

Past Event: 2024 NCSBN Leadership and Public Policy Conference

So where Jefferson wants this expedition to go to is a place where the United States has weak claims. Britain has better claims, Russia has better claims, Spain has better claims. Even the French have been there before.

None of them have a permanent presence on the Pacific Coast, except the Spanish in California and the Russians up in Alaska. In between is a contested zone. And so what Jefferson's trying to do is to start to play an American hand there. Jefferson had a long-standing interest in science and exploration, and he'd been trying to get somebody to go across the continent for a very long time since the 1780s.

Now he's President of the United States in 1801 and he can actually do something about it. But he's not just doing this out of a love of science. He's doing this because he wants the United States to have the option of expanding as far as the Pacific Ocean. Now he's not sure how that's going to happen, when it's going to happen, but he knows that if he doesn't start to play the exploration game, the United States is going to be frozen out.

So this is an expedition that is venturing into some very treacherous settings. Now, Jefferson is the key guy in getting this going. Without Jefferson, this wouldn't happen. His predecessor is President John Adams. Wouldn't have launched an expedition like this.

This is very much a Jefferson venture. But Jefferson is motivated by this guy, whose face you've probably never seen before. This is Alexander Mackenzie. He has the bad taste to be Canadian. And why is that a bad taste? Because Canadians aren't supposed to do anything before Americans do.

And Mackenzie made it across the continent more than a decade before Lewis and Clark. And then he went back to... He did this in 1793. The route down near, the green route, shows how he proceeded in order to get across the Rocky Mountains to what is now British Columbia.

And he marked this on the stone. The stone's still there, "Alexander Mackenzie from Canada, by land, 22nd July, 1793." And why is he doing all of this? He's in a party, which is about nine guys. He's the only one that speaks English. The other members are either French Canadians or they're Native Americans.

And without Native American help, he doesn't get through there. And they have to go this very tortuous route through the Rocky Mountains. And what's his goal? This cute animal, a sea otter. If any of you have been to the aquarium at Monterey, you've seen them, okay? Back in that day, they didn't keep them in aquariums, they just wanted to kill them by the thousands.

And why? Because they have very high value as pelts to sell in China. So there was an international commerce at that time. And these creatures are important elements in it because they're so highly valued in China. Now, Mackenzie comes to London and he publishes a book which is laying out what he's done, this exploration, and pitching the British government on an ambitious venture to set up military posts combined with trading posts to claim the entire Pacific Northwest region and keep any other country from doing so.

Jefferson gets his hands on a copy of this book published in 1801. And if there's one thing that Jefferson is always inclined to do is to think the worst of the British. So he's reading and he's going, "Yes, they're going to do this, and we got to get busy."

So Mackenzie is motivating Jefferson. Now, what he doesn't realize is that Britain has their hands...the British have their hands full dealing with problems around the world, especially dealing with Napoleon in Europe. But also the East India Company, which controlled British trade with China, does not want a new company based in Canada to compete with them.

So the British government pat Alexander Mackenzie on the back, gave him a night hood, and tell him to go back to Canada. But Jefferson doesn't know this. So he's motivated by fear of what the British are really up to. Now, if you also read that book carefully, you would not have any confidence that it was going to be easy to get across the continent because of the rocky mounts.

This map shows the state of geographic knowledge at the time. Now, if you just orient your eye, you'll see on the left side is the Pacific Coast. On the right side, with all the detail, is the Great Lakes in the Missouri Valley. But if you go and see the center, I'm going to press the right button, it turns out, this is the Rocky Mountains.

Look how narrow they are. It looks like you just pack a picnic lunch and you can go for the day. This is wishful thinking put on a map. Did anybody know? No. How does this happen? Because various fur traders and explorers are up here visiting with native peoples up here in what's now North Dakota and say, "There are some mountains to the West."

They go, "Yeah." They go, "They're low mountains, right?" And native peoples go, "Sure, yeah, they're low mountains, and you can get through them really easily. Yeah, very easy." So then they go back and they create maps that look like this. So this is what Jefferson believed was going to happen, that yeah, they'd have to go upstream up the Missouri River but they'd get up here and then basically you'd have a week to get through the mountains and over the other side and you are where the sea otters are.

Now, Jefferson has a man in mind for this job from the start, and it's Meriwether Lewis who is from this county, Albemarle County, Virginia. So Jefferson knows him very well. From a prominent family.

He's a young man. He is 28 years old. And he's been working for Jefferson already as his personal secretary, which is a very important confidential position. This is like being Chief of Staff is today for the President. So this is somebody Jefferson can trust. He's got a military background. He's a captain in the U.S.

Army at the same time. So he turns to Meriwether Lewis and says, "I want you to do this." And Meriwether Lewis is not a trained scientist, but he is a pretty good naturalist. He's good at describing things in writing that he sees. But he's also a very emotional guy. And he also had an understanding of his limitations and he felt like he needed a co-commander.

So he pitches Jefferson on recruiting a second guy, another army captain, a little bit older. He's 32 years old. His name is William Clark. So hence the Lewis and Clark expedition. If Jefferson had his initial way, it just would have been the Lewis Expedition.

Now, military men of that time were very prickly and competitive about relative rank. And technically, Meriwether Lewis has seniority even though he's younger in age than Clark. But he makes quite clear to Clark at the start in inviting him, "We're going to be co-commanders. We're going to decide things together."

Also, note these red lines in here. This is a map indicating the dissemination of the horse. Native peoples did not have horses. These were introduced from Spain, and native people start to obtain them at the end of the 17th century.

And over the course of the next century, they will make their way all the way up into what is now Canada. And this is transformative to the native way of life. Here is a painting, a later painting from the 1830s that shows a Native American on horseback with a bow hunting a bison.

The horse is most valued because it improves their chances of killing bison. And bison are animals that have very thick pelts that are very useful as robes to wear in winter. And they also have a lot of meat. So it improves the standard of living of native peoples.

They're much better fed. And we have some data about the heights of native peoples, and that's a measure of nutrition. And the native peoples on the Great Plains were the tallest native people in North America. And they're taller than most Americans, meaning Americans of the United States. So the native peoples there are eating a diet that's extremely rich in protein, thanks to their acquisition of the horse, which improves their ability to hunt the bison.

What this does is it sets off a land rush, not by settlers, not by American settlers, but by Native American settlers. And these arrows show various native peoples that are either moving from the East or from the Rocky Mountains.

So the Comanche, for example, are breaking away from the Shoshone and moving onto the southern plains. Or the people that are called the Sioux on here. We know them as the Lakota, usually. They're coming from what is now Minnesota. So the number of native peoples living on the Great Plains explodes. And the diversity of those people is much greater because they want in on this way of life.

But this brings them into violent competition with one another over control of bison herds. So it escalates warfare. All of this is happening in the 18th century, so just before Lewis and Clark are moving out there. So they're not moving into some sort of unchanged, unchanging primitive world, they're moving into a very dynamic place with a lot of native peoples, a lot of different native peoples, a fair amount of violence, and things have not sorted themselves out, and the Lewis and Clark expedition will add a new element of potential trouble to that world.

We don't have a lot of illustrations that were made at the time of the expedition. There's no artist that goes along with them, and of course, there's no photographer. So the paintings that you see were made much later.

They're made by people imagining what it looked like. Now you look at this scene and it's showing them in year one of the expedition, which is 1804. 1803 is about setting up shop. 1804 is about going up the Missouri River from what is essentially St. Louis.

And their destination is to get up to the Mandan villages, which are in the midst of what is now North Dakota. That's a stretch of the river, a long stretch of the Missouri River that's pretty well known and is routinely visited by fur traders based either in Canada or in St. Louis.

But that doesn't mean it's going to be easy. Now

They have some experience with native peoples in the Ohio Valley, but it's a different set of native peoples here. And the dominant people are the Lakota, relatively newcomers, but very numerous and very aggressive about expanding their own power. And what they don't want is what Lewis and Clark are doing.

Because Lewis and Clark are going to go up to the Mandan villages who are the enemies of the Lakota. And Lewis and Clark are bringing along trade goods, which include guns and gunpowder. The Lakota don't want the Mandans to become better armed because then they'll be able to defend themselves against the Lakota.

Also, the Lakota have engaged in a kind of business with fur traders where if you pay them enough,

because the Clatsops are unfriendly, they're not, but the Clatsops have a lot of business relationships that they've developed with the British and American mariners on the coast.

So they're savvy about business. And Lewis and Clark don't like that because Clatsops drive hard bargains in their trading. And also, these are American guys. And what do American guys of the early 19th century want to eat? Meat.

Do they want to eat a lot of salmon? No. We love salmon. They didn't. They're eating salmon after salmon after salmon because the best salmon in the world is there. But these guys, they just want some beef and there's no beef to be had. Now they'll make do if they could get some elk and deer, and they get some of that, but not enough to satisfy them.

Now the next year is going back. And this shows the overall route. I mean, so you can see Louisiana,

Now, he then moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and this statue is in Louisville, Kentucky, and it's a

They managed to put a stop to that. On the other hand, they're not... You want to wear something different than your uniform? Have at it. You want to get that from the Indians and wear it? That's fine. So they loosen up on a lot of things, but they got certain core regulations that they persuade people to follow.

So the expedition, it shows a lot of flexibility and evolution as they go along to figure out how to get this group to succeed in the assigned mission most effectively and figuring out what is it that we don't need to be sticklers about.

- [Man 1] Thank you for sharing. I remember myself as a young child reading Lewis and Clark, their expeditions, and we're always amazed. But I wanted to see if you could expand upon their return. Many thought that it sounded like, or at least some thought they failed.

There's no clear route for trade. But what did Jefferson see? Was this a success? Or what were the next steps he took, or his agenda as they returned, and for the next, I guess, the rest of his tenure as President?

- Well, Jefferson's not going to have a lot more of his tenure. You know, he's going to have another couple of years. And one item that's kind of frustrating for him is that Lewis was the guy who kept the journal. And Lewis is supposed to organize all the papers and write it up and then bring it to Philadelphia and get it published because they want a counterpart to Alexander Mackenzie's book.

They want Europeans be able to read and see that the Americans have accomplished this. And Lewis just finds it really tough to get the time to concentrate on doing this. And then there's the tragic end of Lewis' life, which happens in October of 1809.

He's under some pressure, considerable pressure because there have been questions raised about his handling of the monies as governor of the Louisiana Territory, which was everything on the West Bank of the Mississippi, north of what is now the state of Louisiana.

And so he's coming East to actually answer to that investigation and bringing the notes for the journal when, along the way, he commits suicide. So in terms of getting this into print, I forget exactly when it happens, but I think it's around 1812, which is a lot later than Jefferson would have liked. And in terms of finding a commercially viable and militarily viable route to get to the Pacific, that's disappointing.

And the United States has a really small military at that time and a very limited military budget. So there's no possibility of establishing a U.S. military post on the Pacific coast at that time. There is a trading company, an American-based trading company run by John Jacob Astor, and he will establish a private fortified trading post at a place now called Astoria in Oregon on the Columbia River.

And he will do that in 1811, but it's not a U.S. government operation, and Jefferson is not President anymore. And this only lasts two years because there's a new war with Britain that does erupt in 1812. And in 1813, there's a hostile takeover of Astoria by the British. So in the short term, there's not an impact, and Jefferson isn't able to follow up on it in his p[ro]p[er] t[er]m.

- Exactly. A signed book.

- Inspirational to all of you.

- Yes, I do have another question. I know, again, looking to the leadership lessons that we can learn here from Lewis and Clark and from Jefferson and his vision of assigning them as the leaders on the expedition, you know, we talk about leadership a lot, and being a good leader requires understanding how to delegate responsibilities. And I think your answer to my last question talked about, you know, making sure that somebody is up at night and you're not drunk and falling asleep or taking a nap when they're on duty.

How did Lewis and Clark delegate responsibilities to the individuals on the expedition?

- Well, they are figuring out the personalities of all of the people. And I'm sure this is something that's all familiar to you, that you have to figure out the personalities of the people you're working with.

And you find out what people are good at and also you find out what they're not so good at. And that's what Lewis and Clark are doing. They're not some sort of distant commanders. That's not possible. They're camping out with these guys, they're talking with them through the day. They get a very good feel for these men with their differential skills.

So you need to find out who are the really good hunters because a lot of the food they're going to eat is

And they come to really like her and feel protective of her, and they come to really dislike Charbonneau. But they got to keep that relationship going. So not able to, like, middle of the expedition fire Charbonneau because he'll take off Sacagawea and that's it.

They also become incredibly fond of her infant who's 50 days old when the thing starts. And his name is Baptiste, his first name. So he's Baptiste Charbonneau, but he's called Pomp on the expedition by the Americans.

And when the expedition is over, William Clark offers to adopt Baptiste. And his parents agreed to this because they got the sense that Sacagawea was really impressed by the Americans and thinks that she wants her son not to grow up in the French fur trader world of Charbonneau but would rather he grew up knowing the kinds of things that William Clark knew.

So William Clark secures him a good education, and he'll live on, and he'll actually become a kind of celebrated hunter's guide, mostly to European royalty that's coming over for trying some of the last bison hunts during the 1850s and '60s. And he'll live on into the 1860s.

So I would say that she impresses them as having an appealing personality. She seemed quite modest to them. Somebody who is pretty stoical, who endured the hardships of this expedition better than most of the men, and is very useful to them.

And they become very sympathetic to her and her son. And in part, as she rises their estimation, Charbonneau sinks. Well, we have a winner. You with two questions.

Nobody can challenge you. So thank you very much. Thank you, all.