

Lesson Forty-Eight

Lewis And Clark Expedition

LESSON IDEA

To show the importance of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in opening up the western wilderness to Americans and in blocking the territorial ambitions of England, France, and Spain.

PREPARATION

Review last week's lesson, especially George Washington's quotation about our relations with European powers. Provide a copy of the map on page three for each family member. Read the "During The Week" section and assign the suggested projects.

IN THE SPACIOUS, sun-filled office of the President of the United States, two men were engaged in a conversation that would set in motion one of the most dangerous and difficult explorations in U.S. history. The older of the two, a tall redhead, was President Thomas Jefferson. The other was Meriwether Lewis, a captain in the U.S. Army who was also Jefferson's secretary.

The two shared many interests. Both were Virginians, gentlemen farmers, scholars, and amateur botanists. Their conversation on this particular day, as on many others, concerned the wilderness lands west of the Mississippi River and the search for a waterway connecting the east coast of the new nation with the Pacific Ocean. Belief in the existence of such a connecting waterway, commonly called the Northwest Passage, dated back almost to the time of Columbus. In the minds of merchants, explorers, and statesmen, there had to be such a river road; the logic of geography required one. The English, French, and Spanish had all searched for one without success, but they had at least narrowed the possibilities to the Missouri and Columbia Rivers. Why do you think a Northwest Passage would be so important to those foreign nations? [Ask each family member for an opinion.]

There was great wealth in the northern sec-

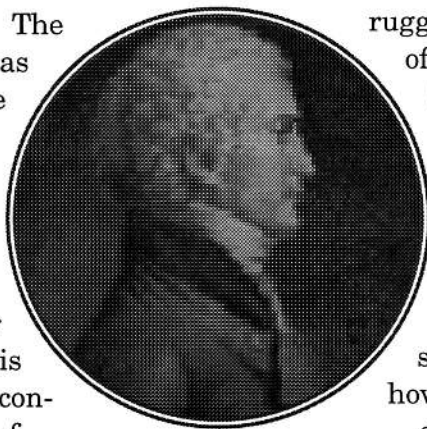
tion of the American continent. The trade in beaver skins alone was worth millions. But this potential fortune in furs depended on a relatively cheap and easy transportation route from Indian camps to ocean ships. England had ready access to the Indian camps through her Canadian holdings, the Great Lakes, and Hudson Bay. But a Northwest Passage would reduce transportation costs and enhance profits. It would do the same for the French, helping them to compete with England. Spain was interested in discovering a Northwest Passage for yet another purpose: it could serve a barrier to prevent the English from moving south from Canada to conquer the Spanish territory in New Mexico and California.

(That showed how little they knew about the rugged Rocky Mountains or the amount of land separating New Mexico from Canada.)

The United States was anxious to frustrate the ambitions of all three nations and force them off the American continent. Do you remember why? [Review several of the quotations from last week's lesson, and remind family members how much American leaders mistrusted the totalitarian European governments.]

As early as 1783 Thomas Jefferson had promoted exploration of the western wilderness to find a Northwest Passage. He proposed the idea to George Rogers Clark, the famous frontier leader of the American Revolution, but nothing came of it. In 1793, he helped the American Philosophical Society raise funds to back a western journey by the French botanist Andre Michaux. Meriwether Lewis, then 18, asked to go along, but the expedition ended before it began when it was discovered that Michaux's loyalties were not to America, but to the subversive revolutionaries of France.

Jefferson apparently kept young Lewis' enthusiasm for western exploration in mind, for in 1801 he invited Lewis to suspend his budding army

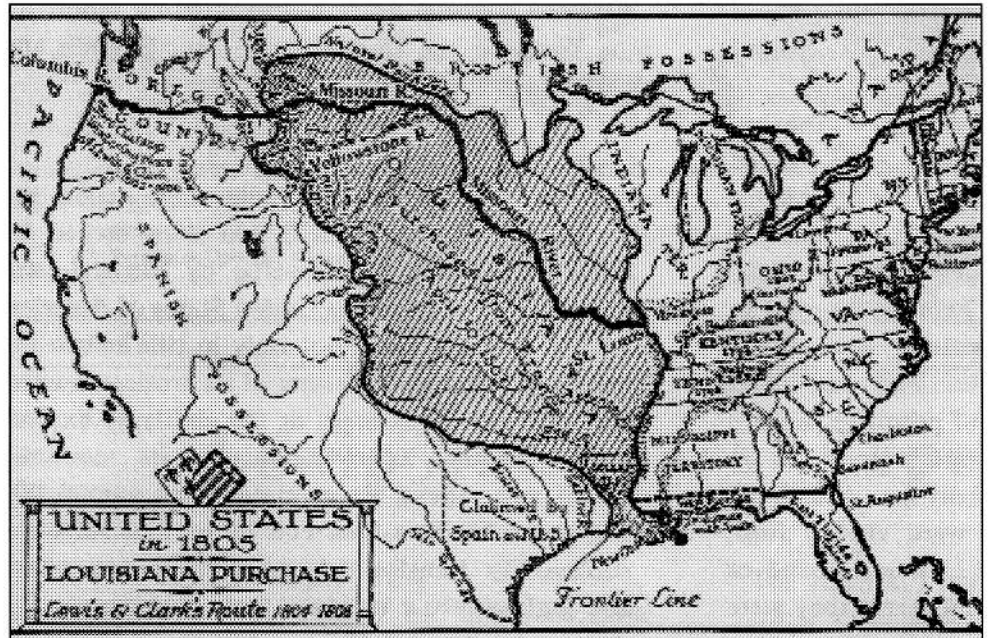


Meriwether Lewis

career and come to the nation's capitol. "The appointment to the Presidency of the U.S.," Jefferson wrote Lewis, "has rendered it necessary for me to have a private secretary." Yet the new president wanted more than a secretary. The job he offered Lewis, at \$500 a year, was equivalent to an aide-de-camp. "Your knowledge of the Western country, of the army, and of all its interests and relations," reason Jefferson, "has rendered it desirable for public as well as private purposes that you should be engaged in that office."

The next two years were devoted to preparation as Lewis absorbed knowledge and skills from the scientists, diplomats, and politicians who surrounded the President. Events moved rapidly toward a crisis as Spain sold her interests in the vast Louisiana territory to Napoleon Bonaparte, and then, without warning or explanation, closed the port of New Orleans to American frontiersmen. Even before Jefferson began bargaining for the purchase of New Orleans, he was making plans for Lewis to head an expedition into the northwest to find a practicable water road to the Pacific. Publicly, it was to be a geographic and scientific expedition; privately, it was to be an American thrust into the wilderness to discover the Northwest Passage and to keep foreign influence from mushrooming west of the Mississippi. While James Monroe and Robert Livingston negotiated with Napoleon in Paris, Lewis was in Philadelphia studying botany, zoology, and celestial navigation, and working feverishly to ready men, boats, and supplies for the expedition.

What surprising development occurred in Paris that made Lewis' new assignment even more important to the new nation? [Review the major points of last week's lesson: the sudden French decision to sell the entire Louisiana territory to the U.S., the vaguely defined Louisiana bound-



STARTING from St. Louis on May 14, 1804, Lewis and Clark led their men up the Missouri, across the Rockies, then down the Columbia to the Pacific Ocean. On their return trip, Clark explored the Yellowstone while Lewis followed the Marias and the Missouri. They returned to St. Louis September 23, 1806 — the first Americans to cross the North American continent.

aries, and the enormous potential for expansion that the purchase offered our country.]

Lewis needed a corps of 30 or 40 men, including, as he phrased it, "some good hunters, stout, healthy, unmarried men, accustomed to the woods, and capable of bearing bodily fatigue in a pretty considerable degree." He also needed a co-leader, someone he could trust and who could assume complete leadership if necessary. His choice was William Clark, the younger brother of Revolutionary War hero George Rogers Clark. The two men complemented each other perfectly.

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

Both Lewis and Clark kept daily journals describing their journey in minute detail. Originally published in seven volumes, and a volume of maps, there are numerous condensations available. One of the most interesting is the edition edited by Bernard DeVoto (*The Journals of Lewis and Clark*). DeVoto's introduction is sufficient reason to include the book any family library, as it summarizes both the events that preceded the expedition, and those that made the adventure so important to the expansion of America. Another fascinating in-depth study of the epic journey is *Meriwether Lewis: A Biography* by Richard Dillon.

Both books are in print.

