



Conspiracy: Meriwether Lewis and Thomas Jefferson's Missing Documents

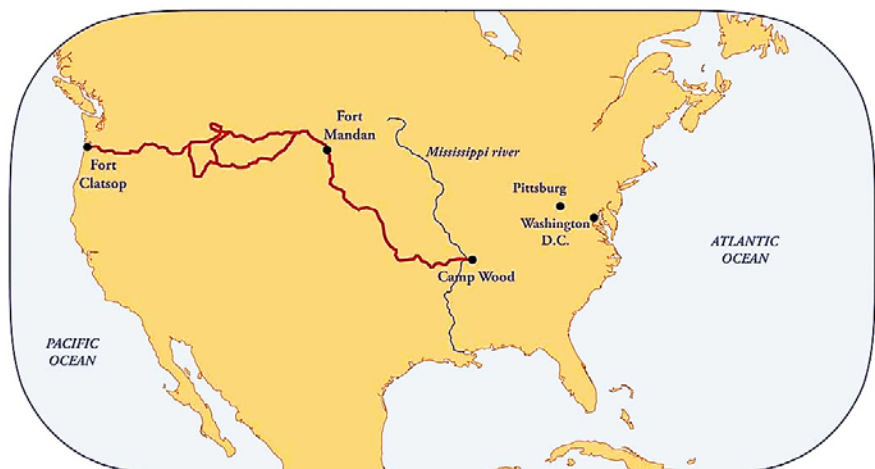
Jim Willis

Some lost treasures do not consist of gold, silver, or precious gems, yet their value exceeds monetary reckoning. Some even consider these lost treasures priceless, and a few seem to be cursed, considering the experience of those who figure prominently in them – such are the valued treasures of lost documents. Roman leaders, for instance, consulted the Sibylline Books for 900 years before they disappeared. And then Rome fell. Many Mayan texts, including the famous Codices, were burned by Spanish conquistadors and Catholic monks in the 16th century. A precious few were copied and hidden, otherwise history would never even have reported on them. And the once mighty Maya empire collapsed into the mists of time, leaving only magnificent, crumbling ruins in their wake, where once gold sparkled in the morning sunrise.

The *Hebrew Bible*, called the *Old Testament* by Christians, cited about 20 chronicles that no longer exist. How can anyone put a price tag on the *Dead Sea Scrolls* or the *Nag Hammadi texts*? Scholars consider all these beyond price. The Lewis missing documents might hold a key to the 1803 Louisiana Purchase of territory considered vital by Thomas Jefferson, and Lewis died while having them in his possession. Does a verdict of suicide cover up a conspiracy to murder?

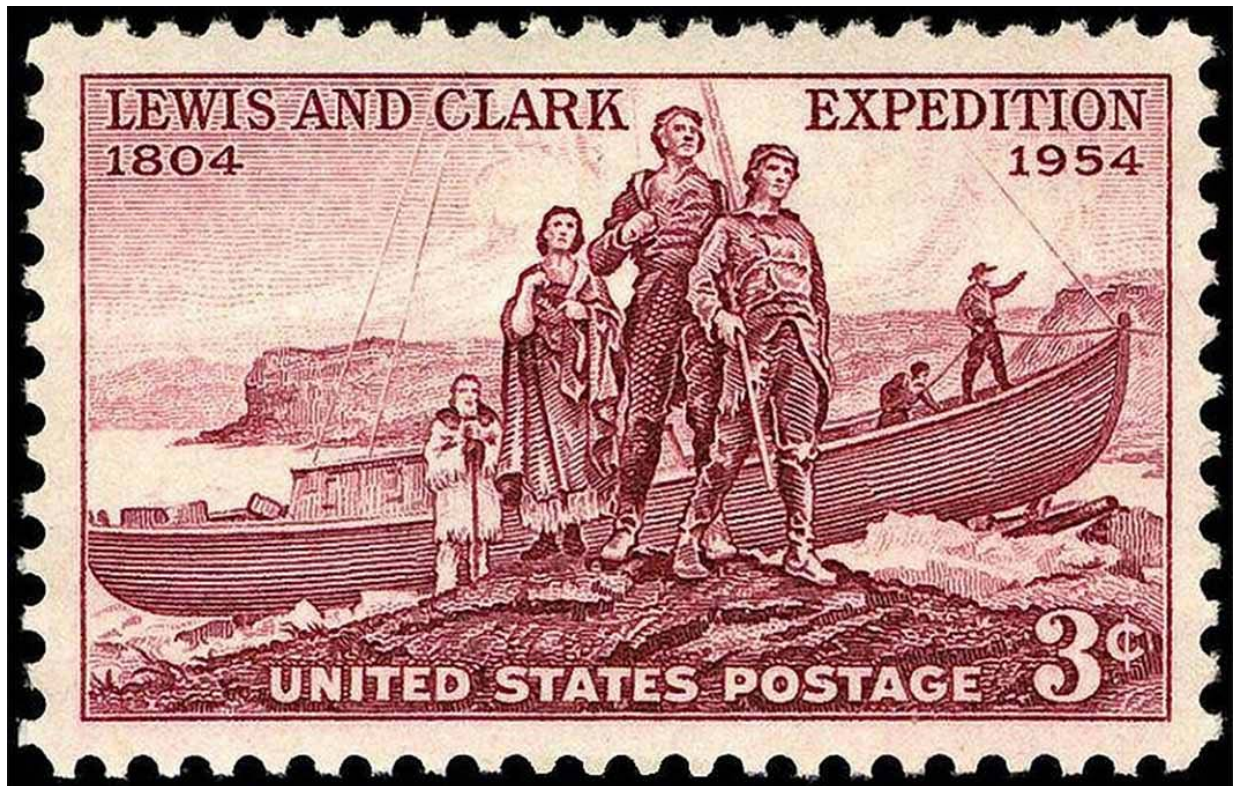
*The route of Lewis and Clark
expedition (Dimitrios / Adobe
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The Lewis and Clark expedition



Lewis and Clark Corps Discovery Expedition

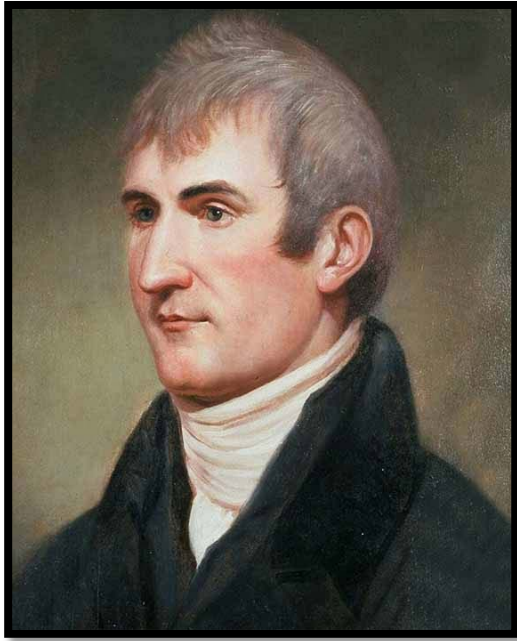
The missing pages from the journals of Meriwether Lewis, hero of the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery expedition from 1804-1806, are considered priceless. Lewis' friend, American president Thomas Jefferson, had given the expedition some key goals. They were to explore the Missouri River to find *"the most direct and practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce ... and render a knowledge of those people who inhabited the route."* To that end, either Jefferson or Lewis, it is not clear which, created a gridded sheet which listed common English words in the left-hand column and blank columns to the right. The idea was to fill in equivalent Native American words to see if there were common roots in any European languages.



Lewis and Clark, 1954 issue. U.S. Post Office; Bureau of Engraving and Printing; designed by Charles R. Chickering (Public Domain)

Jefferson was obsessed with the idea that Europeans made it to the Americas way before Columbus. He firmly believed, for instance, that the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, after their defeat by the Assyrians in 721 BC, eventually migrated to the Americas. This was the theory that became the basis of the theology of the Latter-Day Saints just a few decades later. It is still in vogue in parts of the American Southeast. There are members of Cherokee tribes to this day who find similarities between their language and that of ancient Hebrew. Artifacts still show up from time to time throughout the United States that seem to bear Hebrew inscriptions, as well as Phoenician, Greek, and other Mediterranean countries.

When the expedition returned from their explorations, Lewis had collected 14 Native vocabulary sheets for President Jefferson. By September, 1806, he had completed nine more. Jefferson's plan was to take Lewis' records and combine them with the 40 or so he had already personally documented. He wanted to publish a text that would prove his thesis.



That never happened. When Lewis died, his records were lost to history. No one knows what became of them. After his death, they became a central piece of a conspiracy surrounding Meriwether Lewis and his missing documents.

*Portrait of Meriwether Lewis by Charles Wilson Peale (1807)
(Public Domain)*

Extraordinary Meriwether Lewis

Meriwether Lewis is a *bona fide* American hero. His close friendship and fruitful partnership with William Clark, their work in opening the new western frontier that America bought in the Louisiana Purchase, and their subsequent journey all the way to the Pacific Ocean, is legendary. (The Louisiana Purchase was the

acquisition of the territory of Louisiana by the United States from the French First Republic in 1803. This consisted of most of the land in the Mississippi River's drainage basin west of the river. Following the establishment of the United States, the Americans controlled the area east of the Mississippi and north of New Orleans. The main issue for the Americans was free transit of the Mississippi out to sea.)



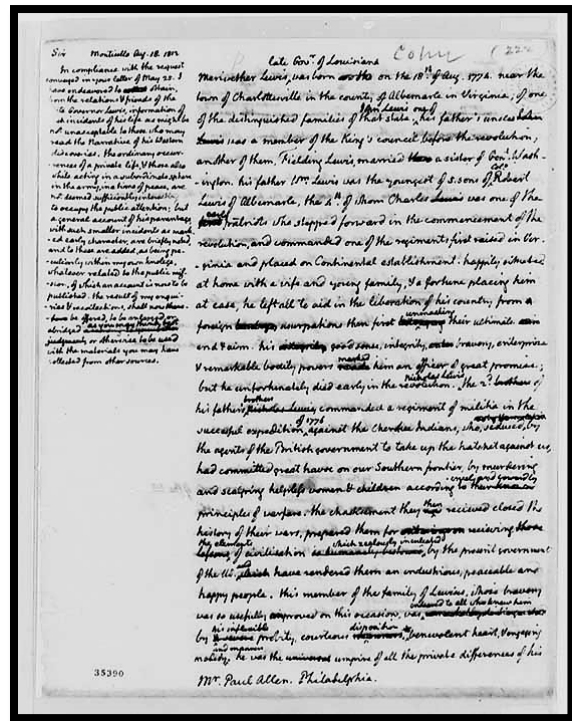
*Transfer of Louisiana by
Ford P. Kaiser for the
Louisiana Purchase
Exposition (Public Domain)*

On the dangerous trip, Lewis and Clark lost only one man, and that was to a disease which no amount of planning could have prevented. The work of the Corps of Discovery went a long way toward fueling the fires of Manifest Destiny that would soon grip the country. Jefferson believed it would take a hundred generations to fully occupy all the new territory Lewis and Clark had explored. Americans did it in five. But Lewis came to a sad end, and that is where the mystery of the lost documents begins.

Lewis was appointed governor of Louisiana Territory in February of 1807. By 1809, his world was falling apart. Massive debt, alcoholism, a genetic predisposition to depression, malaria, and a disappointing love life all took their toll. Rumors began to circulate that Governor Lewis was to be recalled, or at least not re-appointed, and that James Madison, who had replaced Jefferson in the White House, had lost confidence in him. The complicated War of 1812 was building on the horizon, and much of the territory Lewis and Clark had explored was threatened by previous claims of other countries.

Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Paul Allen with a biography of Meriwether Lewis, (1813) (Public Domain)

In August of 1809, Lewis decided to make the long journey to Washington, D.C. He wanted a face-to-face meeting with the bureaucrats of the Madison administration, but thought it would be good to visit his mother and his friend Thomas Jefferson, who had moved back to Virginia. Then he would go to Philadelphia to meet with the publisher of his yet unfinished book. After a brief time spent with William Clark putting his affairs in order before an extended trip, he left on September 4, 1809.



His plan was to book passage on a flatboat all the way down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where he would then secure passage on a ship around the southern tip of Florida, and up the East Coast to Chesapeake Bay. There he would go by water up the Potomac River to the capital. But those plans never materialized. Just 250 miles (400 kilometers) downstream from St. Louis, he decided to leave the river and travel overland to Virginia. He also seems to have been troubled enough to write a will, leaving everything to his mother, Lucy Marks. The reasons for his change of mind are often debated. Some say he had come down with a fever that was raging through the lower country of the southern Mississippi region. But others suspect that he was worried the papers he was carrying might fall into the hands of the British, who were patrolling the Gulf of Mexico and boarding American vessels.

Lewis' Suicide?

This begs the question, what was contained in those papers that he was afraid might fall into "enemy" hands? There were also reports that during his river journey he had attempted suicide, but was restrained by fellow travelers. A deposition later quoted Gilbert Russell, who captained the vessel: *"On the morning of September 15, 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 by other causes."* This certainly speaks to his mental health. Clearly, something was wrong.

Whatever his mental state, Lewis decided to travel north on the Natchez Trace toward Nashville, Tennessee. From there he would head east toward Washington. Along the way, he stopped at a wayside tavern named Grinder's Inn. As it turns out, that was as far as he would go. The mystery that still involves historians was about to play out to its conclusion.

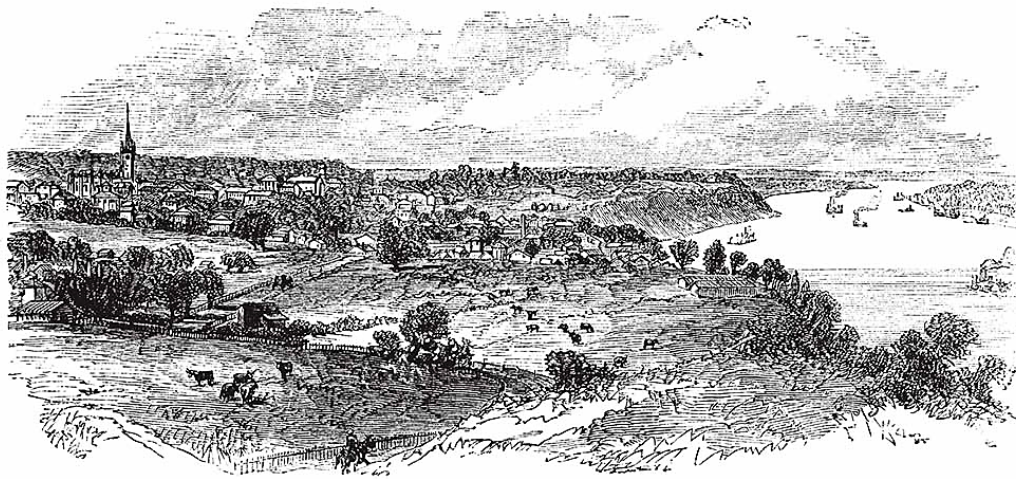


Meriwether Lewis National Monument located at milepost 385.9 on the Natchez Trace Parkway. The broken shaft represents a life cut short. (Skye Marthaler /CC BY-SA 3.0)

To drive the historic Natchez Trace, now a scenic highway, one cannot help but travel in Lewis's shadow. Its trail was blazed in ancient times by Indians. Only a few years after Lewis used it, heading north, Andrew Jackson traveled south with his troops to fight the Battle of New Orleans. It was frequented not only by travelers, but by desperados and robbers, who preyed on parties that were not sufficiently protected. Today it is a beautiful drive, full of historical significance. One of the most important places to stop is Grinder's Inn, the final resting place of Merewether Lewis.

No one knows for sure what happened that night. There are two opposing camps who still argue about details, sometimes in very learned, scholarly papers. One side believes what is probably the opinion of most historians. It was there, they say, that Lewis committed suicide. Their evidence is based on solid, if circumstantial, facts and the testimony of the one witness to the event. Lewis seems ready to have taken his own life, due to his pressing problems, his state of mind, the fact that he attempted suicide while on the boat, and that he had made out his will.

Without going into a lot of detail that has been covered in book after book and paper after paper, those who subscribe to this theory have a good argument.



Natchez in Mississippi, USA, vintage engraved illustration (Morphart/ Adobe Stock)

Lewis' Murder?

But then there are those who believe Lewis was murdered. They base their case on a few primary and highly significant facts that have continued to buttress a whole conspiracy theory. An article published in 1845 by the *New York Dispatch* outlined the essential facts of the story: Lewis died of two gunshot wounds. He was carrying a brace of .69 caliber pistols. They fire a big ball of lead. The first shot was to his head, carrying away part of his forehead. The second was right below his breastbone. According to later testimony, *"They found him lying on the bed; he uncovered his side and showed them where the bullet had entered; a piece of the forehead was blown off, and had exposed the brains, without having bled much."* Would it have been conceivable for a man to shoot himself in the head and then, when that failed to finish the deed, shoot himself again in the chest, and still survive for a few hours? To most laymen, it certainly seems like an impossibility.

Priscilla Grinder, the innkeeper, heard the shots, but waited until morning to check on her guest, despite, according to her later testimony, hearing Lewis say, *"O madam! Give me some water, and heal my wounds."* Her testimony, however, might not be very reliable. It was subject to change over time. Thirty years later, in 1839, she swore that two unknown men had arrived at the inn the same night Lewis was there. Supposedly, he challenged them to a duel before they rode off into the night. Why did she change her story? Was she bought off the night the death transpired, and then told the true story years later?

Her establishment consisted of two cabins linked by what today would be called a breezeway. Then, it was commonly called a dogtrot. Supposedly, she heard Lewis talking either to someone during the night, or to himself. In her first testimony, she swore Lewis was agitated, pacing back and forth. This has convinced quite a few historians that he was of a mind to commit suicide. But what if she was paid to say that, or was even part of a murder plot? In the words of historian John

Bakeless, “It takes a lot of credulity to believe that a frontier woman, used to hardship and living in a dangerous wilderness, on a trail infested with bandits, would wait until morning before going herself to the barn, or sending children to summon the servants, when a mortally wounded man was crawling around and begging for help.”

Historical Marker at 1900 Benjamin Franklin Pkwy Philadelphia PA - Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission 2003 (Nick-philly/ CC BY-SA 4.0)



The Missing Papers

Finally, in the morning, the papers Lewis had been carrying to Washington, the ones he was so afraid would fall into the hands of the British that he abandoned his original plan and decided to carry them overland instead, were gone, and they have never reappeared. Where are they?

These points are enough to ignite a conspiracy theory that rages to this very day. Was Lewis murdered, so his killers could steal the papers he was carrying? If so, what was in them? Was it simply an Indian lexicon? Or was it something else? When Lewis’s friend, William Clark, who shared the expedition with him and knew what Lewis was carrying, and indeed, even helped him pack, heard about the death, his first thought was, “*What will be the consequence? What will become of (our) papers?*” That certainly seems a strange reaction to have upon hearing of the death of one of his best friends.



Theories about the contents of the papers form a list that grows almost every year. Some say Lewis and Clark discovered proof that Britain, or another nation, might have had a prior claim to the vast area known as the Louisiana Purchase, rendering Jefferson’s expensive project obsolete. The papers, they say, carried the secret proof. Others believe the expedition discovered that Indians such as the Mandan tribe might be descended from other European claimants, such as the Welsh or the Vikings.

Captain Meriwether Lewis Statue at the Lewis and Clark Exposition, 1903 (Public Domain)

Who were the Suspects?

The passing years produced many theories about who the killer or killers might have been, but they are all based on sheer speculation. Possibilities include: Lewis' servant, perhaps to recover money which was owed him; James Neelly, agent to the Chickasaw nation, who reported the death to Jefferson and seems to have stolen Lewis' rifle, horse, pistols, dagger, and pipe-tomahawk; Neelly's servant, who was either bribed or terrified into silence; the Grinders, both Priscilla or her husband, who might have been hiding nearby; or common robbers who worked the Natchez Trace. Moccasin tracks and the impression of the butt of a rifle were found in the dirt near Lewis' cabin.

Why, one might ask, does someone not petition to exhume the body and submit it for modern forensic examination? It is said that the National Park Service will not permit it, but are they just a convenient scapegoat?

Whatever the case, two things are known for sure. Lewis died, and his papers are missing. Unless they resurface, perhaps after being hidden away in some government warehouse or someone's basement vault, no-one will ever know what happened that fateful night on the Natchez Trace, and the valuable documents will continue to confound scholars into the foreseeable future.

Top Image: Lewis and Clark Statue in Seaside, Oregon (pngstudio / Adobe Stock)

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