
The Lewis and Clark Expedition and the Louisiana Purchase and Their Role in American History

The Lewis and Clark expedition is a significant exploration in the history of the United States. It explored newly acquired land and helped promote westward expansion. It provided new information for cartography and taxonomy.

In 1803 Thomas Jefferson acquired the Louisiana Territory. After having “offered to buy for \$2 million only the region around the mouth of the Mississippi River, which included the port and city of New Orleans” (<https://www.ericdigests.org/2004-1/purchase.htm>), Napoleon countered the offer by offering to sell the entire Louisiana Territory for \$15,000,000 which included the cancellation of all war debts. Though strict constructionist felt it was not in his right to acquire new land, Jefferson went ahead and made the purchase. John Quincy Adams later “criticized Jefferson for getting into office under the banners of state’s rights and state’s sovereignty...and immediately purchasing Louisiana” (Brown, 30). Later during the case of American Insurance Company v. Canter it was decided that “the Constitution confers absolutely on the government of the Union, the powers of making war, and of making treaties; consequently, that government possesses the power of acquiring territory, either by conquest or by treaty” (https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_8_9s5.html)

After the Louisiana Purchase Jefferson commissioned his personal secretary, Meriwether Lewis to head the expedition, Lewis then contracted his friend William Clark to co-captain the expedition. “Together they collected a diverse military Corps of Discovery” (<https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/lewis-clark/>) to help ensure the completion of the two year journey to the Pacific. One main thing that made the expedition a success was the help they received from Indians. They would have starved or been killed if it wasn’t for Sacagawea, a Shoshone Indian, “the Indians were inclined to believe that the whites were friendly when they saw Sacagawea. A war party never traveled with a woman, especially a woman with a baby.” (<https://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/inside/saca.html>)

The expedition made great contributions to cartography. “They prepared about 140 maps on the trail and collected some 30 maps from Indians, fur trappers, and traders” (https://www.edgate.com/lewisandclark/mapping_on_trail.html). Many of the maps they provided helped provide a more detailed look at the west, “including a greatly expanded view of the Rocky Mountains and a more accurate positioning of some of the western rivers”(https://www.mnh.si.edu/education/lc/lcmapping/index.html?page=empty_space.html). The information these maps provided helped pave the way for westward expansion.

Not only did the expedition provide advances in cartography, but it also provided information for taxonomy. The expedition documented “179 species of undocumented plants and trees” and provided the “first documentation of 122 species of animals, birds and fish” (<https://www.greatfallstribune.com/communities/lewisandclark/main.html>). With this information scientist were able to learn more about the land that had been conquered. Lewis and Clark also brought back to Jefferson a prairie dog as a gift, which did not exist in the east.

The Lewis and Clark expedition is a significant moment in time because it helped provide a

wealth of information about the New World. It helped improve relations with the Indians and helped to encourage westward expansion. It also provided the President with the power to purchase land for the United States. The Lewis and Clark will always be a lauded journey not only for the knowledge it provided, but also for the courage it took to venture out into the wilderness, not knowing what faced them.

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