

X. A Proper Scientific Record

The act of making and preserving a proper scientific record, or even understanding what that means, requires some degree of training and literacy.

On June 20, 1803, Thomas Jefferson's extensive written instructions to Meriwether Lewis concerning the Lewis and Clark Expedition to come were made complete (1). About making observations "of latitude and longitude, at all remarkable points on the river," and all other on the "courses of the river," he wrote: "Your observations are to be taken with great pains and accuracy; to be entered distinctly and intelligibly for others as well as yourself;". He added: "Several copies of these, as well as your other notes, should be made at leisure times, and put in the care of the most trustworthy of your attendants to guard, by multiplying them against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed. A further guard would be, that one of these copies be on the cuticular membranes of the paper birch [*Betula papyrifera*], as less liable to injury from damp than common paper."

About reaching the Pacific, Jefferson went on to write: "On your arrival on that coast, endeavor to learn if there be any port within your reach frequented by sea vessels of any nation, and to send two of your trusty people back by sea, in such a way as shall appear practicable, with a copy of your notes;" Well, Mr. Jefferson was in all ways concerned with the accurate and detailed recording of data in journals and preservation of them, as any good scientist today is. This thrust in his instructions to Lewis, about recording and preserving data, is what distinguishes the Lewis and Clark Expedition from the more elementary and unscientific act of trekking west merely to participate in the commerce of fur trading, which many adventurers did in the 19th century.

While Jefferson anticipated well for the Expedition itself, he did not reckon with events that followed, which threatened thoughtful assimilation of the Expedition's data. First of all, Lewis himself suffered an early and mysterious death in Tennessee, in October 1809, while traveling to Washington in his new capacity of Governor of Louisiana. He was even then carrying journal volumes with him, with the likely intent of facilitating publication. Jefferson's "Memoir of Meriwether Lewis" addresses the event and Coues (1) adds other information.

That left William Clark to complete the public record for the foremost captain. Clark engaged a Philadelphia lawyer named Nicholas Biddle to edit the journals for publication as a narrative. Clark's intent was that Benjamin Barton, eminent scientist of Philadelphia, would produce the formal publication concerning the natural history of the Expedition (2). Unfortunately, Barton became ill and died, and this important piece of the effort went undone. Biddle tenaciously surmounted many difficulties with publishers and accomplished his task in 1814.

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The original journal manuscripts themselves were deposited at Clark's directive in the hands of the American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia, where they languished for much of the remainder of the 19th century. Fortunately, naturalist Elliott Coues was commissioned late in the century to edit the Biddle work for republishing. In the course of that, he learned of the existence of the original manuscripts. The wonderful result is: (1) Coues, Elliott, ed., "The History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition," Vol. I - III, New York: Dover Publications (1987 reprint of Francis P. Harper's unabridged 1893 edition); (2) Cutright, Paul Russell and Brodhead, Michael J., "Elliott Coues: Naturalist and Frontier Historian," Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press (1981).

Coues was this writer's first reading of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and the memory of that literary trip with them is yet a profound experience.

Charles B. Greenberg
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation