

From Sergeant John Ordway to his Parents

By Sergeant John Ordway

This letter was written by Sergeant John Ordway to his parents on April 8, 1804. After briefly outlining the nature of the Expedition to his parents, Ordway describes the compensation he expected to receive upon completing the journey and informs his parents what they should do if he did not return.

John Ordway, born in Hebron, New Hampshire, around 1775, was third in command of the Corps of Discovery after Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. In addition to being in charge when the captains were not around, Ordway rationed the provisions and made sure the men kept in order. The members of the Expedition were expected to maintain military discipline, and several were flogged for failing to do so.

On the Corps' journey back east, Ordway led a detachment of ten men down the Jefferson and Missouri rivers, after which they reunited with two other detachments led by Lewis and Clark. Although Lewis's group had a fatal encounter with the Blackfeet, Ordway's group made it down the Missouri without incident.

After the Expedition, Ordway returned to New Hampshire and got married. In 1809, he and his wife Grace moved to Missouri, where they became prosperous landowners. He died in New Madrid, Missouri, around 1817.

As one of the few formally educated members of the Expedition, Ordway kept a daily journal, which he sold to Lewis and Clark after the Corps' return to the United States. The journal remained in a private collection until it was finally published in 1916. The University of Nebraska Press republished the Ordway journal in 1996.

Further Reading: Moulton, Gary, ed. *The Journals of John Ordway, May 14, 1804–September 23, 1806, and Charles Floyd, May 14–August 18, 1804*. Lincoln, Nebr., 1996.

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