

The Noncommissioned Officers of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

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## The Lewis and Clark Expedition

In 1803, myths of woolly mammoths; Peruvian llamas; blue-eyed, Welsh-speaking Indians defined the unexplored West. The men of the Lewis and Clark expedition dispelled such speculations, including the myth most hoped would prove to be true: the existence of a northwest passage by inland waterways (pbs/lewisandclark).

Such a passage -- a river or series of connected rivers that would cross the western mountains and reach the Pacific Ocean would have allowed a more direct commerce with the Orient. President Thomas Jefferson believed the discovery of the Northwest Passage would break open the wealth of North America (pbs/lewisandclark).

Ever fascinated with science, Jefferson also sought to gain knowledge of the flora and fauna of the unexplored territory; and to make contact with the many tribes of the Western Indians. Lewis and Clark were extensively successful in gathering specimens and drawings of numerous plants, animals, and insects on their journey. They were equally successful in most of their dealings with the Indians. However, their interactions would help lead to the eventual decline of many of the tribal nations that had helped them along their passage (Ambrose, overleaf). Later coming white men would exploit the trust the team had developed with many of the Indian leaders. Many tribes would be oppressed; others devastated by diseases carried by the white man, to which they had no immunity; and some of the more rebellious tribes massacred. But, that is another story.

Meriwether Lewis was like a son to President Jefferson and the two spent much of their time together musing over grand adventures. The reading by both men of Alexander Mackenzie's book, Voyages From Montreal, on the River Saint Lawrence, Through the

Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Ocean, (London, 1801) was the motivation to start the expedition (Ambrose, 26).

Mackenzie had unsuccessfully attempted to find a practical route for fur trading across the continent, but he had crossed the continent (Ambrose, 26). Jefferson and Lewis took on this challenge, determined to be the first to succeed in finding a navigable transcontinental passage to the northwest; and therefore claim expansion of the United States beyond its current western boundary of the Mississippi River.

Lewis began preparation by training and accumulating supplies and equipment. His education included studies in “astronomy, botany, navigation, medicine, and biology, among other scientific disciplines” (pbs/lewisandclark). Some of the mathematical instruments that Lewis gathered are listed below:

- Surveyor’s and hand compasses
- telescope
- quadrants
- thermometers
- plotting instruments and sextants
- chronometer (pbs/lewisandclark)

Camp supplies included 150 yards of cloth to be oiled and sewn into tents and sheets, pliers, chisels, 30 steels for striking to make fire, handsaws, hatchets, whetstones, iron corn mill, two dozen tablespoons, mosquito curtains, 10½ pounds of fishing hooks and fishing lines, 12 pounds of soap, 193 pounds of “portable soup” (a thick paste concocted by boiling down beef, eggs, and vegetables), three bushels of salt, and writing paper, ink, and crayons. A wide range of items were procured as presents for the Indians. Such things as pocket mirrors, sewing needles,

small scissors, ribbons, combs, handkerchiefs, rolls of tobacco, tomahawks that doubled as pipes, face paint, and beads were brought along to trade for goods needed along the way. These trinkets would be the “currency” needed to acquire horses, food, lodging, guides, and protection from the Indians. Along with the clothing that each man would bring with him, extra shirts, coats, shoes, pants, blankets, and stockings were part of the provisions for the team. Clark also took an extensive traveling library of reference books and a robust medical kit as he thought would be beneficial to supporting the mission and the men (pbs/lewisandclark).

The weapons that Lewis chose were on the leading edge of technology for that time. He obtained 15 - prototype Model 1803, muzzle loading, .54 caliber rifles as the main weapon for the men. He also had one long-barreled rifle that fired with compressed air. This weapon would fascinate the Indian leaders on many occasions. Of all of the supplies that would fall short on the duration of the trip, not once did the team lack for lead, flint, or gunpowder. These supplies were the only ones that Lewis knew would be neither attainable nor substitutable along the way (pbs/lewisandclark).

Lewis’s duties beyond the logistical preparations for the mission were to find the men who would accompany him on this excursion. The first person he chose was William Clark. Clark was the commander of a company of Regular Army elite riflemen-sharpshooters where Lewis served as an ensign. During this time, the two men formed a mutual trust. Both men looked to the each other as men of their word, steadfast in their deeds (Ambrose, 32). Once Clark became the co-Captain and co-commander of the team, he and Lewis combined their efforts in selecting the rest of the men.

Among the 32 men chosen were four Noncommissioned Officers. Sergeant John Ordway was born in New Hampshire in 1775. He was an exception to the rest of the enlisted men on the

expedition because he was a regular army soldier, not from the Virginias, and well educated. Considered the group's First Sergeant, he was third in the chain of command - behind Captains Lewis and Clark. His daily duties included maintaining the book of detachment orders, writing daily activities in the official journal and managing the distribution of rations and other supplies. The commanders chose SGT Nathaniel Pryor, born in Virginia in 1772, because of his outstanding leadership skills and his reputation for being a "jack of all trades". SGT Charles Floyd, born in Kentucky in 1782, joined the expedition on August 11, 1803, where he led one of the three squads of enlisted men. Floyd came from a farming background and so was responsible for judging land quality, including soil conditions (pbs/lewisandclark). Corporal Richard Warfington, born in 1777, was a member of the North Carolina Second Infantry. Patrick Gass was born in Pennsylvania, June 12, 1771. He joined the army in 1789 and enlisted as a member of the expedition on January 3, 1804, after making a personal appeal to Lewis. Although originally enlisted as a junior soldier he filled the rank of sergeant after a vote by the men following the death of Charles Floyd. He was a skilled carpenter, which proved invaluable in the construction of the expedition's three winter quarters. (pbs/lewisandclark).

The men trained in the winter of 1803-1804 at a staging area at Camp Dubois, Illinois Territory (pbs/lewisandclark). The criteria selection to be a member of the team was due to the skills that each man already had. Therefore, training focused primarily on the development of teamwork and discipline. Lewis and Clark shared their knowledge and experience with the team throughout the mission. Every member of the team played an active role in the success of the mission, including one slave, one woman, and a dog.

The roles of the Noncommissioned Officers are too varied and lengthy to completely expound on. Here are a few of the contributions they made their heroic efforts pivotal to the success of the mission. Because of Sergeant Ordway's reputation for being responsible, reliable, and competent, Lewis and Clark chose him to lead a separate subordinate task force during the return trip allowing them to expand the area of exploration. He also was the only member of the expedition to make a journal entry every day, making his journal the most complete record of the journey (pbs/lewisandclark). Sergeant Pryor had a reputation as "a man of character and ability" and was often responsible for administration, such as "Presiding" authority at the court marshal of two privates, both charged with getting drunk while on duty. The penalties were severe. One received one hundred lashes on his bare back, and the other 50. Sergeant Gass hewed dugout canoes and fashioned the wagons to carry the canoes 18 miles overland around the falls of the Missouri River in Montana (pbs/lewisandclark). "Transferred from Captain John Campbell's company of the Second Infantry Regiment as a corporal, Warfington was both reliable and efficient. When his enlistment expired during the expedition, Lewis and Clark asked him not to take his official discharge, but to retain his rank and authority and command the return party to St. Louis in 1805. The captains believed Warfington was the only trustworthy member of the return party, and wanted to ensure the safety of their dispatches, journals, and specimens sent to President Jefferson. Warfington accepted command of the return party and completed his mission so successfully that he even managed to keep alive a prairie dog and four magpies Lewis had sent to Jefferson. Lewis later recommended Warfington receive a bonus beyond his regular pay" (army.mil/cmh).

A mission that was to expand commerce and explore the wilderness beyond the Continental Divide has proven to be much, much more. It was the catalyst for changes in our country that

would be unimaginable to the men who made this incredible journey. They could not have known the tremendous impact they would have on the Native people, wildlife, landscape, and ideology of our fledgling nation. More than two hundred years later, the legacy they left on that long, long trail is still a vibrant thread in our country's history, present, and future.

When asked the question, "is there a lesson to be taken from the Lewis and Clark Expedition?" ([pbs.org/lewisandclark/living](https://pbs.org/lewisandclark/living)). The renowned historian, Stephan Ambrose, had this to say, "Teamwork!" The members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition became "so close, so bonded, that everyone of them could recognize a cough in the night and know who it was. They could hear a footstep and know who it was. They knew who liked salt on their meat and who did not. They knew who's the best shot on the expedition. Who is the fastest runner. Who is the man who could get a fire going the quickest on a rainy day. They knew, because they sat around the campfire, about each other's parents and loved ones. Each other's hopes. And they had come to love each other. To the point that they would sell their own lives gladly to save a comrade. They had developed a bond, they had become a band of brothers, and together they were able to accomplish feats that we just stand astonished at today when we look at them. The crossing of the continent with nothing but rifles to depend on in the face of dangers, the greatest possible imaginable dangers, and physical difficulties. To manage the portage of the Great Falls, to get over the Lolo Trail, to go down that Columbia River, these are feats that, had they not welded themselves together into that team, they just could not possibly have accomplished" ... the number one human lesson of the Lewis and Clark expedition is, what can be accomplished by a team of disciplined men who are dedicated to a common purpose" ([pbs.org/lewisandclark/living](https://pbs.org/lewisandclark/living)).

Works Cited

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