

The Dearborn River Confluence: Montana's Northwest Passage

John B. Wright

A river route to the Pacific was the dream of Thomas Jefferson¹—manifest transit for “Louisiana” furs and Canton silks. This optimism was crushed when Meriwether Lewis reported to the President that a 340-mile portage was needed from the Missouri to the Columbia rivers, including 140 arduous miles of “the most formidable part of the tract...(over) tremendous mountains which for 60 mls. are covered with eternal snows.”² Stephen Ambrose put it succinctly, “With those words, Lewis put an end to the search for the Northwest Passage.”³

But should it have been?

For large ships, certainly, but for the pirogues, canoes, and shallow-draft keel boats that would dominate river travel in the region for the next fifty years? Absolutely not. While any crossing of the Continental Divide required some overland portage, the expedition never comprehended how short such a transfer could have been. The journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the landscape of Montana reveal an overlooked confluence with the Missouri—the Dearborn River—that, if appreciated, might have changed the historical geography of the Louisiana Territory and beyond. In fact, a kind of Northwest Passage *did* exist.

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, America was almost entirely dependent on rivers and coastal waters for travel and trade. Fall-line cities from New Haven to Macon grew at the heads of navigation. Coastal cities grew at good harbors. Canal building would become a national craze. Waterways *were* transportation and prior to the coming of the railroads; no viable commercial alternatives existed. While trails, post roads, and stage routes were used, they could not compete with the relative ease and efficiency of shipping. This fact energized the search for the Northwest Passage to the Pacific. It spawned legends such as the Rio Buenaventura, an Edenic westering waterway that allowed a straight shot to the coast. It brought hope to a coastal plain country bent on Manifest Destiny, which had still not effectively breached the Cumberland Gap across the Appala-

John B. Wright is Professor in the Department of Geography at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. *Historical Geography* Volume 31(2003): 91-98. ©2003 Geoscience Publications.

chians. Finding this mythical riverine road to the ocean was one of the primary tasks assigned to two men hired by the president of the United States to explore the half billion newly acquired acres of the Louisiana Purchase. If such a route could be found, the dear sum of four cents per acre could be easily defended on the basis of commercial advantage alone.

When the Corps of Discovery pushed upriver from St. Louis on May 22, 1804, they did so by keelboat and fought hard against a five-miles-per-hour current. During that first summer's hot, mosquito-ridden hard pulls they somehow managed seven-to-ten miles per day. It is easy to imagine that during these travails Lewis and Clark dreamed of floating fast, with a freshening breeze across their faces, down a strong and useful river to the Pacific Ocean. That would be success. They had other vital callings—making scientific observations, forging good relations with Indians, assessing resources—but exploration itself, the prospect of finding a Northwest Passage through a galactic wilderness was the essential job at hand.

In June of 1977, I took a canoe trip down the Dearborn River to its mouth. That night by a campfire, I reviewed the journal entries of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. On July 18, 1805, Meriwether Lewis named the Dearborn River for Henry Dearborn, Jefferson's Secretary of War, and considered it a "handsome bold and clear stream." That was about it. This tributary, like countless others, went unexplored perhaps because of the Corps' pressing business of finding the source of the Missouri and the looming presence of a spectacular canyon just upstream that marked their entry into the long-awaited Rockies. The next day, the party paddled into a chasm of limestone that continues to draw attention. Lewis wrote:

We entered much the most remarkable cliffs [sic] that we have yet seen. These cliffs [sic] rise from the water's edge on either side perpendicularly to the hight [sic] of (about) 1200 feet. Every object here wears a dark and gloomy aspect. The towering and projecting rocks in many places seem ready to rumble on us. The river appears to have forced its way through this immense [sic] body of solid rock for the distance of $5 \frac{3}{4}$ Miles and where it makes its exit below this has thrown on either side vast collumns [sic] of rocks mountains high ... from the singular appearance of this place I called it the gates of the rocky mountains.

After my canoe trip, I visited the Gates of the Mountains, took a boat tour, and began wondering. Had Lewis and Clark missed the passage they sought just downstream from this gorge (Figure 1)? Had the lure of Three Forks (where the Jefferson, Madison, and Gallatin rivers form the Missouri) drawn them past a rather unpromising looking confluence that could have changed so much? Did they expect the Northwest Passage to be more arduous or more obvious? My questions only increased during a drive back up the Dearborn River to Rogers Pass and a short, low elevation crossing of the Continental Divide. In a few miles, I went from the

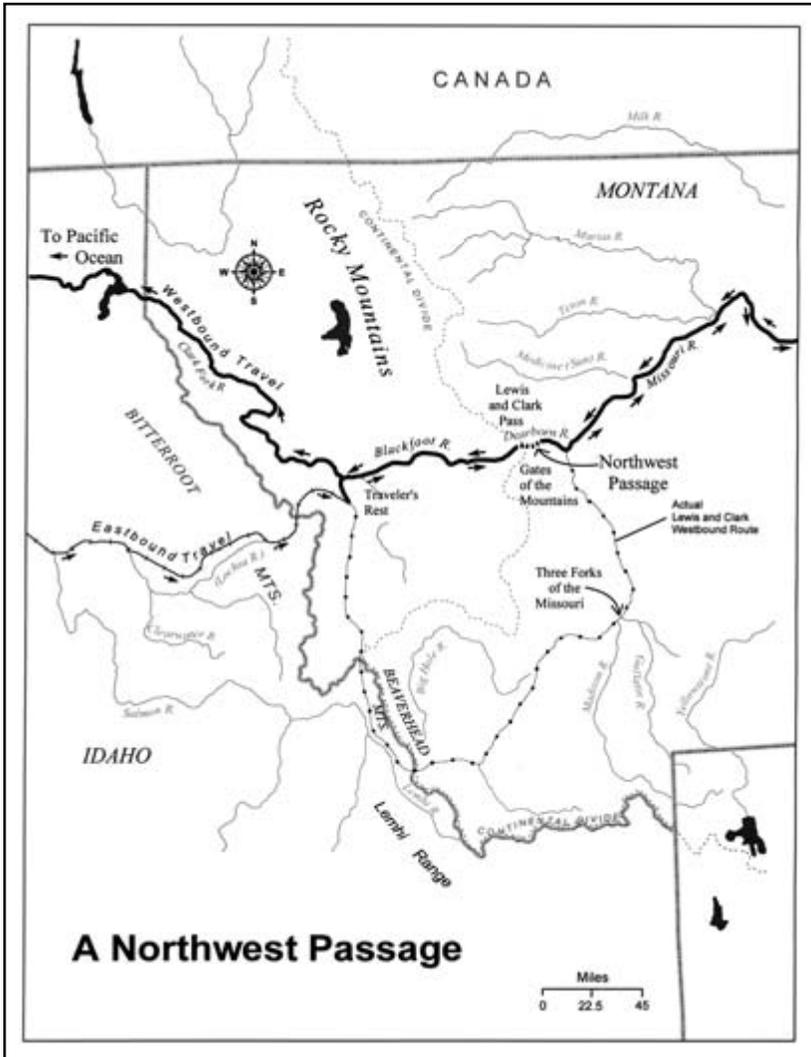


Figure 1. A Northwest Passage.

Missouri watershed to the Columbia. I sat down on a rock balanced between two oceans and wondered even more.

On July 27, 1805, the Lewis and Clark Expedition left the Missouri River and began the 340-mile "portage" that Lewis later described to a disappointed Thomas Jefferson. It would take them two months to cover this terrain, including a brutal crossing of the Bitterroot Mountains on the Lolo Trail just west of Traveler's Rest. Had it not been for the kindness of the Nez Perce Indians, the men might have died from illness or starvation. Once on the Clearwater River in Idaho, the party floated in dugout canoes to the Snake River, negotiated rapids and falls along the Columbia

and reached the Pacific on November 6, 1805. William Clark exalted, "Ocian [sic] in view! O! the joy." Some 4,000 miles had been covered in eighteen months.

After wintering at Fort Clatsop, the expedition retraced its route over the Lolo Trail to Traveler's Rest south of what is now Missoula, Montana. On July 3, 1806, after a three-day break, the expedition split. Clark headed east through the Yellowstone River country. Lewis headed north, crossed the Clark Fork River on a raft and camped at the mouth of Rattlesnake Creek just three miles from where my home now stands. I have walked this area for thirty years and boated nearby waters that remain the focus of my wonderings about Lewis and Clark.

Based on the advice of Nez Perce guides, Meriwether Lewis then raced east up the Blackfoot River:

A river called Cokahlarishkit, or the River of the Road to the Buffalo, and thence to the Medicine River and the Falls of the Missouri, where we wished to go. They [guides] informed us that not far from the dividing ridge between the two waters of this [the Blackfoot] and the Missouri River the roads forked. They recommended the left hand [Alice Creek] as the best route but said they would both lead us to the Falls of the Missouri.

Fearful of Piegan attacks, Lewis and his party covered the 170 miles from Traveler's Rest to the Missouri River on horseback in nine days, hardly time enough for careful reflection.

His journals offer few insights about the Blackfoot River, "much sign of beaver in this extensive bottom." Yet, the importance a river route all the way back to Traveler's Rest somehow went unappreciated. The party crossed the Continental Divide at Lewis and Clark Pass on July 7 with little fanfare. Lewis forded the Dearborn River at a full clip and pressed on to the upper portage of the Great Falls of the Missouri. From there he began an intriguing exploration of the Marias River.

The previous year, Lewis dismissed the Marias as a possible Northwest Passage to the Columbia. On June 8, 1805, Joseph Whitehorse wrote: "Captain Lewis thinks that N. Fork [Marias River] bears too far north for our corse [sic] to cross the mountains. for [sic] if we should take the wrong river, we should have more mountains to cross & further to go by land to git [sic] to the Columbia River."

Had Lewis reconsidered? The Captain pressed on seeking the upper reaches of the Marias along Cut Bank Creek, getting within twenty miles of present-day Glacier National Park. Yet, on July 21, 1806, Lewis remained unconvinced he was near a true passage to the sea, "I now fear will not be as far north as I wished and expected." Had he pressed on for two more days and crossed Marias Pass, another route would have emerged following the Flathead River downstream to the Columbia. However, an en-

counter with the much-feared Piegans derailed any such discovery when two Indians were killed. Remarkably, these were the only such deaths on the entire expedition. The resulting forced march effectively put an end to any hope of an American trade alliance with the powerful Blackfeet Confederacy. It also closed out Meriwether Lewis' search for a Northwest Passage. From here, his party paddled down the familiar Missouri and rejoined William Clark at the confluence with the Yellowstone River. At that point, the expedition had an easy six-week float downstream to St. Louis and its disappearance into legend.

If you stand at the confluence of the Dearborn and Missouri rivers today there is nothing spectacular to note. The black volcanic rocks of the Adel Mountains support woodlands of juniper and ponderosa pine. The landscape is elegantly plain—willows and cottonwoods, swallows and osprey, a clear river entering a muddy. During summer, drift boats carry fishermen and rafts carry families on the strong current. There is no work in this, just the pull of gravity against water. No city, town, or village exists at this confluence, just Exit 240 of Interstate 15. After two centuries, the confluence can be reduced to numbers.

But there are more numbers, ones that relate to a clear but imperfect Northwest Passage that Lewis and Clark did not find (Figure 1).

Westbound

The expedition took ten months to reach the Dearborn River on July 18, 1805—half of that spent wintering with the Mandans. From that point, it took nearly four more months of grueling travel to reach the Pacific. The next party through could have done it in half that time. Lewis' 1806 exploration of the Blackfoot drainage came terribly close to solving the geographic riddle of "the passage." If his guides had known that the Clark Fork River was a tributary to the Columbia, the map would have snapped into focus. If the captain had spent a few more days on the return leg, he could have secured this knowledge himself by querying the peaceful Kootenai people living down river from Missoula. Salmon and steelhead ran upstream all the way to their tepees at Thompson Falls, sure signs of marine influence. But understandably, Lewis was eager to return home and the opportunity was lost.

The westbound leg of this Northwest Passage seems amazingly clear to me given the luxury of modern maps, an Old Town canoe, and 20/20 hindsight. From its confluence with the Missouri, the Dearborn River can be followed west toward the Continental Divide for as much as thirty meandering miles. Today the river is so depleted by irrigation withdrawals that it is only floatable during May and June. In 1805, it would have been passable throughout most of the spring and summer. Where the stream would finally be too shallow for boats, only a fifteen-mile portage remained across either Lewis and Clark Pass or Rogers Pass to the fast-

moving waters of the Blackfoot River. At this point the Corps of Discovery could have paddled 1,750 miles downstream to the Pacific Ocean by simply following the Blackfoot, Clark Fork, Pend Oreille, and Columbia rivers. No forks to choose from—a hydrological certainty.

And everything would have been different. The expedition could average thirty-six miles per day downstream on this waterway (their norm for such travel). No trekking through prickly pear. No life-threatening crossing of the snowy Bitterroot Mountains. Just seven weeks of letting the inexorable gradient pull their boats to the sea. While rapids existed, such as the Alberton Gorge (west of Missoula), and waterfalls would have to be briefly portaged around such as Thompson Falls on the Clark Fork and Celilo Falls on the Columbia, these obstacles were moderate compared to those found on overland route used.

If this waterway had been discovered, Lewis and Clark could have reached the Pacific Ocean by mid-September 1805—almost two months sooner than they did.

Eastbound

No such magic exists for the return east. It would be impractical to slug back up that same 1,750 miles against the current. Therefore, Lewis and Clark got it half right. It took the party ninety-nine days to travel from the coast up the Columbia, Snake, and Clearwater rivers, over the Bitterroot Mountains to Traveler's Rest. It might have taken twice as long to follow a circuitous riverine route all the way back to the Continental Divide. From this point, Meriwether Lewis ascended the Blackfoot drainage by horse, crossed the divide and rejoined the Missouri just downstream of the Dearborn River. He was a hair's breadth away from a geographic revelation that never came. In all, the return trip to St. Louis took six months including two weeks Lewis spent exploring the Marias country.

The Northwest Passage

The Dearborn River route—the Northwest Passage—would have shortened the trip to the Pacific by eight weeks. Staying on this course would have shortened the eastbound return by at least those two weeks Lewis spent along the Marias. In all, the Dearborn River route would have shaved nearly three months off the round-trip journey. And it would only have gotten faster.

In time the portage routes would have been improved and, with the help of the Shoshone and Nez Perce, horses would have been provided at the Continental Divide and the Lolo Trail. Blackfeet resistance would remain a hurdle; one that Lewis and Clark may have overstated due to their single violent experience. A simple mixed-transit system would have come on line—keelboat, pirogue, canoe, horse. Guidebooks would be

written. Maps would be improved. Experience would be gained by professional American *voyageurs*—such as the Astorians who would establish the Fort Union Trading Post at the confluence of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers in 1829. The take-off point would move upriver from St. Louis as the Erie Canal linked the East Coast with the Great Lakes. The crossings would take less and less time. As it was, Meriwether Lewis tried to convince President Thomas Jefferson of the commercial potential of the arduous trail he and Captain Clark had blazed. Jefferson would have jumped at the news of a plausible water route to the Pacific. Lewis' mercantile dream was epic and the president dearly wanted to believe. Jefferson had already authorized the construction of the National Road into the American frontier. Soon it would be built to Vandalia, Illinois, just east of St. Louis where construction ceased over conflicts about the site for the Mississippi crossing. Certainly, if a river passage to the Pacific was known, the road would have continued in earnest. The allure would have been too strong to stop.

Furs would be collected all over Upper Louisiana and taken to the coast for shipment to Canton. Asian goods would flow eastward to St. Louis and on to growing markets. America would out compete the British who were still tied to around-the-Horn maritime routes and archaic bureaucracies. All that was lacking was a remedy for the dreaded 340-mile portage. But, absent what Lewis was so close to knowing, the search for the Northwest Passage died like a flicker in Jefferson's eyes. If it had not, Manifest Destiny, that feral geopolitical drive to the sea might have been achieved by the 1820s instead of the 1840s. With the British reeling from a growing American trade presence, the War of 1812 might have had a hot western front. The Oregon country certainly would have been annexed sooner, the Oregon Trail opened earlier, and the boundaries of Canada and the U.S. drawn differently. The impacts of an American foothold on the Pacific (more powerful than Astoria proved to be) would have sent economic tsunamis across the sea. A collision with Russia long before the 1867 purchase of Alaska? An American Hong Kong? The possibilities are endless. Whether these impacts are seen as hegemony or destiny, if the importance of the fifteen-mile Dearborn River portage had been comprehended, the historical geography of Upper Louisiana and beyond would have changed in countless ways.

This Northwest Passage might have functioned as a significant trade route for more than half a century.⁴ Large steamboats would not arrive at the Missouri's head of navigation at Fort Benton until 1859. Rather than end the utility of the Dearborn route, this would have only improved the efficiency of trade. In the spring of 1867, thirty-nine boats hauled freight to Fort Benton as the fur trade waned and gold mining ascended. By then, the Mullan Road led from the docks to Fort Walla Walla in Washington but even this could not have competed with the westbound speed of the riverine Northwest Passage for whatever goods Asia wanted. It was

not until 1887, almost twenty years after the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, that the Great Northern line finally came to Helena linking “Upper Louisiana” into the national grid and ending the need for water transport. This was eight decades after Lewis and Clark.

There are places in the world that leave you wondering. The Dearborn River confluence is one of those. The willows and cottonwoods, shallows and sloughs offer no clue to what passed this way. There is no settlement here, no edifice, no landmark. On a quiet afternoon beside the rustling water, that feels like a blessing. Landscapes turn on such forgotten places and the serendipity of what never was.

Notes

1. Donald W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: Volume 2, Continental America, 1800-1867* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): 65. Jefferson instructed Lewis and Clark to find “the most direct and practical water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.”
2. This quote and all that follow from the journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition can be found by date in numerous sources. See, for example, Gary Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, with Related Documents: 1783-1854*, 2nd edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978). Many Internet sites now exist with journals provided such as <http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark>, <http://www.lewis-clark.org>, or <http://www.lewisandclark200.org>. All quotes used in the remainder of this article can be found in these sources by date.
3. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996): 397.
4. James E. Vance Jr., *Capturing the Horizon: The Historical Geography of Transportation since the Transportation Revolution of the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986): 65. Vance wrote that Lewis and Clark found no easy “route either to the western boundary of the nation or beyond it into the *terra nullius* of the Oregon Country.” He argued correctly that “not until pack and wagon transport west of the Hundredth Meridian was developed could the economic frontier be pushed farther.” That would take decades, during which time the riverine North-west Passage presented here might have flourished.