

Linda Honan

Lewis and Clark: The Corps of Discovery Expedition 1804-1806

Zoom, Tuesday 9:00-11:00



Meriwether Lewis and William Clark

In May 1804, an intrepid group of about 45 Americans set out to cross the country from the east coast to the Pacific. Their mission was at the request of President Thomas Jefferson, who wanted them to explore the lands westward of the Louisiana Purchase. This seminar will study their achievements, following the Missouri River to the Yellowstone River and the Rockies, reaching the Pacific at the border of modern Oregon and Washington States. The seminar is based on the book *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson and the Opening of the American West* by Stephen E. Ambrose. A second source will be Rod Gragg, *Lewis and Clark On the Trail of Discovery: The Journey that Shaped America*.

Jefferson's goals were to stake a claim to this huge territory before France, Britain or Spain did; to identify unknown animals and plants; to establish friendly relations with Native Americans living there; and to establish the best route to the coast for traders. He chose his personal secretary Meriwether Lewis to lead the expedition. Jefferson explained his choice as follows: "it was impossible to find a character who to a complete science in botany, natural history, mineralogy & astronomy, joined the firmness of constitution and character, prudence, habits adapted to the woods, and

familiarity with the Indian manners and character, requisite for this undertaking. All the latter qualifications Capt. Lewis has." Lewis chose his army friend William Clark as co-leader. Clark brought along his African American slave York as his servant. The leaders then assembled a troop of about 45 soldiers to form their corps.

The journey was immense, and much more difficult than either Jefferson or Lewis realized; they both thought that the route to the Pacific could be traversed via river, from the Missouri to the Snake and the Columbia. They did not realize that a major part of the journey would be across the Rockies. Native American help was an essential part of their trek, and contributed largely to their success. Their guide Sacajawea not only directed them but also found them edible roots and other nourishing plants along the way. Feeding the party took a considerable amount of their time. Each day a hunting group was formed, usually joined by Lewis himself; they would set out to kill any animals they could find.

The initial supplies they took with them included bags of parched corn, barrels of flour and biscuits, kegs of salt pork, coffee, sugar, salt, dried apples, condensed soup, tobacco, and 100 gallons of whiskey. They also brought scientific instruments for the surveying and other observations Jefferson was so interested in: a chronometer, a nautical compass, a pocket telescope, a quadrant, a magnet, pole chains for surveying, a sextant, and several thermometers. To cement relations with the Indians they would meet they also brought a large amount of trade goods: beads, mirrors, ribbons, handkerchiefs, scissors, and thousands of fishhooks and sewing needles.

Our seminar will accompany this brave troupe throughout their expedition until their final triumphant return in September of 1806. The astronauts of their day, they had done what many people believed to be impossible. The flower below, *Mimulus lewisii*, is named for Lewis – one of the many discoveries on their journey.

