THE DEATH OF MERIWETHER LEWIS: INVESTIGATING AN AMERICAN MYSTERY THROUGH PRIMARY SOURCES

Advanced Placement United States History

by

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for

Teaching American History: Biographies of a Nation

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Essential Understanding

This is an exercise in using primary sources designed to elicit an understanding of their value and limitations. It also is designed to allow the students to explore the concept of interpretation. What does the document say? What do you think it really means? Is there a definitive answer? What is truth when two documents contribute contradictory evidence? What is truth when two documents from the same person contribute contradictory evidence?

Using the existing documentation, the students have a chance to explore this question for themselves.

Essential Question

Montana Social Studies Content Standard 1: Students access, synthesize, and evaluate information to communicate and apply social studies knowledge to real world situations.

Rationale

Every discipline has a process by which knowledge is gained or inquiry is made. In the social studies, the information inquiry process is applied to locate and evaluate a variety of primary and secondary sources of information. Information gathered in this manner is then used to draw conclusions in order to make decisions, solve problems and negotiate conflicts. Finally, as individuals who participate in self-governance, the decision making process needs to be understood and practiced by students as they prepare to take on civic and economic responsibilities.

Grade 12 Benchmarks

1. analyze and adapt an inquiry process (i.e., identify question or problem, locate and evaluate potential resources, gather and synthesize information, create a new product, and evaluate product and process).
2. apply criteria to evaluate information (e.g., origin, authority, accuracy, bias, and distortion of information and ideas).
3. synthesize and apply information to formulate and support reasoned personal convictions within groups and participate in negotiations to arrive at solutions to differences (e.g., elections, judicial proceedings, economic choices, community service projects).

Using this standard, the students are going to examine some of the fundamental issues of history: What are the facts? How reliable is the evidence? Who can we believe? What are the standards we use in examining documentary evidence?
Historical Narrative

The basis for this exploration is the death of Meriwether Lewis who died of gunshot wounds in 1809 while journeying toward Washington, D.C. Arguably the most famous explorer in American history, Lewis was only 35 years old. He had led an expedition to the Pacific and back, been made a member of the American Philosophical Society, and appointed governor of Louisiana. The job of governor challenged Lewis with problems that he could not easily solve. His Presidentially appointed secretary wanted the job of governor for himself, and continually worked to undermine Lewis. He was supposed to be preparing his journals for publication. Some of his diplomacy with Indian tribes further up the Missouri had collapsed. At the time of his death, bills he had submitted to Washington had been rejected. He was left holding the bag, and once word of his financial difficulties got out, he was beset with creditors. He liquidated most of his assets to satisfy them. Then he packed his papers (including the journals from the expedition) and set off for Washington with the hope that he could confront and convince the treasury of his proper use of funds. He took a substantial sum of money. Along the way, he apparently became ill and acted strangely. He also changed his original plans and headed to Washington along the Natchez Trace. At Grinder’s Stand, a farm and inn, he was shot—apparently twice—and died. His traveling companion, James Neely, was not present when it happened, but he had Lewis buried. Initial accounts indicated the death was by suicide. Were they truthful? Where did the money disappear? What really happened?
Instructions

An introduction will be provided by the teacher laying out the basic question and illustrating some of the documents in their original form. The question of suicide or murder will be presented with the students’ assessment to be derived from their examination of the evidence.

The class will then be divided into seven groups to look at seven documents. Each individual will take one of the documents and review it by completing the document analysis sheet. This will be completed as a homework activity. It will be collected and given a grade for completion.

The documents to be examined include:

1. James Neelly’s letter to Thomas Jefferson recounting the death of Lewis.
2. Alexander Wilson’s account of his interview with Priscilla Grinder
3. The much later newspaper article interviewing Priscilla Grinder
4. Gilbert Russell’s letter to Thomas Jefferson
5. Gilbert Russell’s signed deposition
6. William Clark’s letter to his brother Jonathan
7. Thomas Jefferson’s written comments about Meriwether Lewis

On the third day, the documents will be returned to the students and they will gather in their groups to discuss their findings. This should be completed within 15 minutes. Students may add and alter their analysis sheets and they see fit.

After they have completed that group discussion, they will be rearranged into larger groups with each document represented by at least one participant. Each student will receive a copy of all the documents. Their discussion will be to conduct an inquest and determine whether Meriwether Lewis was murdered or committed suicide. They must specifically cite evidence from the documentation to support their answer. They will complete a sheet that lists the vote on their decision and cites the evidence that enabled them to reach their conclusion.

As a follow-up, each student will write a short paper answering the following questions?

1. What is your personal conclusion, and which argument was most influential in helping you come to that conclusion?
2. What further evidence do you wish you could have consulted?
3. Which source did you find the least credible, and why?

When the essays are collected (one or two days later), the instructor will conclude the activity with a discussion of the difficulties of using primary sources and the need for the student of history to understand that bias is inherent in any historical document. The point can be made that how we interpret a document is another form of bias itself. Following this assignment, when the essays are corrected and returned, the students should be assigned an appropriate Document Based Question to complete.

**Student Assessment Requirements**

1. Students will complete and submit the document analysis sheets on one of the assigned documents.

2. Students will write a short paper answering the three following questions:
   a. What is your personal conclusion, and which argument was most influential in helping you come to that conclusion?
   b. What further evidence do you wish you could have consulted?
   c. Which source did you find the least credible, and why?

3. Students will complete Advanced Placement DBQ of the instructor’s choice requiring them to practice analysis of documents regarding veracity and bias.
Documents
Written Document Analysis Worksheet
Adapted from the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC

1. TYPE OF DOCUMENT (Check one):
   ___ Newspaper
   ___ Map
   ___ Advertisement
   ___ Letter
   ___ Telegram
   ___ Congressional record
   ___ Patent
   ___ Press release
   ___ Census report
   ___ Memorandum
   ___ Report
   ___ Other

2. UNIQUE PHYSICAL QUALITIES OF THE DOCUMENT (Check one or more):
   ___ Interesting letterhead
   ___ Seals
   ___ Other
   ___ Handwritten
   ___ Notations
   ___ Other
   ___ Typed
   ___ "RECEIVED" stamp

3. DATE(S) OF DOCUMENT and elapsed time from the events it describes:
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

4. AUTHOR (OR CREATOR) OF THE DOCUMENT and his or her POSITION (title):
   ____________________________________________
   ____________________________________________

5. FOR WHAT AUDIENCE WAS THE DOCUMENT WRITTEN?
   ____________________________________________

6. DOCUMENT INFORMATION (There are many possible ways to answer A-E.)
   A. List three things the author said that you think are important:
      ____________________________________________
      ____________________________________________
      ____________________________________________
      ____________________________________________
   B. Why do you think this document was written?
      ____________________________________________
      ____________________________________________
C. What evidence in the document helps you know why it was written? Quote from the document.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

D. List two things the document tells you about life in the United States at the time it was written:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

E. Write a question to the author that is left unanswered by the document:

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

F. What are some (more than one) possible biases in this person’s account?

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
Letter from James Neelly to Thomas Jefferson—October 18, 1809

Nashville, 18 October, 1809

Sir:

It is with extreme pain that I have to inform you of the death of His Excellency Meriwether Lewis, Governor of upper Louisiana who died on the morning of the 11th Instant and I am sorry to say by Suicide.

I arrived at the Chickasaw Bluffs [Fort Pickering on the Mississippi River] on or about the 18th of September, where I found the governor (who had reached there two days before me from St. Louis) in very bad health. It appears that his first intention was to go around by water to the City of Washington; but his thinking a war with England probable, & that his valuable papers might be in danger of falling into the hands of the British, he was thereby induced to change his route, and to come through the Chickasaw nation by land; I furnished him with a horse to pack his trunks &c. on, and a man to attend to them; have recovered his health in some degree at the Chickasaw Bluffs, we set out together. And on our arrival at the Chickasaw nation I discovered that he appeared at times deranged in mind. We rested there two days & came on. One day's journey after crossing Tennessee River & where we encamped we lost two of our horses. I remained behind to hunt them & the governor proceeded on, with a promise to wait for me at the first houses he came to that was inhabited by white people; he reached the house of a Mr. Grinder about sun set, the man of the house being from home, and no person there but a woman who discovering the governor to be deranged, gave him up the house & slept herself in one near it. His servant [John Pernier] and mine slept in the stable loft some instance from the other houses. The woman reports that about three o'clock she heard two pistols fire off in the Governors Room: the servants being awakined by her, came in but too late to save him. He had shot himself in the head with one pistol & a little below the Breast with the other-when his servant came in he says; I have done the business my good Servant give me some water. He gave him water, he survived but a short time. I came up sometime after, and had him as decently Buried as I could in that place-if there is any thing wished by his friends to be done to his grave I will attend to their Instructions.

I have got in my possession his two trunks of papers (amongst which is said to be his travels to the Pacific Ocean) and probably some Vouchers for expenditures of Public Money for a Bill which he said had been protested by the Secy. Of War; and of which act to his death, he repeatedly complained. I have also in my Care his Rifle, Silver watch, Brace of Pistols, dirk & tomahawk; one of the Governors horses was lost in the wilderness which I will endeavour to regain, the other I have sent on by his servant who expressed a desire to go to the governors Mothers & to Monticello [President Jefferson's home]: I have furnished him with fifteen Dollars to Defray his expences to Charlottesville; Some days previous to the Governors death he requested of me in case any accident happen to him, to send his trunks with the papers therein to the President, but I think very probable he meant to you. [Editor: Madison was now president.] I wish to be informed what arrangements may be considered best in sending on his trunks &c. I have the honor to be with Great respect Yr. Ob. Sert.

James Neelly

U. S. agent to the Chickasaw Nation

The Governor left two of his trunks at the Chickasaw Bluffs in the care of Captain. Gilbert C. Russell, Commanding officer, & was to write to him from Nashville what to do with them.
—The Death of Meriwether Lewis: page 9—

Nashville, Tennessee
18th Oct. 1809

Joseph

It is with the utmost pain that I have to inform you of the death of His Excellency Meriwether Lewis, Governor of Upper Louisiana, who died on the morning of the 26th inst. and I am sorry to say by design.

I arrived at the Chickasaws Bluff on the 18th of September, where, according to the Governor, who had reached them two days before, the Governor had been there. It appears that his first intention now is to go around by water to the City of Washington, but he thinks it better to land at the place where England probably that his valuable papers might be in danger of falling into the hands of the British; he was hereby induced to change his course, and to come through the Chickasaw Nation by land. I furnishes him with a letter to take
having recovered his health to some degree at the Chickasaws Bluff, he set out with us. On our arrival at the Chickasaw nation I discovered that he appeared as long deranged in mind, we had then two days to come on a long journey after losing some days. When we arrived we lost two of our horses, some [were] behind to come near the Governor proceeded on, with a promise to wait for me at the Etoe's house. He came to the town inhabited by white people, he reached the house of a miller, where he told him that man lying from home, and no person there. Two women who discovering the Governor, to be deranged gave him up the house & stole herself into one man's house. And went stealthily in the house to some distance from the other house, the woman reports that above three o'clock the house two pistols fired off in the Governor's room, the women being awakened by the noise in time too late to serve him, he had shot himself in the head with one pistol a little before the Doctor went the other when his servant came in he says, then came the doctor & my good servant gives me some water, he gave him water.
he always been a tough time, I came up some time after, that him as directly Barnes as I brace so that planes. Up then in any thing wishes by his friends to be done to his great deed to attend to their instructions,

There are in my possession his two

trunks of papers amongst which is said to be his letters to the Pacific Ocean, and mostly done

During my time on the Cumberlands, he had been posted by the 18th of May, and of

which are to his death, her perpetually complained.

There are also in my possession his pistols, silver watch, and

of pistols, and a map of the region. One of the governor

had to be in the wilderness which desire to return to Virginia, the other his who was by his demand who

escaped a desire to go to the governor Martin

to Monticello; there furnished them with

1500 dollars to buy him, his expenses to Charleston,

t some days previous to the governor death he,

requested of me in case any accidents

happened to him, to send his thanks to the

wrote: There is to the President, but I
The Death of Meriwether Lewis: page 12

Think it very probable he mean to join
Jacks to be informed what arrangements
May be considered best in sending on
his trunks, we have the honor to be

With great respect


J. Rutledge
Sec. Agent of the


The Governor left two
of his trunks at the


The Farmer


The President of
the United States,
Monticello, near
Charlottesville Va.
Letter from Alexander Wilson to Alexander Lawson—May 28, 1811

May 28, 1811

(Note: The author of the following letter was a prominent ornithologist and friend of Governor Lewis who had agreed to do the bird illustrations for the journals. Two years after Lewis' death, Wilson had the opportunity to interview Mrs. Grinder, proprietor of the inn where Governor Lewis died. Wilson recounted their conversation in this letter to Alexander Lawson, a well-known engraver and a mutual friend of Lewis.)

...Next morning (Sunday) I rode six miles to a man's of the name of Grinder, where our poor friend Lewis perished. In the same room where he expired, I took down from Mrs. Grinder the particulars of that melancholy event, which affected me extremely. This house or cabin is seventy-two miles from Nashville, and is the last white man's as you enter the Indian country. Governor Lewis, she said, came there about sun-set, alone, and inquired if he could stay for the night; and, alighting, brought his saddle into the house. He was dressed in a loose gown, white, striped with blue. On being asked if he came alone, he replied that there were two servants behind, who would soon be up. He called for some spirits, and drank a very little. When the servants arrived, one of whom was a negro, he inquired for his powder, saying he was sure he had some powder in a canister. The servant gave no distinct reply, and Lewis, in the mean while walked backwards and forwards before the door, talking to himself. Sometimes, she said, he would seem as if he were walking up to her; and would suddenly wheel round, and walk back as fast as he could. Supper being ready he sat down, but had not eat but a few mouthfuls when he started up speaking to himself in a violent manner. At these times, she says, she observed his face to flush as if it had come on him in a fit. He lighted his pipe, and drawing a chair to the door sat down, saying to Mrs. Grinder in a kind tone of voice, "Madam this is a very pleasant evening." He smoked for some time, but quitted his seat and traversed the yard as before. He again sat down to his pipe, seemed again composed and casting his eyes wishfully towards the west, observed what a sweet evening it was. Mrs. Grinder was preparing a bed for him; but he said he would sleep on the floor, and desired the servant to bring the bear skins and buffaloe robe, which were immediately spread out for him; and it being now dusk the woman went off to the kitchen, and the two men to the barn, which stands about two hundred yards off. The kitchen is only a few paces from the room where Lewis was, and the woman being considerably alarmed by the behaviour of her guest could not sleep but listened to him walking backwards and forwards, she thinks for several hours, and talking aloud, as she said, "like a lawyer." She then heard the report of a pistol, and something fall heavily on the floor, and the words "0 Lordl" Immediately afterwards she heard another pistol, and in a few minutes she hear him at her door calling out "0 madam! Give me some water, and heal my wounds." The logs being open, and unplastered, she saw him stagger back and fall against a stump that stands between the kitchen and room. He crawled for some distance, raised himself by the side of a tree, where he sat about a minute. He once more got to the room; afterwards he came to the kitchen door, but did not speak; she then heard him scraping the bucket with a gourd for water, but it appears that this cooling element was denied the dying man! As soon as day broke and not before, the terror of the woman having permitted him to remain for two hours in this most deplorable situation, she sent two of her children to the barn, her husband not being at home, to bring the servants; and on going in they found him lying on the bed; he uncovered his side and shewed them where the bullet had entered; a piece of the forehead was blown off, and had exposed the brains, without having bled much. He begged they would take his rifle and blowout his brains, and he would give them all the money he had in his trunk. He often said, "I am no coward, but I am so strong, so hard to die." He begg'd the servant [John pernier] not to be afraid of him, for that he would not hurt him. He expired in about two hours, or just as the sun rose above the trees. He lies buried close by the common path, with a few loose rails thrown over his grave. I gave Grinder money to put a post fence round it, to shelter it from the hogs, and from the wolves; and he gave me his written promise he would do it. I left this place in a very melancholy mood, which was not much allayed by the prospect of the gloomy and savage wilderness which I was just entering alone. . .
Gilbert Russell to Thomas Jefferson—January 4, 1810

Fort Pickering, Chickesaw Bluffs,

January 4th 1810

Sir,

Conceiving it a duty incumbent upon me to give the friends of the late Meriwether Lewis such information relative to his arrival here, his stay and departure, and also of his pecuniary matters as came within my knowledge which they otherwise might not obtain, and presuming that as you were once his patron, you still remain’d his friend, I beg leave to communicate it to you and thro’ you to his mother and such other of his friends as may be interested. He came here on the 15th September last from whence he set off intending to go to Washington by way of New Orleans. His situation that 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. Being placed then myself in a similar situation with him by having Bills protested to a considerable amount I had made application to the General & expected leave of absence every day to go to Washington on the same business with Governor Lewis. In consequence of which he waited six or eight days expecting I would go on with him, but in this we were disappointed & he set off with a Major Neely who was going to Nashville.

At the request of Governor Lewis I enclosed the land warrant granted to him in consideration of his services to the Pacific Ocean to Bowling Robinson Esq Sec’y of the T’y [Treasury] of Orleans with instructions to dispose of it at any price above two dollars per acre & to lodge the money in the Bank of the United States or any of the branch banks subject to his order. He left me with two Trunks a case and a bundle which will now remain here subject at any time subject to your order or that of his legal representatives. Enclosed is his memo respecting them but before the Boat in which he directed they might be sent got to this place I rec’d a verbal message from him after he left here to keep them until I should hear from him again. He set off with two Trunks which contain’d all his papers relative to his expedition to the Pacific Ocean, Gen’l Clark’s Land Warrant, a Port-Folio, pocket Book, and Note Book together with many other papers of both a public & private nature, two horses, two saddles & bridles, a Rifle, gun, pistols, pipe, tomahawk & dirks, all elegant & perhaps about two hundred & twenty dollars, of which $99.58 was a Treasury Check on the U. S. branch Bank of Orleans endorsed by me. The horses, one saddle, and the check I let him have. Where or what has become of his effects I do not know but presume they must be in the care of Major Neely near Nashville.

As an individual I verry much regret the untimely death of Governor Lewis whose loss will be great to his country & surely felt by his friends. When he left I felt much satisfaction for indeed I tho’t I had also been the means of preserving the life of this valuable man, and as it has turned out I shall have the consolation that I discharged those obligations towards him that man is bound to do to his fellows.

It is probable that I shall go to the City of Washington in a few weeks also. I shall give you a call and give any further information you may require that has come within my knowledge. Having had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Wm. Randolph, I pray you to tender my respects to him.

I remain Sir with the utmost veneration and respect your Ob’t Servant.

Gilbert C. Russell

Thomas Jefferson Esq.
Fort Pulaski

January 24th, 1820

Sir,

Concerning it a duty incumbent upon me to give the facts of the late illness and death of Lewis, who, information relative to his arrival here, his stay and departure, and also of his present state, as soon as possible. My knowledge of which they otherwise might not after him, and presuming that as you were in his patron you will remain his friend by leave to communicate it to you and thus you to his mother and other of his friends as may be interested.

He came here on the 15th September last from which he set off intending to go to Washington by way of New Orleans. This rendered it necessary that he should be stopped until he would recover, which I knew it 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. Being pleased then myself...
in a similar situation with him by having 
Bill, presented to a considerable amount. I had 
made application to the Secretary of War for 
leave of absence every day he went to 
Washington on 
the same business with Governor Lewis. In con 
quince of which he waited for at least 
proving that I wanted to go with him but in the 
years we were disappointed. He set off with a Major 
Nied with a letter to Mr. Chouteau 
and the agent of Governor Lewis, demanding 
the land warrant granted to him in con 
gratiation of his services to the Indian Council, 
leaving Missouri City, by the City of 
St. Louis, with instructions to dispose of it at any price 
above two dollars per acre. I took the 
money in the Bank of the United States or any 
of the branch banks subject to his order 
and left with me two flannels a case and 
three bundles which will now remain here 
subject at any time to your own or that of 
his legal representatives. Ordered in his 
Vermont, prospecting there but before the boat 
in which he died, the boat might not got 
At this place from a turbid marsh from
them off. He left here to keep them under & showed her from them ag'in.

He left with two friends which contained all his papers relative to his expedition for the Pacific Ocean. Genl Clark, Senator, had a Port Folio, pocket Book, Maps, and State Book together with many other papers of both a Public & private nature. Two horses two saddles, Hewed a Rifle gun pistols, rope, Tommy hawk & dart, all seen gent to perhaps about two feet and twenty o'clock, of which 39 3/4 was a Treasury checks on the U. S. branch Bank of Orleans encumbered by me. Two horses one saddle and the check I left here have. Where or what has become of these papers, I do not know, but presume they must be in the care of Major Meely near Nashville.

As an individual I very much regret the untimely fate of Genl Lewis whose loss will be great to his country, however felt by his friends. When he left they felt much satisfaction. For another I think it was the means of preserving the life of one valuable man, and a of the brave
out I shall have the consolation that I discharge these obligations towards him. That man is bound to do to his fellow.

It is probable that I shall go to the City of Washington in a few weeks, and I shall give you a case and give you any further information you may require that lies, came within my knowledge.

Having had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Randolph I pray you to lend my respects to him.

I remain Sir with the utmost

Gentleman Respectfully,

R.[Signature]

[Signature]

Thomas Jefferson
Gilbert Russell’s Statement for the Record—November 26, 1811

[Russell Statement, 26 November 1811]

Governor Lewis left St. Louis late in August, or early in September 1809, intending to go by the route of the Mississippi and the Ocean, to the City of Washington, taking with him all the papers relative to his expedition to the pacific Ocean, for the purpose of preparing and putting them to the press, and to have some drafts paid which had been drawn by him on the Government and protested. On the morning of the 15th of September, the Boat in which he was a passenger landed him at Fort pickering in a state of mental derangement, which appeared to have been produced as much by indisposition as other causes. The Subscriber being then the Commanding Officer of the Fort on discovering from the crew that he had made two attempts to Kill himself, in one of which he had nearly succeeded, resolved at once to take possession of him and his papers, and detain them there untill he recovered, or some friend might arrive in whose hands he could depart in Safety.

In this condition he continued without any material change for five days, during which time the most proper and efficacious means that could be devised to restore him was administered, and on the sixth or seventh day all symptoms of derangement disappeared and he was completely in his senses and thus continued for ten or twelve days. On the 29th of the same month he left Bluffs, with the Chickasaw agent the interpreter and some of the Chiefs, intending to proceed the usual route thro’ the Indian Country, Tennesee and Virginia to his place of distination, with his papers well secured and packed on horses. By much severe depletion during his illness he had been considerably reduced and debilitated, from which he had not entirely recovered when he set off, and the weather in that country being yet excessively hot and the exercise of traveling too severe for him; in three or four days he was again affected with the same mental disease. He had no person with him who could manage or controul him in his propensities and he daily grew worse untill he arrived at the house of a Mr. Grinder within the Jurisdiction of Tennesee and only Seventy miles from Nashville, where in the apprehension of being destroyed by enemies which had no existence but in his wild immagination, he destroyed himself, in the most cool desperate and Barbarian-like manner, having been left in the house entirely to himself. The night preceeding this one of his Horses and one of the Chickasaw agents with whom he was traveling Strayed off from the Camp and in the Morning could not be found. The agent with some of the Indians stayed to search for the horses, and Governor Lewis with their two servants and the baggage horses proceeded to Mr. Grinders where he was to halt untill the agent got up.

After he arrived there and refreshed himself with a little Meal & drink he went to bed in a cabin by himself and ordered the servants to go to the stables and take care of the Horses, least they might loose some that night; Some time in the night he got his pistols which he loaded, after every body had retired in a Separate Building and discharged one against his forehead not making much effect—the ball not penetrating the skull but only making a furrow over it. He then discharged the other against his breast where the ball entered and passing downward thro’ his body came out low down near his back bone. After some time he got up and went to the house where Mrs. Grinder and her children were lying and asked for water, but her husband being absent and having heard the report of the pistols she was greatly allarmed and made him no answer. He then in returning got his razors from a port folio which happened to contain them and Seting up in his bed was found about day light, by one of the Servants, busily engaged in cutting himself from head to foot. He again beged for water, his should be clouded by such an act of desperation was to his friends still greater cause of regret.

(Signed) Gilbert Russell

The above was received by me from Major Gilbert Russell of the [blank] Regiment of Infantry U. S. on Tuesday the 26th of November 1811 at Fredericktown in Maryland.

J. Williams
Priscilla Grinder’s 1839 Account—Recorded in the New York Dispatch—February 1, 1845

We find in the North Arkansas, a paper published at Batesville, Ark., a communication stating some singular and not generally known facts concerning the mysterious death of Capt. George M. Lewis, one of the two persons employed by the U. S. Government to conduct the celebrated Expedition of Lewis and Clark, in exploring the region West of the Rocky Mountains. The writer is at present a teacher in the Cherokee Nation, and says that he is personally acquainted with the circumstances which he relates. The expedition, consisting of seventy or eighty persons, and the guidance of Lewis and Clark, was commenced in 1803 or 1804 and completed in about three years. The writer says the remains of Captain Lewis are “deposited in the southwest corner of Maury county, Tennessee, near Grinder’s old stand, on the Natchez trace where Lawrence, Maury, and Hickman counties corner together.” He visited the grave in 1838, found it almost concealed by brambles, without a stone or monument of any kind, and several miles from any house. An old tavern stand, known as Grinder’s, once stood near by, but was long since burned. The writer gave the following narrative of the incidents attending the death of Captain Lewis, as he received them from Mrs. Grinder, the landlady of the house where he died in so savage a manner.

She said that Mr. Lewis was on his way to the city of Washington, accompanied by a Mr. Pyrna [sic] and a servant belonging to a Mr. Neely. One evening a little before sundown, Mr. Lewis called at her house and asked for lodgings. Mr. Grinder not being at home, she hesitated to take him in. Mr. Lewis informed her that two other men would be along presently, who also wished to spend the night at her house, and as they were all civil men, he did not think there would be an impropriety in her giving them accommodations for the night. Mr. Lewis dismounted, fastened his horse, took a seat by the side of the house, and appeared quite sociable.

In a few minutes Mr. Pyrna [sic] and the servant rode up, and seeing Mr. Lewis they also dismounted and put up their horses. About dark two or three other men rode up and called for lodging. Mr. Lewis immediately drew a brace of pistols, stepped towards them and challenged them to fight a duel. They not liking this salutation, rode on to the next house, five miles. This alarmed Mrs. Grinder. Supper, however, was ready in a few minutes. Mr. Lewis ate but little. He would not stop eating, and sit as if in a deep study, and several times exclaimed, ‘If they do prove anything on me they will have to do it by letter.’ Supper being over, and Mrs. Grinder seeing that Lewis was mentally deranged, requested Mr. Pyrna [sic] to get his pistols from him. Mr. P. replied, ‘He has no ammunition, and if he does any mischief it will be to himself, and not to you or anybody else.’ In a short time all retired to bed, the travelers in one room, as Mrs. G. thought, and she and her children in another.

Two or three hours before day Mrs. G. was alarmed by the report of a pistol, and quickly after two other reports, in the room where the travelers were. At the report of the third, she heard someone fall and exclaim, ‘O Lord! Congress, relieve me.’ In a few minutes she heard some person at the door of the room where she lay. She inquired, ‘Who is there?’ Mr. Lewis spoke and said, ‘Dear madam, be so good as to give me a little water.’ Being afraid to open the door she did not give him any. Presently she heard him fall, and soon after, looking through a crack in the wall, she saw him scrambling across the road on his hands and knees.

After daylight Mr. Pyrna [sic] and the servant made their appearance, and it appeared they had not slept in the house, but in the stable. Mr. P. had on the clothes Mr. L. wore when they came to Mrs. Grinder’s the evening before, and Mr. L’s gold watch in his pocket. Mrs. G. asked him what he was doing with Mr. L’s clothes on; Mr. P. replied, ‘He gave them to me.’ Mr. P and the servant then searched for Mr. L., found him and brought him to the house, and though he had on a full suit of clothes, they were old and tattered, and not the same as he had on the evening before, and though Mr. P. had said that Lewis had no ammunition, Mrs. G. found several balls and a considerable quantity of powder scattered over the floor of the room occupied by Lewis; also a canister with several pounds in it.

When Mr. L. was brought to the house, [illegible] his shirt bosom and said to Mrs. G.: ‘Dear madam, look at my wounds.’ She asked him what made him do so? He replied, ‘If I had not done it somebody else would.’ He frequently asked for water, which was given to him. He was asked if he would have a doctor sent for, he said not. A messenger, however, went for one but did not get him. He attempted to cut his throat, but was prevented. Some of the neighbors were called in. He frequently cried out, ‘Oh how hard it is to die, I am so strong.’ He, however, soon expired. Major Neely was sent for, and he and Mr. P. buried him and took possession of his effects. Mrs. G. heard that Pyrna [sic] went to see Mr. Lewis’ mother, and that she accused him of murdering her son; and he finally cut his own throat, and thus put an end to his existence.

I make no comment on the above; it is all wrapt [sic] up in mystery. I have heard that Capt. Clarke, the worthy colleague of their tour, was highly honored and handsomely rewarded by the government, while Lewis was neglected, and that this had an effect to produce alienation of mind. If this be true, are there not some living who are acquainted with the fact?
William Clark to Jonathan Clark—October 28, 1809

Mr. Shanons

Octr. 28th 1809

Dear Brother

I proceeded on verry well to Mr. Smiths and arrived there about an hour after dusk, and this day have Come on verry well to this place The man boy is not well, tho' not wors than he was when you parted with us_

when at Shelbyville to day I Saw in a Frankfort paper called the Arguss a report published which givs me much Concern, it Says that Govr. Lewis killed himself by Cutting his Throat with a Knife, on his way between the Chickaw Saw Bluffs and nashville, I fear this report has too much truth, tho' hope it may have no foundation—my reasons for thinking it possible is founded on the letter which I recved from him at your house, in that letter he Says he had Some intintion of going thro’ by land & his only objection was his papers The Boats I Sent down with the pelteres [pelttries], under the derections of Mr. James McFarlane must have over taken the Govr. between new madrid and the Chickasaw Bluffs, and if he was Still dis posed to go through, I is it not probable that he might have intrusted his papers to McFarlane who is a perticular friend of his and on his way to the City of Washington? and Set out from the Bluffs with a view to pass thro’ the most derect rout, which is by nashville _ I fear O! I fear the waight of his mind has over come him, what will be the Consequence? what will become of his paprs? I must write to Genl. Robinson or Some friend about nashville to enquire about him, and Collect and Send me his papers, if he had any with him _ I am quit[e] distressed about this report.

... I am Sorry to tell you that I am not only forgetfull but neglectful & inattentive, I hope you will excuse me, and parden this hasty Scraul which is written in a room Crouded with different descriptions of people. Some drunk _

Julia joins me in Love to you Sister nancy and belev yrs to affly. [be]

yr Frend & Bra

WmClark
spectacle of his mind on his way to the City of Washington, and set out from the Bluffs with a
Gentleman, the Mind and soul, what is
by Nashville. Upon and after the death of his friends
has over come him, what will be the consequence
his spirit into another form? Must wrote to
send Robinson or some friend about Nashville to
enquire about him, and Colles and send me
his papers, if he had any with him. I am great
suffered about this matter.
Thomas Jefferson to Paul Allen—August 18, 181

... It was the middle of Feb. 1807. before Capt. Lewis with his companion Clarke reached the city of Washington where Congress was then in session. That body granted to the two chiefs and their followers, the donation of lands which they had been promised encouraged to expect in reward of their toils & dangers. Capt. Lewis was soon after appointed Governor of Louisiana, and Capt. Clarke a General of it's militia and agent of the U.S. for Indian affairs in that department.

A considerable time intervened before the Governor's arrival at St. Louis. He found the territory distracted by feuds & contentions among the officers of the government, & the people themselves divided by these into factions & parties. He determined :at once, to take no side with either; but to use every endeavor to conciliate & harmonize them. The even-handed justice he administered to all soon established a respect for his person & authority, and perseverance & time wore down animosities and reunited the citizens again into one family.

Governor Lewis had from early life been subject to hypocondriac affections. It was a constitutional disposition in all the nearer branches of the family of his name, & was more immediately inherited by him from his father. They had not however been so strong as to give uneasiness to his family. While he lived with me in Washington, I observed at times sensible depressions of mind, but knowing their constitutional source, I estimated their course by what I had seen in the family. During his Western expedition the constant exertion which that required of all the faculties of body & mind, suspended these distressing affections; but after his establishment at St. Louis in sedentary occupations they returned upon him with redoubled vigor, and began seriously to alarm his friends. He was in a paroxysm of one of these when his affairs rendered it necessary for him to go to Washington. He proceeded to the Chickasaw bluffs where he arrived on the 16th of Sep. 1809. with a view of continuing his journey thence by water. Mr. Neely, agent of the U.S. with the Chickasaw Indians arriving there two days after, found him extremely indisposed, and betraying at times some symptoms of a derangement of mind. The rumors of a war with England, & apprehensions that he might lose the papers he was bringing on, among which were the vouchers of his public accounts, and the journals & papers of his Western expedition, induced him here to change his mind and to take his course by land thro' the Chickasaw country. Altho' he appeared somewhat relieved, Mr. Neely kindly determined to accompany & watch over him. Unfortunately, at their encampment after having passed the Tennessee one day's journey, they lost two horses, which obliging Mr. Neely to halt for their recovery, the Governor proceeded under a promise to wait for him at the house of the first white inhabitant on his road. He stopped at the house of a Mr. Grinder, who not being at home, his wife alarmed at the symptoms of derangement she discovered, gave him up the house, and retired to rest herself in an outhouse; the Governor's & Neely's servants lodging in another. About 3. o'clock in the night he did the deed which plunged his friends into affliction and deprived his country of one of her' most valued citizens whose valour & intelligence would have been now imploied in avenging the wrongs of his country and in emulating by land the splendid deeds which have honored her arms on the ocean. It lost too to the nation the benefit of recieving from his own hand the Narrative now offered them of his sufferings & successes in endeavoring to extend for them the boundaries of science, and to present to their knolege that vast & fertile country which their sons are destined to fill with arts, with science, with freedom & happiness.

To this melancholy close of the life of one whom posterity will declare not to have lived in vain I have only to add that all facts 1 have stated are either known to myself, or communicated by his family or others for whose truth I have no hesitation to make [myself] responsible: and I conclude with tendering you the assurances of my respect & consideration.
The Death of Meriwether Lewis

Sir, Monticello Feb. 18, 1813

In compliance with the request contained in your letter of May 33, I have the honor to transmit herewith the following notice of the death of Meriwether Lewis, one of our most distinguished citizens. He died on the 18th of May, 1813, near the town of Charlottesville in the county of Albemarle in Virginia. Of the distinguished families of that state his father’s race in the line of descent from the Indian chief, was a member of the King’s council before the revolution, and married to him. His father’s name was Robert Lewis, and his brother was one of the most celebrated patriots. He stepped forward in the commencement of the revolution, and commanded one of the regiments first raised in the war, and placed on Continental establishment. Happily situated at home with a wife and young family, he was called to aid in the liberation of his country from a foreign tyranny, with which he was associated. He was a man of rare qualities, and his death was a loss to the country.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,

[Signature]

The above is a true and accurate account of the death of Meriwether Lewis, as communicated to me by Dr. Madison, his long-time friend and correspondent.

[Signature]
county. He always received by both parties, he was also the guardian of Massinester Lewis, of whom we are now speaking, and also of his father.

Then, at a very early age, he continued some remarkable scenes of a tender and estimable mother, of the respectable family of Allen.

A natural philosophy, and was remarkable even in his infancy for his enterprise, boldness, and wisdom. Then only 8 years of age, he habitually went out alone, even with his dog, into the forest to hunt the raccoon and possum.

He, seeking shelter in the night, can then only be taken. In this exercise, no season or circumstance could obstruct his purpose, plunging into the winter snows and frozen streams in pursuit of his object. At 13, he was sent to the Latin school and opened the 6th of May. Then he returned to his mother, and entered on the cares of his farm, having, as well as a younger brother, been left by his father with a competency for all the comforts and comforts.

purposes of temperate life, his talent for observation, which had led him to an accurate knowledge of the plants. Various of his own country, would have distinguished him as a farmer.

But at the age of 20, willing to be the author of his youth, and a passion for more daring pursuits, he engaged as a volunteer in the body of militia which were called out by Gen. Washington, an occasion of the sacrifices produced on the Western parts of the U.S., by the Society, and from which he was removed to the regular service as a lieutenant in the line. At 23, he was promoted to the Captaincy, always attracting the first attention and power in his regiment. When the Indian War of 1812 required, he was appointed postmaster to his regiment.

And when a home occurrence occurred which led to the conclusion of his life, it will justify a recurrence to the original idea, with which I resided in Paris, John Sappington, Jr.

that arrives there, will mean in the U.S. for energy better than your.
he had accompanied, took on his voyage to the Pacific ocean, and distinguished himself on that by his intrepidity, being of a common disposition, he was now painting for some new enterprize. His immediate object at Paris was to engage a company in the front trade of the western coast of America, in which he failed. When proposed to him to go by land to Kamchacka, coast in some of the Russian vessels to Nootka sound, fell down into the lake of the Bafile, and penetrate thence to the U.S. he expects, seized the idea, and only asked to be assured of the permission of the Russian government. I interested in M. de Simeonov, M.P. of the Congress at Paris, but more especially the Baron de Grimm, M.P. of Saxe, other the more special agent for correspondence on matters not immediately diplomatic. He at last permitted her permission was obtained; Van continued his journey, with the above plan, and he took his territory. He was set out from Paris and arrived at St. Petersburg after the emperor had left that place to pass the winter (I think) at Moscow. Her finances not permitting him to make a stay at St. Petersburg he left with a passport from one of the ministers. He arrived near Kamchacka was obliged to take up his quarters, he was preparing in the spring to resume his journey, when he was arrested by an officer of the Congress, who or this time from the capture of Van changed his mind, and forbidden his proceeding, he was put into a carriage and day it was a knight, without ever stopping. He reached Poland there he was set down and left to himself, the fatigue of the journey took his health, and then he returned to Paris his bodily strength remained, his mind however was much impaired and he after this undertook the journey to Egypt. I received a letter from him, full of sanguine hopes, dated at Cairo. The 18th of June 1808, the day before he was to set out for the head of the Nile.
The Death of Meriwether Lewis: page 27—
In 1803, the act for establishing trading houses with the Indian tribes being about to expire, a new modification of it was recommended to Congress by a confidential message of January 1st, and an extension of its views to the Indians on the Missouri. In order to prepare the way toward the Missouri, the author set out from St. Louis, to trace the Missouri to its source, to climb the highlands and follow the best water communication which offered itself from thence to the Pacific ocean. Congress approved the proposition and voted a sum of money for carrying it into execution. Captain Lewis had been some time ago with me as private secretary, immediately renewed his solicitation to have the direction of the party. I had now had opportunities of knowing him intimately.

Of course undaunted by possessing a firm and unswerving purpose which nothing but impossibilities could divert from its destination, careful as a father of those committed to his charge, and steady in the maintenance of order and discipline, intimate with the Indian character, customs and principles, habituated to the hunting life, familiarly acquainted with the vegetables, animals, and climate of his own country, against long time in the description of objects at a distance, honest, disinterested, beloved, of sound understanding and a fidelity to truth so conspicuous that whatever he should report would be as certain as if seen by himself, with all these qualifications as if selected and implanted by nature in one body, for this express purpose, I thought no hesitation in confiding the enterprise to him. To fill up the measure desired, he wanted nothing but a greater familiarity with the technical language of the natural sciences, and readiness in the astronomical observations necessary for the geography of his route, to acquire these he repaired immediately to Philadelphia, and placed himself under the tuition of the distinguished professors there, who with a real decision, enkindled by an
ardent devotion to science, communicated to him freely therefor. -mation requisite for the purposes of the journey. While attending to the fabrication of the arms requested with which he chose that his men should be provided, he had the benefit of daily communication with Mr. Andrew Ellicott, whose experience in As -onomical Observations, and practice of Maps in the woods made -es him to appreciate Capt. Lewis of the many difficulties he would encounter, and of the obstacles to resources offered by a woodland and uninhabited country. The following is a draft of the instructions issued to Capt. William Clark, of this column: He was appointed to hold such -blications of the enterprise, in the event of Capt. Lewis' death. 

While these things were going on here, the country of Lou -isiana, lately ceded by Spain to France, had been the subject of ne -ociation at Paris between us & the last power; and had actually been transferred to us by treaty concluded at Paris on the 14th of May 1803. This information received about the 1st day of July increased infinitely the our interest in the expedition. It opened the apprehensions of interruption from other quarters, everything in this quarter being now proposed. Capt. Lewis left Washington on the 1st of July, and proceeded to Pittsburg where other articles had been ordered to be provided for them. The men too were to be selected from the military stations on the - Ohio, delays of preparation, difficulties of navigation, & other un -known circumstances prevented his arrival at Catholic until the season was so far advanced as to render it prudent to suspend his exploring the lakes. Meantime until the ice should have broken up in May-From -his journal, now published, will give the history of his journey - to and from the Pacific, until his return to Capt. Lewis on the 23rd Sep. 1806. He reached St. Louis, the 9th of October, Congress being dissolved. -ton never did a similar event excite more joy than the United States.
The health of its citizens had taken a lively interest in the case of this journey, and looked forward with impatience for the information it would furnish their anxieties for the safety of the corps; had been kept in a state of excitement by unfounded rumors, circulated from time to time, on uncertain authorities, and unconfirmed by any letter or other direct information; the news from the time they had left the Mandan home on their ascent up the river in April of the preceding year, until their actual return to St. Louis, in the middle of Feb. 1807, when Capt. Lewis with his companion, Clarke reached Washington, about the middle of February, when Congress was then in session. That body granted to the two chiefs and their followers, the confirmation of lands which had been promised in reward of their services. Capt. Lewis was soon after appointed Governor of Louisiana, and Capt. Clarke a General of its militia, and agent of the U.S. for Indian affairs in that department. A considerable time intervened before the Governor’s arrival at St. Louis, he found the territory devastated by feuds, and contending among the officers of the government. The people themselves divided by these into factions and parties; he determined at once to take no side with either, but to use every endeavor to conciliate and harmonize them. He even handed justice he determined to all whom established respect for his personal authority, and more recent Maine were of the animosities and reunited the citizens again into one faction.

Governor Lewis had from early life been subject to hypochondriacal affections; it was a constitutional disposition in all the nearer branches of his family. His were more immediately inherited by him from his father, they had not however been so strong as to give uneasiness to his family. While he lived with me in Washington, I observed at times sensible depressions of mind.

—The Death of Meriwether Lewis: page 30—
but knowing their constitutional source, I estimated their course by
the laws of the family, the causes and concomitants of which were familiar to me, but
that was to me a baby’s play. A child’s disease, which that
required of all the faculties of body and mind, apart from
these delusive affections, but after his establishment at St. Louis
in its sudden or spontaneous turn, they returned upon him without
distress, and began seriously to alarm his friends. He was in a
paroxysm of one of those then so frequent, or it is necessary, for him
to go to Washington. He proceeded to the Chickasaw Bluffs, where he
arrived on the 16th of Sept. 1808, with a view of continuing his journey
homeward by under the care of an agent of the US, with the Chickasaw
Indians, arriving three days after. Found him an extremely
boisterous, and betraying at times some symptoms of a serious
mood of mind. The rumors of a war with England, apprehended
that he might lose the preparatory he was bringing on, among which
were the events of his public accounts, and the journals of the
part of his Western expedition, induced him here to change his
mind and to take his course by land through the Chickasaw coun-
ty. The latter.- he appeared somewhat relieved. Mr. Neely de-
determined to accompany him. With all the inconvenience of their
adventure of his journey, among the events of the Chickasaw
Indians, they lost two horses, which Mr. Neely engaged himself to have for their
recovery, the Governor proceeded under a promise to wait for
him at the house of the first white inhabitant on his road.
He stopped at the house of Mr. Grinnell, who was not at
home; his wife discovering alarmed at the symptoms of de-
terence, she discovered him up the house, and retired
to rest herself in an outbuilding; the Governor’s Mrs. Neely’s servants
lodging in another. About 1 o’clock in the morning, he was dead which plunged his friends into affliction and
deprived his country.
Lesson Reflection
Bibliography


