The Wallula Gap Detour
Across Horse Heaven Hills

Plus

A Cold Case Mystery:
Why Didn't Meriwether Lewis's Two Best Friends Investigate His Death?
and
2016 Award Recipients
**Spring Symposium on the Columbia River**

The Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation is partnering with the Oregon-California Trail Association on a symposium on the Columbia River’s many layers of history from the Ice Age floods to the explorers, the trappers and traders, and the pioneers and settlers. The meeting will be held from March 31 to April 2, 2017, at the Heathman Lodge in Vancouver, Washington. For more information, please contact Lindy Hatcher at lindy@lewisandclark.org or 406-454-1234.

**Photos from a Twin Cities, Minnesota, gathering at the September 17–19, 2016, regional meeting sponsored by the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation Illini Chapter**

(Photos by Steve Lee and Lou Ritten)

- Tour at James J. Hill house
- At the Minnesota History Center
- Ft. Snelling rifle demonstration
- Minnehaha Falls
- Indian pouch, Minneapolis Institute of Art
- St. Anthony Falls from the Stone Arch Bridge
- Viewing Curtis prints
- Walking the Stone Arch Bridge
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Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation
2016 Award Recipients

On the cover:
The Meriwether Lewis Monument at Grinder’s Stand. Photo courtesy of Tony Turnbow.

On the back cover:
Yellepit Pond on the Columbia River. Photo courtesy of A. G. Wesselius.

We Proceeded On welcomes submissions of articles, proposals, inquiries, and letters. Writer’s guidelines are available by request and can be found on our website (www.lewisandclark.org). Submissions may be sent to Robert Clark, WSU Press, P.O. Box 645910, Pullman, WA 99164-5910, or by email to robert.clark@wsu.edu.
November 2016 • Volume 42, Number 4

We Proceeded On is the official publication of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc. Its name derives from a phrase that appears repeatedly in the collective journals of the expedition. © 2016

E. G. Chuinard, M.D., Founder, We Proceeded On
ISSN 0227-5-6706

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We Proceeded On, the quarterly journal of the Foundation, is mailed to current members in February, May, August, and November. Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted and indexed in HISTORICAL ABSTRACTS and AMERICA: HISTORY AND LIFE.

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As Keepers of the Story–Stewards of the Trail, the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, Inc. provides national leadership in maintaining the integrity of the Trail and its story through stewardship, scholarship, education, partnership and cultural inclusiveness.

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We Proceeded On is published four times a year in February, May, August, and November by Washington State University Press in Pullman, Washington, for the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, P.O. Box 3434, Great Falls, Montana 59403. Current issue: November 2016, volume 42, No. 4, ISSN 02275-6706

Incorporated in 1969 under Missouri General Not-For-Profit Corporation act. IRS Exemption Certificate No. 501(c)3, Identification No. 510187715.
A Message from the President

With elections much on our mind this year, we’re pleased to announce that the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation (LCTHF) also has a new administrative team in place. The goal of your new officers and board of directors is to continue to further our mission as “Keepers of the Story and Stewards of the Trail” by husbanding our financial resources, increasing our membership, and expanding our partnerships. We are especially appreciative of the ongoing recognition and support we receive from Mark Weekley, the superintendent of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, and his staff.

A robust and dedicated membership is crucial to fulfilling our mission. We need to reverse the decline in membership numbers witnessed in recent years. The most straightforward way is through our gift membership program. If each current member gives one gift membership to celebrate a loved one’s birthday or a holiday, we would DOUBLE our membership! And membership in the LCTHF is the gift that keeps on giving as all new members receive four issues of We Proceeded On and four e- or hard-copy editions of The Orderly Report, in addition to information about national and regional meetings, and the opportunity to join a local chapter.

The help of our membership was especially critical during the public review period just passed for the sections of the Eastern Legacy designated by the National Park Service (NPS) to run from Pittsburgh to Camp Dubois. The NPS has collated the comments from the public review into a report for the Department of the Interior. The department usually takes about a month for final review of the report, which is then sent to Congress. This may take longer, however, because of our new federal administration. “The Eastern Legacy study is also important as it has created a greater awareness in Congress that there is a Lewis and Clark Trail out there and a lot of people who care about it,” says Superintendent Weekley.

Once Congress has the report, Congress can 1) do nothing, 2) accept part of the report, or 3) accept the Eastern Legacy recommendation in its entirety. In view of the uncertainty of the ultimate outcome, it is important for LCTHF members and friends to express their views to their elected officials. You are all invited to join your leadership in Washington, DC, in February 2017 to “Hike the Hill” with the American Hiking Society and the Partnership for the National Trails System. This will be your opportunity to visit with your senators and representatives to advocate in person for Congress’s acceptance of the NPS recommendation to add the Eastern Legacy to the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. Superintendent Weekley reminds us, “At the end of the day, this is Congress’ decision which is what makes it a political process.” In a participatory democracy such as ours, it is important to make our voices heard. Watch for an announcement of the date for “Hike the Hill” in The Orderly Report due out this December.

Our goals are further entwined with Superintendent Weekley’s as the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail came into being for commemoration and protection with the help of our foundation. Weekley emphasizes the importance of using financial resources to make an impact by supporting well-managed projects that will grow over time. In this category he includes the LCTHF’s William P. Sherman Library and Archives; the Discovering Lewis and Clark website (the content and technical aspects of which the LCTHF now manages); and the idea of developing an administrative history of the LCTHF as management aid. Knowing where we have been helps to know where we should be going.

Future projects of the LCTHF will also be created with the programs of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail in mind. Superintendent Weekley and Neal Bedlan, chief of interpretation, education, and visitor services, are working on a Comprehensive Interpretive Plan (CIP) that will create the basis for a unified approach to trail-wide interpretation for the many partners along the trail. The process includes reviewing the variety of interpretive resources that currently make up the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. The resultant CIP will then be used to provide guidance for NPS staff to maximize the effectiveness of the interpretation resources the NPS
We Proceeded On November 2016

will provide for the next five years. Honoring Tribal Legacies is another Lewis and Clark Trail program for which Superintendent Weekley has overseen the creation of a curriculum guide. “The story needs to be told with the inclusion of the important role played by Native Americans in the success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. It is a story of partnership and friendship,” explains Weekley.

Superintendent Weekley is also working on an innovative collaboration between the NPS and National Geographic on “geotourism” to produce a travel guide to the places most recommended and respected by locals. “Geotourism is a tool for bringing people in,” says Weekley. “The National Park Service is looking to foster the desire in tourists to protect the Lewis and Clark Trail and the resources along its length. If people go out on the trail for recreation, they will appreciate the trail and care for it. And we want it to be fun.” Geotourism’s innovative approach offers local people who know all the best sites in their area a platform for increased visibility.

Members of the LCTHF will soon be asked by Superintendent Weekley to share their knowledge about what is special on each segment of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. He is looking for input in the categories of 1) places to go, 2) where to stay, and 3) things to do. Watch for upcoming announcements in The Orderly Report about the launch of the geotourism project’s link to where you can post information about the trail and its environs.

One of the biggest challenges along the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, according to Dan Wiley, chief of integrated resource stewardship for the trail, is that the trail administrators do not own land along the trail. The NPS relies on the public’s trust, its good name, and the help of the LCTHF to accomplish what the law requires the NPS to do. The top two strategic priorities developed in 2014 are trail awareness and stewardship of the trail’s cultural, natural, and recreational resources. An important feature of this new approach is to augment the public’s perception of the trail as a corridor that expands the trail to include communities on both sides of the center line. A plan for an auto tour route will direct visitors traveling the trail to explore this wider area. The first signs are currently being installed along the segment of the trail that runs from Helena to Dillon in southwestern Montana.

Your officers and board of directors join me in thanking our members for your past support and participation. We look forward to expanding our membership, programs, and partnerships in the year ahead.

—Philippa Newfield
San Francisco, California
An Author’s Response

Dear Editor:

I write in response to Kira Gale’s letter in the February 2016 issue of We Proceeded On. I appreciate the attention her letter focuses on French attempts during the 1790s to foment war in the lower Mississippi valley in order to wrest New Orleans and surrounding territory from Spain. Indeed, as Ms. Gale states, William Clark’s brother, George Rogers Clark, was involved in two such schemes, even accepting a French commission to command the revolutionary army of the Mississippi.

I show on page 286 of The Unknown Travels and Dubious Pursuits of William Clark that in 1793 George took part in a French project through which the naturalist Andre Michaux was ostensibly to penetrate the West and George was to invade Louisiana for the French Republic. Although the Michaux plan never came into being, George thereafter remained alert for other opportunities to drive the Spanish out of Louisiana. And, as I detail from pages 146 through 148, his words and actions on behalf of France setting him at odds in the United States with the Alien and Sedition Acts, he accepted an offer of sanctuary in Spanish St. Louis in 1798. Once there, George continued urging his French contacts to attack Louisiana before the US or Britain might do so.

Ms. Gale indicated that I am “puzzled” why William Clark in 1798 listed thirteen strategic locations on the lower Mississippi River in the order of a boatman traveling upstream from the Gulf of Mexico. I refer her to my summation on page 323 in which I write that such information was useless to Clark, “but not to a military force.”

Ms. Gale’s statement is correct that I document my discovery “that Clark was smuggling Spanish government silver dollar payments up river to Benjamin Sebastian”; the evidence, consisting in part of two entries in Clark’s journal and a letter to his father, is unequivocal. Concerning James Wilkinson, however, I make clear on page 321 there is yet no unequivocal evidence proving the 670 Spanish dollars Clark sent upriver in his sugar barrel were, as I say, “something other than lawful compensation,” whether for Wilkinson or someone else.

Jo Ann Trogdon
Columbia, Missouri

Of Buckskin and Fringes

Dear Editor,

We performed music of the Lewis and Clark Era at the opening of the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers’ film on the Lewis and Clark Expedition. At the time we wondered why the U.S. Army would put together its own film to attempt to correct the inaccurate depiction by Burns. One of the things that most offended the US Army was the depiction of members of the expedition in fringed buckskin clothing, like a mountain man. He said that this was an official Army expedition and that the members wore military uniforms and observed Army regulations and ceremonies. When a cloth uniform wore out, it was taken apart to make a pattern from which a buckskin uniform could be made.

These uniforms had no fringes, as depicted by Burns. Military discipline was also completely ignored in Burns’s depiction. After the Burns program ran on TV, the National Geographic Magazine’s issue on Lewis and Clark depicted them in fringed buckskin outfits. The colonel said that the U.S. Army sent a harsh letter to National Geographic citing the inaccuracies in their presentation. The Geographic responded to the effect that after the Burns TV show they felt they had to depict the men in fringed buckskin as the public probably would not believe their depiction if they had portrayed them in regular Army uniforms made of buckskin. It was sad to see the sculptures on page 16 of the August 2016 issue of WPO depicting the men in fringed buckskin. So, Burns, who is not well regarded by most historians, strikes again! Too bad.

Information from the journals of the Corps of Discovery about fiddling and dancing are on our website, voyagerrecords.com.

Phil & Vivian Williams
Seattle, Washington
This Sublunary World

Dear Editor,

In a recent article (“The Rhyme of the Great Navigator, Part 3,” We Proceeded On 41:3) David Nicandri points to an uncommon word, *sublunary*, that links Lewis’s remarks on his 31st birthday (18 August 1805) to lines in Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*. He states that both passages share a sense of gloom and that the “melancholy subtext” of Lewis’s passage can be read “as a foreshadowing of Lewis’s end-of-life psychological travail.”

The Lewis passage, however, can be linked to passages by other well-known poets of his era and interpreted as far from gloomy.

Nicandri calls *sublunary* a “very unusual” word, used just this once by Lewis, but admits that it was used by three other contemporary explorers. It can also be found in Samuel Johnson’s pioneering *Dictionary* of 1755. Johnson derives the word from the Latin *sub* and *luna*, and defines it as “situated beneath the moon; earthly; terrestrial; of this world.” He then quotes five famous poets to bring out its shades of meaning.

These five passages indicate that by the eighteenth century the word was widely used to bring out contrasts between earthly and heavenly realms and between the passing frailty of human life and the depths of the eternal. John Dryden’s passage is explicit: “The celestial bodies above the moon being not subject to chance, remained in perpetual order, while all things sublunary are subject to change.” John Milton describes night’s shadow moving across the sky’s “vast sublunar vault.” John Donne scorns the mere sensuality of “dull sublunary lovers’ love.” Jonathan Swift cautions that lustful Roman gods “pick up sublunary ladies.” John Denham treats exploration and discovery as instances of human futility and error: “And these discov’ries make us all confess / That sublunary science is but guess.”

Nicandri’s quotation from Young also fits this pattern, for it exclaims on the brevity of “Bliss! Sublunary bliss! Proud words and vain!” Vain, that is, against the sweep of “Time’s enormous scythe.”

Against this background, Lewis’s passage reads as a balanced meditation on life in the grip of time. At the midpoint of his life “in this sublunary world” he looks to the past and then to the future. The past seems a record of hours misspent in “indolence.” But since these hours “are past and cannot be recalled, I dash from me the gloomy thought and resolved in future, to redouble my exertions.” He will “at least in deavour to promote those two primary objects of human existence, by giving them the aid of that portion of talents which nature and fortune have bestowed on me.”

Earlier in the passage Lewis names these two objects, by reflecting that in the past he did little “to further the happiness of the human race, or to advance the information of the succeeding generation.”

At this point Lewis had successfully led his party across the continent to the edge of the Continental Divide, making insightful notes on geography, flora, fauna, and native peoples. He could rightly claim to be advancing the information of succeeding generations as he made his journal entries. Nature had given him talents of leadership and observation, and fortune had answered his longing to lead this expedition. He might have supposed that his efforts were furthering human happiness by enlarging American claims in the West and checking European domination.

Read in this way, Lewis’s passage does not seem melancholy but rather hopeful, even boastful. Lewis could be exulting that his efforts would reach beyond one generation—and beyond the sublunary to the immortal. If we take him at his word, he stands forth here as sane, competent, and sanguine about his attainments and prospects.

But what if Lewis wrote “sublunary world” and simply meant “earthly life” without any literary overtones? He often uses such stilted language, perhaps from his years as Jefferson’s secretary rather than from reading poetry. This passage occurs at the end of an entry with details about the day’s occurrences—in a particularly busy time of planning and negotiating with Cameahwait and his people. It may have been penned days later, when Lewis was catching up on field notes and recalled that this was his birth date. He looks back with some regrets then looks forward with new resolve—as who does not on commemorative occasions? He could just be hastily jotting an afterthought, recording what he thinks he should say, even to himself, about turning 31. For all these reasons this one paragraph will hardly do as a portal into Lewis’s depths of character.

Albert Furtwangler
Salem, Oregon
Beacon Rock Effigies

It may be of interest to WPO readers to know the carved cedar effigies shown on page 21 of the August 2016 issue of WPO are on permanent exhibit at the Columbia Gorge Interpretive Center Museum located in Stevenson, Washington. Helene Biddle Dick, granddaughter of Henry J. Biddle, donated them in 1985 as well as the four carved sticks found at the same time by Biddle. The museum is open daily with the exception of New Year’s, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Helene liked to tell the story about Washington’s governor refusing the gift of Beacon Rock and the fast reversal when Oregon entered into the picture. “How funny that would be,” she said, “to have an Oregon state park in Washington!” Indeed.

Sharon Tiffany
Retired Executive Director
CGICM
Stevenson, Washington

Exploring the Corps by Adoring and Imploring

Immediately after the end of the 2016 annual meeting in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, my wife Carolyn and I made a beeline for Washington, DC, to extend our visit to the east. We stayed just a couple of blocks from the National Cathedral in the northwest quadrant of the city and decided to stroll over after lunch.

Completed in 1990, eighty-three years after the cornerstone was dedicated by President Theodore Roosevelt, the impressive stone masonry building stands on a high point and affords a magnificent view overlooking the capital city. The Episcopal house of worship, a shining example of Gothic architecture, is the second largest cathedral in the United States, after St. John the Divine in New York City.

The cathedral is open to persons of any (or no) faith. Woodrow Wilson, the 28th president of the United States, is entombed here, the only president to be buried in Washington, DC, proper. From its intricate English-carved stone pulpit, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his last sermon, joining with Bishop Desmond Tutu, Billy Graham, and a host of other ministers who have preached there over the years.

On either side of the eastern end of the nave stand several smaller chapels used for more intimate ceremonies. As our tour guide described their respective features, I was struck by the red needlepoint cushions hanging from pegs low on the back of the chair in front, to be placed on the floor for use by supplicants in St. John’s Chapel. The roughly 18” by 10” by 2” cushions are dedicated to those who have made significant contributions to American history, including all forty deceased presidents through Ronald Reagan. Approximately 150 notables from all walks of life are commemorated with these cushions.

Suddenly the needlepointed name of William Clark caught my eye. On the vertical surface, placed over a vivid red background, were several designs relating to his life. Arrayed in the upper left corner are what appear to be a hatchet, a rifle, a powder horn, and a wampum belt. Below the belt, roughly in the center along the lower edge, stands an Indian woman, surely representing Sacagawea, reaching out with her arm. In the lower left corner sits what are probably pages of the journals underlying the hilt end of a sword and a long-barreled pistol. In the lower right is clearly a map. The artist did well to capture many items of significance to Clark and the Corps of Discovery.

I signaled my wife to tell the guide to continue along without me. Who else might I spot among the other
cushions on display? Surely Meriwether Lewis would be there, too. In the same row as Clark was his older brother George Rogers. A very similar pattern of hatchet, rifle, powder horn, and wampum belt appeared prominently.

Where to find Lewis? I searched rapidly up one side of the aisle and down the other. I discovered Thomas Jefferson, Albert Gallatin, John J. Audubon, and Nicholas Biddle. (But no Madison?) Also represented were Daniel Boone, James Monroe, and Alexander Hamilton. (Certainly not Aaron Burr!)

But where was Meriwether? A question to the information desk initially failed when the clerk couldn’t find the list of the cushion honorees, but a more diligent search uncovered it. My cursory perusal revealed no Lewis. But the sharp-eyed guide noticed that a certain “Louis, Meriwather” had been honored. The Lewis cushion, like John Madison’s, was out for repair at the moment.

Undaunted, I went back the next day and snapped a picture of the somewhat impressionistic Lewis and Clark stained glass window located in bay C of the south nave. The sun shone through stylized depictions of, among others, the keelboat, wild animals and birds, tepees, a fort, and water features. Oh! the joy! My whale had been beached and a sense of the Pacific prevailed. Before I left, I got down on my knees to thank the Lord for my blessings. William Clark, that most supportive of men, cushioned the floor. Lewis remained, as seems to be his wont, ever the mystery man.

Lou Ritten
La Grange Park, Illinois

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Boy Scouts Work Toward Lewis and Clark Badges

Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation Past President Dan Sturdevant has been working with Boy Scout Troop 260 of Kansas City, Missouri, on its Boy Scouts’ Lewis and Clark badge. Dan and the troop visited the statue of Lewis and Clark at Clark’s Point near downtown Kansas City, Missouri, the site of the expedition’s visit on its return trip September 15, 1806. The troop also visited Kaw Point near the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas Rivers where the expedition camped from June 26 to 29, 1804, where they wrote in their journals. Richard Hinderliter, the troop leader, wrote to Dan, “Thanks for meeting with us. It meant a lot to the boys.” The LCTHF is developing generic Lewis and Clark badges for Boy Scouts and groups such as Camp Fire, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, and other youth organizations.
With the arrival of spring in 1806 the waterborne Corps of Discovery left Fort Clatsop near the mouth of the Columbia and began its transcontinental homeward journey. On April 24, about a month after their departure from their winter encampment, their last two dugouts were sold for six fathoms of white beads as the expedition transitioned to a marching cadre accompanied by pack horses.\(^1\) Seeking to avoid further struggles upstream against the spring current, the corps began its longest overland trek of the entire expedition.

Captains Lewis and Clark, after marching along the rocky Columbia River shoreline with its stretches of sand dunes, bought two “nags” to ride the next evening.\(^2\) The corps, with the aid of a Nez Perce guide and family whom they had met a few days earlier, followed an ancient trail connecting fisheries to a major trading center on the river: “Waiya‘im,” the Shahptian name for Celilo Falls. The riverine trail with its Wallula Gap detour across the Horse Heaven Hills in Benton County, Washington, was anglicized to the “Celilo Falls Trail,” an extension of the Nez Perce Trail originating in the Nez Perce homeland.

The mounted captains and their guide led a caravan of seventeen horses: horses they had purchased in trade from downstream Indians, borrowed Nez Perce horses (2), hired Nez Perce horses (3), and the Charbonneau family riding their two horses. Private Bratton, suffering a back ailment, and fatigued corpsmen were assigned horses not employed in cargo transport. The remuda was sufficient to pack the expedition’s meager supplies, and Sergeant Gass reported, “most of the men having their knap-sacks carried on the horses.”\(^3\)

Wallula Gap looking to the east, upriver. All photos are courtesy of the author.
Accompanied by a Nez Perce family with a herd of young unbroken horses, the procession became unmanageable when joined by curious natives interrupting the march across the semi-arid plains. Previously the captains had agreed upon an order of march; corpsmen not leading a pack horse were divided so the officers could command their group alternately each day in front of the column of horses and dust. The arrangement had its perils. Private Hall’s hired horse was stolen when he lagged behind.

The object of the corps in taking a cross-country detour away from the Columbia River was to avoid a major obstacle to overland travel they observed during the westward downriver travel the previous fall. Wallula Gap, a National Natural Landmark in Washington, is a water gap where the Columbia River cuts through an anticlinal ridge: a long, narrow upfold of basalt flows. The river makes a horseshoe turn and flows westward through the gap with its 1,000-foot-high vertical basalt cliffs. Ten to twelve thousand years ago the floodwaters released from Glacial Lake Missoula far upstream in today’s Montana were backed up by the narrow gap in the Horse Heaven Hills, creating dramatic effects on the geography. The gap’s name derived from “Wallula,” a Walla Walla word meaning “a small stream running into a larger one.” The Nez Perce named the nearby tributary to the Columbia River “Walla Walla” after the Waluulapam, a mid-Columbia plateau tribe living in the area.

Scant information on the Wallula Gap detour route was recorded by corps journalists; nor are their April 26 campsite and the detour route marked on the expedition’s course map. Historians have been reticent about speculating on the details and route of the remote cross-country trail. There is no scientific unanimity on the subject. The Wallula Gap detour route described here is based on conjectural analysis of journal records, topographical research, and geographic reconnaissance. Location of the April 26 campsite is a key piece to the puzzle for determining the distance traveled the next day before the procession encountered the Wallula Gap detour. Captain Clark located the camp, “about a mile below 3 Lodges of the fritened band of the Wallah wallah nation.” On the previous October 19, 1805, during their passage down the Columbia, the village of the “Fritened” Indians, downriver from “Mussel Shell
rapids,” was marked on the course map by the westbound cartographer. Sergeant Ordway reported the April camp was “on the bank of the river,” and added “only small willows to burn.” After collaborating with Clark and Shannon, Nicholas Biddle interlined Clark’s April 27 journal entry, “passed above our camp a small river called Youmalolam riv.”9 Today’s Umatilla River in Umatilla County, Oregon, was unnoticed on the westbound journey; the southern drainage was added to the course map after the corps continued homeward.

Today’s McNary Dam impoundment has inundated the “Mussel Shell rapids” and the natives’ fishing campsite; the location of the expedition’s April 26 encampment is flooded by the waters of Lake Umatilla behind John Day Dam. Conjectural analysis places the April 26 campsite below the present townsite of Plymouth, Washington, and in the vicinity of Four Mile Canyon. Sergeant Ordway’s account suggests the camp was near a canyon drainage that would support wetland vegetation in the dry plains of native shrub-steppe: desert plants dominated by sagebrush and bunchgrass. The distance measured to the Wallula Gap detour by the expedition, and in this analysis, was calculated from Four Mile Canyon.

Captain Lewis reported on the morning trek of April 27, “at the distance of fifteen miles passed through a country similar to that of yesterday; the hills at the extremity of this distance again approach the river and are rocky abrupt and 300 feet high.”10 The corps followed a trail around the Wallula Gap cliffs that left the banks of the river and continued cross-country to return to the river again further upstream. Switzler Canyon is fifteen miles upriver from Four Mile Canyon and can be observed from Sand Station Recreation Area located across the river in Oregon. From this vista, Wallula Gap can be seen blocking passage along the shoreline; however the Wallula Gap detour route is not readily apparent.

Captain Clark noted the gap in his westbound journal entry of October 18, 1805, and included the ridge and water channel on his course map.11 Camped above the gap, he reported, “at 16 miles from the point the river passes into the range of high Countrrey at which place the rocks project into the river from the high clifts which is on [both] the Lard. Side about 2/3 of the way across and those of the Stard Side about the Same distance.”12 Passing through the gap the next day he did not com-
We proceeded on the lofty cliffs on both sides of the river. On the 1806 eastbound journey the expedition was again confronted with the towering cliffs; however this time the precipices forced the shoreline trail they were following to ascend to the uplands.

Indigenous summer fishing camps and the southern terminus of the Wallula Gap detour route were located near “Spukshowki”: today’s Switzler Canyon.\(^\text{13}\) The long, steep-fronted canyon, strewn with taluses of loose rock and rock benches, winds south ten miles from the crest of the Horse Heaven Hills ridge and, near its mouth, is 380 feet deep. Huge pumps on the shore of today’s Lake Wallula send water 1,000 feet uphill to irrigate orchards and vineyards on loess soil above the basalt cliffs. On the eastern slope of the canyon a four-
wheel-drive track to service the irrigation pumps has exposed the windblown sandy silt. A complete record of the detour route would provide interesting information, were it available. Captain Lewis merely reported, “we ascended the hill and marched through a high plain for 9 miles when we again returned to the river.”

In the modern investigation of the Wallula Gap detour, horses were employed to survey the area and assess the feasibility of climbing from the Columbia River to the Horse Heaven Hills and returning to the river. In late April, starting at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Horse Heaven Habitat Management Unit trailhead at McNary Dam, investigators rode upstream following a fishing access dirt road. The impoundment behind McNary Dam plus railroad line construction has resulted in the modern trail being closer to the rock benches that prevented the expedition access to the high plains. The modern-day explorers could only surmise what the “Mussel shell rapids” and fishing camps looked like before being flooded by the rising water of Lake Wallula. However, the surveyors marveled at the observation skills of the corps’ journalists. The sandy road often crossed rocky scree that slowed the progress of the horses as the riders passed under the spectacular perpendicular rock benches and watched for nesting curlews and rattlesnakes, as had the corps.

Continuing upriver, we bypassed several rocky canyons with steep sides that were not appropriate for a horse trail, let alone moccasin-clad Native Americans. Upriver from the eastern slope of Switzler Canyon and before the commencement of a two-hundred-foot-high rock bench, however, there was an opening with sandy alluvial soil, free of basalt scree, gently sloping to the uplands above. Unfortunately all-terrain-vehicle
spilling over the ridgeline from Glacial Lake Lewis behind the Wallula Gap constriction, the receding floodwaters created sloping channels on the east side of the crest. Native Americans followed a wildlife migratory route in the wide coulee, free of basalt escarpments, to access a fishery above the gap. The corps followed the trail that dropped precipitously one thousand feet to the river in search of a Walla Walla fishing camp, only to discover the camp had moved upstream.

Washington State 1881 cadastral maps included trails used for centuries by Native Americans. Pioneers followed the ancient trails and established the townsite of Hover in the fertile river bottom. A wagon road from the ridgeline down to the south end of the river flat was constructed in the wide coulee; old rock bridge abutments can still be found in the gully. Today, Yellepit Pond is sandwiched between rock benches and a railroad embankment in the Yellepit Habitat Management Unit. Hover was moved upriver after the construction of McNary Dam.

tracks have now obliterated any evidence of a trail used for centuries by Native Americans, first on foot and later with the aid of horse.

With confidence in the discovery, the riders easily climbed to the high plains and saw exactly what Sergeant Ordway reported—"assended a high plain where we Saw an extensive country around us & not a tree to be Seen." The uplands are now cultivated with dry-land wheat that has obliterated any trace of the ancient trail worn in the cryptobiotic soil crust. The ancient trail avoided the deep, steep-walled Switzler and Spaw canyons, abandoned spillover channels from the Ice Age floods. It continued north in a straight line to a ridge crest depression where the Ice Age floodwaters had eroded a shallow channel across the divide. Following their guide, the corps had descended to the river in a wide flat-bottomed, U-shaped, or hanging, coulee.

In contrast to the steep-fronted western Horse Heaven Hills canyons, created by high-velocity water
To rest fatigued corpsmen and horses the captains halted on the river bottom and were informed by their guide, “the village was at the place we should next return to the river” (emphasis added). Chief Yellepit, leader of the hospitable Walla Wallas, and six of his riders joined the caravan to lead the corps to a fishing camp farther upriver. The account continues, “we continued our march accompanied by Yellepit and his party to the village which we found at the distance of six miles situated on the N. side of the river at the lower side of the low country.” The captain’s brief depiction of their route has led to speculation on the route the corps used to reach Yellepit’s camp after leaving the river bottom.
The mounted modern-day explorers followed the old wagon road from the 1,280-foot ridgeline to Yellepit Pond and searched for a route back to the ridge crest from the north end of the river bottom. Vertical rock benches at the river's edge prevented shoreline passage farther upriver; the expedition would have been confronted with talus slopes that extended to the river's waterline. The riders followed a four-wheel drive track located in a narrow coulee from the north end of Yellepit Pond to the ridge crest and followed the ridgeline until it descended to the lowlands above Wallula Gap. In their haste to get to the Walla Walla fishing camp and the following two days of activity with their hosts, the corps’ journalists neglected to mention climbing again to the ridgeline before the next return to the river.

From Yellepit Pond the modern-day explorers rode to the ridge crest and continued on the ridgeline before gradually dropping to the barren plains north of the present Yellepit way station, an abandoned railroad facility. The six-mile ride from Yellepit Pond ended on sloping lowlands that terminate at the base of rock benches downriver from the old railroad facilities. Rock benches with talus slopes approaching the railroad embankment prevented downriver passage with
We Proceeded On November 2016

the horses. Even before Lake Wallula flooded the river a downriver passageway along the shoreline would not have been feasible for horses.

There is no consensus among scholars of the expedition on the location of the April 28 and 29 campsite where the corps was hosted by the hospitable Walla Walla band at a fishing camp on the Columbia River. Sergeant Ordway validated the captains’ information on the location of the campsite, “at the commencement of a low barron Smooth country.” The next day he also provided more information: “we borrowed a canoe from the Indians and crossed over the Columbia to the South Side above the mouth of the river which we took to be a byo where we passd. down last fall.” He was referring to the mouth of the Walla Walla River and its large floodplain lined with sand and gravel bars.

The original Walla Walla River delta extended into the Columbia River forcing its main channel west against the basalt rock benches and talus slopes downriver from the lowlands. Before the construction of McNary Dam, the Walla Walla River meandered three serpentine shoreline miles to flow a mile west from its present confluence and mudflat delta. Submerged under the waters of Lake Wallula, the original mouth of the Walla Walla River is now marked with a navigational buoy. Directly across from the barren lowlands the buoy can be observed in the middle of the Columbia River. The river’s channel is now two miles wide compared to its one-half mile width when the corps ferried its cargo in a borrowed canoe and swam its horses across the river. Establishing the location of the original mouth of the Walla Walla River was instru-
mental in determining the northern terminus of the Wallula Gap detour. 23

After researching the route of the Wallula Gap detour on horseback, the modern-day explorers made the following conclusions: Starting at the southern terminus of the Wallula Gap detour near today’s Switzer Canyon, the corps traveled overland across the Horse Heaven Hills, dropped down to the Columbia River in the vicinity of today’s Yellepit Pond, and returned to the ridgeline again before descending to the river for the second time at the lowlands above Wallula Gap. Additionally, the corps’ campsite of April 18 and 19 was determined to be on the Columbia River’s western shoreline lowlands opposite and above the 1806 mouth of the Walla Walla River. 19

Dr. A. G. “Doc” Wesselius is a retired veterinarian who has spent his life working with horses and currently volunteers his pack string for back country trail maintenance. An active Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation member, he serves on the board of directors for the Washington State Chapter.

Notes
15. 45 degrees 56.7 minutes N – 119 degrees 6.5 minutes W
22. Evergreen Pacific River Cruising Atlas, 70. 46 degrees 3.7 minutes N – 118 degrees 57.5 minutes W
23. 46 degrees 3.5 minutes N – 118 degrees 56.4 minutes W

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Photograph of the Missouri River near Great Falls, Montana, courtesy of Steve Lee.
A Cold Case Mystery

Why Didn’t Meriwether Lewis’s Two Best Friends Investigate His Death?

Kira Gale

Meriwether Lewis died three years after returning from the expedition to the Pacific Coast. He was thirty-five years old and residing in St. Louis as the governor of Louisiana Territory. He died during the night of October 11, 1809, at a lonely tavern inn on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee while on his way to Washington to meet with federal officials. He had originally planned to travel by boat on the Mississippi River from St. Louis to New Orleans and go from there to Baltimore by sailing ship. He changed his plans at Fort Pickering at Chickasaw Bluffs (today’s Memphis, Tennessee), where he decided to travel by horseback. Governor Lewis was accompanied by his free mulatto servant John Pernier and his dog, Seaman. His death was called a suicide. I believe he was assassinated.

The Suicide Argument

Anyone who cares about Meriwether Lewis and how he died must ask the same question—why didn’t his two best friends—William Clark and Thomas Jefferson—investigate his death if they had the slightest doubt about the suicide story they received from others? Surely, they would have wanted his killers brought to justice. This is the crucial question for both those who believe Lewis committed suicide and for those who believe he was murdered. I believe the answer is—William Clark believed the lies he was told, and Thomas Jefferson knew the truth.

If Jefferson knew the truth, why didn’t he try to convict the assassins of their crime? An apparent suicide, or a “natural death,” is the best means of concealing an assassination. Jefferson would have had to challenge the suicide story, and then launch a major investigation to bring Lewis’s killers to justice. It would not have brought him back to life, and an investigation would have seriously destabilized the nation, because Lewis was killed by powerful enemies. William Clark, on the other hand, believed it was suicide because he knew how deeply unhappy Lewis was over his financial problems surrounding the money owed him by the federal government.

Forged Letters

On November 26, 1809, a few weeks after Lewis’s death, Clark wrote to his brother and reported he had received letters confirming the suicide story at Grinder’s Stand and further saying Lewis had earlier tried to kill himself while he was on the boat. The letters were forgeries, written in the name of Captain Gilbert C. Russell, the commander of Fort Pickering where Lewis spent two weeks before he started on his final journey to Washington, DC, on the Natchez Trace.

Before he reached Fort Pickering, Lewis had stopped at New Madrid to make a will, leaving everything to his mother in Virginia. It was a simple statement, written in his small pocket notebook, and legally witnessed. The letters Clark received said Lewis had made a new will at Fort Pickering naming Clark the executor of Lewis’s estate. Clark searched in vain for this second will and historians have continued to search for it. I searched for it myself, before realizing it was a lie created by the assassins. Clark referred to the letters in a letter he wrote to his brother Jonathan, letters that have not been found. The story of a second will was included in the letters in order to make Clark believe the stories of Lewis’s suicide and suicide attempts. Everyone realized Clark was the obvious choice to become executor of Lewis’s estate, and he did serve as an executor.
Captain Russell’s Two Letters to Jefferson

What is the proof the letters Clark reported receiving from Captain Russell were forged? Clark wrote to his brother about the letters on November 26. Captain Russell wrote to President Jefferson on January 4 and January 31. Russell’s authentic letters were an official report concerning Lewis’s stay at the fort, and what Russell had learned about the twelve remaining days of Lewis’s life.

If there had been a second will made at the fort, naming Clark the executor of Lewis’s estate, Russell would have been a witness to the will, and he would have sent this legal document to the former president. Russell did send a legal document to Jefferson, a memorandum of understanding, signed by both Lewis and Russell, concerning two trunks Lewis left behind at the fort. This memorandum of September 28 is significant, and will be discussed later in the article.

The letters Clark received claimed that Lewis spent “15 days in a state of mental derangement” at the fort. This assertion is directly contradicted in Russell’s January 4 letter in which he states of Lewis: “in about six days he was perfectly restored in every respect & able to travel.” The same man could not have written both statements.

Was Frederick Bates involved?

Before Lewis left Fort Pickering on September 29, Captain James House in Nashville wrote a letter to Frederick Bates in St. Louis. Dated September 28, House reported to Bates that Major Amos Stoddard, while traveling to Nashville, had met a man “immediately from the Bluffs” who said Lewis was in a state of mental derangement, and that he had made several attempts at suicide that this person had prevented. It continued with the information that Captain Russell had taken Lewis into his own quarters and was keeping “a strict watch over him to prevent his committing violence on himself and had caused his boat to be unloaded and the key to be secured in his stores.”

There are two clues in this letter indicating House and Bates were involved in the conspiracy. First, the identity of the man who saved Lewis from “several attempts to put an end to his own existence” is not revealed. The real purpose of the letter—other than confirming the mental derangement and suicide attempts stories—is to tell Bates where the key to the locked room could be found. Frederick Bates, the territorial secretary, was serving as acting governor in Lewis’s absence. He was a known enemy of Lewis. It appears that Captain House was also part of the conspiracy. It is another piece of evidence that Lewis was carrying documents they did not want examined by the federal government.

Another forged document muddies the historical record

Donald Jackson, editor of Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, did not include these two authentic letters written by Captain Russell in his classic reference work. It was a serious omission, as Russell’s letters are an official report on Lewis’s activities in the last month of his life. Instead, Jackson included another forged document, written two years later in 1811, called the “Russell Statement,” written in the name of Captain Russell. The 1811 Russell Statement was identified as a forgery by two of the nation’s top document experts during the Coroner’s Inquest held in Hohenwald, Tennessee, in 1996. The statement said Lewis had tried to commit suicide multiple times while traveling on the boat from St. Louis to Fort Pickering. If Lewis had tried to commit suicide on the boat, the real Captain Russell would have reported this to the president. Because Jackson included the forged Russell statement and failed to include Russell’s two authentic letters in his book, the suicide story was once again reinforced.

Wilkinson organized the assassination

Who organized the assassination of Governor Meriwether Lewis? I make the case it was General James Wilkinson, Lewis’s predecessor in office as governor of Louisiana Territory and commanding general of the United States Army. In 1807, after Lewis returned from the Pacific, President Jefferson appointed Lewis the second governor of Louisiana Territory, based in St. Louis. Jefferson had appointed Wilkinson the first governor of Louisiana Territory in 1805, despite public criticism about combining political and military authority in one person.

Lewis’s assassination was organized by General Wilkinson and John Smith T, the general’s shirttail
relative. Smith T had added a T to his name to distinguish himself from other John Smiths. The T stood for Tennessee. Smith T was the leading associate of Aaron Burr in the St. Louis area and a wealthy lead mine operator. He tried to deliver 12,000 pounds of lead to Burr during Burr’s attempted invasion of Mexico in 1807.

Lead was used to make bullets. The Lead Mine District south of St. Louis contained the highest concentration of lead in the world, and was worth more than the entire price of the Louisiana Purchase. Federal land agent Will Carr wrote that the lead production would pay off a considerable part of the purchase price of Louisiana within a few years. It was reserved by the federal government as public land, which could only be leased.

Both men were considered dangerous. Wilkinson was called an assassin by his contemporaries. He was known to use forgeries. Smith T was a duelist reputed to have killed more than fifteen men. Meriwether Lewis had injured both men. He removed Smith T from his public office in Louisiana Territory in 1807, and he had removed many of Wilkinson’s friends from the U.S. Army when he served as President Jefferson’s confidential aide in 1801. Lewis had prepared a coded review of army officers ranking them on their loyalty to Jefferson and Jefferson’s Republican Party. Wilkinson was an old-fashioned Federalist, who detested Republicans while maintaining an appearance of neutrality. Wilkinson’s was the only name Lewis left blank in his coded review.

Wilkinson and Smith T’s motives for assassinating Lewis would have involved crooked land deals and contested lead mine district leases. Wilkinson was notorious for his corrupt practices as governor. Smith T was using a private army to fight for control of the best lead mine claims. Wilkinson and Smith T undoubtedly had colluded in shady land deals, and Lewis was bringing documents to Washington regarding the lead mine district and other land records.

I believe Wilkinson and Smith T were planning a repeat of Burr’s filibuster expedition into Spanish territory in order to participate in the first revolution for Mexican independence, which eventually took place in 1810. This is how I connect Lewis’s assassination to the “Silver Mines of Mexico.” A filibuster is an unauthorized military attack by citizens of one country against a country at peace with their own country.

After Lewis’s death, in December, 2009, an advance, reconnaissance party led by Smith T’s brother and Wilkinson’s former sheriff left St. Louis bound for Sante Fe. They were arrested and imprisoned by Spanish authorities a few months later. In 1813, after they were released from prison, they joined the Gutierrez-Magee expedition to invade Mexico.
Lewis leaves St. Louis

What were Lewis’s intentions when he left St. Louis for Washington on September 4? First, he had to recover the money the federal government owed him—money he had spent on territorial expenses while serving as governor. Historian Thomas Danisi says the federal government owed Lewis about $9,000. His annual salary as governor was $2,000. After Lewis’s death, the government reimbursed his estate $5,257.46.11

In St. Louis Lewis put his land titles up as security for his private debt of $4,000. He owned, or he was making payments on, seventeen parcels of land in the St. Louis area, ranging from the Great Mounds along the riverfront to a farm he bought for his mother. He was planning to sell his property in Albemarle County, Virginia, and bring his mother to St. Louis to join him and his brother Reuben.12 In addition, Lewis had signed papers in May, agreeing to be responsible for the education and expenses of Toussaint Jessaume, the thirteen-year-old son of the interpreter for the Mandan chief. Toussaint’s parents, his sister, and the Mandan chief and his family returned to the Mandan-Hidatsa villages in 1809.13

Lewis was planning to stay in the east to work on a book concerning the expedition—a three-volume account of the expedition that would contain the scientific data they collected as well as a record of their travels. In 1807 he had begun making arrangements with scientists and artists in Philadelphia. Frederick Bates, the territorial secretary of Louisiana, had served as acting governor in 1807, and he could do so again in 1810. William Clark, who was Indian agent for Louisiana Territory, would also be in St. Louis to keep an eye on things. Lewis could help his mother move to St. Louis, and work with his friends in Philadelphia. Perhaps he might find someone to marry, someone who would move to St. Louis despite its isolation. And most importantly he needed to recover the money the government owed him.

On August 18, 1809, in St. Louis, the day of his 35th birthday, Lewis was ill with malarial fevers. He had someone else write a letter to Secretary of War William Eustis in his defense. Lewis, and many others, routinely suffered from malarial fevers, caused by the bites of infected mosquitoes. Lewis had received a letter from Eustis denying him reimbursement for government expenses. He dictated:

Be assured Sir that my country can never make “A Burr” of me—She may reduce me to Poverty but she can never sever my Attachment from her.14

Secretary of War Eustis was one of Aaron Burr’s closest personal friends, and the physician to both Burr and his daughter. In Meriwether Lewis I present the case for Burr and his associates planning their own separate filibuster expedition to participate in the first Mexican revolution. Wilkinson and Smith T, Eustis and Burr, and their New England associates, all had good reasons to want Lewis removed from office. He was too honest to remain governor of Louisiana Territory and he would interfere with their filibuster plans.

Before leaving St. Louis, Lewis concluded a treaty with the Arkansas Osage Indians who had unexpectedly shown up. He wrote a 42-page letter on August 27, 1809, to Eustis and President Madison about Indian affairs, a task that indicated he was well enough to function normally.15 He left St. Louis with his servant, John Pernier, a free mulatto who had worked for Jefferson at the President’s House in Washington, and with his Newfoundland dog, Seaman. He wrote, upon his departure: “I shall leave the Territory in the most perfect state of Tranquility which I believe it has ever experienced.”16

Fort Pickering

Who joined Lewis on board the boat going down the Mississippi to New Orleans? There had to have been at least two conspirators who intended to arrange Lewis’s death by “suicide” while he was on the boat. One of them would have been General Wilkinson’s nephew, Benjamin Wilkinson. As a courtesy, Lewis had agreed to take a trunk belonging to an army officer to Baltimore. When Lewis changed his plans and decided to travel overland by horseback, Benjamin Wilkinson agreed to take charge of the trunk and bring it to Baltimore on the sailing ship. The general’s nephew left Fort Pickering on the same day that Lewis departed for the Natchez Trace.17

I propose that Benjamin Wilkinson and another conspirator I call “Mr. X”18 had to quickly improvise a new plan to assassinate Governor Lewis after Lewis abandoned river travel. What is the evidence for an assassination attempt disguised as a suicide on the boat? It consists of a hearsay account reported by letter written at Nashville before Lewis even left the fort,
the forged Russell letters Clark received, and the forged "Russell Statement" of 1811. All three accounts claimed Lewis had attempted to kill himself while on the boat. Since Captain Russell did not report this in his letters to President Jefferson, it was a lie. They intended to kill Lewis on the boat and make it look like suicide. When Lewis left the boat, they still planned to call his assassination a "suicide."

Did Lewis decide to make a will at New Madrid because he was worried about assassination? Did he leave the boat at Fort Pickering because of it? It’s possible. Lewis made out a simple will at New Madrid on September 11, leaving his property to his mother. The will was witnessed by his servant John Pernier and recorded in Lewis’s pocket notebook. Perhaps Lewis made the will because he was starting on a long journey, but he was most likely aware of his enemies on the boat. He was alert. He knew he was carrying damaging documents to Washington, and he knew Wilkinson and Smith T were dangerous.

He was sick with malaria when he arrived at Fort Pickering. Captain Russell wrote to Jefferson that Lewis arrived on September 15, saying:

His situation rendered it necessary that he should be stoped until he would recover, which I done & in a short time by proper attention a change was perceptible and in about six days he was perfectly restored in every respect & able to travel.

Lewis waited at the fort for another week because Captain Russell was hoping to receive permission to travel to Washington himself. All the federal officials on the western frontier were owed money by the federal government. Russell would have made his travel request weeks before Lewis arrived at Fort Pickering. After Russell learned his request was denied, Lewis set out from the fort with Indian Agent James Neelly on September 29.

Recruiting an Assassination Team

I propose that as soon the boat arrived at Fort Pickering, one of the conspirators, “Mr. X,” went to find James Neelly at the Chickasaw Indian Agency near today’s Houston, Mississippi, on the Natchez Trace. General Wilkinson, the most powerful government official in the west for many years, surveyed and improved the Natchez Trace as a military road between Nashville and Natchez. Neelly, a recently appointed Indian agent, owed his job to the general.

When Neelly was asked to participate in the conspiracy to kill Lewis, he said there was a big problem—he had to appear in court in Franklin, Tennessee, on October 11. He was being sued for a debt of $103.44. The date had been set months earlier, and if he didn’t show up he would be jailed. He agreed to go to Fort Pickering and serve as an escort for Lewis on his final journey, but he had to be in Franklin on October 11. Neelly and Mr. X must have agreed that Robert Grinder, the owner of Grinder’s Stand, a tavern and inn on the Natchez Trace, would commit the murder, and that Captain John Brahan in Nashville could be depended on to cover up the murder. Mr. X went north on the Trace to consult with Grinder and Brahan, and Neelly went northwest to the fort to meet Lewis.

Lewis was waiting to hear if Russell could accompany him. Neelly waited as well. When Neelly and Lewis finally set out they were accompanied by a man who would take care of the pack horse carrying Lewis’s trunks. Russell later wrote to Jefferson that his man said Neelly kept Lewis supplied with liquor and both men were drinking heavily after they left the fort. Neelly was a known alcoholic. Neelly insisted Russell’s man return to Fort Pickering after they reached the Indian Agency. Neelly’s black slave would take over the baggage handling. Russell wrote to Jefferson that if his own man had remained with Lewis until they reached Nashville, he believed Lewis would still be alive. He blamed Neelly and liquor for the suicide.

Prior to departure from Fort Pickering on September 29, Lewis and Captain Russell signed a memorandum concerning two trunks Lewis was leaving at the fort. Russell enclosed the memo in his letter to Jefferson. The trunks must have contained land records, because they were to be sent back to Will Carr, the federal land agent in St. Louis, if Lewis didn’t send new instructions by letter from Nashville. If Russell got a letter from Lewis, the trunks could be sent to Nashville. This seems a pretty clear indication Lewis believed he might not reach Nashville alive, and he wanted the trunks and their contents carefully protected. He was carrying the journals of the expedition with him, but he feared for the safety of the land records. Later, Russell reported someone showed up at the fort saying he had verbal instructions from Lewis that Russell should
We Proceeded On

hold the trunks at the fort and not send them back to St. Louis. The conspirators wanted to search the trunks.

Lewis and Neelly traveled by the Indian Agency road from the fort to the Natchez Trace. When they reached the agency, Neelly dealt with an urgent matter. Colonel Joseph Van Meter had been robbed of saddlebags containing $671 in silver dollars while he was staying at James Colbert’s Inn near the Tennessee River. It must have been intended for land purchase at the Great Bend of the Tennessee River. Land speculators were arriving from all over the country to buy the former Chickasaw Indian lands.

Neelly assembled eight leading men of the Chickasaw Nation and had them sign a statement that James Colbert was an honest man who should not be blamed for the theft. Neelly paid to have the announcement placed in the Nashville, Natchez, and New Orleans newspapers. It appeared in the same issue of the Nashville Democratic-Clarion (October 20) that reported the death of Governor Lewis. The announcement was dated October 3. The young thief had been apprehended and was being taken to jail in Nashville.22

This plays a role later on, because everything we think we know about the last days of Meriwether Lewis is unclear.
We proceeded on November 2016 is based on lies. The truth is that after the party left the Indian Agency and crossed the river on Colbert’s Ferry, Neelly split from the party, taking an alternate road to Franklin, where he had his court date. He had to appear in court on October 11, the same day Lewis died at Grinder’s Stand.

WHERE WAS NEELLY, AND WHO WROTE HIS LETTER?

For many years we have relied on yet another forged document known as the Neelly letter, dated October 18, 1809, written at Nashville a week after Lewis’s death. The letter was one of four written by Captain John Brahan reporting Lewis’s death. He signed three of them and forged Neelly’s name on the fourth. However, on the very same day that Brahan was writing his letters, October 18, James Neelly was writing his own letter at the Indian Agency near Houston, Mississippi, to Secretary of War William Eustis asking to be reimbursed for $90 (which was a month’s pay for Neelly), which he had spent paying someone else to take the saddlebag money thief to jail in Nashville.23

After Lewis’s death, the so-called “Neelly” letter and an almost identical letter signed by Brahan were delivered to Jefferson at Monticello by John Pernier, Lewis’s servant. They contain the first story Mrs. Grinder offered describing Lewis’s death. This is the story that has traditionally been accepted as the primary evidence for suicide. There are actually three stories by Mrs. Grinder about the death of Lewis that have come down in history. The so-called Neelly letter—which was actually written by Brahan—says that Neelly was “looking for two lost horses” after they crossed the Tennessee River, explaining why Neelly wasn’t present at Grinder’s Stand on the night of October 11 when Lewis died.

Now we know—thanks to Tony Turnbow who practices law in Franklin—that Neelly was appearing in court on October 11. Neelly was ordered to pay the $103.44 he owed, and after leaving Franklin, where his farm was located, he would have gone to Grinder’s Stand on the Trace. Perhaps he was present at Grinder’s Stand when Governor Lewis was buried in a shallow grave in the yard of the inn, or perhaps he arrived the next day. Neelly never did go to Nashville. There wasn’t time for him to go there and to return to his agency by October 18. Someone from Grinder’s Stand went up to Nashville and conferred with Captain Brahan, who then wrote the first Mrs. Grinder story.

MRS. GRINDER’S THREE STORIES

As lawyers have pointed out, the first Mrs. Grinder’s story is inadmissible evidence. Neelly—that is, Brahan—reports that Mrs. Grinder didn’t witness Lewis killing himself, but reports, nevertheless, her saying that he used his two pistols to shoot himself in the head and a little below the breast. His pistols were North & Cheney horseman’s pistols, fourteen inches long. The .69 calibre bullets were more than half an inch in diameter.24 This is the story we have relied on.

The second Mrs. Grinder story was reported by Lewis’s friend, Alexander Wilson, who visited Grinder’s Stand seven months later in May 1810. Wilson—who
had been recruited by Lewis in Philadelphia to make bird drawings for Lewis's book—was traveling in search of new birds. Mrs. Grinder told Wilson she heard two shots and witnessed Lewis staggering around the yard, but she was afraid to help him. Wilson paid Robert Grinder to put a post fence around Lewis's grave to prevent the hogs and wolves from disturbing it, and got Grinder's promise in writing to fence the grave.

The third Mrs. Grinder story was published in a newspaper article in 1845. A schoolteacher visited Mrs. Grinder in 1838, after Mr. Grinder had died. This account says that two or three men rode up to Grinder's Stand at dark and asked for lodging. Lewis, Pernier, his dog, and Neelly's slave had arrived earlier that evening. Lewis met the men with pistols, and the three men rode off. In this story Mrs. Grinder says she heard three pistol shots in the night. Mrs. Grinder calls Lewis's mulatto servant “Mr. Pyrna,” indicating she thought he was a gentleman. She says Mr. Pyrna had on Lewis's clothes and carried his gold watch, and he told her that Lewis had given them to him. Lewis, when he was found, had on old and tattered clothes.  

I believe the most likely scenario is contained in the third story. Two or three men rode up to Grinder's Stand demanding Lewis give up the incriminating documents he was bringing to Washington. These were the documents in the trunks Lewis left in the care of Captain Russell. Lewis refused to do so, and he drove them off with his pistols. He was both courageous and a highly skilled marksman. At daybreak, Lewis planned that Pernier would ride away as a decoy, wearing his clothes and carrying his gold watch.

Local tradition is that Robert Grinder and his nephew Thomas Runion actually committed the murder. They would have crept up silently and shot Lewis from behind. Lewis was taken by surprise because he was expecting to hear the return of the men on horseback.

In 1848, when the State of Tennessee established a Monument Commission to erect a monument over Lewis's gravesite, the commissioners stated in their official report that it was commonly believed that “Governor Lewis perished by his own hands. It seems to be more probable that he died by the hands of an assassin.” They must have seen gunshot entrance wounds in the back of his skull, or in his back.

In 1814 a minister published the inscription on Seaman's dog collar in a collection of epitaphs. The inscription read:

The greatest traveler of my species. My name is SEAMAN, the dog of Captain Meriwether Lewis, whom I accompanied to the Pacific Ocean through the interior of the continent of North America.

The collar was on display at the Masonic Museum in Alexandria, Virginia. The minister wrote that Seaman died of grief on Lewis's grave, but it was much more likely that he was shot by Lewis's killers.

After Lewis's Death

Captain Russell's second letter to Jefferson accused Neelly of stealing Lewis's possessions. The only member of Lewis's family to visit Tennessee was his half-brother John Marks, who went to Tennessee in December 1811 to retrieve Lewis's possessions from Neelly. Mrs. Neelly, at the family farm near Franklin, gave him Lewis's horse and rifle. Neelly himself was at the Indian Agency, where John Marks was “informed that Neelly carries Lewis's two pistols, dirk (dagger) constantly with him.” Neelly also had possession of Lewis's gold watch. Neelly must have gotten the gold watch back
We Proceeded On

from Pernier. Marks did not travel to the Indian agency and Neelly retained possession of Lewis's belongings.30

John Pernier delivered two letters written by Brahan, one signed by Brahan and the other signed with the forged signature of Neelly, to Jefferson at Monticello. When he arrived at Albemarle County, Pernier first visited Lewis's mother and informed her of her son's death. She was convinced Pernier had something to do with it—undoubtedly because he was extremely nervous. She always believed it was murder.31 It is my contention Pernier told Jefferson the truth about what really happened at Grinder's Stand. Pernier had been a servant at the President's House before being employed by Lewis. Jefferson sent Pernier to Washington to deliver the news to President Madison. I also believe Pernier told Madison the truth.

Jefferson sent a letter with Pernier to Madison on November 26. The letter advised that the president's former secretary, Isaac Coles, be placed in charge of distributing Lewis's possessions when they arrived in Washington. Jefferson rode over to visit James Monroe on November 30 where they had an “hour or two of frank conversation” about the “catastrophe of poor Lewis.” Jefferson offered Monroe the governorship of Louisiana Territory after Lewis's death, but he said: “I do not think myself Calculated to meet the Storms which might be expected.”32 Clark had very important duties in St. Louis. He could not have performed them effectively if he believed Lewis was assassinated. He would have wanted Lewis's killers brought to justice, and given the grave national interests at stake with the impending war with Great Britain and their Indian allies, it was better to have Clark regard Lewis's death as a suicide.

After delivering the news to President Madison, Pernier remained in Washington, hoping to be reimbursed by Lewis's estate for $271.50 in back wages. Pernier was living with another former servant of Jefferson in Washington. His friend was old, blind, and very poor. On May 5, 1810, someone wrote a letter on the blind man's behalf to President Jefferson announcing Pernier's death on April 29 from an overdose of opium or laudanum. Pernier was facing debtor’s prison if he did not recover his wages. He had no money for opium. The letter said that Pernier had been “confined from sickness arising from uneasiness of mind” while staying with his friend. Wilkinson had arrived in Washington shortly before Pernier's death. I believe Wilkinson was a serial assassin, and add John Pernier's name to the list of his victims.35

On August 18, 1813, the 39th anniversary of Meriwether Lewis’s birth, Jefferson wrote an account of Lewis's life for inclusion in the soon-to-be-published His-
tory of the Expedition under the command of Lewis and Clark.” Although he made an obligatory reference to Governor Lewis’s “hypochondriac affections,” I do not believe he intended it to be taken seriously. Instead, this quote best expresses his true feelings regarding Lewis:

Of course undaunted, possessing a firmness & perseverance of purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its direction…honest, disinterested, liberal, of sound understanding and a fidelity to truth so scrupulous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by ourselves.37

Meriwether Lewis did encounter “impossibilities” on his last journey, but his legacy will always remain bright as one of the great leaders of the early American Republic, whose life was cut short. His account of the journey to the Pacific, his scientific research, and his observations on Indian life will continue to be of enduring value to future generations. I think it is how he would most like to be remembered. ☮

Kira Gale is the founding president of the Mouth of Platte Chapter of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation. She is the author of several books, including Lewis and Clark Road Trips: Exploring the Trail Across America (2006), and most recently, Meriwether Lewis: The Assassination of an American Hero and the Silver Mines of Mexico (2015).

Notes

The author has posted downloadable PDFs of all documents discussed in this article on www.lewisassassination.com.


4. Starrs and Gale, Death of Meriwether Lewis, 233.


22. Tony Turnbow supplied the scan of the court record (Atlanta, Georgia National Archives and Records Administration office: U.S. Federal Records, Mississippi Territory, R M1315). The prisoner, George Laneheart, appeared before the judge on November 3, 1809. He had stolen saddlebags belonging to Colonel Joseph Van Meter which had been placed in the safekeeping of inn owner James Colbert. Laneheart was ordered confined to the debtor’s room of the Nashville jail for two months and until his fine of $10 and prosecution costs were paid. The newspaper advertisement said that Van Meter was a resident of Virginia. *Nashville Democratic-Clarion*, October 20, 1809 (Tennessee State Archives).

James Neelly went to extraordinary lengths in getting signed testimony from area residents and paying for ads in the three leading regional newspapers. Thomas Danisi did not acknowledge the existence of the advertisement placed in the same October 20 issue of the Nashville *Democratic Clarion* which announced the death of Meriwether Lewis. It disproves his theory. Danisi says Neelly and Lewis did not take the Agency Road to the Chickasaw Agency before traveling on the Natchez Trace, but instead traveled in a straight line from Fort Pickering to the Natchez Trace.


33. Starrs and Gale, *Death of Meriwether Lewis*, 239; Gale, *Meriwether Lewis*, 434-35, 438. The note by Isaac Coles is found in the Lewis-Marks Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia Archives. It is dated January 10, 1810. The collection also contains the note that Neelly has Lewis’s gold watch and pistols. There is another letter by Coles, dated January 5, 1810, in Jackson, *Letters of Lewis and Clark* (#311, 486-87) that doesn’t mention the “disarray” of the papers.


John Colter: The Legend of the First Mountain Man

By Don Amiet.
Baltimore: Publish America, 2009. 312 pp., historical fiction. $29.95, paperback; $6.99, Kindle.
Reviewed by Glen Lindeman.

Amiet’s *John Colter* fits into the ever-growing list of fictional works focusing on members of the Corps of Discovery. This subset genre in the Lewis and Clark literature can be said to have originated with Eva Emery Dye’s wildly popular *The Conquest*, published in 1902. In more than a century since Dye’s fiction-laced Sacajawea biography appeared, at least three dozen writers have turned their hand to publishing novels about the expedition, with many scores of other books have been written for juvenile audiences, with York, Lewis’s dog (Seaman), and, again, Sacajawea being popular central figures.

*John Colter: The Legend of the First Mountain Man* is meant for mature readers and obviously was written by an author with an enduring interest in his subject. In Amiet’s depiction, Colter is enthralled with the West’s wide-open spaces, its freedom, and its opportunities for earning a fortune in furs. Captain Clark constantly fraternizes with Colter and the other enlisted men in a warm and congenial fashion, often while sitting with them around the campfire. Meriwether Lewis, too, is approachable by Colter and the other soldiers, but to a lesser extent than Clark. Witty sarcasm and humor help all of them surmount the challenges of bad weather, unruly rivers, rocky trails, hunger, and other adversities of the journey. Day to day, Colter and the enlisted men engage in good-natured bantering among themselves, as would be expected in any group of vigorous young men in the prime of life. But on a somewhat darker level, some of this talk has sexual innuendos, and also a mild anti-Indian bias. George Drouillard, the French-Shawnee interpreter, holds his own in the give-and-take over quips about his native blood.

In the writing of this historical novel, the author might have benefited from access to Ron M. Anglin and Larry E. Morris’s *Gloomy Terrors and Hidden Fires: The Mystery of John Colter and Yellowstone*. Of course, this was not possible, since Amiet’s novel appeared in 2009, a half-decade before the publication of Anglin and Morris’s definitive Colter biography in 2014.

Regarding actual documented dialogue during the expedition, of course, the journal keepers wrote down very few direct statements, even when their paraphrased passages are added. Whether or not one agrees with a particular modern-day writer’s imaginative effort in creating dialogue and corresponding personality development, readers of Lewis and Clark historical fiction will themselves be induced to come up with their own personal reflections on what Colter and other corps members might have said, what their personalities were like, and their individual attitudes and feelings. The possibilities are probably nearly endless. Amiet’s purpose is well met in this fictional effort.

“...My friend I do assure you that no man lives with whom I would prefer to undertake such a trip as yourself.”  
William Clark

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The Journal of the Lewis & Clark Trail Heritage Foundation

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Distinguished Service Award

Dr. Joe Mussulman received the Distinguished Service Award for his critical work in making the Discovering Lewis and Clark website a respected resource on the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the Corps of Discovery. Joe is the founding producer, editor, and writer for the Discovering Lewis and Clark website. The website went online in 1998 after five years of preparation and has become the premiere educational website about the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Joe’s attention to accuracy, respect for tribal cultures, and thoroughly documented research have made this website an invaluable resource for scholars, students, educators, and historians studying the Lewis and Clark story.

In addition to the website, Joe has designed and produced brochures, travel and study guides, and 58 full-color maps illustrating the expedition’s entire route from coast to coast. In 1999 Joe received a Montana Governor’s Arts Award, and in 2005 he received the Montana Governor’s Humanities Award. He authored five articles that appeared in We Proceeded On.

Robert Betts Library and Archives Award

Sue Buchel received the Robert Betts Library and Archives Award for volunteering the past six years at the William P. Sherman Library and Archives at the LCTHF headquarters in Great Falls, Montana. Sue was recently named volunteer librarian. She attracted other volunteers and secured funding from the LCTHF board for Shelly Kath to work as a library technician. Together Sue, Shelly, and volunteers cataloged the books, art, and Lewis and Clark memorabilia, organized the archives stored in boxes, and developed policies and procedures for the library. Sue worked with Shelly to organize the Don Nell Visual Resource Collection for which she received support from the Headwaters Chapter of the LCTHF.

In addition to training the LCTHF staff and volunteers in the art and science of cataloging and archiving, Sue has advanced the LCTHF’s oral history project. She helped secure audio visual equipment through a Portage Route Chapter grant for the purpose of recording the recollections of the people who were instrumental in the creation of the LCTHF in 1969, the designation of the Lewis and Clark Trail as a national historic trail in 1978, and the organization of the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial.

Trail Stewardship Award

Chuck and Penny Raddon have organized and led the Lolo Trail Work Week with a team of 20 to 25 volunteers. They work to maintain Hwy 500, a rugged and beautiful 50-mile segment of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail in Idaho. Chuck and Penny worked closely with the USDA Forest Service to identify areas of the trail most in need of maintenance. Chuck led maintenance teams in the field while Penny prepared meals and “womanned” the cook tent. Each evening, Chuck related trail sites to Lewis and Clark journal entries.

The team of volunteers, under the outstanding leadership of Chuck and Penny, has been out on the Lolo Trail participating in one of the best types of trail stewardship possible. They work together in a spirit of comradesie, embodying the spirit of the Corps of Discovery. Chuck and Penny make their home a welcoming bed and breakfast to the many out-of-state work crew members. They continue to give graciously of their time and energy to maintain this annual trail stewardship project.