

How did the lewis and
clark expedition help
america expand?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Lewis & Clark Expedition is one of the pivotal moments in the history of the United States. Two centuries ago, under the orders of the then President Thomas Jefferson, Captain Meriwether Lewis and Captain William Clark set about with a team of thirty three personnel to explore, observe and chart the vast expanses of territory to the west of the continent. Titled very aptly the Corps of Discovery, the team started their journey in Wood River, Illinois in 1804 and reached the Pacific Ocean on the other side of the continent a year later. The entire route taken by the team measured 3700 miles. It covered several states, including “ Missouri, Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho, Oregon and Washington”. (“ Lewis and Clark Bicentennial,” 2001) The expedition marked a key event in the course of the nation’s history. This is acknowledged during the bicentennial celebrations of the event that transpired in 2005. On the occasion of the event, a government commissioned Bicentennial Council was set up to educate the public as well as to promote research on the event. The Federal Interagency Lewis and Clark working group is another testimony to its importance. This essay will argue that Lewis & Clark Expedition played a key role in shaping the subsequent history, culture and geopolitics of the nation.

In the early days of the American republic, literature pertaining to natural history was an esteemed medium of information. It combined scientific and spiritualist approaches to the study of American geography. The copious descriptions and classifications contained therein served as essential tools to “ contain the immensity and incomprehensibility of American nature, a subject Americans knew little about.” (Lewis, 2004) The early accounts of the

discoveries in western expanses were crucial for forging in people a sense of rootedness to their land. It encouraged early republic Americans

“ to celebrate the complexity of the natural world, and by extension God, through an intimate understanding of its products. This scientific-spiritualist approach crossed boundaries of class and education, jumped denominational lines, and assuaged guilty consciences over the racial genocide that accompanied expansion across the continent.” (Lewis, 2004)

Hence, it is clear that Lewis & Clark has a profound socio-cultural relevance.

One of the other achievements of the expedition was its completion of an overland journey through and across river systems in Missouri. By virtue of this feat, vast uncharted tracts of the West were opened up. The pioneers extended their interest well and beyond cartography. For example, they collected samples and specimens of plants and animals – some of which they’ve never encountered before. They actively studied the culture and social structure of native Indian tribes that they happened to pass by. The comprehensiveness of the expedition is highlighted by the fact that basic civil administration tasks were also performed. These include conducting diplomatic councils, forming trading relationships with tribes and recorded weather data. It is not unfair to claim that the team led by Lewis and Clark went beyond the obligations of their contract. This is attested by the fact that the team created Camp River Dubois on the Wood River at the confluence of the two great rivers, Mississippi and Missouri, north of St. Louis. The captains then “ recruited young woodsmen and enlisted soldiers who volunteered from nearby army outposts. Over the winter, they prepared

the men, whom they called the Corps of Discovery, for the frontier.” (Conry, 2004)

The team led by Lewis and Clark spent twenty eight months exploring, studying and recording the magnificent American landscape beyond erstwhile frontiers. It is a landmark event in American history because it captures the essence of challenges to westward expansion. For example, one area of challenge is on account of international diplomacy, where American imperialist goals would be received negatively by established European imperial powers. The expedition had implications for economic and trade relations with European powers. (Jones, 2002) For example, in Coues’s 1893 edition cast Lewis and Clark, the event was seen “ as part of a grand American imperial project and became part and parcel of an effort to whet the appetite of, and to prepare the American nation for, a new round of frontier conquest and empire-building, this time not in North America but overseas.” (Lewis, 2004)

Beyond the imperial overtones there were more immediate and practical challenges faced by the team. For example, communicating with local tribes was quite problematic. It is to the credit of the team that they were somehow able to overcome these challenges. Perhaps, the most astonishing of the feats by the expedition is the sheer physical endurance exhibited by the team. An indefinite journey into unchartered territory is tough enough, but when that journey continued for more than two years it underscores the superhuman effort. But such a risky enterprise was worth the effort when looked retrospectively. For, without the successful completion of the Corps of

Discovery, American history would have taken a different course, perhaps less illustrious than what has transpired.

The Lewis & Clark Expedition is a precursor to the thriving field of historical and anthropological research. Even a whole new discipline such as American Studies was inspired by the rich findings of the expedition. The amount of primary scholarly material generated by the team of the Corps is one of its kind. One of the valuable collections is the book 'In Their Own Words: Lewis and Clark' by George Sullivan. This book uses "primary sources including drawings, journal entries, and maps-to explain the history of the Corps of Discovery." (Brugar, 2004)

It is on account of the significance of Lewis & Clark Expedition to American history that it is celebrated even today. In January of 2003, the celebration to commemorate the bicentennial of the Corps of Discovery's expedition was inaugurated at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello home in Charlottesville, Virginia. The festivities that followed continued for well over three years – a conscious decision to match the twenty eight month duration of the epic journey. An annual Lewis & Clark Day is also commemorated and celebrated. During this special day students across schools in the country are educated about the cultural, political and historical importance of the Corps of Discovery. In some schools, special exhibitions and simulations are organized, wherein,