

Meriwether Lewis in Our Midst

by Rev. Richard W. Davies



Beginning in 2003, the United States will begin the bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which was to determine if there could be an overland access to the Pacific Ocean using the Missouri and the Columbia rivers. President Thomas Jefferson was eager to have a way to compete with the British fur traders who were moving down from Canada. Jefferson pointed to a young American, Meriwether Lewis, to organize this exploratory adventure.

Who was Meriwether Lewis? Let's begin with some biographical information.

The British Army was sent in the 17th century to the American colonies, and one soldier was named Robert Lewis. One of his children became Col. Robert Lewis, who, with his wife, raised nine children. Their fifth born son was named William. He inherited almost 1,900 acres of land, plus slaves, a few miles from Jefferson's Monticello home. In 1769 William married his Welsh second cousin Lucy Meriwether. The Meriwether family was land rich, owning some 18,000 acres near Charlottesville. Between 1725 and 1774, there were eleven marriages uniting the prestigious Welsh bloodlines of the Lewis and Meriwether families.

Meriwether Lewis was born on August 18, 1774. He had an older sister Jane, and a younger brother Reuben. When the Revolutionary War began in 1775, William served as a Lieutenant. In 1779, he died from pneumonia after nearly drowning in the Rivanna River. As was common custom then, widow Lucy soon married again to Capt. John Marks. She was a highly regarded mother and citizen. She died at age 86.

Young Lewis did not have an easy time gaining an education. A gentleman's early education came through private study, usually with a clergyman. Lewis did study with the Rev. Matthew Maury, whose father, the Rev. James Maury, was a teacher of Thomas Jefferson. Lewis could not attend William and Mary College, due to caring for his mother, Lucy, a widow for the second time, and her property. Lewis was a true Virginia gentleman. He owned slaves and riding horses; he was a tobacco planter, a dancer, and a heavy drinker. Lewis never married. One of Lewis's advanced teachers was his neighbor, Thomas Jefferson, also of Welsh descent, who taught Lewis the equivalent of a college degree in math and botany. In 1792, Lewis eagerly heard about a proposed western exploration and he caught the vision Jefferson's "Corp of Discovery."

In 1794, 20 year old Lewis enlisted in the Virginia militia, as it was being called out by Gen. Washington to quell the Whiskey Rebellion at Pittsburgh. Lewis was given the rank of Ensign. Some 13,000 troops came to this area in October to subdue the rebellious farmers in the Chartiers Valley who did not want to pay the excise tax on whiskey. The 500+ rebels were overwhelmed. To keep order, Gen. Daniel Morgan, also of Welsh descent, remained near Pittsburgh over the winter. Lewis remained on duty with him. In 1795, Lewis enlisted in the regular army as a

sharpshooter, serving under Capt. William Clark who would later be his partner in the expedition. Lewis made repeated trips from Detroit to Pittsburgh as a messenger for Gen. "Mad Anthony" Wayne. In 1801, President Jefferson made Lewis his secretary, primarily to screen Army officers for their skills and to detect if they held to Federalist politics. Lewis lived in the White House with Jefferson, his father figure.

In 1802, Jefferson approved Lewis to lead the project and a fund of \$2,500 was approved in February, 1803. Lewis studied Albert Gallatin's maps of the west, from Washington County, and the maps he had of the west. Lewis ordered rifles and equipment from the Harper's Ferry armory, all to be shipped to Pittsburgh. In June, Jefferson tried to placate New England clergy who thought \$2,500 was far too much money for such a foolish venture. The President said the trip was partly to elevate the beliefs of pagan Indians. Lewis wisely invited William Clark to be his equal partner.

On July 4, it was announced that Napoleon had sold all of Louisiana to the United States for \$15 million dollars. Now, Lewis and Clark would be passing through American territory, not French. On July 5, Lewis came to Pittsburgh. He selected 12 men here to join the expedition. The Pittsburghers wanted to be paid in money, but they really wanted the reward of land grants for their service. Lewis ordered a keel boat, and a pirogue, which is a flat bottom boat for use in swamps. The talented Pittsburgh boat builder was a drunk, and delivery of the boats was frustratingly slow. On July 29, Clark's letter of acceptance arrived in Pittsburgh. He agreed to serve!

On August 31, 1803, Lewis left Pittsburgh for Louisville. On October 15, Lewis met William Clark there, to continue their leadership of the exciting three year expedition to find a route to the Pacific ocean.

The expedition is recorded in American history as a rousing success. Sadly, however, Lewis's life ended in depression. He committed suicide on October 11, 1809.

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