afterwards, Mrs. Grinder's husband arrived as did Agent Neeley. Captain Lewis was hastily buried in a nearby field, his grave covered with old wooden planks to protect the body from wild animals. Neeley wrote a letter to President Jefferson, informing him of what he determined to be Lewis' suicide. As word of the incident slowly made its way back east, no one apparently questioned the validity of the report, including the two men who best knew Meriwether Lewis: William Clark and Thomas Jefferson. After reading of the incident in a Frankfort, Kentucky, newspaper *The Argus*, while visiting in Shelbyville, Captain Clark wrote to his brother Jonathan on October 28, 1809, "I fear this report has too much truth, tho' I hope it may have no foundation....I fear O! I fear the waight (sic) of his mind has overcome him." On August 18, 1813, what would have been Captain Lewis' thirty-ninth birthday, former President Jefferson wrote, for publication, "About 3 o'clock in the night he did the deed which plunged his friends into affliction and deprived his country of one of her most valued citizens".

While most historians today accept the suicide scenario, some, including most of the Lewis descendants, disagree. How, they ask, could such a competent marksman as Captain Lewis miss when he fired at his own head? If Lewis was intent on ending his life, why would he begin such an arduous journey to right the wrongs he felt the government had dealt him? The list of potential assassins included Neeley, whom Lewis barely knew and who took his own time in turning over Lewis' personal possessions to his mother and President Jefferson; John Perier, who either killed himself in April of 1810 or was seen later in New Orleans, wearing clothes belonging to Captain Lewis; the innkeeper Mr. Grinder, a man not noted for his virtue, who would certainly recognize a wealthy man traveling alone along the Natchez Trace; the numerous bandits who roamed the Trace; or even hired assassins who feared that Lewis "knew something" on Wilkerson and Burr that he might share in the nation's capital. Locals in and around Grinder's Station in the early 20th century seemed to recall something their fathers and grandfathers had said about an inquest following Captain Lewis' death determining it a murder, although no record of such an inquest exists today. One hundred dollars in gold Captain Lewis was carrying with him has never been accounted for even 207 years later.

Meriwether Lewis' grave remained abandoned and unmarked for over thirty years. In 1843, the state of Tennessee created Lewis County and allocated \$500 to erect a monument at the grave site of the explorer. The monument features a broken column, symbolizing Lewis' early and tragic death. Sadly, it, too, fell victim of neglect until the 1920's when the Meriwether Lewis

Memorial Association was founded. In 1925, the U.S. War Department assumed maintenance of the gravesite. Maintenance was transferred to the U.S. Department of the Interior in 1933. On October 7, 2009, in a ceremony marking the 200th anniversary of Captain Lewis' death, a bronze bust of Lewis was dedicated and the first national memorial service ever held honoring the life and achievements of Meriwether Lewis was observed.

Still, mysteries and fascinations surround the lives and deaths of those like Captain Lewis who served our nation with such devotion throughout history. We often tend to lose sight of the fact that our heroes were also just as human as we are, and prone all too often to the same eccentricities and foibles. Their humanness in no way detracts from their accomplishments. I am reminded of a quote by another outstanding HCC professor, Mrs. Frances Thomas, who once said, "The bizarre realities of life are stranger than anything a fiction writer could ever hope to create".

Perhaps it is of more importance for us to focus on how a man lived than how he died.

"Rest in Peace, Captain Lewis. Rest in Peace".

*Erin Hookley*  
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