Rediscovering Lewis & Clark

C.B.J. Saint-Memin's portrait of Meriwether Lewis as he appeared in 1807 upon his return from the West.

William Clark.

By David Halaas and Andrew Masich
It's been called the greatest exploring expedition in American history—Lewis & Clark's epic trek to the Pacific. Between 1803 and 1806, the Corps of Discovery claimed and charted a vast new territory, made contact with Indian nations, revealed scientific wonders, and experienced adventures that captured the imagination of the nation and the world.

But few Americans today know that the journey began in Pittsburgh, the "Gateway to the West."

THE PITTSBURGH CONNECTION

In 1794, young Ensign Meriwether Lewis of the Virginia militia responded to President Washington's call to suppress the Whiskey Rebellion in Western Pennsylvania. He spent the winter at a small post on the Monongahela River, 15 miles above Pittsburgh near present-day Brownsville.

The following year, 21-year-old Lewis challenged a fellow officer to a duel in an argument over politics. General "Mad" Anthony Wayne transferred the hot-headed ensign to the company of Chosen Riflemen, an elite unit of sharpshooters commanded by Captain William Clark. Lewis and Clark served together in the Ohio Country west of Pittsburgh and became lifelong friends.

While stationed at Fort Fayette in Pittsburgh in March 1801, Lewis, now a captain and paymaster of the First Infantry Regiment, was summoned to Washington by his friend and old neighbor Thomas Jefferson, newly elected President of the United States. Lewis had grown up in sight of Jefferson's estate, Monticello. Jefferson needed a private secretary and advisor on the "Western Country."
I SHALL EMBARK AT PITTSBURGH [AND] DESCEND THE OHIO IN A KEELED BOAT OF ABOUT TEN TONS BURTHEN, FROM PITTSBURGH TO IT'S [sic] MOUTH, THENCE UP THE MISSISSIPPI TO THE MOUTH OF THE MISSOURIE, AND UP THAT RIVER AS FAR AS IT'S NAVIGATION IS PRACTICABLE WITH A BOAT OF THIS DESCRIPTION, THERE TO PREPARE CANOES OF BARK OR RAW-HIDES, AND PROCEED TO IT'S SOURCE, AND IF PRACTICABLE PASS OVER THE WATERS OF THE COLUMBIA OR ORIGAN RIVER AND BY DESCENDING IT REACH THE WESTERN OCEAN.

Jefferson commissioned Lewis to lead the Corps of Discovery even before the Louisiana Territory was purchased from French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803. Lewis and Jefferson chose Pittsburgh, the Gateway to the West, as the supply depot and launch point for the expedition—all purchases of supplies and trade goods were directed to the strategic Forks of the Ohio.

On June 19, 1803, Captain Lewis wrote to William Clark, now retired from the service and living in Kentucky:

I shall embark at Pittsburgh [and] descend the Ohio in a keeled boat of about ten tons burthen, from Pittsburgh to it's [sic] mouth, thence up the Mississippi to the mouth of the Missourie, and up that river as far as it's navigation is practicable with a boat of this description, there to prepare canoes of bark or raw-hides, and proceed to it's source, and if practicable pass over the waters of the Columbia or Origan River and by descending it reach the Western Ocean.

Lewis arrived at Fort Fayette (now 9th Street and Penn Avenue) in Pittsburgh at 2 p.m. on July 15, 1803, determined to leave the Forks of the Ohio by July 20. To his shock and dismay, he found the skeleton of the 55-foot, 10-ton keelboat that he had commissioned for $400 laying on its ways at Greenough's Boat Yard on the outskirts of Pittsburgh near Suck's (also known as Sooks or Sukes) Run. In 1803 alone, eight ship-building companies in Greenough's Ship Yard produced $40,000 worth of boats, barges, keelboats, and sea-faring schooners. Lewis's keelboat was constructed of locally sawn lumber, mostly black walnut and pine.

To Lewis's horror, his boat builder was dead drunk; Lewis complained to Jefferson that the man was guilty of "unpardonable negligence." As he waited, Lewis bought one flat-bottom pirogue, possibly built upstream at Elizabeth by John Walker, a tavern-keeper.
who operated a ferry and sawmill. Lewis went to the boat yard every day to “hasten the work” while his second in command, Lieutenant Moses Hooke, recruited men, received supplies, and saw to the daily preparation of the expedition.

Lewis had not received a reply from old army comrade William Clark, whom he had offered the co-capitaincy of the expedition. On August 3, 1803, he requested Secretary of War Henry Dearborn to appoint Lieutenant Hooke as his second in command – it would be the “Lewis & Hooke Expedition.”

From the Pittsburgh region came crewmembers George Shannon, at 18 the youngest member of the expedition, and John Colter, an experienced backwoodsman. Sergeant Patrick Gass also lived nearby and knew the Ohio Country like the back of his hand. Lewis made two other important acquisitions in Pittsburgh: a big, black Newfoundland dog he named Seaman, and a newfangled Girodien air rifle with which he hoped to impress the Indian nations he encountered during the journey.

Because the boat was not ready to launch when Lewis arrived on July 15, the expedition was delayed six weeks – just long enough for Clark’s acceptance letter to arrive. Poor Lieutenant Hooke, packed and ready to go, had to stay behind and his chance for immortality vanished.

Lewis watched the river level drop daily and he feared that the launch window would close and the expedition would not get underway until the following spring. Pittsburghers told Lewis it was the lowest water in memory and people could even walk across the shallows of the Monongahela.

At 7 a.m. on August 31, the boat builder drove home the last nail and Lewis instantly loaded the keelboat and set off at 11 a.m. with “11 hands, 7 of which are soldiers, a pilot and three young men on trial,” floating past the Point and arriving at Brunot’s Island, three miles below.

On August 31, 1803, Lewis and the Corps of Discovery made their first stop at Brunot’s Island. Items in Dr. Brunot’s house that day that are on display at the History Center include a door knocker and engraved powderhorn (c. 1760) plus, shown here, Pittsburgh-made coffee pot (engraved with Brunot family arms), miniature portrait of Betsy Brunot (c. 1803), and a candle snuffer with tray.

This life mask of Meriwether Lewis by artist Michael Kraus is based on the four known portraits painted during Lewis’s lifetime. It portrays the 29-year-old captain as he appeared on his departure from Pittsburgh in August 1803.
OUR REGION HAS A COLORFUL PAST, INDEED.

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The first of the Lewis and Clark journals was published in 1807 in Pittsburgh, authored by Sergeant Patrick Gass. Gass beat the captains to press by seven years, much to Lewis's displeasure and Jefferson's chagrin. Lewis seemed unable to complete and publish his versions of the journals. He fell into a deep depression and committed suicide in 1809. After the return of the expedition, Gass returned to Western Pennsylvania, where he lived and where his descendants still reside.

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On the island, Lewis met Dr. Felix Brunot, who had come to America with Marquis de Lafayette and served in the American Revolution under General George Washington at the battles of Brandywine and Germantown. Brunot settled in Pittsburgh in 1797 and established a farm on the island that now bears his name. Lewis had met Brunot while at Fort Fayette. When Lewis’s flotilla – comprising the keelboat, pirogue, and possibly a dugout canoe – docked at the island, many of the Brunot family turned out, along with other Pittsburgh dignitaries, to wish Lewis’s Corps of Discovery bon voyage.

Lewis took the occasion to demonstrate his new air gun, a secret weapon of the Austrian Army. Lewis described the incident that followed:

Charged it and fired myself seven times [at] fifty five yards with pretty good success; after which a Mr. Blaze Cenas [a Brunot cousin] being unacquainted with the management of the gun suffered her to discharge herself accidentially. The ball passed through the hat of a woman about 40 yards distant cutting her temple about the fourth of the diameter of the ball; she fell instantly and the blood gushing from her temple. We were all in the greatest consternation. Supposed she was dead [but] in a minute she revived to our enespressable satisfaction, and by examination we found the wound by no means mortal or even dangerous.

Lewis quickly assembled the crew and shoved off, but the keelboat became stranded on “ripples,” or sandbars, at McKees Rocks. Three times the crew unloaded tons of supplies from the keelboat into the shallow-draft pirogue and manhandled the boat over the sand and rocks.

Somewhere between McKees Rocks and Neville Island the crew moored their boats. Lewis recorded the very first entry of the now famed Lewis & Clark Journals: “halted for the night much fatigued after labouring with my men all day – gave my men some whiskey and retired to rest at 8 OClock.”

The corps would continue west for another three years and 3,000 miles, its adventures ingrained in American history, a journey launched from Pittsburgh.

Andrew Masich is president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Regional History Center; David Halaas is Museum Division Director. They co-authored Cheyenne Dog Soldiers: A Ledgerbook History of Coups and Combat (University Press of Colorado, 2000). Their latest book, Halfbreed: The Remarkable True Story of George Bent, is available from DaCapo Press.
ARMS AND AMMUNITION

Superior arms and ammunition enabled Lewis and Clark's men to successfully hunt and defend themselves. Corps of Discovery members each day ate up to nine pounds of fresh meat, including elk, buffalo, antelope, and bear. There were several confrontations with Indians, but only one deadly encounter. In July 1806, on Two Medicine Creek near present Great Falls, Mont., Blackfeet Indians attempted to capture expedition rifles and horses. In defending themselves, Private Reuben Fields used his hunting knife to kill one of the raiders, and Captain Lewis used his pistol to shoot down another. Guns and horses were as essential to the Blackfeet as they were to Lewis and Clark. In fact, for the Indians of the Great Plains, they were the keys to survival and dominance. Though Lewis deeply regretted the fight and the killing, he felt he had no choice; keeping his arms and horses was a matter of life and death.

Historians still debate the type of firearms Lewis brought from the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Va. (more information is available at [www.nps.gov/haha/lewis]). Some believe they carried the 1792-94 contract rifle, modified to accept new flintlocks made at Harper's Ferry. The .54 caliber U.S. 1803 model rifle evolved from this type. Lewis himself was accidentally shot by Private Pierre Cruzatte with one of these "short rifles" during the return trip. The men carried .69 caliber flintlock military muskets and pistols. All of the expedition members were issued a knife, hunting pouch, and attached powder flask, as well as a vent pick and horsehair brush.

The .51 caliber Girandoni air rifle pictured here is the type carried by Meriwether Lewis to impress Indian tribes. It was developed as a secret weapon by the Austrian Army in 1780. Judge Thomas Rodney, who saw Captain Lewis demonstrate his air rifle in Wheeling, Va., just one week following the shooting incident on Brunot’s Island, described it:

September 8, 1803. Visited Captain Lewess barge. He shewed us his air gun which fired 22 times at one charge. He shewed us the mode of charging her and then loaded with 12 balls which he intended to fire one at a time; but she by some means lost the whole charge of air at the first fire. He charged her again and then she fired twice. He then found the cause and in some measure prevented the airs escaping, and then she fired seven times; but when in perfect order she fires 22 times in a minute. All the balls are put at once into a short side barrel and are then dropped into the chamber of the gun one at a time by moving a spring; and when the trigger is pulled just so much air escapes out of the air bag which forms the [breech] of the gun as serves for one ball.

Rodney perfectly describes a Girandoni repeating air rifle, with its large loading spring and multiple-shot magazine. Although Lewis never identified the maker of his air rifle, it seems likely, given Rodney's description, that it was a Girandoni air gun.
THE ROONEY CORPS OF REDISCOVERY

The Rooney family took back to the History Center photographs, water samples, botanical specimens, and artifacts collected along the trail which were incorporated into an exhibit, *Rediscovering Lewis & Clark: A Journey with the Rooney Family.*

## ANALYSIS OF SELECTED WATER SAMPLES

Pittsburgh Water and Sewer Authority August 25, 2003

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<th>Location</th>
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<th>Hardness (mg CaCO3/L)</th>
<th>Alkalinity (mg CaCO3/L)</th>
<th>Ca (mg/L)</th>
<th>Mg (mg/L)</th>
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The Rooney family visited Fort Clatsop and posed for a final picture in Astoria, Ore.

In Lane Deer, Mont., the Rooney family visited the Northern Cheyenne Reservation, where they met with tribal leaders and participated in a special sweatlodge ceremony.

SUGGESTED READINGS


Historian Gary E. Moulton has just completed his 20-year effort to transcribe and annotate the Lewis and Clark journals. In a 13-volume set, readers can relive the epic journey and its Pennsylvania origins. For the Pittsburgh Lewis & Clark connection, see The Journals of Lewis and Clark Expedition, Volume 2, August 30, 1803 – August 24, 1804 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

For contemporary documents and letters associated with the expedition, see Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783 – 1854, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978) edited by Donald Jackson. Readers can follow the keelboat's construction as well as the shooting incident on Brunot's Island.