

Into the New Territory

By Unknown

The expeditionary flotilla got underway in May 1804, leaving from the St. Louis area and heading up the Missouri in a keelboat and pirogues. They loaded their vessels with tons of supplies and trade goods, more than forty men, and a range of armaments. It did not take long before they discovered the vagaries of the Missouri's current, sandbars, and eroding banks that made travel on the river treacherous, even though they knew a fair amount about the first section of their journey, up to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota.

They had maps of the lower Missouri, considerable but scattered information from traders about Indians along the route, and specific warning about tribes that might disagree to the Expedition. Difficulties of river travel aside, the captains focused their effort on Jefferson's desire for strong and reliable relations with Indian nations. During the first four months on the river, they successfully dealt with the Oto, Missouri, and Yankton tribes, but late in September they encountered the Teton Sioux in present-day South Dakota.

Diplomacy is a fragile art. Each party pursues its own goals by its own methods, and success often comes to the one who adjusts best to changing conditions. Considering how little Lewis and Clark knew about Indian trading on the Missouri, they made surprising headway, but their paternalistic approach and insistent claims of American sovereignty got mixed receptions from Native peoples.

They generally began each encounter in a programmatic way. First, they displayed their strength and power with demonstrations of firearms, followed by a speech that announced the good-intentioned rule by the "Great Father" of seventeen nations to the east, and ended with a distribution of presents, medals, and flags for the chiefs, plus promises of trade goods in the future. Clark described meeting the Oto in August 1804: "After Brackfast we Collected those Indians under an orning of our Main Sail, in presence of our Party paraded & Delivered a long Speech to them expressive of our journey the wirkes of our Government, Some advice to them and Directions how They were to Conduct themselves."

When they encountered the Teton Sioux, their diplomacy hit a snag every bit as dangerous as those that waylaid boats in the Missouri. The Teton had no interest in furthering the Americans' mission. They saw the Americans as invaders, and they expected receipt of a tariff in goods to allow the Corps past their section of the river. At their meeting with the Teton on September 25, 1804, the captains faced a dicey situation. Lewis had made his usual speech and had demonstrated his air gun, which fired without powder and impressed the gathered Indians. "Soon as I landed the Perogue," Clark recorded, three of their young men Seased the Cable of the Perogue, the Chiefs Soldr. Huged the mast, and the 2d Chief was verry insolent both in words & justures declareing I Should not go on, Stateing he had not recved presents Suffient from us, his justures were of Such a personal nature I felt my Self Compeled to Draw my Sword, at this motion Capt. Lewis ordered all under arms in the boat.

After two days of discussions and exchanges of presents, with additional tense moments between the Corps and Teton men, the Expedition moved on, savvier and perhaps warier, but nonetheless committed to establishing good relations with Indian nations.

At the Mandan Villages, where the Corps established Fort Mandan, they spent the winter of 1804-1805 planning their foray into the unknown regions on the upper Missouri and trying to establish solid trade alliances with the Mandans. At Fort Mandan and the nearby Indian villages, Lewis and Clark discovered that trade in European goods was integral to Mandan and Hidatsa economies, and they learned the important roles British traders played. The captains hosted Indian leaders at Fort Mandan and learned a great deal about the tribes in the region. The entire Corps had an opportunity to become familiar with individuals and the routine of village life.

York, Clark's slave who accompanied his master throughout the journey, drew intense interest from the Arikara and Mandan. As Clark recorded, the village Indians were "much astonished at my black Servant." The Arikara called York "big medicine," which reflected both his exotic image and an apparent belief that he possessed important power.

It was during their discussions with the Mandan and Hidatsa that the captains met Toussaint Charbonneau, a French trader who lived in a Hidatsa village with his two Shoshone wives and worked for the Northwest Company traders from Montreal. Charbonneau brokered his services on the Expedition with Lewis and Clark by offering his wife, Sacagawea, as an interpreter who could aid them in the Rockies, where they would enter her tribe's territory.

At about age twelve, Sacagawea had been captured by Hidatsa raiders near the Three Forks of the Missouri in 1800, taken back to the Hidatsa villages, and sold as a wife to Charbonneau, then in his forties. She gave birth to a boy, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, in February 1805, and less than two months later she and her baby left with the Expedition, heading upriver to the farthest reaches of the Missouri.

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