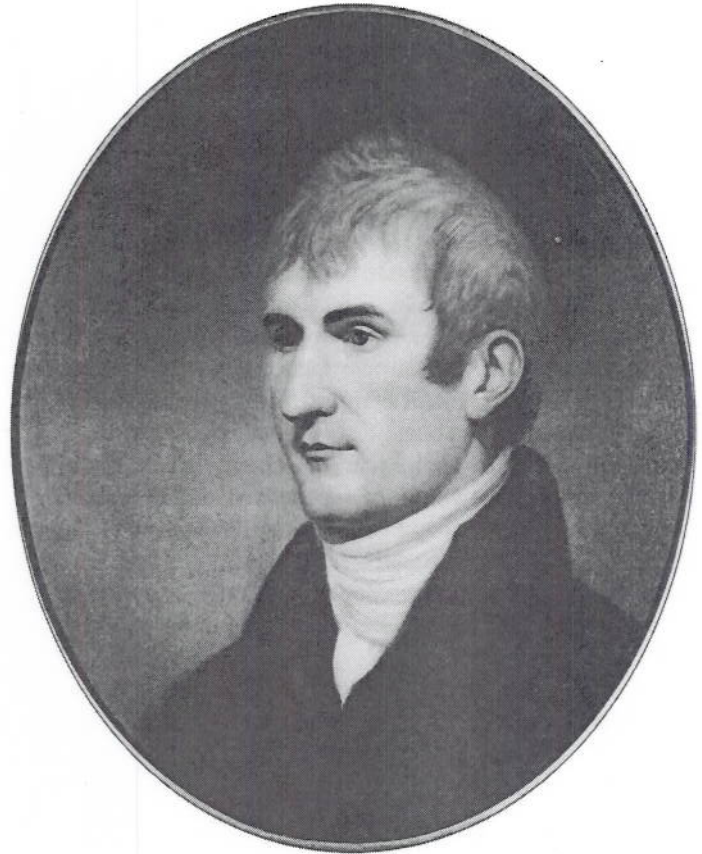


ABOUT THE WEST

The Lost Years of Meriwether Lewis

Kathryn Moore



Meriwether Lewis. Portrait by Charles Willson Peale, 1807.
Independence National Historic Park, Philadelphia

ALMOST as if rising from the dead, the Corps of Discovery floated down the Missouri River arriving at St. Louis on September 23, 1806. Captain Meriwether Lewis reported their triumphant return from the nearly three-year expedition across the uncharted American wilderness to the Pacific, and wrote to his friend, President Thomas Jefferson, that he would soon leave for Washington. Meanwhile Lewis and Discovery's co-captain William Clark relaxed, outfitted themselves in new clothes, and attended parties and balls held in their honor. They and their men were heroes, and all were happy to oblige their adoring public.

Scarcely three years later, former president Jefferson would receive less joyful news regarding his protégé:

It is with extreme pain that I have to inform you of the death of His Excellency Meriwether Lewis, Governor of Upper Louisiana who died on the morning of the 11th [October] Instant and I am sorry to say by Suicide.¹

Countless articles and books have been written

retelling of the heroic venture of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and others on the death of Lewis. Yet, few historians have attempted to piece together the fragments of Lewis's life during the years between these events to explain how someone at the pinnacle of success could plummet downward so swiftly and tragically to apparently seek his own demise.

Two months after the expedition's jubilant return, Lewis resumed his journey and rode toward the capital. Once there he reestablished his earlier residence at the President's House. Prior to the expedition, Captain Lewis had been hand-picked by Jefferson to be his private secretary because of Lewis's unique qualifications: "Your knolege [*sic*] of the Western country, of the army and of all it's [*sic*] interests & relations."² Interestingly, Lewis's job seemed rather "unsecretarial" since Jefferson took care of the bulk of his correspondence. Instead, he performed a variety of tasks as the president's assistant, which ranged from advising Jefferson on downsizing the U.S. Army to reduce federal debt, to managing administrative matters and helping with any guests.

One unusual mission Lewis undertook was to pay political writer James Callendar the sum of \$50 toward his \$200 fine under the Sedition Act. Jefferson had ordered the writer released from prison, but Callendar, who previously had supported Jefferson, was incensed that the amount was so small and warned Lewis that he was aware of information damaging to the President. Callendar demanded hush money as well as a federal job. Lewis repeated this threat to Jefferson who took no action declaring, "He knows nothing of me which I am not willing to declare to the world myself."³ Hence Callendar went public with rumors he had heard, and scandalous accusations soon flew furiously regarding the President's behavior and his life with a slave named "Dusky Sally."

While Lewis attended to the President, they enjoyed the company of family and friends, including a former Army comrade — Lieutenant William Clark. Years later, Clark recalled: "I had frequent Reasons to Visit the Eastern States & Washington where I became Acquainted with the Presidt. Mr. Jefferson."⁴ It is easy to envision these two young men sitting around the President's fire listening to Jefferson's plans of an expedition to follow the Missouri to its source and ultimately reach the Pacific. Jefferson's blue eyes must have brightened to discuss his long-held vision; in fact, years before, he had proposed such a trip to William's eldest brother, George Rogers Clark.

Less than two years after selecting Lewis as his private secretary, Jefferson chose him again for a new position as the leader of the young nation's most ambitious expedition named the Corps of Discovery. Their goals were multifold but included finding the source of the Missouri River, taking the Columbia to the Pacific, and exploring the West for a northwest passage. In view of the danger of such an enterprise, Lewis desired a co-captain and immediately seized upon his old friend. Clark soon received a summons with promises of equal rank and pay. Unfortunately, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn did not share Lewis's and Jefferson's enthusiasm, and refused to promote Clark. This infuriated and embarrassed Lewis who immediately wrote to Clark that although "it [*the commission*] is not such as I wished, or had reason to expect . . . you will

observe that the grade has no effect upon your compensation, which by G-d, shall be equal to my own."⁵ Throughout the expedition, Lieutenant Clark was addressed as "Captain" and shared fully in its leadership.

The Corps of Discovery achieved its goals, albeit without finding a northwest passage. They also managed to evade capture by the Spanish who received reports of the expedition from America's governor of newly purchased Louisiana, Brigadier General James Wilkinson (Lewis's former commander). Wilkinson advised his secret Spanish employers to send men "to intercept Captain Lewis and his party, who are on the Missouri River, and force them to retire or take them prisoners."⁶

The lengthy ordeal of their journey caused many to believe in the demise of all. To everyone's astonishment, only one casualty occurred — Sergeant Charles Floyd died of appendicitis near the site of present-day Sioux City, Iowa. And only one member was wounded. On the return trip while Lewis and translator Pierre Cruzatte were hunting elk, they mistook a buckskin-clad Lewis for their prey, and Cruzatte accidentally shot his commander. Fortunately Lewis's wound was not life-threatening; however, it was uncomfortable and caused the Captain to spend a good deal of the return journey lying face down in a canoe since sitting was no longer an option.

Lewis eventually journeyed home to his mother in



Virginia. Once there he resumed a courtship with a certain cousin named Maria Wood, who apparently did not embody the adage that “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Undaunted, Lewis pursued other young ladies. His comrade, Clark, found success and was married to the young woman of his desires, and Lewis hoped to find the same happiness. The following year he wrote to a friend of

My little affair with Miss A-n R-h has had neither beginning nor end on her part; on my own it has had both . . . am now a perfect widower with respect to love. . . . certain it is that I never felt less like a hero than at the present moment.⁷

The young lady in question was most likely a resident of Monticello, Anne Randolph, who was also President Jefferson’s eldest granddaughter and about half Lewis’s age.

Historians marvel at the dawdling nature of Meriwether Lewis following his triumphant return to civilization. He visited friends and family. He was honored at a variety of functions along the East Coast and seemed in no particular hurry to work. After spending nearly four years planning and executing the expedition, as well as carrying the weight of responsibility for it, perhaps the young Captain desired a life free — at least temporarily — of any further demands on his time and energies.

Compiling the multitude of notes of the co-captains required a staggering amount of organization and narration. Lewis seemingly felt overwhelmed by the task and procrastinated beginning the project. Others, however, were attempting to jump in ahead to make their mark. Two members, Private Robert Frazier and Sergeant Patrick Gass, had their journals published individually in 1807. Lewis, furious that people might buy these rather than the one he and Clark proposed, drafted a protest warning the public lest they “depreciate the worth of the work which I am myself preparing for publication. . . .”⁸ Gass’s publisher David McKeehan responded in harsh language:

Your rapid advancement to power and wealth seems to have changed the polite, humble and respectful language . . . into that of him who commands and dispenses favours.⁹

McKeehan painted Lewis as a tyrannical madman demanding that no one in the country would be allowed the benefit of reading of *his* expedition unless they paid *his* price for *his* work.

Meanwhile, Meriwether Lewis reported for duty once more. The President needed a reliable observer to report directly to him on the proceedings of the most notorious trial of the young nation — the trial of former Vice President Aaron Burr on the charge of treason in the

spring and summer of 1807. Thomas Jefferson’s classically designed capitol building in Richmond was the stage for this fascinating drama.

Lewis watched as his former commander, Wilkinson, perjured himself by disclaiming any partnership with Burr regarding creating an empire in Louisiana. Wilkinson, fearing his own treasonous connections with the Spanish would be discovered, had earlier spread the rumors of Burr to transfer suspicion. The general, himself, barely managed to dodge his own indictment. For reasons which still remain obscure, President Jefferson stood by Wilkinson and refused to acknowledge the opposition’s complaints of Wilkinson being in Spain’s pocket. The general was unfazed by his near escape. Although he was removed as governor, Wilkinson retained his position as the Army’s senior officer.

Jefferson was left with a vital government position open, and he needed the right sort of man to serve as the governor of Upper Louisiana, which encompassed most of the original Louisiana Purchase. The President’s first choice was his long-time friend and future president, James Monroe. Having successfully negotiated the labyrinth of intrigue in Napoleon’s court, it is little wonder that Jefferson found Monroe the perfect match for the political complexities presented by St. Louis. This “Gateway to the West” hosted a wide variety of citizens — Spanish and French residents, as well as rough and tumble boatmen and adventurers seeking their fortune through land speculation. With money in scarce supply, land was the principal currency. Wilkinson’s heavy-handed land speculation when serving as governor had also poisoned the waters and created numerous enemies.

Perhaps realizing the turmoil that awaited any newcomer, Monroe turned down the offer; but Jefferson proposed it again and reminded him of the unique opportunity this position offered as a means of personal gain — through land acquisition. Still unmoved, Monroe declined. Since the governorship also involved dealing with Westerners and Indians, Jefferson thought perhaps another trusted Jeffersonian would do: Meriwether Lewis. Historians have since regarded this assignment as a reward bestowed upon the explorer. Thomas Jefferson did not share their slight regard for this critical position. He needed someone in St. Louis who could be trusted and who could negotiate through the mire of competing interests. More importantly, he relied on Lewis’s prior military background as a means to keep watch on Brigadier General Wilkinson.

Even before Meriwether Lewis set foot in St. Louis in 1808, he was in trouble. Territorial Secretary Frederick Bates, doubling as acting governor until Lewis’s arrival, periodically wrote to Lewis asking for guidance in handling certain matters. At all times, Bates’s manner was cordial and deferential. But this tone changed abruptly upon the arrival of his new boss. The two men disagreed on nearly every matter, and Bates fumed to his friends of Lewis’s manner and ideas. Nothing the Governor did or

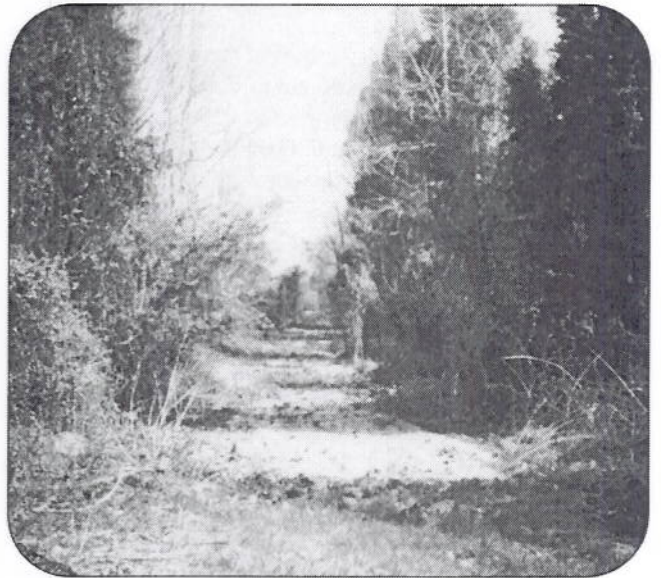
said suited Territorial Secretary Bates. Ironically Bates had earlier lost the coveted position of President Jefferson's private secretary to Lewis (or at least so Bates's father believed). As governor, Lewis, who apparently lacked sufficient skills of a political operative, soon found himself ill-prepared for the position he held.

Longing for the days when his enemies were merely grizzly bears and rattlesnakes, Lewis found himself in the midst of squabbling factions and the target of repeated vitriolic attacks by Secretary Bates. At least one friendly face could be found in the crowd — William Clark had preceded him to St. Louis to assume position as Brigadier General of the militia and the Territory's Indian agent. But even the sight of his old friend must have been bittersweet, for Clark brought his wife Julia. No doubt she was a reminder that his friend had succeeded where he had failed. The following year the Clarks became parents of a baby boy who was christened Meriwether Lewis Clark.

Unfortunately for Lewis, the happy times spent with the Clarks were few compared to the constant challenges he faced as governor. Plains Indian nations vied with each other, jockeying for power and threatening the peace of his Territory. Incredibly, in this time preceding the War of 1812, Bates had unknowingly assigned a British spy as an Indian agent, who in turn, did his best to provoke trouble among the tribes. On at least three occasions, Lewis called out the militia, and worried lest the rumors of trouble by Shawnee chief Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet proved true, that more men might be required to defend the territory. He also took precautions in case Indian tribes of the north, such as the Sioux, might attack since word had reached him of British agents attempting to recruit them as well. Lewis worked diligently to improve relations among various Indian nations and sent Clark up the Missouri near present-day Kansas City to negotiate a treaty with the Osage.

Thanks to Wilkinson's land-grabbing schemes, which had proven extremely divisive in St. Louis, Governor Lewis also spent a great deal of his time attempting to conciliate various parties and redesigning the system to prevent such problems in the future. He, nevertheless, acquired prime lands of his own. Later he wrote to his mother that he had purchased a house for her and began making preliminary plans to move her west. He and Clark also became silent partners in a fur-trading enterprise.

In spite of the aggravations and constant threats to Louisiana, Lewis managed to make an impressive list of improvements to the Territory. As a Mason, he began the first lodge west of the Mississippi. He founded the first post office and encouraged fellow Mason Joseph Charless to begin the first newspaper, the *Missouri Gazette*. Lewis laid out roads connecting towns of eastern Missouri and aided Clark in the establishment of trading posts. He worked to create harmony within the diverse



Views of the Natchez Trace of the historic road have eroded and sunk over time.
Author photos

town and, as Jefferson later said, rose above political party interests.

While dealing with his daily duties as governor, Lewis avoided corresponding with his mentor Thomas Jefferson and others who kept asking the perennial question: When would his expedition journal be published? Originally he said that the journals would comprise three volumes as well as a map, and promised publication of the first volume by early 1808. He did not meet the deadline.

Perhaps he felt himself unequal to the task. He knew well that the American populace was clamoring to read the journals. People were hungry for details about what the men had found — the Indians, the plants and animals, soil, and climate. Did he find his descriptions lacking in conveying the beauty and majesty he and his comrades had found? He had been simply an Army captain

performing his duty. His straightforward narrative may have seemed too shallow and nondescript. Realizing the overwhelming responsibility to be the eyes and ears for the world — an artist and poet, botanist, sociologist, linguist, and meteorologist — created a formidable writer's block. Very likely he attempted to commence the project; however, no such work exists. It would not be until 1814 that Clark pieced together their journals with the help of Philadelphia publisher Nicholas Biddle to bring to fruition their long-awaited account.

One aspect of the expedition remained: a Mandan chief Sheheke (Big White) still needed to be returned to his people. He, along with other tribal chiefs, had been invited to go to Washington and council with the President. Some had regrettably died from disease during their stay, but the others had returned — all except She-

heke. A seemingly easy enterprise to return him to his people proved to be a nightmare, and the first attempt failed. Unbeknownst to Lewis or the men he sent to accompany Sheheke, the Mandan had begun fighting another tribe, the Arikara. As a result, they killed or wounded nearly a third of the force as they attacked Sheheke's escort. The detachment decided to return to St. Louis with Sheheke. A second venture succeeded, but it cost the Governor dearly.

Originally the War Department had allocated \$7,000 for this purpose, and Lewis used that as well as \$500 more to buy trade goods to bribe their way up the Missouri. William Eustis, Secretary of War under the new President James Madison, found Lewis's additional expenditure outrageous and refused to authorize payment. Consequently, the burden fell on Lewis. He was as

He fought his way to the Pacific and back but took the wrong turn to Nashville

Meriwether Lewis committed suicide — or did he? His death has been the subject of debate for nearly 200 years. Whispers of his depressed state of mind (and/or alcoholism, and/or an addiction to opium) made their way east. These allegations as well as many other details remain rather ambiguous. For example, the nature of Lewis's wounds is a major area of discrepancy: some versions say he was shot twice, others say three times. Places mentioned are his forehead, back of the head, under his chin, in his sides, chest, abdomen, and back.

Stories abound of what followed Lewis's death. Some insisted that a coroner's inquest had been held and determined that Lewis was a homicide based on site of wounds and lack of powder burn marks. Local legend says Mrs. Grinder's husband was the culprit, but neighbors feared retribution and declared it a suicide to keep the peace. Supposedly, in another version, a post rider had found Lewis's body lying by the Natchez Trace, and he insisted that the Governor had been shot in the back. Another story arose from the exhumation of his body in the 1840s that claims Lewis suffered a wound in the back of the head. Pistols then had elongated barrels, and this was seen as proof of foul play since such a gunshot would have required the movements of a talented contortionist. A committee sent their findings to the state capital, reporting that they believed Meriwether Lewis was indeed a murder victim.

Despite these allegations, many contemporary historians tend to cite Neelly's assertion of suicide as fact and airily dismiss any alternative. Remarkably their belief stems from the testimony of Neelly who was *not* at the scene. Based on Neelly's letters, both William Clark and Thomas Jefferson accepted this verdict. A few years later, Jefferson wrote:

Governor Lewis had from early life been subject to hypochondriac affections. It was a constitutional disposition in all the nearer branches of the family of his name.¹⁶

Initially, Clark also believed that his friend's state of mind was the key to his demise. William Clark wrote to his brother Jonathan a few days after Lewis's ill-fated departure.

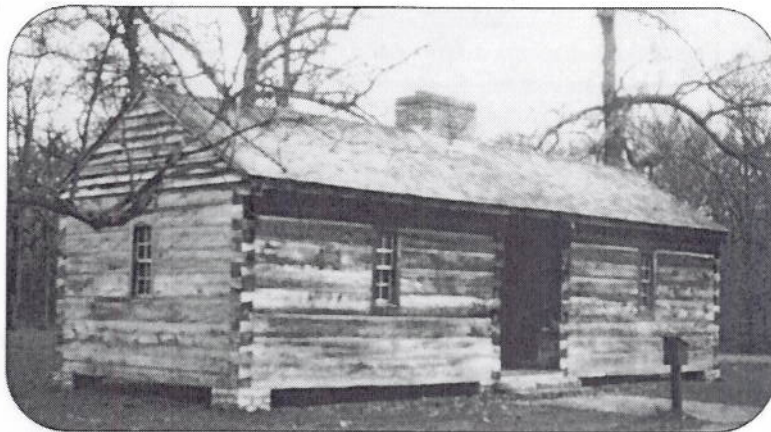
I do not beleve [*sic*] there was ever an honest [*sic*] man in Louisiana nor one who has pureor [*sic*] motives than Govr. Lewis. if his mind had been at ease I Should have parted Cherefully [*sic*].¹⁷

In later years, however, family tradition holds that William Clark voiced doubts that his colleague would have committed such a desperate act.

Jefferson's easy acceptance, though, is more difficult to explain. Why would a president who could have chosen anyone for private secretary choose one who suffered from what was then called "melancholia"? Furthermore, after living with Lewis for two years, why then select such a man to lead an expedition into the wilderness knowing that he was prone to "sensible depressions of mind"?¹⁸ And why send him to the Burr trial as the president's personal representative and later appoint him governor of a territory in turmoil? Thomas Jefferson stated that the "sedentary occupations"¹⁹ seemed to make Lewis more prone to these attacks; interestingly, it is Jefferson who appointed the soldier-explorer to the only desk jobs he knew. Perhaps the former president, in his mid-60s and hundreds of miles from the scene, found it easier to simply accept Neelly's verdict.

cash poor as anyone in St. Louis and found himself in a precarious financial situation, which was exacerbated by Secretary Bates who apparently informed the Governor's creditors. They called in his debts, demanding immediate payment. Meriwether Lewis scrambled to comply but feared bankruptcy. Typical of government bureaucracy, it took three years for the War Department to finally comprehend the nature of the additional expense. In 1812, a payment of \$636.25 was authorized. Unfortunately it arrived too late to help Lewis.

Prior to this financial disaster, Lewis had planned to travel east. He needed to see Biddle regarding the journal as well as visit his



Reconstruction of Grinder's Stand. The design may not be quite authentic, nor is the house situated properly on the property. In Lewis's day, the house faced the Trace, which runs generally along the tree line in the background. *Author photo*

Each time Mrs. Grinder related the story, it changed a bit. Thirty years after Lewis's death, Mrs. Grinder gave an account to a teacher who wrote an article for an Arkansas newspaper. By this time, many key details differed from her previous accounts. However, regardless of which version of Mrs. Grinder or James Neelly one believes, at the very least, Meriwether Lewis appears as one of the most inept suicides ever. Here is an expert in firearms who bumbles along, shooting his head ("grazing"²⁰ it or blowing away a "piece of his forehead"²¹), then his chest (side, back, or abdomen, and possibly stopping to reload since Mrs. Grinder said there were three shots from his two pistols). He then crawled to the next cabin to beg for water, and crawled back to his cabin before lingering for several more hours in agony. Incredibly, some stories depict the medical officer of the Lewis and Clark expedition unable to locate any vital artery as he slashes himself wildly with his razor before he finally perishes. This is the version that many claim is the most plausible explanation for Lewis's death.

On the other hand, the list of possible murder suspects can be readily shortened. Those who allege this to be a typical murder along the Trace must explain why any highwaymen would simply kill Lewis but fail to relieve him of his fine set of pistols, his watch, and other personal effects. Only the money was taken, but no one knows by whom.

Those pointing the finger to John Pernier, Lewis's servant (described as a mulatto, Creole, or Spaniard), must attempt to reconcile committing such a hideous act with his making the long journey to Virginia to personally inform Lewis's mother, Lucy Marks. Her tough, no-nonsense frontier spirit was legendary. She declared he must have murdered her son and chased him away with her rifle. Pernier hastily departed

(apparently not collecting the \$240 he said Lewis owed him) and supposedly committed suicide soon after.

The motive for the Grinders most likely would have been robbery. Years later the Grinders managed to acquire an attractive property, although no one knew where the money originated. It is interesting to note that of the many graves at this isolated site, at least two immediately adjacent to Lewis's are unmarked. Perhaps Grinder's Stand was a popular suicide spot?

Neelly was suspected of robbery. Moreover, conspiracy theorists jump at his name since he worked for the notorious Brigadier General Wilkinson. Was this a political assassination? Had Lewis gained knowledge that could prove fatal to Wilkinson's already checkered career?

Prior to Lewis's departure from St. Louis, the Governor had learned that someone (most likely Wilkinson) was spreading rumors. Just as earlier with Burr, Wilkinson was again the subject of inquiry, and some historians have posited that he may have decided to escape suspicion by claiming Governor Lewis was intent on creating an insurrection using St. Louis as his base. In his final letter to Secretary of War Eustis, Lewis defensively wrote, "my Country can never make 'A Burr' of me."²² Since Wilkinson was then based in New Orleans, it may have been a desire to avoid him as much as the Royal Navy that caused Meriwether Lewis to alter his route.

In their brochure of the Natchez Trace Parkway, the National Park Service states the one fact not in dispute when it describes Grinder's Stand as the site where Meriwether Lewis "died of gunshot wounds . . . under mysterious circumstances."²³

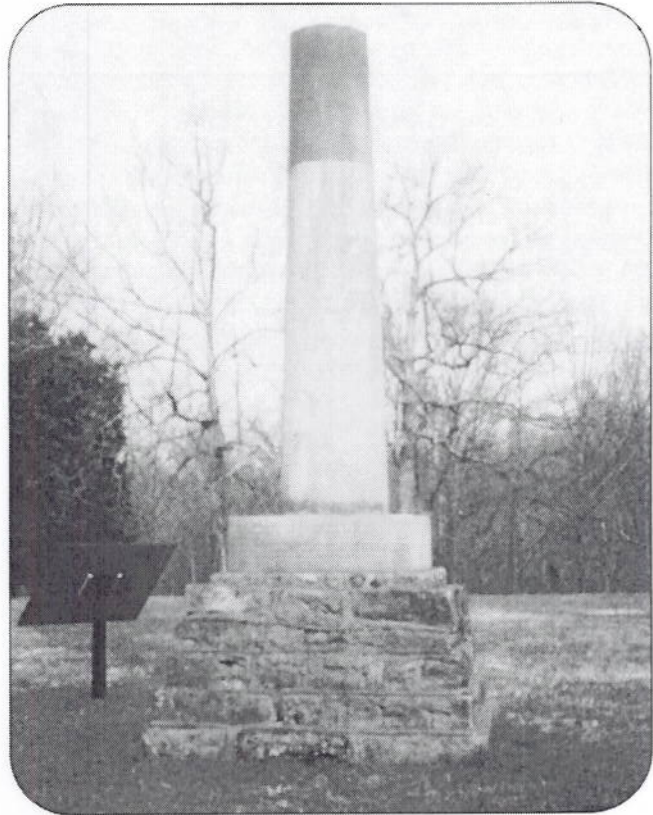
family, including his aged mother and his friend Thomas Jefferson. He hesitated, perhaps owing to his distrust of Bates during his absence. But with the disputed claim, Lewis decided to travel directly to Washington and present the reasons for the added expenditures. He was confident that all could be set straight, and he took the additional precaution of authorizing his trusted friend William Clark to handle most matters in his absence.

Meriwether Lewis departed St. Louis on September 4, 1809, with his servant John Pernier. Initially he planned to travel by water down the Mississippi to New Orleans. There he would transfer to a ship and seek passage to Washington. A few days into his trip, Lewis fell ill with a recurrence of malaria, a disease that can reappear unexpectedly and manifest itself in a variety of symptoms — high fever, delirium, paranoia, etc. — that may mimic insanity. He was taken off the boat and kept at Fort Pickering (present-day Memphis), under the watchful eye of its commander Captain Gilbert Russell. According to Russell, Lewis's illness remained acute for nearly a week, and Russell advised him to remain yet another week. During this time, a peculiar thing happened. Word of suicidal attempts by "deranged"¹⁰ Governor Lewis reached Nashville. The source of these rumors is unknown.

Lewis decided to change his route and travel overland via the Natchez Trace. Citing the possibility of his papers being taken or himself being captured by British ships in the Atlantic, he sent word to President Madison that, "Provided my health permits no time shall be lost in reaching Washington."¹¹ Believing he might require additional money, he borrowed nearly \$100 from Captain Russell before departing.

Few roads in American history share as colorful or dangerous a past as that of the Natchez Trace. One of its nicknames was the "Devil's Backbone." In many places, the Trace was less a road and more a path, for originally it had been used by Native Americans of the region. It became the main overland route from New Orleans to Nashville, a small frontier community where a stage could be taken east. Robbers, thieves, and highwaymen roamed the Trace prowling for easy marks. Scarcely anyone traveled the road alone. Some of the roughest men of the frontier, the rivermen who traveled south to New Orleans on flatboats then returned north, always amassed in packs when they journeyed on the Trace.

Consequently, when Lewis appeared healthy enough to resume his journey, he needed others to accompany him. Captain Russell himself desired to be the Governor's escort, but his request was turned down by General Wilkinson. Out of the blue arrived a newly appointed Chickasaw Indian agent in the employ of Wilkinson, James Neelly. He immediately volunteered to provide the escort with his own servant. Four men were better than two, and the group departed Fort Pickering on September 29. Lewis himself was well protected with a rifle, brace of pistols, tomahawk, and a



Meriwether Lewis Memorial. It is a sad irony that perched above the Missouri River in Sioux City, Iowa, is the soaring obelisk to expedition member Charles Floyd while the leader of the Corps of Discovery rests under a monument that many observers note strongly resembles a filtered cigarette. Perhaps as part of the bicentennial activities of the expedition, the National Park Service should move Lewis's body from the remote location at Grinder's Stand to the more visible and visited Park Service site of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. After all, Meriwether gave years of service and his life to open that gateway to the West. *Author photo*

dirk. En route Lewis's malaria resurfaced, and they stopped for a few days. Then the party resumed and apparently moved at a brisk pace. On the morning of October 10, the men rose to find some of the horses missing. Instead of remaining together, they decided to split with Lewis riding ahead and Neelly agreeing to meet him at the next inn or "stand."

Accounts vary considerably as to what transpired next.

Lewis left Neelly to search for horses. (In one story, the servants accompanied Lewis. In another, they followed some time later.) That afternoon Governor Lewis came to a pair of roughly hewn log cabins with a passageway between. He rode up and inquired of the mistress if it was a public house. She affirmed this and he asked for lodging, which she provided in the cabin across from hers. Mrs. Grinder was there alone with her children because her husband was away (at another farm of theirs or hunting). She cooked dinner for the Governor who ate with her and her family (and, depending on which version of the story is told, she may have had servants there, too). Mrs. Grinder later commented

that his behavior was odd, for he would pace and then sit and talk "like a lawyer."¹² He asked for liquor but drank little. Pernier and Neelly's servant appeared sometime (or were already there) and bedded down (in the stable or in his cabin).

Later that night shots rang out (two, or was it three?). A short time later Mrs. Grinder heard a noise outside as though someone were crawling. Then Lewis's voice cried out, begging for water. Fearful that danger lurked in the dark, Mrs. Grinder refused his request and kept the door closed. She did, though, peer between the chinks in her door and witness the Governor of Upper Louisiana pitifully scraping the empty water bucket, then painfully dragging himself back to his cabin. Once day broke, Mrs. Grinder said she went to visit him, presumably to give him some water, and found him wounded in the head and chest. The servants (one or both who may or may not have been present in the cabin or asleep in the barn) claimed he had said, "I have done the business."¹³ He complained that because he was so strong, it took him so long to die. Lewis breathed his last early that morning.

Some time later James Neelly arrived. The only contemporary written account of this tragic event comes from his pen. Of course, he was not present at the time, but gives the servants and Mrs. Grinder as the source. Neelly wrote the news to Jefferson and apparently to others, as well. He announced that Lewis's death was a suicide. Both Clark and Jefferson readily accepted the verdict, citing their friend's melancholy frame of mind. One who disputed Neelly's word was Captain Russell, who insinuated that Neelly may have been responsible for the Governor's death.

Governor Meriwether Lewis was buried promptly. A year later, Lewis's friend and noted ornithologist Alexander Wilson went to Nashville, then followed the Natchez Trace about 70 miles to Grinder's Stand. There Wilson dejectedly described Lewis's final resting place as a mound "by the common path with a few rails over his grave. I gave Grinder money to put a fence around it, to shelter it from the hogs and from the wolves."¹⁴ Forty years later a bigger monument was dedicated. This remains today in the form of a broken column "to denote

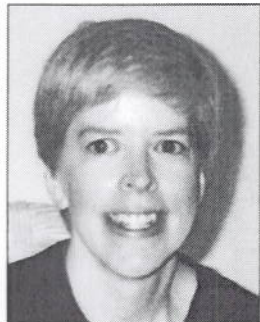
the violent and untimely end of a bright and glorious career."¹⁵

NOTES

1. Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and Related Documents*, 2 vols. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 2:467.
2. *Ibid.*, 1:2.
3. Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 706.
4. Jackson, *Letters*, 2:572.
5. *Ibid.*, 1:179.
6. David Leon Chandler, *The Jefferson Conspiracies* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc.), 171.
7. Jackson, *Letters*, 2:720.
8. *Ibid.*, 385.
9. *Ibid.*, 400.
10. Jackson, *Letters*, 2:467.
11. *Ibid.*, 464.
12. Richard Dillon, *Meriwether Lewis* (Santa Cruz, CA: Western Tanager Press, 1988), 332.
13. *Ibid.*, 336.
14. *Ibid.*, 339-340.
15. National Park Service display, Grinder's Stand, Tennessee.
16. Jackson, *Letters*, 2:591-592.
17. James J. Holmberg, *Dear Brother: Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 210.
18. Jackson, *Letters*, 2:592.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Vardis Fisher, *Suicide or Murder? The Strange Death of Governor Meriwether Lewis* (Chicago, IL: Swallow Press, 1962).
21. Dillon, *Meriwether Lewis*, 333.
22. Jackson, *Letters*, 2:460.
23. National Park Service, *Natchez Trace Parkway Official Map and Guide*, 1999.

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