How the
Lewis & Clark Expedition
influenced
America's Road System

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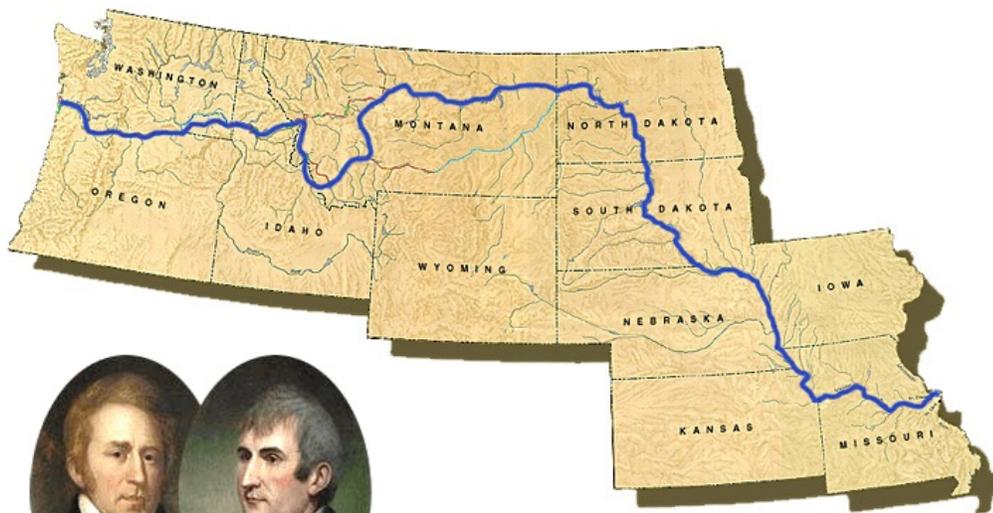
How the Lewis & Clark Expedition Influenced America's Road System

The sorry state of America's roadways was a source of concern for many civic-minded Americans long before the late 19th century when an association of bicycle enthusiasts instigated the Good Roads Movement, and the almost coincidental invention of the automobile.[1]

In a young and mobile country, road-building was deemed as important as the establishment of newspapers, schools, churches and institutions of local government in "civilizing" the wilderness, but funding was rarely available.[2]

This dearth of passable roads in Colonial America created enormous problems for travelers and merchants alike. Boat traffic was not only the fastest route between two points, it was often the only route. Early settlements in the colonies were understandably all located along the Atlantic seaboard or adjacent to navigable waterways.

British policy-makers for the colonies recognized the administrative problems of governing a scattered population and discouraged westward emigration, suggesting

[1] John A. Jakle. The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth-Century North America. (Lincoln & London, 1985). P. 121.
Philip P. Mason. The League of American Wheelmen and the Good Roads Movement. (U. Of Michigan Press, 1958). pp. 42-51.

[2] An Outline of American History. Chapter 4: Westward Expansion and Regional Differences. Literature and the frontier. (1995) http://grid. let. rug. nl/~welling/usa/c4-.-p2.htrnl. p.2.

Nova Scotia or Georgia as targets for the seemingly inbred American wanderlust. In a 1721 report to King George I, the Council of Trade and Plantations cited the difficulties of transporting bulky commodities overland as the rationale for such policy. But a more convincing motive was revealed by Lord Edgemont, Secretary of State in 1765, when he recommended forbidding westward emigration because settlers in the "Heart of America [would be] out of reach of Government."[3]

Nevertheless, as the nation developed growing pains emigrants moved inland, and as Britain had feared, colonists acquired an independence born of the expansion of population beyond easy reach of the seacoast.[4]

One consequence of the resulting isolation was the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794. Farmers in remote western Pennsylvania, faced with the insurmountable task of transporting their corn to market over virtually trackless roads had solved the problem by converting their crops to more portable corn whiskey, only to have it taxed beyond profitability. The resulting tax rebellion was a wake-up call to politicians at all levels of government.[5]

In a rare show of political harmony, founding fathers Washington, Hamilton, Jefferson and later, Clay and Calhoun viewed transportation and communication (terms which they used interchangeably) as essential to the unification and very survival of the

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[3] Henry Nash Smith. Virgin Land: The American West As Symbol and Myth. (n.p. @1978) http://darwin.clas. virginia.edu/-tsawyer/HNS. p.2.

[4] An Outline of American History. p.l. Smith. p. 2.

[5] Phil Patton. Open Road. (Simon & Schuster, NY, 1986). p. 28.

fledgling nation.[6] As early as 1803 President Thomas Jefferson called for improvements to the already established Natchez Trace to secure communication with new territories.

Even before the deal was finalized for the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson had asked Congress for $2,500 to fund the charting of a route from Mississippi to the Pacific. In explicit instructions, he directed the expedition's eventual leader, Meriwether Lewis,

> "to explore the Missouri River and such principal stream of it, as, by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean, may offer the most direct and practical water communication across the continent, for the purposes of commerce."[7]

Jefferson's knowledge of the West, like that of all Americans at the time, was limited. He would not know until the return of Lewis & Clark that

> "Beyond the Missouri there was no natural equivalent for the network of navigable rivers that had so magnificently furthered the agricultural occupation of the eastern half of the Mississippi Valley. The Far Western farmer would evidently have to depend on railroads [still decades in the future] to get his crops to market."[8]

In addition to sponsoring exploratory expeditions, the President and his Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, had developed a ten-year plan of internal improvements for the new country which included turnpikes, canals and waterways at a cost to the new congress of $2 million a year - a sum then equal to 15% of the federal

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[6] Ibid. pp. 25-26.

[7] Thomas Jefferson. Letter to Meriwether Lewis. (1803) The American West. American Westward Expansion [Online] Available HTTP: http://www.American West.corn/pages.wexpansi.htm.

[8] Smith. pp. 29-30.

budget. The plan called for a great north-south turnpike running from Maine to Georgia and connected to the western waterways with four perpendicular turnpikes branching off at various intervals. Jefferson wanted to prevent the country from becoming too dependent on what he perceived to be the centralized powers of maritime trade and manufacturers concentrated in eastern cities. His plan was designed to counteract this centralization by facilitating westward expansion.[9]

Jefferson took advantage of every opportunity to promote the plan. In his sixth annual message to "the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States in Congress Assembled" on December 2, 1806, he recounted the successes of the just returned Lewis & Clark Expedition and proposed that an anticipated treasury surplus be applied

> "...to the great purposes of the public education, roads, rivers, canals, and such other objects of public improvement as it may be thought proper to add to the constitutional enumeration of federal powers. By these operations new channels of communication will be opened between the states; the lines of separation will disappear, their interest will be identified, and their union cemented by new and indissoluble ties."[10]

The growing trend toward centralized federal powers was hotly contested among the former independent colonies and Jefferson conceded that his proposal might be "an extension of the federal trusts" which might even need a constitutional amendment.[11] But he was also very sensitive to the sectional differences which were only reinforced

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[9] Patton. p.28.

[10] Thomas Jefferson. (nd) "Works of Thomas Jefferson" in " A Chronology of US Historical Documents [Online]. Available Gopher: gopher://gopher.vt.edu:10010/2/106/1

[11] Ibid.p.24.

by poor roads, and felt his ten- year plan could help eliminate the conflicts that were already developing among the newly created states.

Jefferson was still campaigning for his ambitious program of internal improvements in his eighth and last message to Congress in November of 1808. In nearly identical phrases, he put forth his final appeal to appropriate funds for

> "...the improvements of roads, canals, rivers, education, and other great foundations of prosperity and union."[12]

But despite his efforts and those of Secretary Gallatin, who had submitted his "Report on Roads and Canals" in 1808, the plan never materialized.

> "After Gallatin, no unified plan for a national system of highways was seriously proposed until after World War I, and not until the mid-twenties did the roads built with federal aid receive systematic designation."[13]

It was not for a lack of support. Throughout the 19th century, voices were raised in support of the unifying nature of communication/transportation. Jessup W. Scott, the outspoken editor of the Toledo (OH) Blade, felt that the Mississippi Valley offered the potential to become a "community of ideas and interests which must soon mold [it] into homogeneousness of character and make us one country in heart as in government".[14]

More than half a century after Jefferson's ten-year plan, another president trying desperately to hold the country together, endorsed Jefferson's faith in internal improvements as a catalyst for unification. Invoking the concept of a geographical unity confirmed by technology, Abraham Lincoln spoke to citizens of the former Northwest

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[12] Op. Cit.

[13] Patton. p. 36.

[14] Smith. p. 161

Territory: "Steam, telegraphs, and intelligence have brought these to be an advantageous combination for one united people."[15]

Unfortunately for American history, Jefferson's successors in the White House agreed that the federal government lacked the constitutional powers to create internal improvements. The Cumberland (or National) Road, running from the Potomac River near Cumberland, Maryland, to Wheeling, VA, was allowed to deteriorate. But from 1807 to 1822 it had been by far the best improved "artificial" road in the country, providing a vital link to the new Northwest Territories.[16]

In the meantime, the responsibility for building and maintaining roadways fell to individual cities and states.

On his much-publicized visit to the United States in 1842, Charles Dickens used the smooth waterways whenever possible. On those occasions when he was reduced to stagecoach travel, his dissatisfaction was clear, if entertaining: "At one time we were all flung together in a heap at the bottom of the coach, and at another we were crushing our heads against the roof"[17]

Dickens did find at least one road to his liking:

[Columbus] "is distant about a hundred and twenty miles from Cincinnati, but there is a macadamised road (rare blessing!) the whole way, and the rate of

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[15] Smith. p. 163.

[16] Patton. pp. 29, 35.

[17] Charles Dickens. American Notes (1874). In Electronic Text Center. University of Virginia Library .
http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/browse-mixed-new?id+DicAmer&tag=public&images=images/modeng&date=/texts/english/modern/parsed

travelling upon it is six miles an hour."[18]

Far more common however were the corduroy roads he encountered later in the journey:

> "...the corduroy road...is made by throwing trunks of trees into a marsh, and leaving them to settle there... The very slightest of the jolts with which the ponderous carriage fell from log to log was enough, it seemed, to have dislocated all the bones in the human body."[19]

Jefferson's hopes for the road Lewis & Clark had mapped out never materialized. But although the route was never widely used, the expedition itself lit a spark in the American psyche which wasn't extinguished until well into the 20th century. Jefferson valued a democracy peopled by yeoman farmers, and his road philosophy was designed to create just that: "Americans were to pursue happiness down roads that led to inexpensive land in the west."[20]

Fur traders and explorers had blazed the pathways that would eventually become the emigrant trails. These wagon roads heading west over the prairie were well marked and documented, but rarely "improved". Settlers and gold seekers were in too much of a hurry to waste precious time road-building. Then too, virtually the entire length of these "roads" were outside the United States, and sometimes even outside of territorial jurisdiction. While Senators from western states harangued Congress for military protection for the emigrants, they rarely complained about road conditions through the Great American Desert. The most any travelers could hope for were the

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[18] Ibid. p. 219.

[19] Ibid. p.226.

[20] Patton. p. 30.

many ferries and bridges that were obligingly thrown up for the temporary enrichment of their owners. Likewise a few enterprising early arrivals managed to capitalize on a geographic advantage by putting up a strategically placed toll gate, but these hastily created stretches could hardly be considered the "internal improvements" Jefferson so desired.[21]

For decades after the invention of the steam engine, the feasibility and even the necessity of building a cross-continental railroad was seriously debated. Emigrants crossing the continent were doing just that - not settling in the interior where advocates such as Stephen Douglas argued that in order to justify a cross-continental railroad there must first be

> "...a hardy and industrious population [which] would soon have a surplus produce, without the means of getting it to market, and require for their own consumption, immense quantities of goods and merchandize (sic), which they could not obtain at reasonable rates, for want of proper facilities of transportation."[22]

Industrialist Asa Whitney agreed that "the settler in the trans-Mississippi had no way of getting produce to market"[23] but, unlike Webster, insisted that the railway must precede western settlement.

Thomas Hart Benton, champion of westward expansion for over thirty years, was

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[21] Shebby Lee. The Good Roads Movement in South Dakota. 1989. p.1.
Michael Trinklein. The Oregon Trail. Hardships, @ 1995. Available HTTP: http : / /www .isu. edu/ -trinmich/Hardships.htm1#Rivercrossingsanchor .

[22] Smith. p. 33-34

[23] Ibid.

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also a great promoter of a cross-continental railroad, but with a twist. The outspoken

Missouri Senator had avidly promoted some of the earliest exploration and mapping of

the West (which he made sure was coincidentally conducted by his son-in-law, John C.

Fremont). He now proposed the building of a

> "plain old English road [parallel to the railroad], such as we have been
> accustomed to all our lives - a road in which the farmer in his wagon or carriage,
> on horse or on foot, may travel without fear, and without tax - with none to run
> over him, or make him jump out of the way."[24]

He was apparently alone. By the time the Union Pacific and Central Pacific

Railroads completed their transcontinental route in 1869, both sides had concluded that

the railroad was the only means by which the wilderness could be developed. For the

rest of the 19th century and more than two decades into the 20th, the railroads

preempted any other attempts to create internal improvements.

The script for "The Iron Road" on PBS's American Experience program echoes

Jefferson's vision for the country but transposes it to the railroads, proclaiming that they

would "develop the vast interior of the nation, encourage settlement, promote trade and

fuel industry."[25]

Many of the western trails survive today as Interstate Highways, but the majority

disappeared beneath the tall prairie grass. For the most part, they followed the rivers

west, as Jefferson's original plan proposed, and settlement eventually followed this

same pattern. But it was not until interior roads materialized, connecting non-railroad,

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[24] Nash. p. 27

[25] "The Iron Road" from The American Experience. Historical Overview. Union Pacific Railroad.
http : / /www.uprr.com/uprr.ffil/history /hist_ovr.htm

non-waterway communities, that Jefferson's hope for a unified nation (though no longer

a rural one) materialized.

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