

LEWIS AND CLARK: WHY EXPLORE THE VAST UNKNOWN?

Overview:

Why was the Lewis and Clark Expedition important to the United States in the early 1800s? At the time, some members of Congress were not entirely convinced of the mission's value. In this lesson, students will interpret a map of the West as it was known at the time, learn what President Thomas Jefferson asked Meriwether Lewis to accomplish, and explain why the expedition was important for the future of the country. This lesson can be conducted before watching the large-format film *Lewis and Clark: Great Journey West*.

Connections to the Curriculum:

history, geography, language arts

Connections to the National Geography Standards:

Standard 1: "How to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective"

Standard 16: "The changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources"

Standard 17: "How to apply geography to interpret the past"

Time:

one hour

Materials Required:

- Photocopies of the map "British Possessions in North America" (Emporia State University)
- Photocopies of the map "Lewis and Clark Expedition Routes and Control of Lands"
- Optional: Photocopies of the map "Lewis and Clark Expedition Routes"

Objectives:

Students will:

- Interpret a map to understand what Europeans knew about the West in the early 1800s
- Understand the importance of land and resources to a growing country
- Develop reasons to justify a geographic exploration of the West

Geographic Skills:

Asking Geographic Questions
Acquiring Geographic Information
Organizing Geographic Information
Answering Geographic Questions
Analyzing Geographic Information

S u g g e s t e d P r o c e d u r e

Opening:

In 1800, the United States was composed of 16 states, all east of the Mississippi River. President Jefferson had long been curious to know exactly what lay west of the Mississippi. Why was he so curious? (Jefferson's longtime interest in the geography of the West grew even greater in 1803, when the Louisiana Territory was purchased from France, and Jefferson wanted information about the newly acquired land.)

Show students a simple map that includes the Louisiana Purchase, "[Lewis and Clark Expedition Routes and Control of Lands](#)" or show them the map "[Lewis and Clark Expedition Routes](#)" which includes present-day state boundaries. Why was Jefferson certain that an expedition that mapped the territory would be worthwhile? (Jefferson believed there was a Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean, and the country that controlled that waterway would control trade across the continent.) Jefferson chose Meriwether Lewis to lead the expedition, and gave specific instructions on the purpose of the journey. However, Congress was not entirely convinced of the value of the mission.

Development:

1. Print out and give students copies of the map "[British Possessions in North America.](#)" The map shows a portion of the North American West as it was known to Europeans in the early 1800s. Many areas are blank. In essence, Jefferson asked Lewis to fill in the "white spaces" on the map and to find an easily accessible water route to the West Coast by exploring the full length of the Missouri River. He instructed Lewis to describe the geography—the physical and human characteristics—of the places he saw. How might this information help the U.S. of the early 1800s? (Emporia State University)

2. Read aloud a paraphrased version of Jefferson's instructions to Lewis. (If possible, create a handout of the letter for students.) (You can use the links below to find a transcription or a copy of the entire letter.)

20 June 1803

To Meriwether Lewis esq. Capt. of the 1st regimt. of infantry of the U. S. of A.

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri River and other rivers to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean for the purpose of trade.

You should make detailed notes throughout your journey, and make several copies of the notes. Choose the most trustworthy individuals to care for them.

Make careful observations of latitude and longitude at all points on the river, especially at the mouths of rivers and other important places. We want to make new maps of the area.

Plan to meet the Indian tribes and to begin trade with them. We want to know many things about the people you meet, including their tribe names, how many people are in each tribe, their languages and traditions, their occupations, any diseases they have and remedies they use, and the things they might need or offer in trade. Be sure to treat the natives in the friendliest manner that you are able.

You should also notice and record information about new plants and animals that you observe and the minerals you find. Also record what the climate and landscape are like.

Return the way you came and confirm the observations that you made on the way out.

After reading the letter, ask students:

- Where does Jefferson want the expedition to go?
- Whom does Jefferson expect the expedition to meet?
- What information does Jefferson want the expedition to report?
- Why are all of these things important to Jefferson?

3. Have students work in small groups to explain, to Congress, why the expedition would be valuable to the future of the country. Each group should list four or five reasons. Students

should supply relevant evidence to support their opinions. Have students consider the following questions in developing their list:

- Is their reason based on a fact or an opinion?
- How can they support their opinions—with facts, evidence, examples, or appeals?

After they have made their lists, have groups explain their reasoning to the class.

Closing:

How did the area that Lewis and Clark explored (the Louisiana Territory and the areas that other nations had claimed) become part of the U.S.? What would the U.S. be like if these areas had not become part of the country?

Suggested Student Assessment:

Have students summarize, by writing a letter to the Congress of 1803, the importance of the expedition's mission. Students can be given the following prompt:

"It is 1803, and you have been assigned to help the President of the United States write a letter to Congress. President Jefferson's dream is to explore the land West of the Mississippi River to find an easily accessible water route to the Pacific Ocean. The President is convinced that this mission could succeed if he were given money and approval from Congress. You must help Jefferson write a letter to explain the importance of the expedition and what will be accomplished. The letter must convince Congress to support the mission."

Extending the Lesson:

Conduct a "mock Congress" and debate the reasons that the expedition should or should not be funded.

Credit: "Jefferson's Instructions to Lewis" adapted from "Education Volunteer Notebook," Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail Interpretive Center, USDA, Forest Service, 2000-2001. Full text of letter found in Donald Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783–1854* (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1978) pp. 61–66.

Related Links:

- [College of Staten Island/CUNY](#)
- [Emporia State University \(Kansas\)](#)
- [Lewis and Clark: Mapping the West \(Smithsonian Institute\)](#)
- [Library of Congress](#)
- [Public Broadcasting System](#)