



## The Forgotten Expedition of Dunbar and Hunter



### Exploring a New Territory

In 1803, this area joined the United States of America with the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France. What was in this vast “wilderness”? French explorers and fur trappers had been up and down the streams of this country and Spanish explorers had mapped it as well. President Thomas Jefferson wanted to know more about Louisiana and began making plans for Americans to explore it.

Jefferson was interested in the Red and Arkansas Rivers, southern tributaries of the Mississippi, and wrote to William Dunbar of Natchez, Mississippi, about leading an exploratory party. There was too much unrest with the American Indians and Spanish along the Red River, the southwestern border of the territory, so Dunbar suggested a shorter trip to "the hot springs on the Washita." Jefferson agreed and recommended Dr. George Hunter, a Philadelphia chemist, as the second principal. This first scientific expedition into the new territory set out from Natchez, Mississippi, on October 16, 1804, traveling down the Mississippi River to the mouth of the Red River, then upstream a short distance to the Black River, and finally to the mouth of the Ouachita River.

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### The Party and the Route

Along with Dunbar and Hunter, the party consisted of a sergeant and 12 enlisted men from the garrison at New Orleans (Sergeant Bundy, Peter Bowers, John White, Robert Wilson, Mathew Boon, William Court, Edward Rylet, Jerimiah Loper, William Skinner, William Little, William Tutle, Manus McDonald, Jeremia Smith), Hunter's son George, Samuel Blazier as

a guide, and Dunbar's slave. They traveled up the Ouachita River for 21 days before reaching the next settlement, "the post on the Ouachita," Ft. Miró, the site of present day Monroe, Louisiana. They then traveled 25 days before reaching the mouth of Gulpha Creek, then overland to the hot springs.

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**Discoveries**

Along the way, Dunbar took astronomical readings for use in plotting the route after their return. Dunbar and Hunter both made observations about the plants and wildlife that they encountered, as well as the mineral resources. Abundant natural resources would be necessary to the success of settlers in the new territory. One of the most important discoveries was a source of rock suitable for whetstones for knife sharpening. This Arkansas novaculite became the primary source for whetstones by the mid- 1800s and remained the main source until the advent of the manufacture of artificial whetstones in the 1970s.

**At the Hot Springs**

The party camped at the hot springs from December 9, 1804, until January 8, 1805. Dunbar and Hunter improved a cabin built for summer use and stayed in it while the enlisted men camped. Dunbar reported to President Jefferson that "... the hot springs themselves are indeed a great curiosity; the temperature of their waters is from 130 to 150° of Fahrenheit's [sic] thermometer. The heat is supposed to be greater in summer, particularly in dry weather. In water of 130° which was comparatively in a state of repose to one side of the spring run, I found by the aid of an excellent microscope, both Vegetable and animal life, the first

a species of moss, the latter a testaceous bivalve of the size of the minutest grain of Sand." Dunbar was referring to the algae and ostracods that live in the hot spring pools.

Dunbar lamented that it being wintertime with 12 inches of snow on the ground during much of their visit, it was unfavorable for botanical research. He noted one new plant species, "dwarf mountain cabbage was discovered upon the ridges, which partakes the nature of both Cabbage and raddish [sic]. It is very agreeable to taste; the root is white and tastes like a raddish but much milder."

Of the hot springs, Dunbar wrote, "I shall only mention that from our analysis of the water of the hot springs, it appears to contain lime with a minute portion of iron dissolved [sic] by a small excess of Carbonic acid: this is indeed visible upon first view of the Springs. An immense body of Calcareous matter is accumulated upon the side of the hill, by the perpetual depositions from the hot waters, and the bed of the run is coloured [sic] by red oxid [sic] of iron or rather Carbonated iron. Every little spring which rises up in a favorable situation, forms its own calcareous cup, considerably elevated in form of a Crater."

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**Going Home**

The return trip to Ft. Miró only took 8 days. From Ft. Miró, Dunbar took leave of the party and traveled

overland to his home near Natchez. Hunter and the enlisted men continued on to New Orleans.

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**Records of the Journey**

Both men's journals are in the archives of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia, the repository of scientific papers and materials of the day. Dunbar's original journal is in the Ouachita Baptist University archives. The plant and animal specimens collected by Dunbar and Hunter have disappeared.

William Dunbar died in 1810 and is buried near Natchez. George Hunter moved his family from Philadelphia to New Orleans shortly after the expedition and died there in 1823.