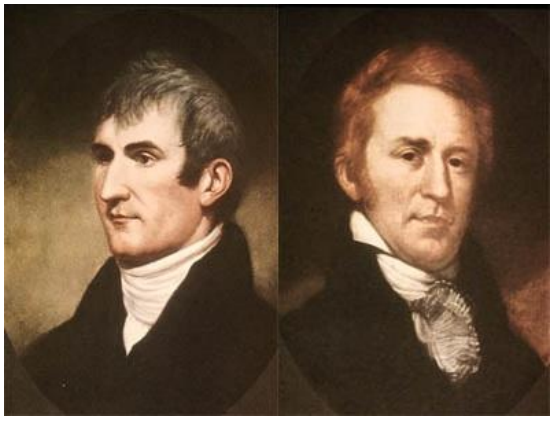
What Did Lewis and Clark Accomplish?



Meriwether Lewis more than fulfilled the wishes of his President, Thomas Jefferson, who had asked his secretary to lead an expedition West. Selecting William Clark as his co-leader, Lewis undertook, and completed, one of the greatest explorations of all time.

Between 1804 and 1806, Lewis and Clark—together with their Corps of Discovery members and Native-American guides, like Sacajawea—explored parts of the Louisiana Purchase (which the U.S. had acquired from France in 1803). The newly acquired territory extended from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada.

Lewis and Clark also explored parts of Oregon Country, where they saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time.

When President Jefferson sent the explorers west, he wanted them to find a water route across the continent. Why was this important to Jefferson? To use his own words ... “for the purposes of commerce.”

He also wanted the group to employ the types of scientific and rational inquiries stemming from the Enlightenment as they explored unknown territories. The Library of Congress tells us what that meant to Jefferson:

> *When Thomas Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark into the West, he patterned their mission on the methods of Enlightenment science: to observe, collect, document and classify. Such strategies were already in place for the epic voyages made by explorers like Cook and Vancouver.*
>
> *Like their contemporaries, Lewis and Clark were more than representatives of European rationalism. They also represented a rising American empire, one built on aggressive territorial expansion and commercial gain.*

How did this expedition square with the views of people who already inhabited the lands which the Corps of Discovery planned to explore? In other words ... Lewis and Clarke were about to go through Native-American territories. How would those inhabitants view these strangers ?

> *But there was another view of the West: that of the native inhabitants of the land. Their understandings of landscapes, peoples and resources formed both a contrast and counterpoint to those of Jefferson's travelers.*

Curators at the Library of Congress compare and contrast five different topics where Native Americans and Corps-of-Discovery members had differing (and sometimes similar) viewpoints:

- Diplomacy
- Geography
- Animals
- Plants
- Clothing

On the issue of **diplomacy**, Jefferson had a plan for American expansion into western territories. He wanted his explorers to open a dialogue, between themselves and the Native-American people. Jefferson told Lewis:

> *It will now be proper you should inform those through whose country you will pass . . . that henceforth we become their fathers and friends.*

On the issue of friends ... why not?

On the issue of "their fathers" ... why - and - how? What if Native Americans did not want "fathers" who were outside of their tribal nations?

> *When Euro-Americans and Indians met, they used ancient diplomatic protocols that included formal language, ceremonial gifts, and displays of military power. But behind these symbols and rituals there were often very different ways of understanding power and authority. Such differences sometimes made communication across the cultural divide difficult and open to confusion and misunderstanding.*

One of the major differences between explorers and Native Americans was their differing view of social standing and hierarchy. With the explorers, people "at the top" had the highest rank and gave the orders. With Native Americans, kinship mattered:

> *An important organizing principle in Euro-American society was hierarchy. Both soldiers and civilians had complex gradations of rank to define who gave orders and who obeyed.*
>
> *While kinship was important in the Euro-American world, it was even more fundamental in tribal societies. Everyone's power and place depended on a complex network of real and symbolic relationships.*
>
> *When the two groups met—whether for trade or diplomacy—each tried to reshape the other in their own image. Lewis and Clark sought to impose their own notions of hierarchy on Indians by "making chiefs" with medals, printed certificates and gifts. Native people tried to impose the obligations of kinship on the visitors by means of adoption ceremonies, shared names and ritual gifts.*

People do not change their culture overnight. The best one can do is to understand that cultural viewpoints differ—sometimes dramatically—and behave accordingly.

Lewis and Clarke, with the help of Native-American guides—like Sacajawea—did the best they could to bridge the diplomatic differences. On the other hand, when they arrived at Native-American villages and camps, they often fired a blunderbuss (a firearm based on the Dutch words for "thunder gun").

At a time when Native-Americans did not possess such weapons, shots from a blunderbuss would have communicated an undoubtable message of explorer authority. Even more significantly, Lewis had an air rifle—likely a Girandoni—which could fire 22 shots in a minute (without smoke and without powder). Native-Americans thought this firearm was "something from the gods."

How did viewpoints differ, between explorers and Native Americans, on the topic of **geography**?

Jefferson wanted to know "the face of the country." To accomplish that, the men would create maps and expand on the sketches they used during their journey. The Library of Congress provides some detail about this:

> *As Lewis and Clark traversed the country, they drew sketch maps and carefully recorded their astronomical and geographic observations. Equally important, they gathered vital knowledge about "the face of the country" from native people.*
>
> *During winters at Fort Mandan on the Missouri in 1804-1805 and at Fort Clatsop on the Pacific Coast in 1805-1806, the explorers added new details from their sketch maps and journals to base maps depicting the course of the expedition.*
>
> *The first printed map of the journey did not appear until 1814 when Nicholas Biddle's official account of the expedition was published in Philadelphia and London.*

Did Native-Americans also create maps? If so, did they differ from Euro-American maps?

> *Euro-American explorers were not the only ones to draw maps of the western country. As every visitor to Indian country soon learned, native people also made sophisticated and complex maps. Such maps often covered thousands of miles of terrain.*
>
> *At first glance Indian maps often appear quite different from those made by Euro-Americans. And there were important differences that reflected distinctive notions about time, space and relationships between the natural and the supernatural worlds. William Clark was not the only expedition cartographer to struggle with those differences.*

Were Native-American maps similar to Euro-American maps in any way?

> *But the similarities between Indian maps and Euro-American ones are also worth noting.*
>
> *Both kinds of maps told stories about important past events, current situations and future ambitions. Both sorts of maps used symbols to represent key terrain features, major settlements and sacred sites. Perhaps most important, Euro-Americans and Native Americans understood that mapping is a human activity shared by virtually every culture.*

Building on his Enlightenment ideas of scientific inquiry, Thomas Jefferson believed it was possible for mankind to know and understand all the different types of plants and **animals** living on Earth. The Library of Congress maintains Jefferson's letter of instructions, whereby he let Lewis know what he expected from this Corps-of-

Discovery trip:

> *Jefferson subscribed to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment notion that assembling a complete catalog of the Earth's flora and fauna was possible. In his instructions, he told Lewis to observe "the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the U.S."*
>
> *The Corps of Discovery was the first expedition to scientifically describe a long list of species. Their journals, especially those kept by Lewis, are filled with direct observations of the specimens they encountered on the journey. Through objective measurements and anatomical descriptions, they defined various species previously unknown to Euro-Americans.*

How did the explorers and Native Americans differ on their view of animals? For one thing, Native Americans believed they could learn moral lessons from animals:

> *Indians studied animal behaviors to understand moral lessons. Animals were beings addressed respectfully as "grandfather" or "brother."*
>
> *Because animals intersected the worlds of the sacred and the profane, Indians regarded them as intermediaries between the human and spiritual realms.*

In addition—as Native Americans would later learn—Euro-Americans were willing to kill buffalo just to harvest their skins (leaving their carcasses to litter the landscape). Native Americans would only kill enough buffalo to meet their needs (including for food).

As Lewis and Clark explored the western areas of the Louisiana Purchase and Oregon Country, they had in mind another directive from President Jefferson. What **plants** grew in these lands? Could they be used for medicinal purposes?

Because Napoleon was waging war in Europe, America's ability to import medicine (and other plant-based products) from the "Old World," was severely impacted. Jefferson gave some explicit instructions about plant observations:

> *In his instructions to Lewis, Jefferson directed the party to observe and record "the soil & face of the country, it's growth & vegetable productions, especially those not of the U.S. . . . the dates at which particular plants put forth or lose their flower, or leaf . . . ."*
>
> *The study and collection of plants was one of Jefferson's life-long pursuits. When he instructed the Corps in their approach to cataloging the country's flora, Jefferson again set the pattern for subsequent explorations. Jefferson, however, was not purely motivated by science; plants thought to have medicinal properties, like tobacco and sassafras, were important to the U.S. economy. As the Napoleonic Wars swept Europe and affected exports to the United States, there was a call to reduce America's dependence on foreign medicine and find substitutes on native soil.*

As Lewis and Clark learned, during their explorations, Native Americans viewed medicine—and the healing of human beings—quite differently from Euro-Americans. The Library of Congress tells us about these differences:

> *Indians and Europeans had been exchanging knowledge about curing and health for three centuries, yet they still held very different beliefs.*
>
> *Indian doctors focused on the patient's relationship to the animate world around him. Euro-American doctors saw the body as a mechanical system needing regulation.*
>
> *Meriwether Lewis, instructed by America's foremost physician Dr. Benjamin Rush, University of Pennsylvania botanist Benjamin Barton and his own mother, a skilled herbalist, was to serve as the Corps doctor, but William Clark also became adept in treating various illnesses. Though Clark rejected Indian explanations, he often turned to Indian techniques when members of his own party became ill.*

In our final point of comparison, between the explorers and the Native-Americans, let's examine how both sides viewed their **clothing**.

People from both cultures—Euro-American and Native-American—dressed in ways that communicated something about their status. Soldiers wore uniforms which displayed their rank. Native-Americans wore clothing which highlighted warrior status. The Library of Congress tells us about the similarities and the differences:

> *In both Euro-American and native cultures, clothing communicated messages about the wearer's biography, rank and role in society. In both cultures, a warrior's clothing was his identity and men entered battle dressed in regalia that displayed their deeds and status. Symbolic insignia revealed a complex code about who a man was and what he had accomplished.*
>
> *But differences did exist. For instance, Plains Indian men wore clothing that incorporated symbols of their spirit visions, tribal identity, and past deeds as manifestations of the spiritual powers that helped them in battle. European soldiers wore similar symbols but as a way to display and inspire uniform loyalty to their nation.*

When the explorers returned to Washington, DC—in 1806—they reported their astounding accomplishments and discoveries to the President and others eager to hear what they had learned. Their work had paved the way for America's soon-to-follow westward expansion.

Credits:

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