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I. Meriwether Homeschooled

You have already been introduced in preceding articles to Thomas Jefferson's seminal American library at Monticello. There's a much more expansive story to tell as it bears on the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803-06. Monticello Library's Librarian-in-Chief reshaped our world through that Expedition, as he did in many other ways. And, by the way, Pittsburgh played a big part in the Expedition.

The overland routes to Pittsburgh from the east, over the Allegheny Mountains, led from Philadelphia and Washington, passing through Fredericktown (present day Fredrick, MD) and Harpers Ferry (presently in the state of West Virginia). Meriwether Lewis traveled the rough, connecting, eastern roads beginning in mid-March 1803 while engaged in the acquisition of scientific knowledge, instruments, goods, and weapons for the Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and back, through Louisiana Purchase lands, a voyage of discovery that he and Jefferson had, effectively, been planning for as much as two years. Lewis was by this time in his life quite accustomed to backwoods travel by horseback, from his army days in Pittsburgh and the Ohio country, and only between Lancaster and Philadelphia went by horse-drawn stage on a "modern," stone highway.

For at least some part of the two years with Jefferson, as his Secretary, during which this Expedition was hatched, Lewis was absorbing the little-known geography of western lands to be explored as well as the culture and habits of the different Indian tribes. He was being prepared by Jefferson for an undertaking that was to be scientific, consistent with Jefferson's own bent, but very much inspired by commercial possibilities too. Fur trading was an important commercial goal, to counter an English presence in the west, as was finding an easy Northwest water passage to the Pacific.

Lewis was learning as well to distinguish new fauna and flora and to carefully and completely record data about them. As Jefferson's Secretary, he had the benefit of access to the third President, his society of contemporary leaders, as well as his comprehensive and incomparable personal collection of books. Some of Lewis's scientific training, especially concerning botany and the use of certain scientific instruments, was gotten during May and June of 1803 in Philadelphia and Lancaster. Lewis visited with some of the most learned Americans of the time, known to Jefferson by his membership in the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia. Lewis took this additional training while he was accumulating the ton or so of crated materials to be shipped, tediously, by wagon from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, by way of Harpers Ferry.

Pittsburgh was the Expedition's staging point for the subsequent trip by keelboat and pirogue, and it was the place of construction for the keelboat. Pittsburgh was the Gateway for the long trip down the Ohio and up the Missouri, waterways offering better means for transporting the tons of materials carried outbound by the Corps of Discovery than any overland route could.

The Lewis & Clark Expedition is a powerful story, as much so as that of the moon landing by NASA more than 150 years later. Like the moon landing, Lewis & Clark

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encompasses so much of known science, but it is about more than just the range of disciplines; it is about conducting the scientific enterprise rigorously and meaningfully. It is about how Meriwether Lewis learned to do this under the tutelage, first and foremost, of Mr. Jefferson. In turn, Lewis later imparted his knowledge to William Clark. But it was begun in the spirit of Monticello Library, by homeschooling.

Going West next!

Charles B. Greenberg
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