

PITTSBURGH: GATEWAY TO THE FAR WEST IN 1803

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ON a Pittsburgh wharf in the gray, early dawn of August 31, 1803, stood Army Captain Meriwether Lewis. At heel was Scannon, his Newfoundland dog. Six weeks of spartan — but not too patient — forbearance was coming to a close. Soon would begin the greatest adventure of their lives. Soon both man and dog would start a journey that would take them to the Pacific Ocean and back. And now at 7:00 A.M., in the early morning light, a keelboat splashed into the Monongahela.¹ The Captain's long wait was over, and he watched intently as the boat took the water.

Now a keelboat launching was a frequent sight in the Pittsburgh of that day and time, but this occasion would prove to be different. At 10:00 A.M., after three hours of brisk, orderly loading, Captain Lewis, with his dog and with a crew of eleven men, headed the boat down the Ohio River — the beginning of the greatest transcontinental exploration ever undertaken by the United States.² Few people were there to witness the departure, and later, fewer still would remember that the Lewis and Clark expedition under the auspices of Thomas Jefferson actually started from Pittsburgh in a Pittsburgh-built keelboat.

The Far West was the outer space of that day, and President Jefferson had long dreamed of an exploration that would bring back the secrets of that area. As far back as 1783, he had asked George Rogers Clark, Revolutionary War hero, to head such an expedition.³ But money and opportunity had not been available until now, twenty years later, with a secret appropriation from Congress of \$2,500, his dream was about to come true.

To head the expedition President Jefferson chose Meriwether

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1 Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis & Clark Expedition with Related Documents 1783-1854* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1962), 121. Hereafter referred to as *Letters of Lewis & Clark*.

2 *Ibid.* See also John Bakeless, *Lewis & Clark* (William Morrow and Co., 1947), 101.

3 *Letters of Lewis & Clark*, 654.

Lewis, his secretary and close personal friend. To give Lewis stature and authority, the President secured for Lewis a captaincy and permitted him to choose a companion. Lewis asked William Clark, brother of George Rogers Clark, to share the command of the venture. William was a friend and a former army buddy of Lewis' service on the Ohio frontier. These two would gain undying fame, and Jefferson's dream would become a reality.

Jefferson called the expedition "the darling of my heart," and he had a deep and abiding personal interest in all the details of planning and of organizing the project. He asked Andrew Ellicot, chief surveyor of the United States, to instruct Lewis in the use of scientific instruments. He also made available the army supplies and facilities at Philadelphia and at Harper's Ferry. The President extended every effort to aid the expedition and to assure its success.

Arms, supplies, equipment, and Indian presents were hauled by wagon from Philadelphia via Lancaster and Harper's Ferry to Pittsburgh. From this point it was Lewis' responsibility to move equipment and provisions to the vicinity of St. Louis where the ascent of the Missouri would begin.

Pittsburgh, as the Gateway to the West, was well-known to Lewis. It was the logical jumping-off place. From his former military service, he knew that a keelboat was the best means of transporting tons of supplies to the Missouri and beyond. With this knowledge, Lewis ordered the supply officer at Pittsburgh, Lieutenant Moses Hooke, to contract such a boat. Lewis wanted a sixty-foot boat, ten feet wide that would draw about three feet of water.⁴ And confident that such a boat would be well on its way toward completion, Lewis arrived in Pittsburgh on July 15.⁵ The wagon loads of supplies and equipment were in Pittsburgh on July 22.⁶

Lewis was ready to start the adventure, but to his frustration, he found no keelboat waiting; nor did he find even a keel laid. His chagrin increased day by day as the boat builder failed to get started and as the dry August weather visibly lowered the water level of the Ohio.⁷

At first the boat builder swore that there was no lumber available. This could have been true since so many boats were built in and around Pittsburgh. But even after the lumber was secured, the pro-

4 *Ibid.*, 73. For detailed drawings of the boat see Ernest Staples Osgood, ed., *The Field Notes of Captain William Clark 1803-1805* (Yale University Press, 1964), 22. Hereafter referred to as *Field Notes*.

5 *Letters of Lewis & Clark*, 110.

6 *Ibid.*, 112.

7 *Ibid.*, 121, 122, 125.

pensity of the boat contractor for liquor slowed the construction. Captain Lewis made daily visits to the building site and even tried to help in the construction. To him the progress from keel to finished boat seemed interminable. He complained in his letters that it even took twelve days for the workmen to make the oars and poles.⁸

Finally, after six weeks, the boat was finished. It was fifty-five feet long, about ten feet in breadth, and had a mast and sail.⁹ The sail was of little use during the 981 mile trip down the Ohio since the low water forced Lewis time and again to hire oxen to pull to boat over the sand bars.¹⁰ But he was determined and wrote Jefferson that he would go on if he made only one mile a day.

The Ohio journey, however, did serve as a shakedown cruise for the eleven-man crew. And eventually the keelboat made a 3,000 mile round-trip up the Missouri and back to St. Louis.¹¹ The boat served the expedition for better than 4,000 miles of river travel, and it was indispensable to the ascent of the Missouri and to the success of the expedition.

The Lewis and Clark expedition probed deep into the heart of the continent and then beyond to the Pacific Ocean. It gave the United States a substantial claim to the Oregon country. It was the initial move toward the opening of the Far West to the waiting East. And although the true value of the expedition is still being assayed by historians, Pittsburgh's part in this dramatic endeavor has been mostly forgotten.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 534.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹¹ The keelboat was sent back to St. Louis from the upper Missouri in the spring of 1805. See *Field Notes*, 185.