William Clark
Explorer and Diplomat

Jeffrey Smith
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Introduction

It’s hard to think of William Clark without Meriwether Lewis. Together they led the expedition that traveled from St. Louis to the Pacific starting in 1804. While on the expedition, William Clark kept detailed journals of the trip and everything they learned. His journals are the longest of any explorer to the West. If you stacked
all of William’s journals from the trip, the tower would be almost three feet tall!

But there is more to William Clark than those twenty-nine months he spent exploring the new Louisiana Territory. After returning from the expedition, he was placed in charge of Indian affairs in the territory. For the next thirty years, Indian chiefs knew him as the “Red Haired Chief.” He was also governor of the Missouri Territory from 1813 to 1820, before Missouri was a state. Almost every traveler to the West visited William. They studied his maps and saw his museum. No one knew the western tribes better than William Clark.

William saw amazing changes in America. He was born an English subject in Virginia and moved west with his family after the Revolutionary War. He and Meriwether Lewis left St. Louis in 1804 to explore the newest part of the young country.

During his life, William saw America expand westward to the Pacific Ocean. He saw St. Louis grow by leaps and bounds. And he saw steamboats carrying people west to settle in new territories. As American settlers moved west, they pushed native tribes farther west. Some called it progress, but others did not. And William Clark was witness to all of it.
William Clark was born on August 1, 1770, in Caroline County, Virginia, the ninth of ten children of John and Ann Rogers Clark. The Clarks were planters, owning farmland and a few slaves. Five of Billy’s older brothers fought in the American Revolution. The family left for Kentucky in fall 1784, a year after the war ended. His parents took their two youngest children—Billy (as William was called as a boy) was fourteen, Frances was just eleven—and their slaves.
Billy’s older brother George Rogers Clark knew the land, and found them a place on Beargrass Creek near present-day Louisville. They named their farm Mulberry Hill and built a new log home that stood two stories tall and had a stone chimney.

The family’s first night in Kentucky, in March 1785, almost ended Billy’s life. They stopped at the home of old friends, the Elliotts. They decided not to stay for the night, and moved ahead. Later they learned that Indians attacked the home and killed four people that very night. But why?

The Ohio River was the boundary between Kentucky and land held by various Indian tribes. But not everyone respected the border. Settlers hunted on tribal lands, then Indians struck back to defend their

In the 1780s, the “western frontier” was places like Kentucky and Ohio. Americans did not know much about the land west of the Appalachians, but claimed all of the land east of the Mississippi (except Florida).
“I set out at 4 o’clock in the presence of many of the neighboring inhabitants, and we proceeded on under a gentle breeze up the Missouri.” In these words, William Clark recorded the Corps of Discovery’s departure.

President Jefferson had told Lewis and Clark to explore the new territory and to try to find a water route to the Pacific Ocean. They already knew the Missouri was a long river, and that the Columbia River flowed eastward from the Pacific between present-day Oregon and Washington. They planned to travel
up the Missouri River to where it starts (called the “headwater”). They hoped to find an easy overland route from the Missouri to the Columbia River, or to find another river to the Pacific. The president also told the captains to keep journals about what they saw and the people they met. William wrote every day about Indian tribes, animals, plants, and the land. And he drew detailed maps of the entire route.

Each evening they tied up the boats for the night, and every morning Captain Clark sent some of the men out to look for local tribes and hunt animals for food. Others stayed with the boats and went up the Missouri River. Travel against the swift current was hard. Sometimes they could raise their sails and let the wind push them

Supplies for the Trip

The Corps carried a lot of equipment on their long expedition. They carried surveying equipment and compasses; notebooks, pens, and ink; clothing; blacksmithing tools; a microscope; maps, charts, and books; information on Indians; rifles and ammunition; cooking equipment and dishes; tents and blankets; knives and axes.

They also took goods to trade with the Indian tribes they met along the way and gifts to distribute.
As Indian agent for the United States government, William Clark met regularly with western Indian tribes to negotiate treaties, oversee trade, and enforce laws. President Jefferson also appointed William commander of the Missouri territorial militia. His old friend Meriwether Lewis arrived later that year to serve as the new governor of the Louisiana Territory, but he died in 1809.

William traveled west again in the fall of 1808,
this time to open two new trading posts closer to the Osage Indians. In September, he traveled up the Missouri River to what is now Jackson County, Missouri, where he established a new fort and trading post called Fort Osage.

William and an Osage chief named Pawhuska (or White Hair) agreed that the government would protect them and provide a full trading post, a blacksmith shop, and a gristmill. It was the first of thirty-seven treaties Clark signed with Native

The U.S. government opened “trade factories,” or stores, to regulate trade with Native American tribes. Natives traded furs for blankets, gunpowder, kettles, tools, and food. William oversaw all the trade factories west of the Mississippi River.
Why is William Clark so famous today? William Clark and his friend Meriwether Lewis were the first to chart a route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. They introduced Americans to hundreds of plants and animals. They opened relations between the United States and many Indian tribes. They were so notable that we often call the Corps of Discovery the “Lewis and Clark Expedition.”

After he returned from the West, William Clark built on his legacy as an explorer and diplomat to the Indians. He tried to balance the needs of settlers and the Native Americans living in the West. He strove to treat the Indians fairly, and signed more treaties than any other American official.

William Clark’s journals are the most detailed and lengthy account written of the early West. His descriptions of people, places, traditions, and practices still paint the most vivid picture we have of the West in the early 1800s.
August 1, 1770: William Clark is born in Caroline County, Virginia.

1775–1783: American Revolutionary War; five of William’s older brothers serve.

March 1785: Clark family moves to Kentucky.

1789: William Clark joins the military and fights in Indian wars in Ohio.

1803: William Clark selected as co-captain of Corps of Discovery; he recruits men for expedition in Kentucky; group winters at Camp Dubois.

March 1804: Clark and Lewis attend “three flags” ceremony transferring Louisiana to the United States.

May 14, 1804: Corps of Discovery leaves St. Louis area.

December 1804: Corps establishes winter quarters at Fort Mandan.

February 11, 1805: Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, son of Sacagawea, is born.

August 1805: Corps meet Shoshone; they trade for horses to cross Rocky Mountains.

November 1805: Corps establishes winter camp at Fort Clatsop.

March 1806: Corps begins journey home.

July 1806: Lewis and Clark follow different routes, meet up again in early August.

September 23, 1806: Corps reaches St. Louis.

1812–1814: War of 1812; many tribes support the British.

1813: William Clark becomes governor of Missouri Territory.

March 1815: William Clark is placed in charge of Indian affairs in Louisiana Territory and negotiates treaties.

August 1820: William Clark loses election for governor of the new state of Missouri.

June 1820: Julia Hancock Clark dies in Virginia.

1822: William Clark is appointed Indian commissioner in the West; he marries Harriet Radford.

December 1831: Harriet Radford Clark dies.

1832: Black Hawk’s War ends.

September 1, 1838: William Clark dies in St. Louis.
For Further Reading

For Young Readers


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Photo by Jeff Smith: p. 43, William Clark monument, Bellfontaine Cemetery, St. Louis, MO.
William Clark is famous as one of the leaders on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, but he was also a soldier, a politician, and Indian agent. When he was a young boy, America became an independent country and by the time he died, the young country had expanded beyond the Mississippi and more than doubled in size. William served in the Army, explored and mapped new territory, served as governor of the Missouri Territory, and worked to keep the peace between Native Americans and new American settlers moving west as the country expanded.

William Clark left his mark on history not only as a leader of the expedition to explore and map the Louisiana Territory, but also as a political leader and a diplomat.

Jeffrey Smith has a PhD in history from University of Akron. A former museum and library director, he is currently a professor of history at Lindenwood University. He is also editor of The Confluence, a journal of regional studies, and portrays William Clark in one-man shows.

John Hare is an illustrator, graphic designer, and artist. He lives in Gladstone, Missouri.