



Great Falls, Great Beauty, Great Difficulty: The Lewis and Clark Expedition and Diligence

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

The Lewis and Clark expedition represented a pivotal moment in the development of the young and growing United States. In May of 1804, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out on what was to become a nearly 2½ year expedition and one of the grand undertakings in human history. 14 months into that journey, they came upon the Great Falls of the Missouri River. Lewis wrote that it was “the grandest sight” he had ever beheld.

It was also to present one of the most arduous tests of their long journey. While they had anticipated the need to carry their canoes and supplies around the waterfalls, they were not prepared for the massive scale of the falls or the distance of the portage. Rather than the one mile they had anticipated, they would need to carry their canoes and supplies eighteen miles around five waterfalls and a rise of 500 feet – and find a way to do it. Those weeks at the Great Falls of the Missouri River were a test of their teamwork and their resolve, and it was their gritty diligence that carried them through this unexpected and massive undertaking.

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Meriwether Lewis should have been tired, but he was not. Fourteen months earlier, he and his team had set out on this expedition on behalf of President Jefferson and, even after a hard winter, he still enjoyed exploring new terrain. While Lewis liked the company of his traveling companions, he also took pleasure in time spent away from them as he identified plants and wildlife he had never seen before, sketching and describing them in the journal he was required to keep as part of his responsibilities co-leading the expedition. Lewis’ cousin and schoolmate, Peachy Gilmer, once described him as having “perseverance and steadiness of purpose.” Lewis’s partner in this endeavor, William Clark, may have seemed the steadier and sturdier of the partnership. A lieutenant in the army, Clark had an excellent instinct for geography, was a tough fighter, and knew how to construct forts. He and Lewis’s complementary partnership was to serve the expedition well.

The group had set out from St. Louis over a year earlier and spent a long, hard winter at Fort Mandan, in what is now North Dakota. Now, based on what they had understood from the Native Americans with whom they had spoken, Lewis was sure they were nearing the Great Falls of the Missouri River. After what he and Clark anticipated would be a one-day portage around the Falls, they would set out upstream along the Missouri and toward their goal: the Pacific Ocean. On June 13, 1805, Lewis came upon a magnificent sight and wrote in his journal:

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“My ears were saluted with the agreeable sound of a fall of water . . . I saw the spray arise above the plain like a column of smoke which would frequently disappear again in an instant . . . I did not however lose my direction to this point which soon began to make a roaring too tremendous to be mistaken for any cause short of the great falls of the Missouri.”

He described the falls in measured detail, then described his experience further,

“I hurried down the hill which was about 200 feet high . . . to gaze on this sublimely grand spectacle . . . immediately at the cascade the river is about 300 yds. wide . . . the bluff is a smooth even sheet of water falling . . . at least eighty feet . . . the grandest sight I ever beheld, the height of the fall is the same of the other . . . projecting rocks below receive the water in its passage down and break it into a perfect white foam which assumes a thousand forms in a moment sometimes flying up in jets of sparkling foam to the height of fifteen or twenty feet and are scarcely formed before large rolling bodies of the same beaten and foaming water is thrown over and conceals them.”

Interspersed among descriptions of the waterfalls' grandeur are hints that he began to question how—and whether—they could portage around them.

The Great Falls Portage would turn out to be one of the most difficult ordeals of the entire journey. Their original plans had not accounted for the portage to take more than a day; in the end, they would spend several days preparing and, once they did set out, over a month to make the strenuous portage around the falls.

Lewis, Clark, and their team spent the next number of days planning and working as they revised their plans for getting around the falls. To do so required information about the terrain, the falls, the river, and the wildlife. They needed to know the dangers of the landscape, animals they might encounter, and foods they could hunt and gather to supplement their supplies. All the while, they still had to record their detailed observations.

Those weeks of preparation and portage brought illness, exhaustion, heat, and dangerous animals. One day while out walking, Lewis came across a bear, three buffalo bulls, and what may have been either a mountain cat or a wolverine. “All the beasts of the neighbourhood,” he wrote, “had made a league to destroy me, or that some fortune was disposed to amuse herself at my expense.” When it wasn't a large creature like a grizzly bear, it was swarms of tiny mosquitos. Encounters with unfamiliar creatures affected more than just the human members of the expedition; Lewis's Newfoundland dog, Seaman, found these creatures alarming. “My dog,” Lewis wrote, “seems to be in a constant state of alarm with these bears and keeps barking all night.”

Another difficulty was illness. Sacagawea, for example, was ill for several weeks with an unknown ailment. When any member of the party became sick, Lewis prepared and administered herbal treatments while other team members compensated for the work the patient could not do.

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The weather caused strain of another sort. During one fierce storm that brought rain and hail, Clark, Sacagawea, and her baby (nicknamed “Pompy” by Clark) nearly drowned. On other days, the intense heat magnified the strain of the difficult work of the portage and drained the energy of the team.

When it came time to carry all the equipment and supplies overland, it had to be done by hand or in makeshift wagons for 18 miles over extremely rough and largely uphill terrain. The wagons required frequent repair. Prickly pear cactus tore the men’s moccasins, and progress was slow. When they did stop to rest, the men were so exhausted that they fell asleep almost immediately. Some became so faint that they could barely stand up for more than a few minutes at a time. Still, Lewis wrote that no one complained. “All,” he said, “go with cheerfulness.”

The hardships went further. Before the expedition, Lewis had an iron-framed boat — christened the *Experiment* — made in West Virginia. It had been specially crafted for the trip and carried from Pittsburgh to go along the whole journey. It did not, as it turned out, work. As a result, Clark spent five days supervising several men as they felled large cottonwood trees and crafted two dugout canoes.

All of these troubles — terrain, weather, animals and mosquitoes, illness, and the failure of the *Experiment* — added enormous difficulty to the already-trying Great Falls Portage. These troubles tested Lewis and Clark and their group and forged their resolve before they began the next stage of their adventure.

Finally, on the fifteenth of July, nearly a month after they had first encountered the spectacle of the Great Falls of the Missouri, the group finished the portage and headed upstream on the Missouri River. Lewis, Clark, and each member of the expedition were ready for the next stage of their journey. They were also a great deal closer—in experience, if not in distance—to their goal of the Pacific Ocean.