

Mapping the West: The Journey of Lewis and Clark

By Michael Stahl



The United States of America is one of the largest countries on the planet. Much of America today is located between Canada and Mexico, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean. This part of the United States is called the continental U.S. It did not always stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific, though.

After the Revolutionary War, when the U.S. won its independence from England and became its own small country, there were thirteen states that bordered the Atlantic Ocean. France and Spain owned a lot of the land that would eventually become the rest of the continental U.S. That changed in 1803 when the president of the United States at the time, Thomas Jefferson, bought a large chunk of land from France's ruler, Napoleon Bonaparte, in what was called The Louisiana Purchase. However, Americans knew very little about the land that was west of the Mississippi. Therefore, Jefferson asked two men to lead an exploration of that area. Their names were Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

Jefferson felt that Americans needed to explore their new territory for a few reasons. First, and most importantly, he wanted Lewis and Clark to find a "water route" to the Pacific Ocean from the Mississippi River. Jefferson knew that if Americans could travel by river all the way west to the ocean, they could settle there and establish trade with Native Americans in the West. Second, Jefferson wanted to claim the northwestern portion of the continent's midsection before another country did. Lastly, he thought that knowledge of the area's geography would be needed for all of the other goals to come true. Jefferson knew that whomever he chose for the exploration would be in for a dangerous trip. In fact, he, along with many others, figured that the west was home to gigantic volcanoes, huge woolly mammoth animals, and a mountain made of pure salt.

Jefferson chose a group of men named the Corps of Discovery and named Lewis, a captain in the U.S. military, its leader because he was an expert in surviving in the wilderness and was familiar with the lifestyles of Native Americans. Lewis would choose Clark, his old friend, as co-leader.

In May of 1804, Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery began their journey on the Missouri River, leaving St. Louis and sailing northwest. Lewis' main job, besides leading the men, was to collect rocks, plants, and animals along the route to be studied. Clark would make maps and charts of the geography of the unknown land.

Lewis and Clark headed deeper and deeper into uncharted land. As the trip continued, one of their men became ill and died. They also had to do their best to find food and stay healthy during the winter months.

Lewis and Clark were worried there would be battles with many Native Americans. Some tribes were hostile toward the group. However, they were able to make alliances with many Native American tribes. Sacagawea, a Native American woman, joined the Corps of Discovery in the spring of 1805. Sacagawea's knowledge of Native American cultures and her ability to speak Hidatsa and Shoshone, two Native American languages, made her a valuable asset to the expeditionary group. She played a key role in establishing relations between the Corps of Discovery and some of the Native American tribes the Corps of Discovery encountered.

Lewis and Clark would eventually reach the Pacific Ocean after traveling through several rivers, including the Clearwater, Snake, and Columbia Rivers. However, they did not discover one direct water route that could lead boats straight to the Pacific from the Mississippi.

Still, the trip was incredibly beneficial. It lasted three years and covered 8,000 miles. The members of this expedition had discovered the Rocky Mountains, which were not volcanoes nor made of salt. Clark and his crew had learned about over two hundred plants and animals that were new to the Americans, though they did not see any woolly mammoths. Lewis and Clark were the first to trade with dozens and dozens of Native American tribes that had never met the Americans before. Finally, Lewis and his men drew about 140 of the first maps of most of the western United States. It has been said that the maps provided a fill-in of what was mostly a general outline of the area. Therefore, Lewis and Clark made it much more possible for the United States to stretch all the way "from sea to shining sea."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who led an exploration of the land west of the Mississippi River?

- A** soldiers from France and Spain
- B** Native Americans
- C** Meriwether Lewis and William Clark
- D** Thomas Jefferson and Napoleon Bonaparte

2. What does this passage describe?

- A** This passage describes life during the Revolutionary War.
- B** This passage describes the childhood of William Clark.
- C** This passage describes the death of Meriwether Lewis.
- D** This passage describes the trip taken by Lewis and Clark.

3. Lewis and Clark's trip was a success.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A** Lewis and Clark's team discovered the Rocky Mountains, learned about two hundred plants and animals, and drew the first maps of the western United States.
- B** Thomas Jefferson wanted Lewis and Clark to find a water route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean that would increase trade with Native Americans.
- C** During their trip, Lewis and Clark headed deeper and deeper into uncharted land, worrying that there would be battles with Native Americans.
- D** In May of 1804, Lewis, Clark, and The Corps of Discovery began their journey by sailing northwest on the Missouri River.

4. Why might Americans have known little about the land west of the Mississippi River in 1803?

- A** The part of the U.S. between Canada and Mexico is the continental U.S.
- B** Americans had not lived west of the Mississippi River before 1803.
- C** Meriwether Lewis was a captain in the U.S. military.
- D** Meriwether Lewis and his men drew about 140 maps of the western United States.

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A the reasons Napoleon Bonaparte sold land to Thomas Jefferson
- B how the United States won its independence from England
- C gigantic volcanoes, woolly mammoths, and a mountain made of salt
- D Lewis and Clark’s exploration of the western United States

6. Read the following sentences: “However, Americans knew very little about the land that was west of the Mississippi. Therefore, Jefferson asked two men to lead an **exploration** of that area.”

What does the word **exploration** mean in the sentence above?

- A attacking people for the purpose of taking over their land
- B going somewhere new and looking around
- C building new homes in an area that is already crowded
- D asking questions in order to learn more about a topic

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Jefferson and other Americans expected that the West would be dangerous; _____, they expected there to be volcanoes and mammoths.

- A otherwise
- B meanwhile
- C in particular
- D although

8. Who asked Lewis and Clark to lead an exploration of the western United States?

9. What were Jefferson’s three goals for Lewis and Clark’s trip?

10. Did Lewis and Clark’s trip achieve Jefferson’s goals? Explain why or why not, using evidence from the passage.
