THE BUILDING OF

The Lewis and Clark Boat in Pittsburgh

By William K. Brunot
In 2007, a man named Larry Myers contacted the Heinz History Center to say that one of his family members, Jacob Myers, had been a boatbuilder in Pittsburgh in the early 1800s. Larry supplied valid and important references that led to an investigation into the building of Lewis and Clark’s boat and Pittsburgh’s role in it.
The circumstances surrounding the building of the vessel that was used by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on their exploring expedition in 1803 have been uncertain for years. This boat, generally called a “keelboat,” should more accurately be called a barge, or military galley, after a careful look at its design. The differences between the two types of boats are significant. In his journal during the voyage, Lewis himself, and others who saw it, called his big boat a “barge.” The drawings of this boat made by Captain William Clark and other references in the journals also establish its type clearly.

For many years, the fact that Lewis went down the Ohio River with his barge and other smaller boats was not widely known. There is a well-documented tradition that one or more of the Lewis boats was built in Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, but the present research concludes that his barge was built in Pittsburgh.

The research outlined in Patricia Lowry’s August 3, 2003, Post-Gazette article “Who Built the Big Boat?” pointed to a new possibility—that the Lewis boat was built at Fort Fayette. This stockade, erected in 1791 on the banks of the Allegheny River, protected settlers from Indian raids after Fort Pitt had fallen into ruins. It is known that Captain Lewis had his supplies stored at Fort Fayette in preparation for his departure down the Ohio River. A painting of the city of Pittsburgh believed to have been executed in 1804, when studied in detail recently, revealed not only an image of Fort Fayette, but a building on the shoreline that has the features of a boatbuilding structure.

BOATS FOR THE WEST AND ON THE OHIO

The famous Revolutionary War soldier General George Rogers Clark, William Clark’s older brother, used armed galleys in his campaigns against the British and their Indian allies on the western frontier. Before the summer of 1780, with his usual promises to pay the boatbuilders, Clark engaged workmen to construct 100 boats, mostly cheap flatboats, which were to be completed within two months and used to transport provisions on his planned 1780 expedition.

At that time, Jacob Myers was with Clark in Illinois. On July 21, 1780, Myers sent a bill to the Governor of Virginia listing “cost and items used … to make 7 boats for the state of Virginia, cost of 1,765 pounds currency for calking, nails, boxes for artillery and horses.”

Jacob Myers is mentioned again on records of September 29, 1780, and February 20, 1781. During the spring and summer of 1781, General Clark was back in Pennsylvania attempting to raise troops for another expedition. He embarked from Pittsburgh on August 8 with three field pieces and only 400 men.

Jacob Myers was still attached to Clark’s army on March 22, 1782, when a bill was sent from Louisville for “entries for items and cash distributed to various officers and persons—references to corn, meat, and other items.” Persons owed included Jacob Myers. Many letters and bills were sent to Virginia Governor Benjamin Harrison at that time for canoes, boats, barges, paddles, oars, anchors, nails, calking, calking irons, mallets, augers, hemp, cordage, and other boat building supplies.

Major Isaac Craig had been ordered to Fort Pitt with artillery and military supplies. He reached his station in Pittsburgh on June 25, 1780, and was still directing boatbuilding operations in 1790 when he paid $2.66 and 2/3 cents a foot for most of the keelboats and barges he bought.

Of course, there were other armed barges traveling the Ohio whose designs were nearly identical to the vessel that Lewis and Clark used in 1803. On March 21, 1791, John Pope, traveling from Pittsburgh to New Orleans, encountered a “Keel-bottomed boat with a square sail” bound upriver from New Madrid, making two-and-a-half miles an hour without the aid of oars. When he neared Natchez, Pope found a Spanish fleet consisting of a governor’s barge occupied by Governor Guyoso de Lemos accompanied by other vessels. This “galley” had 28 men, 24 oars, one six-pounder, and eight swivel guns.

For many years, the fact that Lewis went down the Ohio River with his barge and other smaller boats was not widely known. There is a well-documented tradition that one or more of the Lewis boats was built in Elizabeth, Pennsylvania, but the present research concludes that his barge was built in Pittsburgh.
A detail of a painting of Pittsburgh, c. 1804, by George Beck, shows Fort Fayette at left, back a bit from the Allegheny River.

The building near the water’s edge is definitely not a ferry building, as described in a 1948 article about this painting; any ferry building, for temporary shelter, would be over the water, not so tall, and not having a big open bay door facing the water, as this does. Instead, this is undoubtedly a boatbuilding structure, close to the water so that boats could be slid along logs or rails when launched but high enough to escape spring floods. Such buildings were about 35 feet high: you can see that it is higher than the fort walls themselves. The building face would have shown as it does in the painting, in the afternoon sun.

The sketch shows what such a boat house at Fort Fayette might have looked like. The main bay would be for larger barges, and the side bays for smaller pirogues, some of which were built upside down. The side sections housed the timber drying racks, the machine shops, small saw mills, stock rooms, drafting tables, and carpentry shop. The rope walks and the sail-making lofts were different operations, and would not have been in this building. There would have been an overhead crane, possibly on a rail, running along the peak of the roof.

The L-shaped structure on the shore just below the boat house isn’t a boat; it is the cantilever crane, on the dock, that would have been used to load Meriwether Lewis’s goods onto his barge.

Fort Fayette was on the south side of the Allegheny River about a quarter of a mile east of Fort Pitt; it sat within about 100 yards of the bank on beautiful rising ground. It straddled present-day Penn Avenue between Ninth and Tenth streets.
A drawing of this galley shows a remarkable similarity to the Lewis and Clark big boat, which was built 12 years later.13

**FORT FAYETTE AND ANTHONY WAYNE**

By fall 1791, much of Fort Pitt had been torn down. In Major Isaac Craig’s letter of October 6 to Secretary of War General Knox, Craig told Knox that Mssrs. Turnbull and Marmie were continuing to pull down and sell the materials of the fort. Knox responded on December 16, directing Craig to build a new fort for the protection of Pittsburgh. Major Craig decided upon the name of Fort Lafayette. Knox approved, but the name “Fayette” was used thereafter.14

Fort Fayette was on the south side of the Allegheny River about a quarter of a mile east of Fort Pitt; it sat within about 100 yards of the bank on beautiful rising ground.15 It straddled present-day Penn Avenue between Ninth and Tenth streets. The structures were enclosed in a square stockade surrounding about an acre. Four bastions contained blockhouses, a brick arsenal, and a barracks with 30 rooms. On May 5, 1792, Captain Thomas Hughes moved his men to the fort.

General Anthony Wayne commanded the third army sent against the Indians north of the Ohio, arriving at Pittsburgh on June 14, 1792.16 Wayne immediately plunged into the business of organizing and training his “army”—just 40 recruits, plus the corporal’s command of dragoons that had accompanied Wayne across the state.17

The number in his force grew rapidly and the “army” was renamed a “legion.” General Wayne himself headquartered at the southeast corner of Liberty and West streets, while his troops encamped on Suke’s Run and across the Allegheny River. The quartermaster and his supplies were kept at Fort Fayette. James O’Hara and Isaac Craig bought flour, meat, forage, and other supplies, and contracted boats for the army’s use.18 By the time of Wayne’s departure, Major Craig had built 42 boats, mostly flatboats, for his troops at Pittsburgh. They were larger than those he had purchased for army use the year before.19

In a letter to General Knox dated November 30, 1792, Craig reported that at an early hour, the artillery, infantry, and rifle corps (except for a small garrison) left Fort Fayette, embarked, and descended the Ohio to “Legionville.” As soon as the troops had embarked, the general went on board his barge under a 15-gun salute from a militia artillery corps at Fort Fayette.20 The salute commemorated the 15 states in the union, and voiced the army’s gratitude for the “politeness and hospitality” that the officers of the legion had experienced from Pittsburgh’s citizens.

Among Wayne’s troops was William Clark, commissioned as a first lieutenant in the fourth sub-legion in Wayne’s western army.21 Thus Lieutenant Clark would have known well the builders and characteristics of the vessels carrying these troops.

By June 1793, Major Isaac Craig, the deputy quartermaster general, forwarded 104 flatboats to Wayne’s expedition laden with provisions, horses, and equipment in addition to goods sent by other craft.22

**THE JACOB MEYERS PACKET BOAT SERVICE**

It seems likely that Jacob Myers participated in building some of General Wayne’s barges because Craig contracted out work and because immediately after Wayne’s departure, Myers built the barges used in his own “Packet Service,” the first boat of which was ready to leave Pittsburgh in October 1793. Because the fortunes of boatbuilders undoubtedly waxed and waned as the demand from the military swelled and stopped, Myers might have been in need of a new market.

Boat carpentry is a highly skilled occupation, far more complicated than home building. Every frame, plank, and rail is curved, twisted, or sawn at angles, and must have to take on a three-dimensional shape. Fittings are curved, cast, or carved, and even sails are not flat. The boatbuilder serves a long apprenticeship and can be in great demand for intermittent periods.

In 1793 Jacob Myers offered his fortnightly service between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati on boats propelled by oars and sails. These were no flatboats; they were intended for continuous service up and down the river. The advertisements, which first appeared in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* on October 19, 1793, and in the *Cincinnati Sentinel* of the Northwestern Territory on January 11, 1794, described the first regularly scheduled boat service on the Ohio River between the two cities.23 One reference mentioned that there were to be four boats of 20 tons each, a size within the range Meriwether Lewis specified in his initial list for the expedition in 1803.24

The enterprise, however, appears to have been short-lived. Isaac Craig clearly knew of the Myers boat service, and in May 1794, wrote that the idea of passenger packet-boats ought to be abandoned.25 The government mail boats that operated from 1794 to 1798 carried a few passengers, but thereafter no regular service appears to have been available on the upper Ohio until the advent of the steamboat. Presumably the ease and cheapness with which boats could be purchased or passage obtained on the boats of others made packet service unprofitable.26
LEWIS, THE WHISKEY REBELLION, AND CLARK

In 1794, a federal army unit was sent to Western Pennsylvania to help put down the Whiskey Rebellion. Meriwether Lewis, who was then 20 years of age, had enlisted in the army as a private and was part of this unit.27 They camped on the Monongahela River about 15 miles above (i.e., south of) Pittsburgh on Andrew McFarlane’s farm at what is now the riverfront town of Elrama, two miles upriver from Elizabeth. McFarlane’s ferry landing was on the west side of the Monongahela River. Lewis may have become familiar with the Elizabeth town boatyards and boatbuilders at that time.

At the same time, Fort Fayette was the center of the rapidly changing forces involved in the insurrection, and was used for incarcerating some of the prisoners.28 Lewis could have seen the Jacob Myers’s advertisements for the packet boat service in the Pittsburgh Gazette, and may have seen his boats firsthand in Pittsburgh.

The 1795 Pittsburgh map on which the Fort Fayette plan is shown most clearly also shows a “U.S. Wharf” on the shore adjoining the fort. The modern definition of the word “wharf” differs somewhat from the definition at this time, which could simply mean a shore. For example, the area known as the “Monongahela Wharf” was a riverbank until well after 1850.

In 1796, William Clark retired from the army with the rank of captain to live quietly with his family. Early that same year, General Victor Collot, a French soldier who had fought on the American side during the Revolution, passed through Pittsburgh, giving us some insight into Fort Fayette and boatbuilding in the city. His mission was secret: he was to assess, for the information of the French government, the strength of the fortifications along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. He visited Fort Fayette and had a low opinion of it, stating, “On a dark night, four grenadiers, with a dozen faggots of dry wood, might burn the fort and all the garrison, and not let a single individual escape.” He also remarked about the cost of boats at that time, saying that keelboats and barges were selling farther up the Monongahela at $1.50 a foot. He stated that Pittsburgh prices were exorbitant.29

GALLEYS BUILT IN PITTSBURGH

Two years later, during a period of trouble with France, two row galleys were built at Pittsburgh under the supervision of Major Isaac Craig. These galleys were 45 feet in length and 13 in beam. They had two masts and were equipped with sails and rigging. There were 30 oars of differing lengths, and the row benches were constructed so that they could be folded away. The first galley, the President Adams, was launched on May 19, 1798, with General Wilkinson presiding.30 Tarleton Bates, Virginian and best friend of Meriwether Lewis, wrote to his brother Frederick Bates six days later, “On Saturday the nineteenth, precisely at 2 PM, the first galley was launched at this place. It was said to be a very beautiful launch, she slid a most unusual distance, I believe 126 feet.”31 It departed down the Ohio on June 8, 1798, with General Wilkinson and his suite on board, followed by six large flat-bottomed boats and several smaller craft.

Because of low water in the Ohio River, the second galley Senator Ross was not launched until nearly a year later, on March 26, 1799. She carried a 24-pounder gun in her bow and some swivel guns on deck. The launching was heralded by a salute fired on board and returned by the guns of Fort Fayette. By April, she had departed for the Mississippi. By then, the anticipated war with France was averted.32

It is plausible that both the President Adams and the Senator Ross were built at the Fort Fayette yards. They were built under the supervision of Major Isaac Craig, who was in charge of operations at that place, and the firing of a salute from the fort would make sense only if they had been launched there—the artillery had a limited effective noise range and there was no means of communication to coordinate such a firing if the galleys had been launched farther away.

CAPTAIN LEWIS NEEDS A BIG BOAT

In September 1800, Meriwether Lewis returned to the Indian frontier. While in Pittsburgh, he had direct dealings with Major Isaac Craig.33 On December 5, Lewis was promoted to captain and on one of his trips traveled down the Ohio with a 21-foot bateau (or keelboat) and a pirogue (or dugout), thus gaining real experience on the western rivers.34 In 1801, Lewis was in Pittsburgh off and on during his military trips where he likely had contact with Major Isaac Craig again.35 It’s unlikely Lewis could have avoided seeing Myers and his boats during this period if Myers was still living in or near Pittsburgh.

Late in 1801, Lewis received the invitation to become secretary to President Jefferson. In 1802 Jefferson and Lewis started planning the great western expedition, and by spring 1803, President Jefferson and Lewis had completed their planning. With Jefferson’s orders, Lewis traveled to Philadelphia to study navigation, surveying,
medicine, and biology with top experts. He also purchased large quantities of military and civilian supplies and trade goods.

In a letter to Jefferson in January 1803, Lewis offered an estimate of the cost of his "means of transportation": $430. He listed his "Articles Wanted" in detail in his May-June summary. Among those items were his "means of transportation":

- 1 Keeled Boat light strong at least 60 feet in length her burthen equal to 8 Tons.

This drawing places some modern street names and landmarks atop a map drawn for the 1876 History of Allegheny County. Details of Fort Fayette include its blockhouse, powder magazine, barracks, and guard house. HC Library & Archives.
No record of the order or contract for the big boat’s construction has been found, and so it is not known who was selected as contractor. What does exist, however, is an example as to how Lewis would have implemented such an order. In a lengthy letter to Jefferson concerning his boat and other transactions, he stated,

I have also written to Dr. Dickson, at Nashville, and requested him to contract in my behalf with some confidential boat-builder at that place, to prepare a boat for me as soon as possible, and to purchase a large light wooden canoe; for this purpose I enclosed the Dr. 50 dollars, which sum I did not conceive equal by any means to the purchase of the two vessels, but supposed it sufficient for the purpose of the canoe, and to answer also as a small advance to the boat-builder; a description of these vessels was given. The objects of my mission are stated to him as before mentioned to the several officers.37

Lewis wrote again to Jefferson on May 29, 1803, from Philadelphia: “I have written again the Dr. Dickson at Nashville, from whom I have not yet heard on the subject of my boat and canoe.”38

These two letters are revealing. First, they illustrate how Lewis might have ordered the big boat in Pittsburgh. Further, they show that as late as May 29, 1803, a day or so before he left Philadelphia, he was still trying unsuccessfully to get his big boat built in Nashville, Tennessee! He then was intending to travel downriver from Pittsburgh with all his goods in smaller boats and by overland transport.

“The person who contracted to build my boat engaged to have it in readiness by the 20th ins., in this however he has failed; he pleads his having been disappointed in procuring timber, but says he has now supplied himself with the necessary materials, and that she shall be completed by the last of this month...”
LEWIS SHIPS HIS SUPPLIES TO PITTSBURGH

At this time, Lieutenant Moses Hooke was in command at Fort Fayette; Lewis had a high regard for his character and competence.7 Lewis also noted that Major Isaac Craig, who had always been associated with Fort Fayette, was also present in Pittsburgh at that time and could take care of his stores if necessary.8

While still in Philadelphia, Lewis shipped his goods from there to the Indian Department, Pittsburgh, which was located at Fort Fayette.9 The list of charges taken out on Lewis's account in Philadelphia included: Transportation of public stores from Philadelphia to Indian D. Pittsburgh 18 small falling axes to be furnished at (ditto) Indian D.

1 Boat and her caparison, including spiked poles, boat hooks & toe line to be furnished at Pittsburg

Lewis also ordered “A strong waggon – wt. From here (Philadelphia) 2700 – to be increased to 3500 or more” and instructed that “the box of mathematical instruments to be sent for Mr. Patterson & well secured with canvas – mark’d ‘This side up’ on the top – & and particular charge given the waggoner respecting it.”10

These instructions indicate that the equipment purchased in Philadelphia was to go to Pittsburgh by wagon—not to some intermediate location on the Monongahela River such as Elizabeth. Fort Fayette, moreover, would have made more sense as a destination for the items, considering the quantity, value, purpose, and ownership of this shipment of military equipment and trading goods. Lewis would have hardly shipped them to an inn, to the post office, to a boatyard on the Monongahela, or to the dilapidated Fort Pitt.

By this time, both Lewis and Clark knew every aspect of the military boats used on previous river campaigns, and would have most likely desired an armed galley—a craft that could mount and fire cannons and go upstream.

Although Lewis wrote that he wanted a “keeled boat,” an actual keelboat with full-length cabins would have been the wrong design for a big expedition up the Missouri. Lewis and Clark had to carry a huge load of supplies and trade goods as well as a large crew. Keelboats cannot mount a large sail and they have only a single oar for steering, which would have been too weak for a boat as large as the one Lewis and Clark needed. Barges or galleys have mounted rudders. A keelboat’s roof oars would have been too inefficient and too few for their big crew. Oars would have to be mounted lower to function. The main power for the boat, rowing, would have dominated the whole design of the Lewis and Clark’s boat selection, and thus led them to select the very type of boat that they did, which was a barge.

LEWIS HEADS TO PITTSBURGH, 1803

It is now clear, though, that the order for the big boat could not have reached Hooke and the Pittsburgh boatbuilder before the first week of June 1803! Having finished his business in Philadelphia, Lewis returned to Washington on the first of June. He left for Harpers Ferry on July 5, where he purchased 3,500 pounds of guns and other supplies. These goods were shipped by wagon to Pittsburgh. Lewis, on the move again by July 8, headed north. When he arrived in Pittsburgh on July 15, Lewis wrote to Jefferson at 3 p.m.: I arrived here at 2 O’clock, and learning that the mail closed at 5 this evening hasten to make this communication, tho’ it can only contain the mere information of my arrival…. I have not yet seen Lt. Hook nor made enquiry relative to my boat, on the state of which the time of my departure from hence must materially depend. The Ohio is quite low, but not so much so as to obstruct my passage altogether.11

Lewis had ridden in from the south. If his boat was being built anywhere along the Monongahela River—at any place between Elizabeth and the boatyards at Pittsburgh—Lewis might have ridden near the boatbuilding site upon entering the city. In fact, the post office was located in the southern section of the city throughout those years, near the boatyards on the Monongahela shore.12

Lewis did not know yet where his boat was being built, nor did he know who the builder was; he had to learn from Lieutenant Hooke, commandant at Fort Fayette and in charge of Lewis’s supplies there.

In Lewis’s letter to Jefferson on July 22, he referred to “The person who contracted to build my boat…. ” Lewis never indicated that he himself selected or contracted with a particular builder. He did not know which yard to visit and it would have been quite pointless for him to ride around the city looking for Lt. Hooke, Major Craig, or the boat that late in the afternoon.

Captain Lewis settled someplace upon his Pittsburgh arrival at 2 p.m., and by 3 o’clock, he was writing Jefferson. Perhaps he stopped at Jean Marie’s Inn, which was on the southeast edge of town, or at William Morrow’s “Sign of the Green Tree” tavern, where he had stayed previously. Perhaps he stayed with Major Isaac Craig at his house at Fort Pitt or with his close friend from Virginia, Tarleton Bates.
In his letter of July 22, Lewis wrote that he had expected his boat to be nearly finished when he reached Pittsburgh but was dismayed to find it in an early state of construction:

DEAR SIR: Yours of the 11th & 15th Ins: were duly received…. The person who contracted to build my boat engaged to have it in readiness by the 20th ins., in this however he has failed; he pleads his having been disappointed in procuring timber, but says he has now supplied himself with the necessary materials, and that she shall be completed by the last of this month; however in this I am by no means sanguine, nor do I believe from the progress he makes that she will be ready before the 5th of August; I visit him every day, and endeavour by every means in my power to hasten the completion of the work….

The Waggon from Harper's ferry arrived today, bringing everything with which she was charged in good order.

The party of recruits that were ordered from Carlisle to this place with a view to descend the river with me, have arrived with the exception of one, who deserted on the march, his place however can be readily supplied from the recruits at this place enlisted by Lieut. Hook….

Though Lewis never mentions the builder of the expedition vessel by name, a Jacob Myers was in the Pittsburgh area at exactly that time. His name appears in several civil records. Myers was proven as a builder of armed barges, but he was getting up in years. Major Isaac Craig would have known of past boats built by him.

Lewis said he visited the boat every day, and that he spent most of his time with the workmen. He could not have done this if he stayed in Pittsburgh and the boat was over 15 miles away by water or over land in Elizabeth.

As late as August 3, 1803, Lewis remarked in a letter to soon-to-be partner William Clark (who was then at present-day Louisville, Kentucky):

my boat only detains me, she is not yet completed tho’ the workman who contracted to build her promises that she shall be in readiness by the last day of the next week. The water is low, this may retard, but shall not totally obstruct my progress being determined to proceed tho’ I should be able to make greater speed than a boat’s length per day.

On August 9th, Major Craig wrote to Caleb Swan that “Capt. Meriwether Lewis prepares to descend the Ohio and ascend the Mississippi.” Lewis wrote Jefferson another letter recounting in more detail some of his experiences during the last few weeks in Pittsburgh:

DEAR SIR: It was not until 7 O’Clock on the morning of the 31st of August that my boat was completed, she was instantly loaded, and at 10 A.M. on the same day I left Pittsburgh, where I had been most shamefully detained by the unpardonable negligence of my boat builder. On my arrival at Pittsburgh, my calculation was that my boat would be in readiness by the 5th of August; this term however elapsed and the boat so far from being finished was only partially planked on one side; in this situation I had determined to abandon the boat, and to purchase two or three perogues and descend the river in them, and depend on purchasing a boat as I descended, there being none to be had at Pittsburgh; from this resolution I was dissuaded first by the representations of the best informed merchants of that place who assured me that the chances were much against my being able to procure a boat below; and secondly by the positive assurances given me by the boat-builder that she would be ready on the last of the then ensuing week (the 13th): however a few days after, according to his usual custom he got drunk, quarreled with his workmen, and several of them left him, nor could they be prevailed on to return: I threatened him
with the penalty of his contract, and exacted a promise of greater sobriety in future which, he took care to perform with as little good faith, as he had his previous promises with regard to the boat, continuing to be constantly either drunk or sick.

I spent most of my time with the workmen, alternately persuading [sic] and threatening, but neither threats, persuasion or any other means which I could devise were sufficient to procure the completion of the work sooner than the 31st of August; by which time the water was so low that those who pretended to be acquainted with the navigation of the river declared it impracticable to descend it; however in conformity to my previous determination I set out.46

In this letter, Lewis said that the boat was “completed” early in the morning of the 31st. If the massive and partly perishable supplies that had to be loaded on the boat just before leaving the dock had to be re-loaded on wagons at Fort Fayette, unloaded on docks located the Monongahela River, and wait there exposed, with quickly improvised stowage plans, this would mean more delays, damage, and public speculation about the military nature of the expedition. Instead, Lewis stated explicitly that he loaded the very day that the boat was completed. The boat was completed at 7 a.m. and fully loaded three hours later.

Because of the three mile distance, the boat could not have been built in Elizabeth, Pa., which is nearly 20 miles up the Monongahela from Brunot’s Island.

In the August 9th letter to Swan, Major Craig stated: “Capt. Meriwether Lewis descended the Ohio the 31st on board a very fine boat fitted out with all convenience it[s] size would admit.” This comment gives us a clear statement, from one who knew well the many boats that had been built on the western rivers, that the Lewis boat was one of a high quality.

Also, Captain Lewis clearly states the distance from his embarkation place to his first stop at Brunot’s Island was three miles—the exact distance from Fort Fayette to the landing near Dr. Felix Brunot’s farm on the island. Lewis could not have measured this on a moving river, but rather he knew this distance because he had been to the island before—the measurement came from land surveys.

After many days travel down the Ohio, the Lewis party reached Wheeling, now in West Virginia. Captain Lewis met Thomas Rodney, who later commented on this interaction in his own journal. Rodney called the Lewis boat a “barge” several times and made other comments that added to the information about the boat:

Captain Lewis’s is a stout young man but not so robust as to look able to fully accomplish the object of his mission, nor does he seem to set out in the manner that promises a fulfillment of it. He sits out in a vessel 56 feet long and completely equipped with sails and 18 oars, with as many soldiers and rivermen as are necessary to man her, and a Mr. Clark, son of Genl. Clark as his companion; and his vessel fitted very nice and comfortable accommodations with great stores of baggage and cargo so that she draws 2 ½ feet of water and will be very heavy to go up against the stream of the Mississippi and other rivers.

This will be the cause of great delay in ascending the rivers so far as this vessel may carry him; but he has what he calls a portable boat, the frame of which is made of iron, to proceed in; yet it seems to me that he had better have adopted the long experience of the Canadians and used bark canoes that are used by them in their northern trade. He has already been delayed a long time in the Ohio waiting for his boat, which cost 400 dollars, and in getting this far, and now is obliged to use three or four Ohio canoes to light him over the riffs or ripples below this place.47

But Lewis knew better than Rodney. A barge was the biggest vessel they could have used and still have gotten up the Missouri River. Rodney might not have understood that a keelboat or just canoes and pirogues would be too small for the military trade goods and other supplies that Lewis and Clark had to carry. Also, Lewis and Clark intended to take many more men and supplies out of St. Louis than were on the voyage down the Ohio.

After more arduous river travel, Lewis wrote to Clark when he reached Cincinnati at the end of September:

DEAR CLARK: After a most tedious and laborious passage from Pittsburgh I have at length reached this place; it was not untill the 31st of August that I was enabled to take my departure from that place owing to the unpardonable negligence and inattention of the boat builders who, unfortunately for me, were a set of most incorrigible drunkards, and with whom, neither threats, intreaties nor any other mode of treatment which I could devise had any effect; as an instance of their tardyness it may serfice to mention that they were 12 days in preparing my poles and oars.50

Lewis referred to his builder in this letter as “a workman” and “the boat-builder” along with a set of “drunkards.” These references seem to rule out the possibility that he contracted with one of the bigger
shipbuilding companies. Lewis noted that his boatbuilder was a man of “mature” years; Jacob Myers would have been about 70 and given his long career, may have known many men in the area who were capable and willing to help with boatbuilding. Lewis does not, however, name Myers in his journal or letters.

Although Lewis didn’t indicate the boatbuilder, he generously heaped complaints and insults upon him. At least some of the blame for the delay was due to the impossibly tight schedule. Also, the builder may have promised more than he could deliver in order to get the contract. So it is understandable why the boat was still in an early stage of construction on July 15, 1803. Had Lewis been successful in his original plan for having his big boat built on the Tennessee River, it could have been brought up to St. Louis in plenty of time for the Missouri expedition, with none of the struggles over the rapids of the Ohio River.

Judging by the success of the Lewis and Clark expedition, however, this Pittsburgh boatbuilder was the right man for the job after all. Beyond that, even a cursory reading of Lewis’s journal of his trip down the Ohio, in which the big boat was subjected to an amazing amount of abuse while being dragged over rocks at many rapids, it is a wonder that this boat made it as far as Cincinnati. This should also be a tribute to the design of the boat and its builder.

The final irony regarding Lewis’s criticism of his boatbuilder is that Lewis himself began drinking to excess at an early age, which could have been a factor in his taking of his own life only six years later.

If a contract for the boat existed it is probable that the arrangements were made by Major Isaac Craig and Lieutenant Moses Hooke. In his letters, Lewis stated several times that the boat had been “contracted for.” He did not say, however, that he himself had signed such a contract. Presumably, there was a

“DEAR CLARK: After a most tedious and laborious passage from Pittsburgh I have at length reached this place; it was not untill the 31st of August that I was enabled to take my departure from that place owing to the unpardonable negligence and inattention of the boat builders who, unfortunately for me, were a set of most incorrigible drunkards...”
BOATBUILDING AFTER 1803

The building of flatboats, keelboats, and barges continued at Fort Fayette and at other boatyards on all three rivers until well after the War of 1812. As late as 1824, Zadok Cramer stated that barges, keels, and Kentucky Boats were built in great numbers in Pittsburgh.

Pittsburgh directories listed seven or eight boat builders in 1810 through 1814, although Jacob Myers is not listed. If we consider his obvious advanced age and debilitated condition in 1803, it is probable that he had died before 1810.

On May 3, 1872, Peter Shouse, aged 83 years, applied for a pension certificate at Fort Fayette for his war service as a boatbuilder during the war of 1812, along with nine other boatbuilders. Those named were William Sprague, S. McGill, G. Guest, W. Hamilton, Eli Edmondson, R. Moore, William Whiteacre, and Robert Beebe. They had all been enlisted by Hezekiah Johnson, the commander at the fort. The implication was that some of these men had been building boats at the fort location before being enlisted.

William Sprague and Peter Shouse appeared again at Pittsburgh as boatbuilders after the War of 1812, and Fort Fayette remained a center of army supply activity until its abandonment sometime in the winter of 1815.
CONCLUSIONS

Captain Meriwether Lewis took his barge all the way from Pittsburgh to St. Louis in 1803. In the spring of 1804, he and his partner Captain William Clark took it all the way to Fort Mandan in the far west, arriving in the fall. By spring 1805, the barge was reloaded and sailed down the Missouri River to St. Louis by some of his crew.

The success of these voyages is a remarkable testimony to Lewis and Clark and their men. But this success is also a testimony to the designers and builders of Lewis’s barge. Working in the heat and humidity on an impossible schedule, these men completed an incredibly durable vessel. They have been too long forgotten, and too often maligned.

The specific location of the building of this barge seems clearly to be Fort Fayette in Pittsburgh, not anywhere on the Monongahela River. The contractors were clearly Lieutenant Moses Hooke and Major Isaac Craig. Fort Fayette was their center of operations, Fort Fayette was where Lewis’s supplies were shipped and stored, and Fort Fayette was the location of the U.S. Wharf at the time. It was the only practical location for the semi-secret project to be carried out.

When Larry Myers contacted the History Center in 2007, his communication led to a valuable reevaluation of the evidence that has accumulated about the building of the Lewis and Clark barge some 200 years ago. Much of this evidence supports the conclusion that Jacob Myers was the principal builder of the Lewis Barge.

William K. Brunot is a retired engineer who has developed an interest in certain details in the adventures of Meriwether Lewis.


4 Lowry, “Who Built the Big Boat?”


6 Index, George Rogers Clark Illinois Regiment American Colonial Wars Sons Revolution, Record Number 6288-4-450-452, July 21, 1780. See also record number 6355-4-487-488 on Roll #4.

7 Ibid. Record Numbers 8363-5-354 and 8358-5-349.


9 James, p. 242.


12 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.

13 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.


19 Letter to General Knox, Secretary of War, March 11, 1792. See Jackson, Letters.


22 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.

23 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.

24 Baldwin, Pittsburgh, pp. 140, 141.

25 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.

26 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.

27 Thwaites, Vol. 1, p. xxv.


29 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.

30 Baldwin, Keelboat Age.


32 Kussart, p. 33.


35 Lewis’s receipt to Isaac Craig, March22, 1801. Receipt Book, Craig Papers. Account Book, Craig Papers, AA/Craig/111c. There are various references to Lewis in these papers. See Bakeless, p. 469.


40 Ibid.

41 Bergon, p. xiv.

42 Ibid.


44 The post office was at Front and Ferry streets. See item 37 in Lois Mulkern, “Pittsburgh in 1806,” Pittsburgh: A Quarterly of Fact and Thought at the University of Pittsburgh, Spring 1948, also at http://digital.library.pitt.edu/pittsburgh/beck/.


46 Lewis to Clark, August 3, 1803, Thwaites, Appendix, p. 266.


50 Lewis to Clark, Original Manuscript in possession of Mrs. Julia Clark Voorhis and Miss Eleanor Voorhis. Also reproduced in Thwaites, Appendix, p. 272.