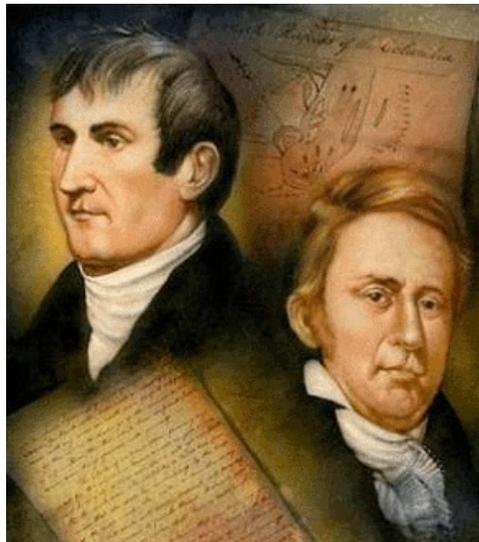


Lewis & Clark and the American Fur Trade



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Presented at the
West River History Conference
Rapid City, SD
October 12, 2007

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After spending nearly two and half years in the wilderness, the men of the Corps of Discovery were in such a hurry to return to St. Louis that they sometimes didn't even pause to eat. But - as befitted the "writingest explorers in history" - they did manage to note in their journals the nearly 150 fur trappers and traders they passed heading upstream that late summer of 1806.¹ The path they had blazed, and the discoveries recorded, had clearly opened up the West to be settled by succeeding generations to come.

Unfortunately, the facts do not bear this out: the route of the Corps of Discovery was so impractical that it was used only once, by the expedition itself. And while they were the first to explore much of the Louisiana Territory, they were in fact preceded by enterprising fur traders from a number of different countries, and their expedition was actually a *response* to the profit motive and the increasing market demand for these furs.

Nevertheless, American school children are taught that Lewis and Clark were the first white men to penetrate the interior and therefore open up the West for the fur trade, and succeeding generations of settlers.

This paper attempts to examine just why the American explorers are accorded such an unearned reputation.

¹ Dayton Duncan. *Scenes of Visionary Enchantment*. (Lincoln, 2004) p. 136

French explorers and fisherman arrived in what is now eastern Canada in the early 16th century, and began almost immediately trading with the natives: European goods for North American furs. Furs of all kinds were valued in Europe, but a preference for hats made of felted beaver fur began to emerge around 1550 (although not yet the beaver top hat that rose to prominence in the late 18th century). The demand eventually became so great that the poor animal became nearly extinct on the European continent and merchants turned to the New World and its seemingly inexhaustible supply of natural resources.

French explorer, Samuel de Champlain built a fur trade post on the present site of Quebec City in 1608, but the uniquely North American enterprise soon shifted its center to Montreal because of its closer proximity to the fertile St. Lawrence valley. This was the earliest fur trade base in North America and remained prominent for two hundred years. From the beginning, the French employed First Americans to do their trapping for them, sending representatives out into the field who took the trouble to learn their languages and trade routes. One of these, Etienne Brule, may have been the first to search for the Northwest Passage in 1618.² This fabled passage was a vital part of the “hopeful geography” embraced during the Age of Enlightenment. Jefferson was convinced, for example, that western North America was a mirror image of the east, with a single height of land - no higher than the Appalachians - parting the waters of the great western rivers.³

An easy water passage over the Rocky Mountains would have created direct

² <http://www.whiteoak.org/learning/timeline.htm>

³ Stephen Ambrose. *Undaunted Courage*. (New York, 1996). pp. 55 & 75.

access to the Pacific Ocean and the lucrative China market, and explorers from many nations suffered great hardships and expended vast sums of their sponsors' money to locate it until Lewis & Clark definitively proved it did not exist on their 1803-1806 expedition.⁴

While the French were dominant throughout the continent, future Americans were also getting into the act. In 1625, the very year that New Amsterdam was established, the new settlement shipped 1,500 beaver and 500 otter skins to Europe.⁵ During the five year span between 1631 and 1636, Plymouth colony shipped an average of 1200 beaver pelts each year while the French, Spanish and Dutch traders added an additional 4,000 to 7,000 to that number each year.⁶

The Mississippi River was first explored by the famed French exploring team of Marquette and Joliet in 1673,⁷ one hundred and thirty years *before* Lewis & Clark crossed it's mighty waters to begin their epic journey. They were followed by LaSalle, who managed to ship back considerable quantities of furs while exploring the central part of the continent.⁸

The English made a strong bid for supremacy in 1670 when the Hudson's Bay Company was chartered by King Charles II. It quickly established a monopoly over all the lands that drained into Hudson Bay - a huge expanse of central Canada. Although

⁴ Ibid. p. 396.

⁵ <http://www.carnegiemnh.org/exhibits/north-south-east-west/iroquois/beaver.html>

⁶ Suzanne Pufpaff. *Bits and Pieces about Beaver Hat Making*. (Nashville, MI, 2006)

⁷ Hiram Chittenden. *A History of the American Fur Trade of the Far West*. (Stanford, 1954) p. 73

⁸ Ibid. P. 85.

British, it employed mostly French-Canadians, who roamed far south of their designated territory. Hudson Bay's main competition came from Montreal-based North West Company, which was founded in 1779. The newer company soon outstripped its hundred-year-old rival, shipping 5½ times as many furs as Hudson Bay, and by 1795 the two companies controlled 93% of the total Canadian fur trade. The North West Company's advantage was that it was managed from Montreal (and considered itself Canadian, or French) while Hudson Bay's governance came from distant London. The two eventually merged in 1821.⁹

Despite the fact that their companies were smaller, the French continued to provide stiff competition and managed to establish so many trading posts in the interior - and with them implicit territorial claims - that the resulting rivalry with the British eventually triggered the French and Indian War (1754-1763).¹⁰ [\[show map\]](#)

While the French and British were scrapping over territorial rights, the Americans began their rise to dominance in the fur trade. The British actually labored under an onerous disadvantage: all Canadian and British fur traders were obliged to ship their pelts to London so that a tax could be assessed before being transshipped to their final destination. All others could send their furs directly to China.¹¹

Furs were obtained by the fur companies in two ways: barter with the Natives and purchase from independent fur trappers who ascended western watercourses and did the trapping themselves, returning to civilization perhaps once a year to sell the

⁹ W. Raymond Wood and Thomas D. Thiessen. *Early Fur Trade on the Northern Plains*. (Norman, 1985). pp. 8-10.

¹⁰ Op. Cit. P. 87.

¹¹ Ambrose. p. 397.

fruits of their labor. In later years this system became quite sophisticated, with the companies employing trappers directly and eventually shipping supplies directly to the field, thus eliminating the need to stop trapping in order to re-supply. But its very complexity (and danger) made the alternative of having the more pliable Indians do their work for them very appealing, and competition for this lucrative trade was at the heart of Lewis and Clark's mission.

Traders had learned early on that once introduced to the white man's goods, aboriginal peoples quickly craved more of the time- and labor-saving goods. In a very short span of time, Indians who had thrived for centuries by their own devices became dependent on manufactured goods originally introduced by these traders. And this dependence made the fur trade at once easier and more profitable.¹²

The exchange of goods created not just economic partnerships but political alliances between Europeans and their Native American neighbors. An open market for European goods in the colonies, and the supply of raw material from the colonies to Europe helped drive the earliest colonial economies. Unfortunately, these developing and shifting alliances also led to rivalries and warfare among various tribes, and even involved Native Americans in European-based conflicts including the Seven Years' War and the American Revolution.¹³ Mention should also be made that contact with Europeans brought a profound change in the Natives' material culture, and introduced deadly diseases with devastating results to the tribal populations.¹⁴

¹² Chittenden. p. 84.

¹³ Kelly Feinstein. *The Fur Trade*. 2006.

¹⁴ Wood and Thiessen. p. 6.

Lewis & Clark were the first *Americans* to visit the Mandan Villages, but Europeans, more specifically the French, arrived ca. 1738 when the elder Verendrye, traveled south from Montreal in search of fur habitats and trading partners in what would become North Dakota. By 1785 the Mandans were receiving regular visitors from the north.¹⁵ European trade goods, however, had reached the Mandans as early as 1650 via the complex trading network connecting the North American tribes. (Lewis & Clark denied that such a network existed, just one example of the Captains' underestimating the inhabitants of the Louisiana Purchase.¹⁶)

From their base in New Orleans, fur trappers pushed north from the early 18th century and eventually the company of Maxent and Company, a New Orleans trading outfit, sent Pierre LaCleade and his stepson, Auguste Chateau, north to establish a new trading center closer to the interior. St. Louis was thus founded in 1764 with the intention of becoming the fur trade capitol of the West and the Chateau family prospered mightily in the following decades. Manuel Lisa, a Spaniard also from New Orleans, and Chateau's chief St. Louis rival, was established enough by 1800 to wrest away the exclusive trade agreement with the Osage Indians which the latter had enjoyed for nearly twenty years.¹⁷

Another Spanish company sponsored what came to be known as the Mackay-Evans expedition in 1795-96. It ascended the Missouri River from St. Louis as far as the Mandan villages, established a fur trading post and added considerably to the

¹⁵ Marc Brown. *The Plainsmen of the Yellowstone*. (Lincoln, 1961) p. 20.

¹⁶ W. Raymond Wood. "Lewis and Clark and Their Neighbors at Fort Mandan". 2003.

¹⁷ Chittenden. P. 126.

geographic knowledge of the area. It was this map which Lewis & Clark took with them on their voyage of discovery.¹⁸

Feeling pressure from these competitors, Jefferson set his sights on obtaining the port of New Orleans for his own country. Three-eighths of all US produce passed to market through the Crescent City, and securing it and the mouth of the Mississippi were essential to safeguard American interests. The unexpected bonanza of scoring all of Louisiana Territory not only ensured the port, but opened up all kinds of economic opportunities for the new president. Napoleon has always taken a beating for selling the land so cheaply just because he needed money to fight a little European war, but in reality the land was so vast and so remote that he probably would have lost it to America's avaricious land-thirst anyway. By selling when he did he at least got three cents an acre!¹⁹

Just as plans for the American expedition were being finalized, the Scot Alexander Mackenzie, a principal in the North West Company of Montreal, published the account of his own successful 1789 march across Canada to the sea, sending Jefferson into a near-panic. To protect American commercial interests and territorial claims, the expedition *must* commence immediately.

Jefferson's oft-quoted instructions to Lewis prior to the expedition underscore the economic objectives of the adventure. The Corps was charged with evaluating the mineral, animal, and water resources of the newly purchased Louisiana Territory which could be exploited for the benefit of the nation. The much-sought-after water route to

¹⁸ Wood and Thiessen. p. 28,

¹⁹ Ambrose. p. 101

the western ocean would be used to transport those resources to the Pacific and thence to China and other world markets. But beyond that was the explicit mission to convince the Natives that British goods and those from other countries were inferior and that they should henceforth trade exclusively with Americans.²⁰ These instructions left no doubt that the fur trade was already well established by 1803 when Meriwether Lewis departed the White House to begin his epic journey. Exploration and scientific discoveries were almost an afterthought, suggested by Jefferson's Attorney General, Levi Lincoln, in case the much-desired water route to the West proved to be an illusion.²¹

Lewis dutifully recorded the numerous favorable habitats for fur-bearing animals along the way, and Clark recommended likely locations for military forts to protect the anticipated fur trade - many of which were subsequently built.²²

As if further evidence is needed, the journals also record encounters with mountain men all along the route, many of whom had been living and trapping in the West for decades. Sacagawea's husband, Toussaint Charbonneau, was just one of many - mostly Canadian - trappers who had been living with native tribes and plying their trade in the West prior to Lewis and Clark's arrival on the scene.

When the Corps finally reached the Pacific late in 1805, they learned to their chagrin that the Russians were well entrenched on North America's western shores, having begun trade there for the luxurious sea otter by mid eighteenth century, and that

²⁰ Ibid. p. 205

²¹ Ambrose. P. 93.

²² Op. Cit.

Spain and Great Britain had also made commercial inroads in the Pacific northwest, providing strong competition to the Boston merchants.²³ Natives there possessed European goods, spoke a smattering of European languages, and were adept in the art of bartering. (One of the first Pacific Coast Indians that the Corps encountered was wearing a standard-issue English sailor's uniform jacket.²⁴)

Not only that, but by the time the expedition returned to St. Louis, Lewis was painfully aware that he had failed at a number of the goals on Jefferson's checklist. He did not find the Northwest Passage, since none was to be found. Far from pacifying the natives so they would spend their time trapping for Uncle Sam instead of warring with each other, he inflamed several Indian tribes along the way. He did not convince a single tribe to switch loyalties, though the Americans did eventually get the upper hand in the fur trade.

Had the British prevailed, historian Hiram Chittenden opined at the dawn of the 20th century, their system of farming out the wilderness to different bands would have sustained the fur trade without over-harvesting the streams, and later the prairies.²⁵ As it turned out, only the fashion trend away from beaver hats in the mid-1830s saved the beaver of North America from complete extinction. By this time the market was saturated anyway, and the British blockade of French and Spanish ports helped put an end to the 200-year-old North American beaver trade. The fur trade continued however, with other furs, especially the buffalo, filling the void, with even more

²³ Chittenden, p. 95.

²⁴ James P. Ronda. *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*. (Lincoln: 1984. p. 168.

²⁵ Stanley Vestal. *The Missouri*. (Lincoln: 1996) p. 183.

disastrous results. Not only were the buffalo nearly exterminated, but so were their hunters.²⁶

In reality, the Lewis & Clark expedition was closer to the end of the fur trade era than the beginning. The fur trade in St. Louis was already forty years old when the expedition set out. Newly-minted Americans born out of the French-Spanish mix in St. Louis did not need convincing that the West was full of furs, nor did they need anyone else to explore the region for them.

So why did Lewis and Clark receive all the credit for opening up the West? Even historian Bernard DeVoto in his landmark 1947 work, *Across the Wide Missouri*, begins his fur trade chronology a year after the return of the expedition (1807).²⁷

The answer - while not simple - is probably an iconic one. In 1804 two-thirds of the American population still lived within 50 miles of tidewater.²⁸ But Americans had faced West since the first European immigrants reached our shores. We had conquered the native inhabitants and needed room for our expanding population.

At the same time, we were ready for a new set of heroes. In one generation the founding fathers had morphed from rebellious traitors into respected political leaders of the new federal government, and a younger generation of adventurers was poised to take their place in the public's imagination. Americans were adventurous and acquisitive, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition was tailor-made to feed the American mythology. If Lewis and Clark hadn't lived, we would have had to invent them!

²⁶ Tom McHugh. *The Time of the Buffalo*. (Lincoln, 1972). p. 286.

²⁷ Bernard DeVoto. *Across the Wide Missouri*. (Boston, 1947). P. 387

²⁸ Ambrose. P. 51.

In addition, Lewis and Clark got great press. Despite what might have been the century's worst case of writer's block, which prevented Meriwether Lewis from preparing the manuscript for publication (and may even have kept him from writing for months at a time on the trail), the journals were finally published in 1814, with William Clark doing the legwork following Lewis' suicide. By this time, Fort Astoria had been built on the site of Fort Clatsop, South Pass had been discovered, providing the easy passage through the Rockies which had eluded the Corps of Discovery,²⁹ and America was well on its way to conquering the West.

What Lewis & Clark accomplished - which the British, French and Spanish failed to do, despite earlier and numerous inroads to the region - was establish an indisputable claim to the Upper Missouri. It was one thing to buy a nebulous region called Louisiana Territory, and it was quite another to hang onto it. The map Clark produced from Lewis' astrological measurements was the first accurate record of the geography of the West, and a map in the Age of Enlightenment was tantamount to a deed of ownership. Prior claims to the region faded away.

It was the dawning of the American era.

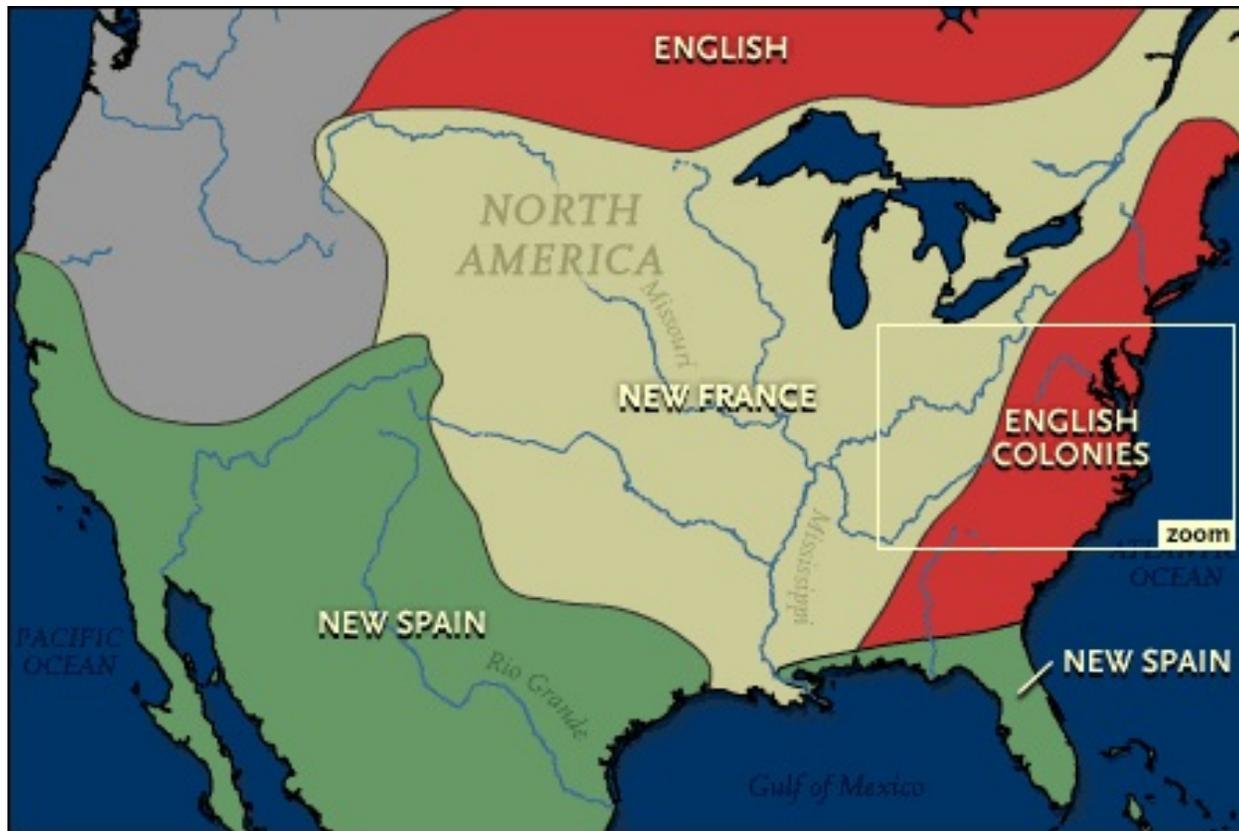
²⁹ DeVoto. p 387.

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Fur Trade Territories

1750



Hudson's Bay Company Fur Trade Territory ca. 1700 (?)

