

IV. Meriwether Lewis and Keelboat

As a result of the Whisky Rebellion of 1794 in four counties of Western PA, President George Washington called out a militia to march to Pittsburgh. One of the volunteers, at a restless age of 20 years old, was Meriwether Lewis. He enlisted as a private and joined the regular army on May 1, 1795 with the rank of ensign. In the fall of 1795, he ended up in the Chosen Rifle Company under Captain William Clark, until Clark left the military six months later. Lewis became a captain on December 5, 1800. He came to know the frontier and river transport by keelboat.

Eleven days before his first presidential inauguration, Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to Lewis, dated February 23, 1801, asking him to serve as the President's Private Secretary in Washington. Thus began the direct circumstances leading to the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Lewis arranged to have the Expedition's keelboat built in Pittsburgh, but not without a test of his patience. Pittsburgh boatbuilders were not sober souls, so Lewis spent half of July and virtually all of August 1803 there while trying to get the work done. He departed, westward on the 31st of August.

Lewis's keelboat was planked, 55' in length, eight feet wide in the middle, and fitted with one square sail on a 32 foot high mast. It had 22 oars. A model of it can be seen on-line at the Lewis & Clark Visitors Center in Iowa. William Clark left behind a rough sketch, now held by the Beinecke Library, Yale University, on which basis it is known.

Although designed specifically for upstream movement, keelboats were difficult at best to maneuver upriver, especially with heavy cargo. Depending on conditions, they were pushed by hands, or driven by oar, and only sailed with favorable conditions. Nevertheless, keelboats were known as "tankers" for the inland fur trade west of the Mississippi River, and they were dominant on the Missouri River until at least 1830.

Thereafter, the steamboat gradually replaced the keelboat. Technological change in the "west" was very visible, even within a lifetime, just as is so today for all of America. By 1874 Mark Twain had published a story with tales of Mississippi River steamboat travel in "Life on the Mississippi." The real west had already been overrun by settlers in the 1840's traveling overland to Oregon and California in "prairie schooners." Schooners were lightened versions of the Conestoga wagons used in Lewis's time to ship cargo over the Allegheny Mountains. By 1850, the end had come for the schooners, while the steam engine enabled the railroad to come to Pittsburgh. In the next decade the pony express and stagecoach of the west each had its very short run in time, while awaiting the westward extension of rails.

The message of Lewis's keelboat is that it was what to use for a brief moment in the technology flow of transportation. You can get a taste for all these 19th century means of transportation in books such as: (1) DeVoto, Bernard, "Across the Wide Missouri"; (2)

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Boorstin, Daniel J., "The Americans: The National Experience"; (3) Flammang, James M., "Robert Fulton, Inventor and Steamboat Builder"; (4) Parkman, Francis, "The Oregon Trail"; (5) Frederick, J.V., "Ben Holladay: The Stagecoach King."

And thank you Bob and Jan Thomas for making me aware of Gragg, Rod, "Lewis and Clark on the Trail of Discovery: the Journey that Shaped America," and gifting a copy to me. Beautiful maps, beautiful keelboat images, and more, and in the WLN collection too!

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