

Yellowstone

and the Lewis & Clark Expedition

National Park Service
P.O. Box 168
Yellowstone, WY 82190



"Great Falls of the Missouri" (near present-day Great Falls, Montana), 1867 pencil sketch by A.E. Mathews. Montana Historical Society, Helena (image digitally cropped)

As our nation prepares to celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of Lewis and Clark's epic journey into the unexplored American West, many have asked, "**Did Lewis and Clark discover Yellowstone?**" The answer is "No." The explorers did not travel through what is now Yellowstone National Park. However, Captain Clark did pass 50 miles north of the park near present-day Livingston, Montana, on his homeward journey in 1806. Still, Lewis and Clark's exploration of the American West is an important part of the history of the Yellowstone region.

The Mission



Meriwether Lewis

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson doubled the size of our nation by purchasing the Louisiana Territory from France. The President then organized an expedition to explore the new territory. He chose his secretary, Captain Meriwether Lewis, as its leader. Lewis chose Captain William Clark to be the co-commander of the expedition we now call the *Corps of Discovery*.

Lewis and Clark were to explore the new land and make detailed maps, recording the latitude and longitude of rivers, mountain ranges, and other features. They planned to follow the Missouri River and its tributaries to their headwaters, quickly cross the Continental Divide (which was speculated to be a narrow, low ridge of mountains), and then locate a navigable river flowing to the Pacific. They were to make notes about the new country--its mineral resources, potential farming lands, climate, water supplies, and timber--and they were to collect and describe the plants and animals of the region. They were also to describe the Indian nations they encountered (how they lived, what they believed, their languages) and to convince those nations that the American government had good intentions toward them and wanted their trade.

The Journey

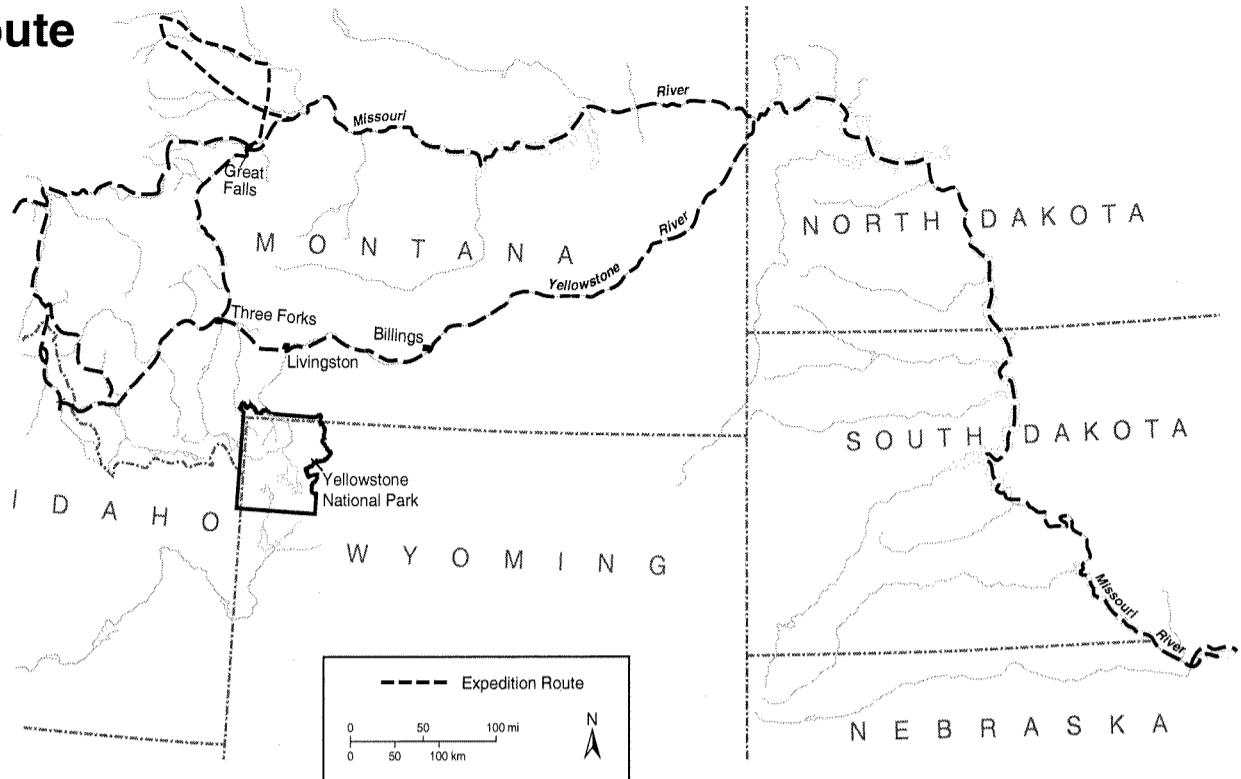


W. Clark

The *Corps of Discovery* left St. Louis, Missouri, in the spring of 1804 and traveled up the Missouri River to the Mandan-Hidatsa villages in today's North Dakota where they spent their first winter. In the spring of 1805, they sent one boat loaded with specimens and their journals to that point back to Washington, D.C. The rest of the party continued up the Missouri, reaching its headwaters in late August. Three tributary rivers form the Missouri, and the *Corps of Discovery* named these rivers after important men in Washington: the Gallatin (Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin), Madison (Secretary of State James Madison), and the Jefferson (President Thomas Jefferson).

Following the westernmost branch, the Jefferson, they eventually ran out of river. Luckily, at this point, they met a small band of Shoshone Indians who provided them with horses so they could continue their journey across the Continental Divide, which proved to be a series of high and difficult mountain ranges. The party nearly starved in these mountains when early snows made travel slow and difficult. Finally across the Divide, they were found by the Nez Perce Indians, who fed them and provided boats so they could float down the Snake River to the Columbia River. The Expedition reached the Pacific Ocean in early November and spent their second winter there. The men began the journey home in April and reached St. Louis in September 1806.

The Route



The "Discovery" Of Yellowstone

Many Native American tribes were quite familiar with Yellowstone. But, John Colter, a member of the *Corps of Discovery*, was probably the first white man to see the wonders of the future park. Instead of returning to civilization with the rest of the expedition in 1806, Colter stayed in the West to trap beaver. Hired by trader Manuel Lisa to explore new trapping territory, Colter made a swing through the region during the winter of 1807-08. It is said that he started his journey from the lower Yellowstone River near the mouth of the Bighorn River (east of Billings, Montana) and traveled south to the Absaroka Mountains, Jackson Hole, Pierre's Hole (west of the Teton Mountains in Idaho), north past Yellowstone Lake, and back to the Bighorn River. No authenticated record exists of this journey. Other trappers and "mountain men" likely visited the area during the following years, but it was not until the late 1860s that real interest was shown in exploring the Yellowstone region. The many uncorroborated stories resulted in the official, government-sponsored Hayden Expedition of 1871. The reports from this expedition led Congress to establish Yellowstone as the nation's first national park on March 1, 1872.

Other Points of Interest Along the Trail

There are many sites along the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail that help explain this significant American journey. A few are listed here:

Jefferson National Expansion Memorial (NPS), St. Louis, Missouri: The Museum of Western Expansion contains excellent Lewis and Clark exhibits under the 630-foot Arch in downtown St. Louis.

Western Historic Trails Center, Council Bluffs, Iowa: The Center introduces visitors to the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail and three western emigrant trails that thousands of Americans used in their journeys west during the 1800s.

Fort Mandan Park and Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site (NPS), North Dakota: This is the area where the Expedition spent its first winter. Visitor centers at both locations provide information.

Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center, Great Falls, Montana: The U.S. Forest Service operates this museum that explains the Expedition's journey. Sited on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River.

Missouri Headwaters State Park, Three Forks, Montana: This state park is where the Madison, Gallatin, and Jefferson rivers join to form the Missouri River. Camping, picnicing, and interpretive signage.

Fort Canby State Park and Fort Clatsop National Memorial (NPS), Oregon: This is the area where the Expedition spent its second winter (1805-1806) before returning home.
