Lewis & Clark in South Dakota

South Dakota State
Historical Society

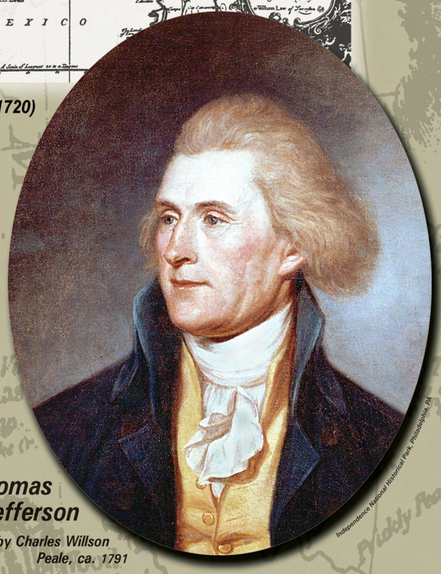
Department of Tourism & State Development

South Dakota Department of Tourism

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River . . . .

—Jefferson's letter of instruction to Lewis, June 1803

"A Map of Louisiana and of the River Mississipi" (1720)

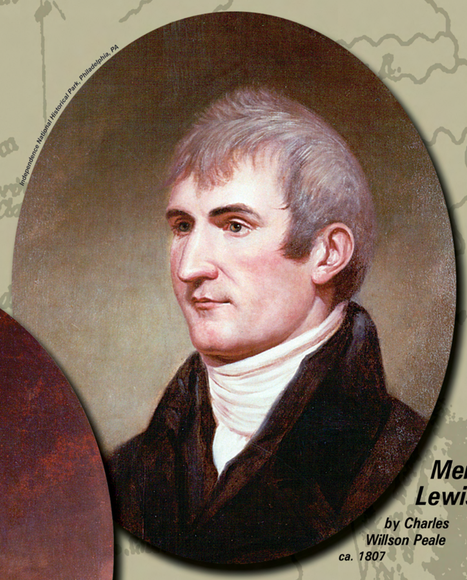


Thomas Jefferson
by Charles Willson Peale, ca. 1791

Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, PA

The United States bought the vast territory between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. The next year, President Thomas Jefferson sent an expedition to explore the Missouri River and its tributaries for a practical water route to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, the explorers were to observe all aspects of the new territory—native tribes, animals, plants, and climate.

Chosen to lead



Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, PA

Meriwether Lewis
by Charles Willson Peale
ca. 1807

Independence National Historical Park, Philadelphia, PA

William Clark
by Charles Willson Peale
ca. 1810

The expedition into Louisiana Territory required extraordinary leadership. Intelligent, practical, and experienced in frontier life, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were the right men for the job. Their "Corps of Discovery" started up the mouth of the Missouri River in May 1804. The complete party eventually included three sergeants, twenty-three privates, two interpreters, Sacagawea and her infant son, and Clark's slave, York. Among their provisions were presents for the Indians, camp equipment, scientific instruments, arms, and medical supplies.

This exhibit focuses on the explorers' journey west through what would one day be South Dakota. Here, they learned hard lessons about the river's hazards, found plants and animals unknown to science, and had memorable encounters with local tribes.

Journal entries taken from *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* edited by Gary E. Moulton.
For this exhibit, spelling and grammar have been modernized.

...before we landed the French ran a snag through their pirogue...

—Clark, 28 August 1804

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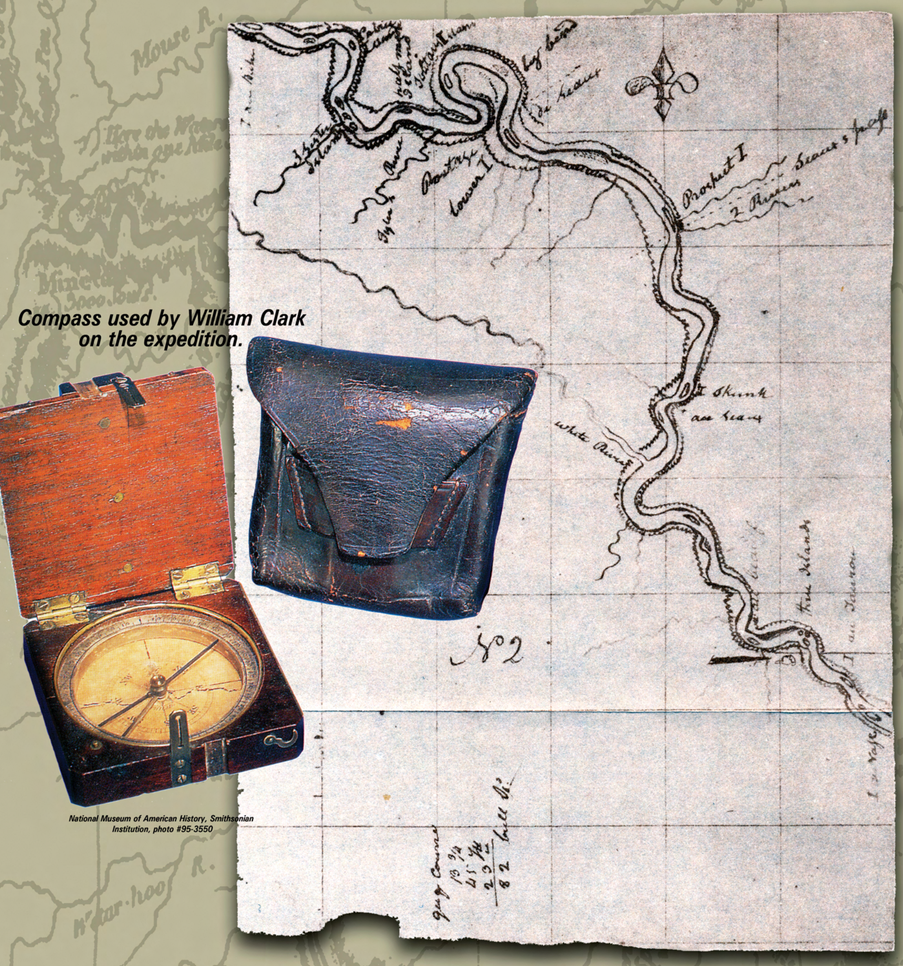
A treacherous road

We found great difficulty in passing between the sand-bars, the water swift & shallow, it took three-fourths of the day to make one mile. —Clark, 28 September 1804

Traveling up the Missouri in a keelboat, a bateau (a light, flat-bottomed boat), two pirogues (canoes made from hollowed tree trunks), and six large canoes, the expedition faced rapid currents and obstacles posed by collapsing riverbanks, countless sandbars, and submerged trees.

At half past one o'clock this morning the sandbar on which we camped began to undermine and give way.... by the time we made the opposite shore our camp fell in.

—Clark, 21 September 1804



Compass used by William Clark on the expedition.

National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, photo #95-3550

The Missouri River in South Dakota from Mud Island to Elk Island. Route from September 10-23, 1804.

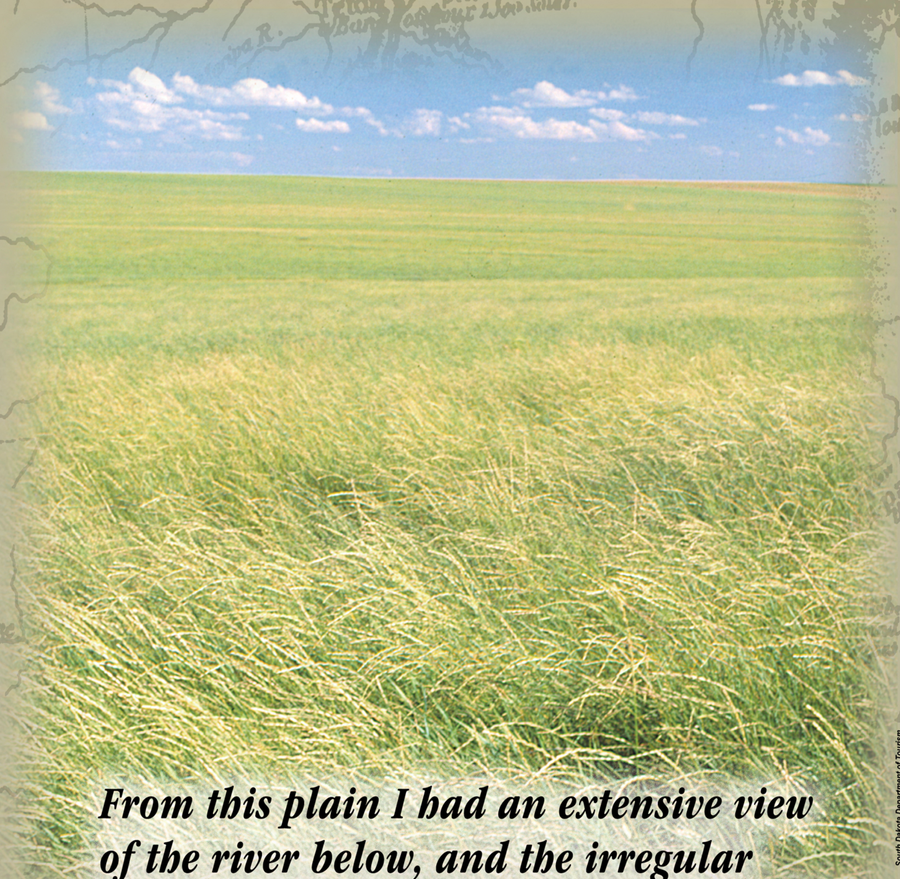
Recording the route

No aspect of the expedition meant as much to President Jefferson as accurately mapping the West, a task taken on largely by Clark. The maps the captain drew and brought back gave a new, remarkably accurate view of the Upper Missouri and the Columbia River Basin. His work was among the first to show that the western mountains consisted of many ranges rather than one. The geographical knowledge gained on the expedition finally put to rest the long-cherished hope of finding an easy water route to the Pacific.

Gazing across the open grasslands of the Great Plains was a new experience for the Corps of Discovery.

...here commences a beautiful country

–Clark, 19 September 1804



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From this plain I had an extensive view of the river below, and the irregular hills which border the opposite sides of the river and creek. . . .This scenery, already rich, pleasing and beautiful, was still farther heightened by immense herds of buffalo, deer, elk, and antelope which we saw in every direction feeding on the hills and plains.

– Lewis, 17 September 1804

. . . in an immense plain a high hill is situated, and. . . by the different nations of Indians . . . is supposed to be the residence of devils. They are in human form with remarkable large heads and about 18 inches high . . . and are armed with sharp arrows . . .

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. . . from the top of this mound we beheld a most beautiful landscape. Numerous herds of buffalo were seen feeding . . . the plain to the north, northwest and northeast extends without interruption as far as can be seen.

–Clark, 25 August 1804

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Spirit Mound

On 25 August 1804 Lewis and Clark climbed Spirit Mound, an isolated hill located six miles north of present-day Vermillion, South Dakota.

Lewis and Clark gleaned as much information as they could from Indians and traders about the land outside the expedition's route. Jon Vallie, a French trader, provided a description of the Black Hills.

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The country from the Missouri to the black mountains (Black Hills) is much like the country on the Missouri, less timber & a greater proportion of cedar. The black mountains he says are very high, and some parts have snowon them in the summer. Great quantities of pine grow on the mountains, a great noise is heard frequently on those mountains. On the mountains [are] great numbers of a goat, and a kind of animal with large circular horns, this animal is nearly the size of a small elk. White bear [grizzly] is also plentiful. *–Clark, 1 October 1804*

The Black Hills

. . . the village of those animals covers about 4 acres . . . and contains great numbers of holes on the top of which those little animals sit erect and make a whistling noise and when alarmed slip into their hole. . . . Those animals are about the size of a small squirrel, their head much resembling a squirrel in every respect, except the ears which are shorter. His tail is like a ground squirrel which they shake & whistle when alarmed.

–Clark, 7 September 1804

Barking squirrels

Lewis and Clark encountered their first prairie dog "town" on 7 September 1804 near present-day Fort Randall Dam. The first to describe the little mammal scientifically, they captured one alive by enlisting all hands to haul water and pour it down the prairie dog's burrows.

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Prairie plants

Prairie Turnip

Dave Ode

Also known as ground potatoes, these plants were a vital food source for Plains tribes. The starchy, tuberous root was boiled and mashed, or dried and pounded into meal.

The Dacotah or Sioux rove & follow the buffalo and raise no corn or anything else, the woods & prairies affording a sufficiency. They eat meat, and substitute the ground potato which grow in the plains for bread.

–Clark, 31 August 1804

Buffaloberry

Dave Ode

This sweet fruit was unknown to science before Lewis and Clark encountered it along the Missouri.

. . . great quantities of a kind of berry resembling a currant except double the size . . . deliciously flavored & makes delightful tarts, this fruit is now ripe.

–Clark, 24 August 1804

Silver Sagebrush

Dave Ode

Another plant the explorers encountered first in South Dakota was this aromatic, woody bush. Sage was an important browse for pronghorn antelope, and Plains tribes used it for flavorings and medicines.

I killed a prairie wolf, about the size of a gray fox with a bushy tail and head & ears like a wolf. Some fur, burrows in the ground and barks like a small dog. What have been taken heretofore for the fox was those wolves, and no foxes have been seen. —Clark, 18 September 1804

The bushy-tailed wolf

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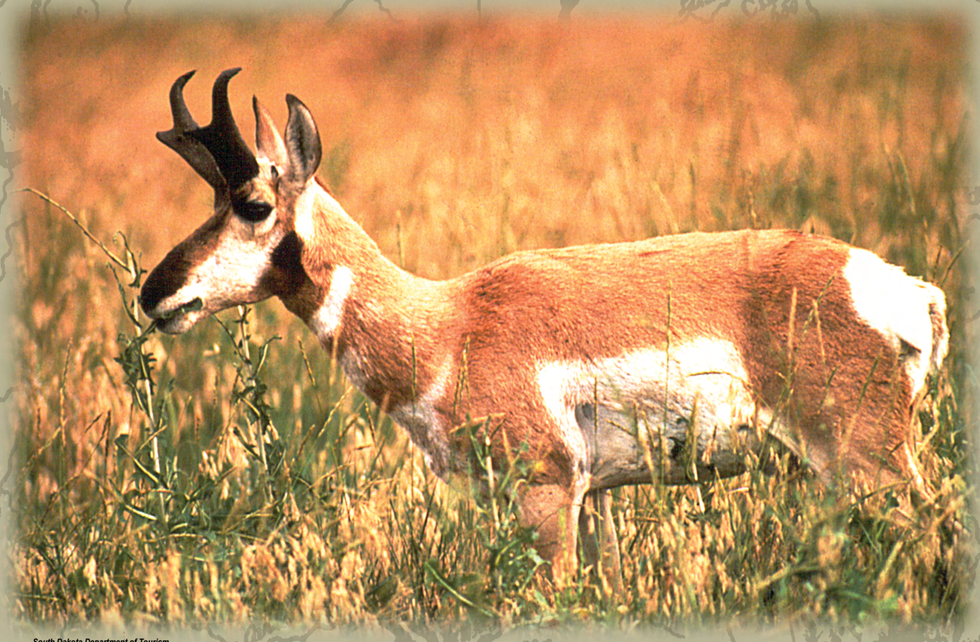
Often called prairie wolves, coyotes are slender, doglike carnivores. Their distinctive howls, yips, whines, and barks break the quiet of the prairie night. The expedition killed its first coyote on 17 September 1804 near present-day Chamberlain.



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. . . we found the antelope extremely shy and watchful. . . . When at rest they generally select the most elevated point in the neighborhood, and as they are watchful and extremely quick of sight and their sense of smelling very acute . . . they will frequently discover and flee from you at the distance of three miles. I had this day an opportunity of witnessing the agility and superior fleetness of this animal which was to me really astonishing . . . It appeared rather the rapid flight of birds than the motion of quadrupeds. –Lewis, 17 September 1804

Wild and fleet

Lewis admired the antelope, a wide-eyed goatlike animal, first seen a few miles below the Niobrara River on 3 September 1804.

A curious kind of deer

Lewis and Clark were the first to use the name mule deer for this common prairie animal. They shot one near present-day Chamberlain on 17 September 1804.

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. . . a curious kind of deer of a dark gray color more so than common, hair long and fine, the ears large & long. . . . This species of deer jumps like a goat or sheep. –Clark, 17 September 1804

Hare of the prairie

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The sighting of white-tailed jackrabbits was first recorded on 14 September 1804 in what is now Lyman County.

. . . it resorts the open plains, is extremely fleet and never burrows or takes shelter in the ground when pursued. I measured the leaps of one and found them twenty-one feet. They appear to run with more ease and to bound with greater agility than any animal I ever saw. –Lewis, 14 September 1804

. . . we met and Captain Lewis delivered the speech & then made one great chief by giving him a medal & some clothes, one second chief & three third chiefs in the same way. They received those things with the goods and tobacco with pleasure.

The warriors are very much decorated with paint, porcupine quills & feathers, large leggings & moccasins, all with buffalo robes of different colors. –Clark, 30 August 1804

The Yankton Nakotas

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska—Gift of Enron Art Foundation

The explorers learned as much as possible about the language, traditions, territory, and intertribal relationships of each tribe they encountered. They met with a group of Yankton Indians of the Sioux (Dakota, Lakota, Nakota) tribe on 30 August 1804 near today's Gavin's Point Dam.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska Gift of Enron Art Foundation

. . . as soon as I landed three of their young men seized the cable of the pirogue . . . and the second chief was exceedingly insolent both in words and gestures to me, declaring I should not go off, saying he had not received presents sufficient from us–I attempted to pacify him but it had a contrary effect for his insults became so personal and his intentions evident to do me injury, I drew my sword. . . . The grand chief then took hold of the cable & sent all the young men off, the soldier got out of the pirogue and the second chief walked off . . .

–Clark, 25 September 1804

Lacking a good interpreter, Lewis and Clark had an uneasy meeting with the Teton Lakotas on 25 September 1804 at the mouth of the Bad River. The powerful Tetons forced other tribes to pay for using the Missouri River, and they tried seizing one of the expedition's canoes as a toll. Clark drew his sword and the Tetons strung their bows, but no blood was shed. The expedition stayed with the tribe for three days, always on their guard.

The Teton Lakotas

The expedition met the Arikaras close to the present North Dakota-South Dakota border. Living in earth-lodge villages, this sedentary farming tribe was dominated by the Tetons, who controlled the river and forced them to sell their crops at low prices. The Arikaras welcomed Lewis and Clark, hopeful that new trading opportunities would break the Teton monopoly.

The Arikaras

We met the grand chief in council & he made a short speech thanking us for what we had given him & his nation, promising to attend to the council we had given him & informed us the road was open & no one dare shut it & we might depart at pleasure. *–Clark, 11 October 1804*

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska Gift of Enron Art Foundation

To the ocean and back

The Corps of Discovery left what is now South Dakota on 14 October 1804, moving up the Missouri to winter with the Mandan Indians. The following spring they continued west, reaching the Pacific Ocean in November 1805. After wintering in present-day Oregon, the explorers headed home in the spring of 1806. They quickly passed through present-day South Dakota in late August and reached the end of their great journey, Saint Louis, in September 1806.

The explorers' legacy

The Lewis and Clark Expedition made the West real for Americans. The knowledge gained on their journey transformed a vast unknown into a landscape filled with rivers, mountains, plains, and people. The Corps of Discovery brought back a wealth of information about land, plants, animals, and native tribes. The maps Clark made would be relied on for the next fifty years. The certainty that no water route to the Pacific existed shaped future commercial ventures. Lewis and Clark opened the road west, making possible a United States that spread from ocean to ocean.

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