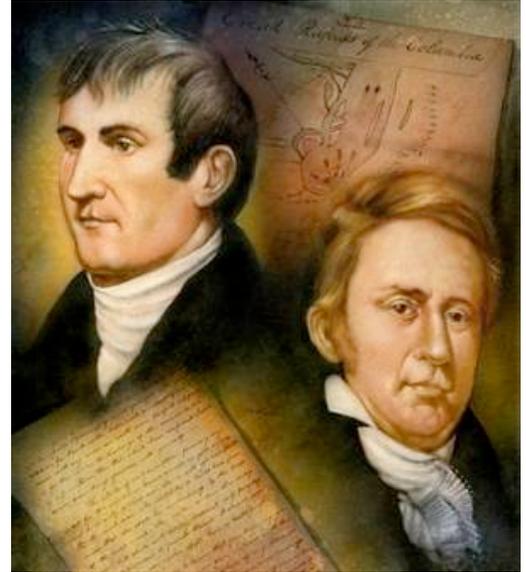


# The Explorers

In the early 1800s, a number of expeditions set out from the United States to explore the West. The most famous was the **Lewis and Clark expedition** [**Lewis and Clark expedition: a journey made from 1804 to 1806 by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the territory gained in the Louisiana Purchase**], which was ordered by President Thomas Jefferson.

The major motive behind the expedition was to make friendly contact with Indian groups that might be interested in trade. A second motive was to find the Northwest Passage, a water route across North America that explorers had been seeking ever since Columbus reached the Americas. With the purchase of Louisiana from France in 1803, the expedition gained a third motive—finding out just what the United States had bought.



In 1804 to 1806 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out to explore the territory gained in the Louisiana Purchase.

## Up the Missouri River

In May 1804, the 45-member expedition left St. Louis, Missouri, in three boats. Jefferson's private secretary, Meriwether Lewis, and his friend William Clark led the expedition. Its members included soldiers, frontiersmen, and an African American slave named York, who worked for Clark.

It was hard going from the first day. Rowing upstream against the Missouri River's strong current left the explorers' hands blistered and their muscles sore. Mosquitoes feasted on their sunburned faces.

By summer, the explorers had reached Indian country. Most American Indians welcomed the strangers, and York fascinated the Indians. They had never seen a black man before. Again and again, wrote Clark in his journal, York allowed his skin to be rubbed with a wet finger to prove "that he was not a painted white man."

The explorers made camp for the winter near a Mandan village in what is now North Dakota. There, a French fur trapper joined them along with his 16-year-old wife, a Shoshone (shuh-SHOW-nee) woman named Sacagawea (sah-kuh-juh-WEE-uh), and their infant son. As a girl, Sacagawea had been kidnapped from her people by another Indian group. Lewis and Clark hoped she would translate for them when they reached Shoshone country.

## To the Pacific and Back

In the spring of 1805, the explorers set out once more. As they moved up the Missouri River, rapids and waterfalls slowed their progress. When they hauled their boats by land around these obstacles, the thorns of the prickly-pear cactus pierced their feet. Meanwhile, grizzly bears raided their camps. Game became scarce.

By late summer, the explorers could see the Rocky Mountains looming ahead. To cross the mountains before the first snows of winter closed the high passes, they would have to find horses—and soon.

Fortunately, the expedition had reached the land of Sacagawea's childhood. One day, a group of Indians approached. To Sacagawea's great joy, they proved to be Shoshone. Learning that her brother was now a Shoshone chief, Sacagawea persuaded him to provide the explorers with the horses they desperately needed.

The explorers made it over the Rockies, but they were more dead than alive. The Nez Perce (nehz pers), an Indian people living in the Pacific Northwest, saved them from starvation. A grateful Lewis wrote in his journal that the Nez Perce "are the most hospitable, honest, and sincere people that we have met with in our voyage."

As winter closed in, the explorers reached their final destination, the Pacific Ocean. Clark marked the event by carving on a tree, "William Clark December 3rd 1805 By Land from the U. States."

## The Explorers' Legacy

After a wet and hungry winter in Oregon, the explorers headed home. In September 1806, two years and four months after setting out, they returned to St. Louis. Lewis proudly wrote to Jefferson, "In obedience to our orders, we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean."

Lewis and Clark had good reason to be proud. They had not found the Northwest Passage, for it did not exist. But they had traveled some 8,000 miles. They had mapped a route to the Pacific. They had established good relations with western Indians. Most of all, they had brought back priceless information about the West and its peoples.

Other explorers added to this **legacy [legacy: a person's or a group's impact on future generations]** and helped prepare the way for the settlement of the West. In 1806, the same year Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis, 26-year-old army lieutenant Zebulon Pike set out to explore the southern part of the new Louisiana Territory. Pike and his party traveled up the valley of the Arkansas River into present-day Colorado. There, Pike saw the mountain that today is called Pikes Peak.

Pike went on to explore Spanish territory along the Rio Grande and the Red River. His reports of the wealth of Spanish towns brought many American traders to the Southwest. But Pike was not impressed with the landscape. He called the West the "Great American Desert."

Another famed explorer, John C. Frémont, helped to correct this image. Nicknamed "the Pathfinder," Frémont mapped much of the territory between the Mississippi Valley and the Pacific Ocean in the 1840s. His glowing descriptions of a "land of plenty" inspired many families to try their luck in the West.



Zebulon Pike's published reports of his expedition spurred American interest in the Southwest. Part of his route would become the Santa Fe Trail, which was used by thousands of pioneers. Library of Congress