

V. Corps of Discovery

“I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” – John F. Kennedy, April 29, 1962 on the occasion of a celebratory dinner for Nobel Laureates.

As with everything Thomas Jefferson, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, every chapter, bore his hand and influence, and, in that way, the influence of his incomparable library at Monticello.

When Meriwether Lewis departed Washington on July 5, 1803 for Pittsburgh, where he would begin the first leg of the Expedition down the Ohio River, France’s sale of the Louisiana Purchase lands had only just, on the previous day, become public news in the capital. The actual sale for about \$15 million had been completed in France about two months earlier; such was the pace of travel for information, even very exciting information, that months passed to cross the Atlantic. For Lewis, who would arrive in Pittsburgh 10 days later, delivery of supplies to Pittsburgh was in progress; ahead was the launching of the keelboat and two pirogues to carry them, and yet to do was identify and assemble the men who would make up the Corps of Discovery.

However, it was not the Corps of Discovery that departed Pittsburgh with him on August 31. The crew at that point consisted of seven or eight army recruits from Carlisle, to be released after descending the Ohio River, and at least two, perhaps three, young men being tested for inclusion in the permanent Corps not yet formed. Two taken on at Pittsburgh were George Shannon and John Colter. Shannon was, at 18, to become the youngest of the Corps, as a private. Colter also became a private, and was discharged at the Mandans on August 14, 1806 on the return, instead of St. Louis, upon his own request. He returned to the fur trade of the west and is recognized today as the first recorded white man to see the lands of Yellowstone Park.

The remaining men for the river trip up the Missouri were assembled at Camp Dubois on the Wood River near St. Louis during the winter of 1803-1804, the first of three winters of encampment for Lewis and Clark. They numbered 45 men at this point, 29 of the Corps and 16 temporary hands. The temporary hands were rowers to help the Corps get up the Missouri with its load to the Mandan villages, then to return to St. Louis with the keelboat. Of the Corps were the two commissioned officers (Lewis and Clark), one interpreter/hunter, two French river men, seven Kentucky men of Clark’s and his slave York, the two from Pittsburgh, and 14 regular army soldiers from frontier river posts.

York’s story, as told by Betts, Richard B., “In Search of York: the Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark,” revised edition, The University Press of Colorado (2000), is the big story within a big story. Jeffersonian period slavery and its utter and

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persistent racial injustice, both overt and covert, practiced through a Civil War, Reconstruction and the present moment, are stories for a separate telling.

Fort Mandan was the second winter-over site and the kickoff point into increasingly uncharted lands, those of the Louisiana Purchase. Thirty two adults set off up the Missouri from Fort Mandan on April 7, 1805 in six canoes and the two pirogues. Added to the remaining original party were Toussaint Charbonneau, a French fur trader and additional interpreter, his now famous Shoshoni (Snake) wife Sacajawea, some kind of special guide for sure, their infant son Baptiste, a Frenchman Baptiste Lepage, and soldiers transferred out of the return party. There is some historical confusion in the reckoning of manpower, but 32 seems to be a certain number for the Corps at departure from Fort Mandan. The Corps of Discovery was finally fixed and on its way into Louisiana Purchase lands. All would return to the Mandan country in 1806, one more way to judge the success of the amazing, multifaceted story of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

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