

Thomas Jefferson and the Mountain of Salt: Presidential Image of Louisiana Territory

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The view of the Blue Ridge Mountains from the west portico of Monticello invites both the eye and the imagination to look beyond, to discover what is on the other side. So it was that Thomas Jefferson, Monticello's builder and occupant—and a man who always looked beyond the Blue Ridge—focused his attention in 1803 on lands west of those mountains, all the way to the great Mississippi River and across it to the territory called by the French “Louisiana,” a territory that was, as of May 1803, American.¹ In his mind's-eye view of Louisiana, the architect of both the purchase of that territory and the exploratory venture that would soon unfold its geography, saw not just a passage to the Pacific through a fertile garden. He also saw wonder. Mammoths and mastodons and giant sloths roamed the upper Missouri, along with strange sheep-like animals the size of an elk and with voluted horns, “said to be docile and very useful to the natives.”² The best evidence from travelers suggested the presence of volcanoes in the interior, and great grasslands—wider by far than any that American eyes had yet seen—lay in the heart of this still-unknown country. Mines of iron, lead, copper, and “the more precious metals” were abundant in America's new possession as was salt, one of the necessities of a frontier civilization that easily could be extracted from “an extensive mountain of salt” the very surface of which was “so salt that it produces no vegetable”—and this in the “midst of an extensive country of the best soil in the world.”³

Jefferson's fascination with Louisiana as both a territory and a concept did not begin with the Purchase; rather, it developed while he was young and particularly taken—as was his father, Peter Jefferson—by the notion that Louisiana was a region of immense fertility holding within its

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geography the key to the commercial water route to the Pacific. Among the books young Thomas Jefferson inherited from his father was Daniel Coxe's *Carolana*,⁴ a work that expanded the English claim to North American territory to include French Louisiana—defined by the mid-eighteenth century as the western portion of the Mississippi's drainage basin. In this vast stretch of territory, according to Coxe, were many wonders, not the least of which were mountains and rivers that lay in perfect symmetry with those east of the Mississippi. Thus were the rumored mountains of Louisiana analogs of the familiar Blue Ridge, and the mighty rivers that watered this fertile quarter of the globe idealized representations of the Rivanna or Potomac, flowing through country similar to that supporting the Albemarle County gentry of Jefferson's Virginia Piedmont. Coxe noted that the western mountains that encompassed the western boundary of "Carolana" (by international law, the French province of Louisiana, regardless of claims by Coxe) were "passable by Horse, Foot, or Wagon in less than a day" and that on the western side of these mountains were "Rivers, which run into a great lake that empties itself by another great navigable River into the South Sea."⁵ Such a geographical description, coupled with Coxe's map that was published along with it, prompted the Reverend James Maury, the young Jefferson's schoolmaster, to write a description of the western half of the Mississippi drainage basin that, as much as anything else, defined Jefferson's own view of the West a half century later:⁶

When it is considered, how far the eastern branches of that immense river, Mississippi, extend eastward, and how near they come to the navigable ... parts of those rivers which empty themselves into the sea that washes our shores to the east, it seems highly probable that its western branches reach as far the other way, and make as near approaches to rivers emptying themselves into the ocean to the west of us, the Pacific Ocean, across which a short and easy communication ... opens itself to the navigator from that shore of the continent unto the Eastern Indies.⁷

No better expression of continental symmetry was ever phrased in the American literature and Maury's geography became Thomas Jefferson's geography as Jefferson's boyhood interest in "Carolana" matured into adult speculation on Louisiana as the land through which a water route to the Pacific Ocean might be found.⁸

As Jefferson systematically acquired written and cartographic knowledge of the trans-Mississippi region between 1780 and 1803,⁹ his geographical awareness of Louisiana was expanded beyond his understanding of the Missouri River as the route to the Pacific Ocean. Particularly while he was American minister to France (1784-87), Jefferson—by his own admission—"purchased everything I could lay my hands on which related to any part of America, and particularly had a pretty full collection

of the English, & Spanish authors on the subject of Louisiana.”¹⁰ From his growing collection, Jefferson began to shape an image of the territory that included not just a view of the commercial water route but of a continental interior filled with the “natural curiosities” so much in vogue as a subject of study and interest among Jefferson’s fellow Enlightenment natural philosophers. Among these books, described as “a particularly useful species of reading” and probably the most influential for Jefferson’s view of Louisiana in 1803 were Robert Rogers’ *Concise Account of North America*, Jonathan Carver’s *Travels in the Interior of North America*, and Baron Louis Armand d’Arce Lahontan’s *New Voyages to North America*.¹¹ These books all confirmed for Jefferson the symmetrical geography of Coxe. They also added romantic descriptions of mountains in the interior of Louisiana that the natives called “the Shining Mountains ... from an infinite number of chrystal stones, of an amazing size, with which they are covered, and which, when the sun shines full upon them, sparkle so as to be seen at a very great distance”¹² and supplemented Jefferson’s increasingly complex understanding of the water route across the continent with some intimation of the lands through which that route would pass: a landscape of fertile meadows filled with deer and turkeys, an abundant land described as “the most agreeable in the world.”¹³

Jefferson’s compilation of information on western North America (especially the territory of Louisiana) during the two decades prior to his election as president of the United States, allowed him to develop an image of Louisiana that was more sophisticated and more detailed than that of anyone else in the young Republic—albeit more based on the geography of the imagination than the geography of reality, derived from speculation rather than empirical observation. How could it have been otherwise? The bulk of the Louisiana Territory in the early nineteenth century was still *terrae incognitae*, visited intermittently by members of the St. Louis-based fur trade, and then only as far up the Missouri River as the Mandan and Hidatsa villages of central North Dakota. Of the farther West, the rivers of wonder and mountains of myth such as the Great River of the West or the Mountains of Bright Stones, were fixed neither in maps or minds and remained as geographical features that wandered about the western landscape.

Jefferson left no clear document outlining his geographical conceptions of the trans-Mississippi West during this period. The closest he came was scattered, in bits and pieces, throughout the only book he wrote, *Notes on the State of Virginia*,¹⁴ written in response to a request by François Marbois, first secretary of the French legation to the U.S., for information on the various states. In responding to a list of inquiries from Marbois in this 1787 book, Jefferson described the Missouri River as the “principal” of the continent’s major hydrographical basin, having its source far to the northwest of its entry into the Mississippi. Traders from St. Louis ascended the river some 2,000 miles and reported that silver, lead, and

salt were readily available in the Missouri valley, and that soil and climate were productive. In addition to these wonders, Jefferson also speculated on two of the most consistent rumors attached to Upper Louisiana through the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: the presence of volcanoes on the upper Missouri and the existence of mammoths or mastodons somewhere in the western interior. As “proof” for the Missouri volcanoes, Jefferson noted that a substance remarkably similar to pumice had been found floating in the Missouri River by fur traders but that the interior location worked against the theory of volcanoes since volcanoes were not generally to be found “so far distant from the sea.”¹⁵ Jefferson maintained a healthy skepticism about Missouri River volcanics, but was much less skeptical about the continuing rumors of elephantoid species in the interior and, in *Notes*, repeated the story of a traveler taken captive by Indians who was “at length carried over the mountains west of the Missouri to a river which runs westwardly.” In this western country he saw huge bones and “natives described to him the animals to which they belonged as still existing in the northern part of their country; from which description he judged it to be the elephant.”¹⁶ In the “perfect economy of Nature” that Jefferson and his fellow Enlightenment scientists understood, there was no chance for extinction. A species might disappear from a region as the result of overhunting or some other human agency but to have it disappear from the “great chain of being” was contrary to natural law as Jefferson understood it: “The annihilation of any species of existence, is so unexampled in any part of the economy of nature which we see, that we have a right to conclude, as to the parts we do not see, that the probabilities against such annihilation are stronger than those for it.”¹⁷ In his instructions to Lewis and Clark, he directed them to search for both “volcanic appearances” and “extinct species.”¹⁸

Jefferson made no specific mention of trans-Mississippian mountain ranges in *Notes* but he did suggest that western mountains were comparable to those on the east side of the continent: “not solitary and scattered confusedly over the face of the country” but in a series of parallel ridges that commenced some 150 miles from the sea. He also speculated on the quality of interior lands, west of the Appalachians and even west of the Mississippi in what was then Spanish Louisiana. These lands were, he concluded, warmer in climate than the Atlantic Seaboard and, hence, a very suitable place for the expansion of agriculture, particularly the cultivation of those exotic and subtropical crops that could not be grown on the coast. And running through the center of this interior garden were the Mississippi and Missouri rivers—“principal channels of future commerce for the country westward of the Alleghany.”¹⁹ This was a theme echoed throughout the remainder of Jefferson’s public life and a theme that was to find action in the form of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

The president’s articulated view of the West from *Notes*, written well before the purchase of Louisiana, did not contain the concepts of sym-

metrical geography derived from Coxe, Jonathan Carver, and others. But it is known that these concepts were part of Jefferson's geographical understanding because they were the foundation upon which he had based a series of abortive attempts to have the Louisiana Territory explored between 1783 and 1793.²⁰ In the latest of these efforts prior to the Purchase, Jefferson, as the agent of the American Philosophical Society, tried to persuade the French botanist Andre Michaux to "explore the country along the Missouri, & Westwardly to the Pacific ocean." In the instructions that Jefferson prepared for Michaux may be seen both the blueprint for the elaborate instructions he would prepare for Meriwether Lewis a decade later and the state of his thinking on the West ten years before the Purchase. Jefferson instructed Michaux that "the chief objects of your journey are to find the shortest & most convenient route of communication between the U.S. & the Pacific ocean ... As a channel of communication between these states & the Pacific ocean, the Missouri, so far as it extends, presents itself under circumstances of unquestioned preference. It has therefore been declared as a fundamental object of your subscription." Michaux would reach a point on the Missouri, noted Jefferson, where "you shall find yourself at the point from whence you may get by the shortest & most convenient route to some principal river of the Pacific ocean, you are to proceed to such river, & pursue it's course to the ocean. It would seem by the latest maps as if a river called Oregon interlocked with the Missouri for a considerable distance, & entered the Pacific ocean, not far Southward of Nootka sound."²¹ Here was the core of misconception: it was possible to ascend the Missouri where a short portage would link the upper Missouri and a river that flowed to the Pacific. Jefferson's subsequent efforts at exploring the West would be based on that misconception.

During the opening months and years of his first administration, considerably in advance of the unfolding events that made necessary an American attempt to secure the right to ship goods through the Port of New Orleans, Jefferson had begun planning for what became the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Several events prompted this planning, not the least of which was Jefferson's long-standing desire to have the Missouri and its connections to the western sea uncovered and his recognition that, now, as U.S. president, he could fulfill that desire. But perhaps the most important event was the late 1801 publication of Alexander Mackenzie's *Voyages from Montreal to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans* in which the great Scottish explorer described his discovery—during his transcontinental trek of 1793—of a short portage of approximately a half-mile between the upper waters of the Peace River and those of a river that Mackenzie mistakenly assumed to be the Columbia, discovered by Robert Gray of Boston in 1792. The British were winning the race for a water route across the continent and since that route loomed large in Jefferson's growing imperial objectives for the West, a response to Mackenzie was required.²² In 1802, Jefferson ordered a copy of Mackenzie's book and the large map

of North America by Aaron Arrowsmith that included the cartographic depiction of Mackenzie's information on the short portage.²³ He also applied to the Spanish, French, and British ministers in Washington for "passports" that would allow an American army officer to travel into Louisiana and across to the Pacific and, by December 1802, had prepared a document for Congress, requesting an appropriation for an expedition "out of our own territory."²⁴ For political reasons, Jefferson decided not to present Congress with this request in his annual message but in a January 1803 special message, Jefferson requested the sum of \$2,500 for an expedition to be led by an officer in the U.S. Army to explore the Missouri River that traversed "a moderate climate, offering according to the best accounts a continued navigation from its source, and possibly with a single portage from the Western ocean."²⁵ All of Jefferson's geographical information gathering from his boyhood to this point was built into this statement. The Missouri River and a short portage to a major stream of the Pacific drainage (probably the recently discovered Columbia), formed "the only line of easy communication across the continent."²⁶

As Jefferson was preparing his message to Congress in late 1802, word was received that the Spanish intendant at New Orleans had closed the port to American shipping. This set off a round of diplomatic negotiations in Europe that began as an American attempt to win back the right of American shippers to use New Orleans and ended with the American purchase of Louisiana Territory "as France had possessed the same"—in other words, as the western portion of the Mississippi drainage basin. In response to the first news of the Purchase offer in March 1803, the president quickly began acquiring additional source materials that would further enlighten him on Louisiana by writing to correspondents in Louisiana for information more up-to-date than fifty-year-old books in his library.²⁷ "For the moment," as Donald Jackson has pointed out, "his great library failed him"²⁸ since that library dealt more with the grander geography of the West and less with the practical and utilitarian aspects of Louisiana settlement that were now almost as important to Jefferson as was the concept of a passage to the Pacific. Perhaps remembering the questionnaire prepared by Marbois nearly two decades earlier that had resulted in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson prepared his own questionnaire to send to Americans residing in the Louisiana Territory, attempting to glean as much current information as he could about the new acquisition.²⁹ It is clear from the questionnaire that Jefferson was not seeking data on the broader outlines of western geography—mountains and rivers and short portages and questions of continental symmetry. That information was already part of his fund of geographical lore and had been utilized extensively in the planning for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. There was a clear separation in the president's mind between the objectives of the expedition that was nearly ready to commence—an expedition based on his broader continental conceptions—and the knowledge that he felt he needed

to gather “about the extent, the boundaries, the terrain, the people and their ways, the potential of the country for development by the United States.”³⁰

In private conversations with Meriwether Lewis and Albert Gallatin (Secretary of the Treasury in Jefferson’s cabinet), Jefferson continued to discuss grand designs of continental exploratory strategy and speculative cartography,³¹ up until July 5, 1803, when Lewis, finally finished with the planning stages of his upcoming transcontinental exploration, left Washington for the West.³² The young Army officer who was to lead America’s epic exploration departed Washington armed with instructions from Jefferson that expressed in as clear a statement as the president ever made, his image of the broader outlines of the geography of the American West:

The object of your mission, is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it, as, by it’s course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado, or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.... The interesting points of the portage between the heads of the Missouri, & of the water offering the best communication with the Pacific ocean, should also be fixed by observation, & the courses of that water to the ocean in the same manner as that of the Missouri.... Altho’ your route will be along the channel of the Missouri, yet you will endeavor to inform yourself, by enquiry, of the character & extent of the country watered by it’s branches, & especially on it’s Southern side. The North river or Rio Bravo [Rio Grande] which runs into the gulph of Mexico, and the North river, or Rio Colorado which runs into the gulph of California, are understood to be the principal streams heading opposite to the waters of the Missouri, and running Southwardly. Whether the dividing grounds between the Missouri & them are mountains or flat lands, what are their distance from the Missouri, the character of the intermediate country, & the people inhabiting it, are worthy of particular enquiry. The Northern waters of the Missouri are less to be enquired after, because they have been ascertained to a considerable degree, & are still in a course of ascertainment by English traders, and travellers....³³

The broad outlines of Jefferson’s image of the larger West are clear: the Missouri heads with a number of other western streams, including the Colorado, Rio Grande, and Columbia, and the connection between those streams is achievable via a portage. This is the core drainage area or “pyramidal height-of-land”³⁴ of Carver’s geography and is an early nineteenth century manifestation of the concept of the short portage that Jefferson learned from the Reverend Maury: a short portage “across which a short and easy communication ... opens itself to the navigator from that shore of the continent unto the Eastern Indies.”³⁵

Following Lewis’ departure for Louisiana and the farther West, Jefferson returned to the questionnaire he had prepared with Gallatin’s

help, and began mailing copies of it to his correspondents in Louisiana in mid-July 1803. As responses began to come in, the president began drafting a memorandum on the boundaries of the newly acquired Territory—a matter of obvious concern since the French definition of the western boundary, in particular, was extraordinarily vague and Spain waited on Louisiana's southwestern flanks to contest any possible infringement of her territorial rights. In drafting this memorandum on boundaries, Jefferson relied heavily on his library at Monticello.³⁶ The president's conception of Louisiana during this period of the Purchase is difficult to grasp, as elusive as some of the sources that he used to shape his understanding of western geography. But it is more than probable that many of Jefferson's favorite old volumes came down from the shelves of the Monticello library, books like Louis Hennepin's *Description of Louisiana*, and Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz's *The History of Louisiana*, both of which bore explicitly upon the territory of Louisiana and its boundaries. From Hennepin, the Recollect father who accompanied La Salle's first expedition to the Mississippi River, Jefferson confirmed what he had learned from earlier writers about the land quality of Louisiana—a garden “of exceeding great fertility and beauty.”³⁷ And from Du Pratz, the historian of French Louisiana, who told of an Indian who made a transcontinental journey by traveling to the Missouri's source and thence to “a neighbouring river, which ran to the opposite direction, since as he judged, it ran from east to west into a sea,”³⁸ Jefferson obtained validation of the Missouri as the commercially feasible waterway across the continent. Both Hennepin and Du Pratz, along with other volumes from Monticello, played key roles in Jefferson's initial public discussions of Louisiana Territory in the form of his memorandum on boundaries, completed in September 1804 and circulated to supporters in the Senate, which would soon begin debate over ratifying the Purchase treaty.³⁹ As the president continued to shape the inchoate images of the previous half-century into a more coherent view of the new American territory during the weeks and months following Lewis' departure from Washington, he began the creation of a second document (albeit one that contained some of his boundary data). This document, called “A Chronological Series of Facts Relative to Louisiana,” was also completed in September 1804, and—like the boundary document—was sent to a number of his correspondents, including members of the U.S. Senate.⁴⁰ Finally, in November 1803, Jefferson compiled everything that he had learned about Louisiana from his correspondents into “An Account of Louisiana,” which contained a summary of the responses to his questionnaire, along with extracts from his reading in the Monticello library.⁴¹

What can be learned about Jefferson's image of Louisiana Territory from these documents? First, it should be noted that the president's “new” image of Louisiana included the basic components of symmetrical geography that pointed the way to the passage that he had been pursuing off-and-on for twenty years and, thus, validated the now-underway Lewis

and Clark Expedition. Second, the documents included elements of imaginary geography derived from apocryphal travel accounts, fanciful flights of geographical fiction that went well beyond the bounds of logic or what passed for science in the Age of Enlightenment: civilized Indians living in advanced cities on the shores of interior lakes that fed rivers flowing both east and west; active volcanoes near the Missouri River's headwaters; still-extant mammoths and mastodons roaming the interior of the continent; and even a mountain of solid rock salt, 180 miles long and 45 miles wide. The documents were obviously intended for wide circulation among the literate American public (they were, after all, delivered to newspapers for publication) and in anticipation of the debate that he knew would take place in Congress over both the Purchase Treaty and whether or not he had exceeded his executive authority in acceding to that agreement with a foreign power without the Senate's consent. Was the inclusion of such fanciful components of western geography a conscious attempt to attract public attention and approval?

None of the documents contained much concrete geographical information but inferences could be drawn from both the boundary memorandum and the "Chronological Series of Facts" that Jefferson's imaginary geography of Louisiana Territory included these cardinal elements: the Missouri headed in a range of mountains or a height-of-land from which there also flowed a great river to the Pacific. The "Account of Louisiana," presented to the Congress in November 1803 and published simultaneously in newspapers throughout the Republic,⁴² may have been the most serious of Jefferson's attempts to justify his administration's actions since it presented considerably more "hard" geography than appeared in either of the other two documents, particularly with reference to Upper Louisiana, or the region north and west of St. Louis. This hard geography, however, was based on soft information provided by the correspondents and "informants" (mostly Americans who had lived in the Louisiana Territory during French/Spanish occupation) that Jefferson had solicited in his questionnaire earlier in the year. In the "Account" that Jefferson described as "a digest of the information I have received relative to Louisiana," the president repeated none of his now-standard tales about volcanoes or mammoths—although it is clear from contemporary sources (like his "instructions" to Lewis) that he still held a belief in both of these "curiosities." Jefferson began the relatively limited geographical descriptions of Louisiana in "Account" by directing his attention to utilitarian concerns. He noted, for example, that the territory contained "in its bowels many silver and copper mines, and various specimens of both are exhibited." Moreover, the "face of the country" of the interior portions of Louisiana, although somewhat more broken than the Mississippi Valley, was "equally fertile." Furthermore, the area of Upper Louisiana had many advantages that were not normally characteristic of regions in the same latitudinal zone. It was elevated and well-watered and had a "variety of large, rapid

streams, calculated for mills and other water works.” The soil was more fertile than anywhere else in the same latitudes and the land was said to yield its produce almost without input of human labor. To the north and west, along the Missouri itself, was “one immense prairie” that produced nothing but grass—not because of aridity but because the soil was “too rich for the growth of forest trees.” Having gone this far, the author of the “Official Account” could no longer resist: in addition to its utility, the landscape of Louisiana was noted for natural beauty, “carved into various shapes by the hand of nature,” presenting the “appearance of a multitude of antique towers.” And finally, “relying on the best information of travelers in that quarter,” there was a mountain comprised entirely of rock salt. One of the president’s correspondents who provided information for the “Official Account” wrote of a trip to St. Louis where he visited a “French man named Shoto [Chouteau] who it is said has just returned from Santa Fee & reports that he has found a Salt Rock of immense size on the dividing ridge that separates the Head Waters of the Arkansaw River from the head waters of the Missouri.”⁴³ Jefferson himself had earlier described this mountain of salt in letters to newspapers following release of the news of the Purchase but in the “Account” he enlarged on such information and provided Congress with specific detail on this natural wonder: it lay “about one thousand miles up the Missouri and not far from that river.” It was “one hundred and eighty miles long, and forty-five in width, composed of solid rock salt, without any trees, or even shrubs on it.” Its very existence might be doubted, noted Jefferson, “were it not for the testimony of several respectable and enterprising traders who have visited it, and who have exhibited several bushels of salt to the curiosity of the people of St. Louis where some of it still remains.”⁴⁴

As might be expected, Jefferson’s depictions of Louisiana elicited varied responses from both the public and the congressional leaders to whom his documents were directed. For those disposed to favor American expansion, the logic of volcanoes, mammoths, a salt mountain, and a passage to the Pacific through the garden of the world, all seemed perfectly reasonable. To those less inclined to favor American growth across the Mississippi, the not-so-solid science presented by the president provided an opportunity to criticize his politics as well. A leading Federalist newspaper, *The Boston Gazette*, ran an editorial the day after it had published Jefferson’s “Account” in which the editor criticized the “Account” for its vagueness, its mention of immense treeless prairies that “seasoned the imagination” for tales of salt mountains and the like. The editor suggested that the “Account” be reprinted with the following addendum inserted after Jefferson’s reference to the mountain of salt: “About halfway between those heights which have been ‘carved into a multitude of antique towers,’ and this ‘salt mountain,’ there flows a vast river of *golden eagles* ready coined, which, at a trifling expense in cutting canals and constructing locks, may easily be turned into the treasury of the United States.” The

editorial further suggested that “the Sugar Refiners in the United States are about to petition Congress, to suffer no settlements nor purchases to be made in the interior of Louisiana and to prevent all persons hereafter from exploring that enchanted country, as it is rumored that the President’s private secretary, Captain Lewis, has lately discovered an immense mountain of SOLID REFINED SUGAR, from which a sufficient quantity may be drawn to supply the whole world.”⁴⁵ To this criticism, the somewhat thin-skinned Jefferson repeated his assertion (by letter to the *Gazette*) that specimens of the salt had been sent to him by citizens of Louisiana. This was bad science repeated and the *Gazette*, seeing its opportunity to further twist the president’s tail (and tale), ran the following front page story: “MOUNTAIN OF CLAMS. A lad returning from the beach a few days since, with a basket of clams, informed his mother that he had discovered a mountain of clams 180 miles long and 45 miles wide. His mother told him the existence of such a mountain might be questioned. ‘I CAN PROVE IT,’ said he, shewing the basket, ‘for here is a specimen of the clams!’”⁴⁶

Little of Jefferson’s geography of hope about Louisiana survived the test of time. The continent did not prove to be symmetrical and Lewis and Clark failed to find the water route to the Indies. While the prairie soil was fertile, treelessness in the trans-Mississippi region was a function of a lack of precipitation unimaginable in the Virginia Piedmont. There were no mammoths or mastodons or giant sloths or volcanoes on the upper Missouri. Jefferson’s belief in these features of western geography, however, defied no logic of science as it was understood in 1803. They did not exist—but they could have. Not so a mountain of rock salt 180 miles long and 45 miles wide and Jefferson’s persistent and stubborn belief in it stands as testimony to the power of the geographical imagination. His belief in the mountain of salt will always be somewhat of a conundrum. Did this brilliant man of science believe in such a thing? Certainly the skeptical editor of a Boston newspaper did not—and that person was, arguably, much less equipped intellectually to deal with such a phenomenon than Jefferson. It should be remembered that Jefferson was president of the American Philosophical Society—the young Republic’s chief scientific organization—at the same time he was the chief executive of the U.S. In his dual capacities, he spoke not only as a politician but a “natural philosopher” (the term “scientist” having no meaning in the early nineteenth century). He was also a frequent correspondent with most of Europe’s and America’s premier scientists and holder of a Doctorate of Laws from Harvard University, awarded for his contributions to the world of Enlightenment science. All of this makes puzzling his unwillingness to back down from his claims about the salt mountain—unless one considers that doing so, while being scientifically sound, might have carried political liabilities: “if they don’t accept the notion of the salt mountain will they accept the notion of the fertile prairies?” would have been a cogent argument for Jefferson and one that bore directly on his desire to

see an American agrarian population expand into the western interior. It was that desire that was foremost in Jefferson's mind and underlay almost everything he did and wrote about Louisiana Territory. As the historian James Ronda has so eloquently written: "Americans would never be seduced by city lights so long as there was rich land available and reliable sources to world markets. Ouragon [Louisiana] could secure the republican dream of simplicity and virtue in a peaceable kingdom."⁴⁷ The republican dream could even induce no less an intellect than Thomas Jefferson to persist in a public debate over the existence of a mountain of rock salt.

Notes

1. A comprehensive treatment of Jefferson's image of the West can be found in J.L. Allen, "Imagining the West: The View from Monticello," in James P. Ronda, ed., *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1997): 3-24.
2. *The National Intelligence* (Washington, D.C.), 21 October 1803: 2.
3. "From Peace Maker to the United States Senate," *The National Intelligence* (Washington, D.C.), 24 October 1803: 1.
4. See Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains: Exploring the West from Monticello* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993): 90.
5. Daniel Coxe, *A Description of the English Province of Carolana by the Spaniards Call'd Florida and by the French, La Louisiane*, 2nd edition (London: private printing, 1741): 63.
6. For Maury's response to Coxe's book, see his letters published in Anne Fontaine Maury, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family* (New York: Putnam's and Sons, 1852): 389-90. See also James Fontaine Maury, "Treatise on Practical Education," (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia's Alderman Library MS Manuscript Division).
7. "The Letters of James Maury," [letter of 10 January 1756] in Ann Maury, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family* (New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons, 1912): 391.
8. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 4-12. Trying to trace the evolution of Jefferson's geographical thinking is made difficult by the fact that his library at Shadwell—the plantation inherited from his father—burned, and with it, many of the books from his schoolboy days. Most Jefferson biographers, however, conclude that "James Maury had the interest and knowledge to imbue him with a romantic curiosity about the inner continent" (Jackson, *ibid.*, 12). John Dos Passos suggested that "Ever since he was a boy and heard James Maury holding forth on the subject at school on the Mountain, Jefferson had been preoccupied with the idea of exploration westward" (Dos Passos, *The Head and Heart of Thomas Jefferson* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954]: 302). It would be a mistake to suggest that Coxe and Maury controlled Jefferson's early development and thinking. He was too independently minded for that and subject to many other influences as well. It may not have been until his bookbuying days in France in the mid-1780s that his education with Maury came to the forefront of his thinking on western exploration and geography at the same time as he was refining his understanding of America's imperial objectives *vis-a-vis* the Spanish and British in western North America. But it is worthy of note that, in 1771, in response to an inquiry from a friend on how to build an adequate personal library, among the books that Jefferson listed as "necessary" was Coxe's *Carolana* (Jefferson to Robert Skipwith, 3 August 1771, Jefferson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress).
9. Jefferson's acquisition of geographical information prior to the Louisiana Purchase is detailed in John Logan Allen, *Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975): chapter 2.
10. Jefferson to William Dunbar, 13 March 1804, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress, vol. 139, fol. 24017.
11. These works, among others, were on a list that Jefferson prepared in 1803 for James Madison's congressional committee making plans for a national library. Jefferson's reference to "a particularly useful species of reading" was subsequent to the creation of that list and was contained in private correspondence. See Allen, *Passage Through the Garden*, 62-63 and notes 29-33.

12. Jonathan Carver, *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America in the Years 1766, 1767, and 1768*, 3rd edition, (London: printed for the author and sold by J. Walter... and S. Crowder..., 1781): 540.
13. Louis Armand de Lom d'Arce, Baron Lahontan, *New Voyages to North America*, 2 vols. (London: H. Benwicke, 1703): 2:386.
14. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787). The copy of *Notes* consulted for this paper is Jefferson's own copy, held in the McGregor Rare Book and Manuscript Collection of the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia.
15. Jefferson, *Notes*, 20.
16. Jefferson, *Notes*, 4.
17. Jefferson to John Stuart, 10 November 1796, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. The best discussion of Jefferson and the Chain of Being is in Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1948): 35. The definitive work on the concept itself is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936). Also helpful in looking at Jefferson's concept of extinction is George Gaylord Simpson, "The Beginnings of Vertebrate Paleontology in the U.S.," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 86 (1942): 130-88.
18. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 39-44.
19. Jefferson, *Notes*, 7.
20. Jefferson actually had made three separate proposals to explore the Missouri River and "whatever river heading with it, flows to the Pacific" prior to his first administration. The first of these proposals was to George Rogers Clark in 1783, the second to John Ledyard in 1785, and the third to Andre Michaux in 1793. These are documented in Allen, *Passage Through the Garden*, 64-67, and Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 4243 (Clark), 45-56 (Ledyard), and 74-78 (Michaux).
21. The original copy of Jefferson's instructions to Michaux is in the collection of the American Philosophical Society. The instructions are reprinted in Donald Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, with Related Documents 1783-1854*, 2nd edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978): 2:668-69.
22. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 121-24. See also John L. Allen, "To Unite the Discoveries: The American Response to the Early Exploration of Rupert's Land," in R. David, ed., *Rupert's Land: A Cultural Tapestry* (Toronto: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1988): 79.
23. Jefferson's letter ordering this book is dated 17 June 1802 and the invoice from his bookdealer, James Cheetham of New York, is dated 21 June 1802. Both documents are in the Jefferson Papers of the Library of Congress; reprinted in Donald Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:55-56.
24. See Albert Gallatin to Jefferson, 21 November 1802, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
25. A discussion of this message is in Allen, *Passage Through the Garden*, 70-72.
26. Jefferson's Message to Congress, 18 January 1803, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
27. Discussions of this process of acquiring additional information can be found in Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, chapter 6, and Allen, *Passage Through the Garden*, 67-69.
28. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 99.
29. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 104.
30. Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 99.
31. Most notable was the correspondence about the map drawn by Nicholas King for the use of Meriwether Lewis. This map, designed by Jefferson and Gallatin, was a compilation of the best cartographic images of the West extant in 1803. For a full discussion, see Allen, *Passage Through the Garden*, 74-103.
32. The news of the purchase of the Louisiana Territory was released to American newspapers and published all over the United States on 4 July 1803.
33. Jefferson's lengthy instructions to Lewis are a remarkable blueprint for exploration, in addition to providing the best glimpse we can get of Jefferson's broader concepts of western geography. They are reprinted in a number of places, most conveniently in Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 139-44.
34. The pyramidal height-of-land was an important construction of theoretical geography in the late-eighteenth century. See John L. Allen, "Pyramidal Height-of-Land: A Persistent Myth in the Exploration of Western Anglo-America," *International Geography* 1 (1972): 395-96.
35. "The Letters of James Maury" [letter of 10 January 1756], in Ann Maury, *Memoirs of a Huguenot Family* (New York: G.P. Putnam's and Sons, 1912): 391.

36. In a letter to William Dunbar of Natchez, one of his most reliable “informants” on Louisiana, Jefferson said that he had begun researching Louisiana geography in his library at Monticello shortly after receiving word of the Louisiana Purchase. See Jefferson to Dunbar, 13 March 1804, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
37. Louis Hennepin, *Nouvelle Decouverte: A New Discovery of a Vast Country in America*, trans. and ed. by Reuben Gold Thwaites (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.): 213.
38. This version of the DuPratz tale is found in Benjamin French, ed., *Historical Collections of Louisiana*, 5 volumes (New York: Lampart, Blakeman, and Law, 1955): V: 123-24.
39. Jefferson’s original draft of this memorandum on boundaries is dated 7 September 1803, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress. The original document cited liberally from Hennepin and DuPratz, among others.
40. The original of this version is in the collections of the American Philosophical Society and is published in *Documents Relating to the Purchase and Exploration of Louisiana* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1904), a special publication done to commemorate the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase.
41. The “Account of Louisiana” was published in most American newspapers of the time. See, for example, the *National Intelligencer* (Washington), 16-18 November 1803.
42. The version of the “Account” used herein was that published in the *National Intelligencer* (Washington), 16-18 November 1803. All citations from the “Account” that appear below are taken from that version. Like the boundary memorandum and the “chronological series of facts,” the “account” was published in *Documents Relating to the Purchase and Exploration of Louisiana* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1904).
43. Thomas T. David to Jefferson, 5 October 1803, Jefferson Papers, Library of Congress.
44. “The Louisiana Salt Mountains,” *Baltimore Federal Gazette*, 7 February 1804, p. 3.
45. *The Boston Gazette*, 1 December 1803, 1-2.
46. *The Boston Gazette*, 19 March 1804, 1.
47. James P. Ronda, “Calculating Ouragon,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 94 (Summer/Fall 1993): 125.