

# Meriwether Lewis

Read the bios on Lewis and Clark. Compare and contrast the lives of the two explorers.

Meriwether Lewis was one of the leaders of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804–06. The goal of the expedition was to explore territory that the United States had just purchased. Lewis and Clark brought back to Americans their first information about the territory between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean.

## Early Life

Meriwether Lewis was born on August 18, 1774, in Albemarle county, Virginia. He was the son of William and Lucy Meriwether Lewis. Thomas Jefferson was a friend of his family. After his father's death Meriwether spent several years in Georgia with his stepfather. There he developed a love of the wilderness and became an expert hunter.

In 1794 Lewis joined a militia that was formed to put down a frontier rebellion. Soon afterward he became a commissioned officer in the regular army. He served mostly in the western territories from Memphis to Detroit. Between campaigns he learned about Native American languages and customs.

When Jefferson became president in 1801, Lewis became his private secretary. He and Jefferson were both intensely curious about the land to the west of the Mississippi River.

## Lewis and Clark Expedition

In 1803 the United States purchased a large section of land, called the Louisiana Territory, from France. The territory extended west from the Mississippi. Following the purchase Jefferson arranged for a U.S. Army expedition to voyage up the Missouri River to its source, and from there to the Pacific Ocean. He chose Lewis to lead it. Already an experienced soldier and frontiersman, Lewis quickly learned botany, medicine, and the use of scientific instruments.

To accompany him, Lewis turned to his former Army captain, William Clark. They recruited and trained what Lewis called the Corps of Discovery and set out from near Saint Louis, Missouri, in May 1804. They would not return until September 1806.

The success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition was a triumph for the United States and for Lewis. With what Jefferson later called "courage undaunted" he led a small party through an unknown wilderness inhabited by many unfamiliar peoples. Lewis carefully recorded observations of the night skies that showed exactly how far north and west the expedition had traveled at every stage of the trip. He also made accurate descriptions of many plants and animals new to science, including the grizzly bear.

## Later Life

On their return the members of the expedition were welcomed as heroes. Lewis was appointed governor of the Louisiana Territory in 1808. In 1809, Lewis set out on a trip to Washington, D.C. On the morning of October 11, at an inn in Tennessee, he was found dying of a gunshot wound. Lewis may have shot himself, though some historians believe he may have been murdered. His journals of the expedition were not published until after his death.

## Cite

While every effort has been made to follow citation style rules, there may be some discrepancies. Please refer to the appropriate style manual or other sources if you have any questions.

"Meriwether Lewis." *Britannica School*, Encyclopædia Britannica, 8 Feb. 2020.  
school.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Meriwether-Lewis/353381. Accessed 17 Mar. 2020.



# William Clark

As co-leader of the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804–06, William Clark brought back to Americans the first description of their newly purchased western territories. In his early career as a soldier he fought against Native American tribes, but as an explorer and an Indian agent he won their respect.

## Early Life

William Clark was born in Caroline county, Virginia, on August 1, 1770. He had little schooling but showed intelligence at an early age. In 1885 his family moved west to Kentucky. As a young man, William became an Army officer. He was following in the footsteps of his older brother, George Rogers Clark, who had been a general in the American Revolution. Serving under General Anthony Wayne, William Clark took part in the battle of Fallen Timbers (1794), in which the Ohio region was taken from the Indians. In 1796 he left the Army.

## Lewis and Clark Expedition

Captain Meriwether Lewis, also a Virginian, had served under Clark in the Army. In the summer of 1803 Clark accepted Lewis's invitation to join him on an expedition. They were to follow the Missouri River from its mouth near Saint Louis, Missouri, to its source in the Rocky Mountains, and to go from there to the Pacific Ocean.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition faced wild rivers, rough mountains, hostile Indians and animals such as the grizzly bear not previously known to European civilization. The success of the expedition was a great early triumph for the United States.

In addition to his share of the command, Clark's special responsibility was to maintain a detailed map of the entire route. Like Lewis and several others, he kept a diary of the expedition's adventures. He also made many detailed drawings of plants and animals.

## Later Life

After returning, Clark was rewarded with land and also given several honors. In 1813 he became governor of the Missouri territory. He frequently received Indian groups in his home in Saint Louis, which was filled with Indian artifacts.

Unfortunately Clark was less sympathetic to his own servant, an African American slave called York. York had been an unpaid member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and expected to receive his freedom in return, but Clark refused to grant it for many years. Clark died in Saint Louis on September 1, 1838.

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