

# The Final Triumph of Lewis and Clark

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The return of the Corps of Volunteers for North Western Discovery to St. Louis in September 1806, after two years exploring the watersheds of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, represented a fundamental turning point in trade and political relations between the aboriginal peoples of the eastern Great Plains and their Euro-American and Creole neighbors. This change may be encapsulated in a metaphor based upon the timetable by which the Corps of Volunteers traveled out to the Pacific Ocean and back. The Corps took fully six months to penetrate up the Missouri River to the Mandan villages near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota, and another six months to reach the Pacific Ocean at the mouth of the Columbia River. In contrast, the return trip, finally undertaken in earnest in May 1806, was a dash of almost four thousand miles that took barely four months to complete.

Similarly, the process of dispossession of the aboriginal peoples from their land, and Euro-Creole exploitation of that land, accelerated after the return of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and their company. A steady, limited campaign of negotiated turnover (spotted with occasional violent seizures) that had been underway since the middle of the seventeenth century gave way to a cascading series of coerced land transfers that converted traditional Indian hunting grounds into American farm and plantation land in blocks of tens of thousands of square miles at a time. By defining the geography of the northern part of the Louisiana Territory and the Columbia River basin through firsthand observation, Lewis and Clark set about a fundamental redefinition of the new territory. Neither the fur trade that had existed since before either of the great captains was born, nor relations between Indians and white men, would be the same. As J.

Frederick Fausz notes, "... Lewis and Clark advocated fur trading not as an end in itself but merely as a means for making Indians politically dependent and ultimately expendable."<sup>1</sup>

Lewis and Clark would not be the first agents of change in the new political and economic structure of American Louisiana. Hiram M. Chittenden states that

[Manuel] Lisa was quick to grasp the importance of the information brought back by Lewis and Clark concerning the resources of the countries traversed by these explorers, and in his characteristic way he at once set about to reap his share of its advantages.<sup>2</sup>

Lisa, a relatively new, but significant player in the St. Louis fur trade (Shirley Christian describes him as "a man driven to become wealthy"<sup>3</sup>), parlayed the return of the government explorers into an opportunity both to enrich himself and to further his competition with the Chouteau family, the established patriarchs of the trade.

It is important to remember that the Treaty of Paris of 30 March 1803, that yielded Louisiana to the United States, had only a limited practical effect on the ground in central North America. France actually ceded little more than its right to control Louisiana. This was paradoxical with regard to Upper Louisiana, inasmuch as the French republic did not actually exercise the colonial control from which it withdrew. Indeed, the last French colonial authority had withdrawn from Upper Louisiana in 1764, when the Spanish took over. After the Treaty of San Ildefonso of 1 October 1800 returned Louisiana to France, French authority in St. Louis, the administrative center of Upper Louisiana, would be exercised for only one day (9 March 1804) by an American, Captain Amos Stoddard.\*

The fact that France only yielded a power that it did not actually exercise had significant implications for the United States as the Federal government attempted to enter into and take possession of the Louisiana Territory. The most important consideration was the fact that,

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\* Stoddard, an artilleryman based with his battery in Kaskaskia, Illinois, received his commission from the French governor as a means to avoid the expense of deploying to St. Louis a French official who would have to return immediately to New Orleans after handing the territory over to the United States.

beyond a few scattered private trading posts along the Missouri, Arkansas and Osage Rivers, the whole of the countryside lay in the possession of the aboriginal tribes who had built their culture upon it for millennia. The United States owned Louisiana, but the aboriginals held it. If the United States were to enjoy the territory they had purchased, they would have to achieve the delicate feat of removing the indigenous people from the land without destroying the prosperous economic structure that was built on aboriginal labor.

The success of Lewis and Clark's campaign to dispossess the Indians from their territory may be seen as the product of the dialectic relationship between the men of the frontier and their times. The economics of the fur trade had changed dramatically over the approximately forty years since Pierre Laclède Liguist expanded his commercial activities to a bluff a few miles south of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. Laclède's, adopted son, Auguste Chouteau, had made his name, even more than his stepfather's, into frontier royalty, but there were clouds on the commercial horizon. Rising marine insurance rates and other costs of doing international business, the unavoidable attendants of the near-constant warfare between Great Britain and France, had driven up the cost of ocean commerce to a level approaching the unsustainable. The increase in ocean-transportation and insurance costs ate into the profits that eked out of a volume of trade that had been sharply circumscribed by the by the arrival of competitors, who chased the same furs as Auguste Chouteau and his brother, Pierre.

And then there were the Indians. The aboriginal tribes of the Great Plains (primarily the Osages, industrial hunters *par excellence*) were both essential the feasibility of the fur trade in the temperate zone of North America and the *bêtes noires* of the francophone entrepreneurs who dominated the fur trade in St. Louis. "[E]ven at relative peace with whites, the Osages were always warring with other tribes, which reduced their ability to hunt and trap," as Shirley

Christian notes.<sup>4</sup>

For the Creoles of St. Louis, life with the Osages, even when they turned from internecine warfare to the business of furs, was in no sense idyllic. *Capitán* Pedro Piernas, the Spanish lieutenant governor of Louisiana, complained to Governor Alejandro O'Reilly on 31 October 1769 that, "If the savages are treated with kindness, reasonably, and with consideration, they are reasonable when in their right mind. But when drunk they are importunate, beggars, insatiable and tiresome."<sup>5</sup>

One could argue that the Creole fathers of St. Louis (the Chouteau brothers, and to a lesser extent Lisa and the other second-tier merchants), and of Louisiana generally, would have liked to see the Indians get a comeuppance that the Europeans lacked the resources to administer. On 24 June 1797, Auguste Chouteau complained to the new Governor of Louisiana, Manuel Gayoso de Menos, that "[The Osages are] a tribe that will cause trouble for a long time because they are so brutal and too far away from civilization to become good people or for one to hope for this change in them except by the passage of time."<sup>6</sup>

It is equally true that the effect of delivering such a rebuke to the "importunate, insatiable and tiresome" Indians would be such a severe dislocation of the fur-based economy that the victory would prove to be Pyrrhic. Regarding Governor Carondelet's\* proposed campaign in 1793 to eradicate the Osages after a number of "outrages" were perpetrated against white settlers (a campaign opposed by the lieutenant governor, Zenon Trudeau, and the leading traders), Christian states that, "The traders well knew that destroying the Big Osages would amount to destroying the best source of skins and pelts in the territory."<sup>7</sup>

Without the aboriginals, the fur trade was nonexistent. No other group, certainly not the

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\* Francisco Luis Hector, Baron de Carondelet, a Frenchman born in Cambrai, of Belgian heritage but a veteran servant of the Spanish Crown, was governor and *Intendant* of Louisiana and Florida from 13 March 1791. Encyclopedia Louisiana, accessed 6 November 2006 at <<http://www.enlou.com/people/carondeletfl-bio.htm>>.

Europeans and first-generation francophone and hispanophone Creoles\*, had the resources or experience to attempt to replace the Indian hunters. The picturesque image of Auguste and Pierre Chouteau, and Pierre's sons, A.P. and Cadet, wintering in safety among the Osages, does not conceal the hard fact that the limited population of Euro-Americans in St. Louis and the surrounding, primarily tributary communities, was grossly unequal in numbers to the literal army of laborers that the Indians could field in pursuit of fur-bearing mammals. The success of the fur trade on the Great Plains had been built in large part on the fact that white traders respected the Indians' ancient right to use their land for their own benefit. This respect, which was necessary from a practical standpoint, engendered the Indian goodwill that allowed the system to operate.

If any of the Indian tribes had been unwilling to accept the presence of foreign merchants, annihilation of the Europeans would have been a simple matter. This is not to say that the Indians would lightly have acted definitively to remove the Europeans from their midst. The newcomers were an irreplaceable source of technically-sophisticated trade goods, firearms and other metal objects chief among them. The aboriginal peoples needed the Europeans as much as the Europeans needed the aboriginals, even though the corrupting influence of trade goods and the economics of trade eventually lead to the destruction of native societies and, to a large extent, their culture.

Notwithstanding the central role that aboriginal people of both sexes played in the production phase of the Great Plains fur trade, it is plain that both the history of aboriginal/white relations, and the economics of the trade as it was practiced at the turn of the nineteenth century, pointed toward the feasibility and desirability of removing the Indians from the trading picture. The pattern that had been established in the Piedmont region of the Carolinas in the eighteenth

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\* For the purpose of this essay, "Creole" refers to the American-born descendants of European-born parents. Thus there were, of course, anglophone Creoles, as well as francophone and hispanophone. I will refer to them as Anglo-Creoles, Franco-Creoles and Hispano-Creoles.

century, by which tribes that lived close to English settlements, and thus learned to profit by acting as middlemen between English traders and upcountry tribes, were cut out of the trading loop (which increased the English traders' profits) gave an unmistakable example to European fur traders of the Great Plains looking to rehabilitate profit margins burdened by warfare conducted on an ocean half a continent away.

Into the mix of influences arguing for elimination of the Osage and other fur-hunting tribes from the market came the Jeffersonian hierarchy of vocation. Thomas Jefferson, despite his scientific bent, was deeply conscious of mankind's primordial relationship with the soil. Thus agriculturalists, people who grew crops, and lived steadfastly on their farms through the changing seasons, were in the Jeffersonian hierarchy the most truly "free" people, since they used their liberty to provide for their own subsistence. Pastoralists, those who raised animals, feeding them with the grass and other plants that grew naturally on the land, were lower on Jefferson's hierarchy. This was due in part to Jefferson's recognition of the inherent inefficiency of feeding grass and cereal grains to animals, then eating the animals, versus humans simply eating the cereals directly. Pastoralists nonetheless were higher on the Jeffersonian hierarchy than were hunters, because pastoralists remained fairly stable on the land.

Hunters, both those who hunted for subsistence and those who hunted to acquire goods for trade, since they were peripatetic, fared poorly in the Jeffersonian hierarchy. Wandering hunters were difficult to track, and ensuring that wandering hunting parties (primarily "savage" Indians) remained focused on hunting their lower prey rather than targeting white settlers, would require an unconscionable, and insupportable, expenditure of public treasure and effort. Added to the expense of policing hunting bands was the inescapable danger that wandering hunters would trample highly valuable tobacco crops, damaging the precious leaves before they could be

harvested, dried, cut, rolled and smoked.

Thus the fur trade of the Great Plains, an economic engine for both colonial immigrants and motherland manufacturers, morphs in light of Jeffersonian ideals into a threat to the stability, security and prosperity of the “empire of liberty.” Aboriginal tribes, their economies firmly founded on an annual cycle of peripatetic hunting, constituted an unavoidable, unfitnessable impediment to the satiation of Virginia planters’ land hunger. Lewis and Clark’s reports of the mineral, agricultural and faunal wealth of Louisiana and the Columbia River watershed ended Jefferson’s fantasy of ghettoizing the aboriginal subjects of the United States in the area west of the Mississippi; Louisiana was simply too rich to be established as “beyond the Pale.”

So: How to deal with the Euro-American and Creole merchants, who had made St. Louis (and the whole of Upper Louisiana, even before Lewis and Clark’s rosy reports) worth having? Jefferson’s self-serving exaltation of agriculturalists notwithstanding, the philosopher-president esteemed the rights of property owners more highly. The extended Chouteau family and their competitors could not simply be dispossessed of their property and livelihood, if for no other reason than that they were white and Christian. Furthermore, the humble submission with which Auguste and Pierre Chouteau submitted to the United States’ authority\* inarguably entitled them to gentle consideration as the Federal government set about restructuring the economics and commerce of the Trans-Mississippi West.

Nonetheless, the Federal government faced a serious conundrum in its efforts to remove the Indians from their land. President Jefferson’s instructions to Meriwether Lewis required Lewis, regarding intercourse with the native tribes whom the expedition encountered, to “...

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\* This case illustrates the principle that numbers have meaning. There were a lot more people, all of them armed, in a fifty-mile radius from St. Louis who owed their loyalty and affection to Auguste and Pierre Chouteau, than owed the same to the United States. It would not be until close to the end of Jefferson’s second term as president that the United States would have a sufficient military presence in what has become known as the “Bi-State area” to make armed resistance to U.S. authority an unacceptably risky proposition.

make them acquainted with ... the peaceable & commercial dispositions of the U.S., of our wish to be neighborly, friendly & useful to them, & of our dispositions to a commercial intercourse with them ...”<sup>8</sup> In light of Jefferson’s denigration, if not actual contempt for peripatetic aboriginal hunters, the notion that he would direct Lewis to promise future commercial benefits to itinerant populations that Jefferson and the Virginians actually intended to convert into static agriculturalists appears, on its face, to be duplicitous. Utilitarianism, the theory that the end (increasing the amount of land available for tobacco cultivation) justifies the means (lulling the aboriginal tribes into a false sense of security that mutually-profitable trade relationships would continue under United States benevolence) is morally suspicious. The argument that deceiving the Indians was necessary in order to gain a sense of what resources were available for exploitation in Louisiana hardly justifies the act.

Fausz asserts that “the Indian trade [w]as a temporary expedient,” since “the obsolescence of ‘savages in the hunter state’ and their rapid displacement by American farmers were inevitable.”<sup>9</sup> The fur hunting grounds of the Great Plains aboriginal tribes were to become, under the ministrations of Virginia adventurers (chief among them Lewis and Clark, eminent sons of Tidewater Virginia), an extension of Virginia\*, and Virginian mores and concepts of “proper” employment were to replace the paternalistic *laissez-faire* of the Chouteau era.

Professor Robert V. Hine, of the University of California – Riverside, wrote in regard to Meriwether Lewis’ scientific observations during the Corps of Discovery’s expedition that “Lewis’ [scientific] competence lay not only in his training but also in his systematic turn of mind ...”<sup>10</sup> The systematic turn of mind that served Lewis so advantageously during the expedition to define the American West served him equally well during the campaign to exploit

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\* It is noteworthy that the first charter of the Virginia colony limited the penetration of the two groups of colonists into the interior of the continent to “one hundred like Englishe [*sic*] miles.” (Virginia Charter, 30 March 1606, accessed 6 November 2006 at <<http://odur.let.rug.nl/~usa/D/1601-1650/virginia/chart01.htm>>

the newly, if incompletely, defined country. Significantly, Lewis, and other officials commissioned to negotiate on behalf of the United States with the Indian tribes, realized that a bald show of force would be both insupportably expensive and doomed to failure. An indirect approach, relying on aboriginals' individual and collective enmity toward each other, gained luster as a more effective solution to the problem of finessing the troublesome tribes, particularly the Osages, off their land.

The Treaty of Fort Osage\*, initially concluded 10 November 1808, asserted that the fort had been built in consequence of the fact that the United States were “anxious ... to protect [the Osages] from the insults and injuries of other tribes of Indians ...,”<sup>11</sup> primarily the Sac and Fox, who were the only other tribe in the trans-Mississippi region with sufficient aggressive spirit to target the otherwise-dominant Osages. What was not stated in the treaty, if only because the United States' admission of its duplicity would be indefensibly cynical, was the fact that “the insults and injuries of other tribes of Indians” had been incited in large part by U.S. agents, with a view to driving the Osage to the negotiating table, there to bargain away their cultural heritage, the source of their economic viability.

Thus an intended theft was disguised as the mounting of a security guard over the property intended to be stolen. The United States, by masquerading as the Osages' protectors against raids by other Indian tribes that the United States had themselves incited, indirectly coerced the Osages to the negotiating table. The good relations that the Laclède/Chouteau dynasty had developed between aboriginals and whites over the previous four decades were turned to the goal of betraying the Osages' trust.

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\* The treaty itself refers to the site of its negotiation and signature as “fort [*sic*] Clark.” Treaty between the United States of America and the chiefs and warriors of the Great and Little Osages, 10 November 1808. In Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke, eds., Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, vol. IV. (Washington, D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1832), 763.

It is interesting to note that the instrument of this betrayal was none other than Pierre Chouteau, scion and beneficiary of the commercial family that had labored so carefully (and so successfully) to win the hearts and minds of the Osages. Governor Meriwether Lewis and General William Clark, the agent for Indian affairs, kept their hands clean while the dirty work was done (a hallmark of English and Anglo-American diplomacy), and simultaneously, and with great subtlety, demonstrated their fundamental contempt for the non-English Chouteaus by putting Pierre (referred to in the preamble of the treaty as “Peter”) in the difficult moral position of a commissioner with a conflict of interest.

On the one hand, Pierre was “agent for the Osages”; on the other, he was “specially commissioned and instructed to enter into the [treaty] by his Excellency Meriwether Lewis, ...”<sup>12</sup> Thus, one man negotiated for both parties, a gross violation of any reasonable standard of law practice. The Virginians’ steady march toward exploitation of the Great Plains justified, from a utilitarian standpoint, the kicking of legal niceties to the curb if they threatened to interrupt the march of progress.

Once the Osages had been coerced from part of their land, the floodgates were opened to a series of patently one-sided treaties that constricted a tribe that had once dominated the heart of a continent into a reservation only a little more than twice the size of the land area of Rhode Island.\* The stakes of the land-grab game were significantly higher in the first quarter of the nineteenth century than they had been at any time during the preceding two hundred years. Whereas in the infancy of white penetration of North America land had been taken from the Indians in small tracts suitable for townships and their immediately outlying farms, by the

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\* The State of Rhode Island has a land area of 1,045 mi<sup>2</sup>, according to Netstate.com (accessed 6 November 2006 at <[http://www.netstate.com/states/geography/ri\\_geography.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/geography/ri_geography.htm)>. The Osage reservation in Oklahoma has an area of 2,250.8 mi<sup>2</sup>, according to BrainyGeography.com (accessed 6 November 2006 at <<http://www.brainygeography.com/features/OK.reserve/osageindianreservation.html>>.

second quarter-century of the United States' expansion beyond the Appalachian mountains, entrepreneurial land acquisition had developed a demand for tracts of land far beyond what the acquiring parties could possibly cultivate with their own resources.

The difference was that land acquisition had become, by the middle of the first decade of the nineteenth century, a question of reality versus potentiality. When George Washington and other Virginia militiamen acquired tracts of tens of thousands of acres in the late 1750s and early 1760s in the area that would become known as the Northwest Territory, they did so on speculation that their property interest would be sold eventually to an amorphous, as-yet-nonexistent horde of settlers that would eventually (though not, at that time, inevitably) expand into the as-yet virgin region. By the time Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Volunteers for North Western Discovery returned from their expedition, the press of white settlement west of the Appalachians had made the settlement horde a reality. This advance of white civilization, in force, to the edge of aboriginal-dominated territory on the opposite side of a significant natural barrier, the Mississippi River, coincided with the definitive collapse of tobacco cultivation in the Tidewater, Piedmont and trans-Appalachian regions of the mid-Atlantic states.

This combination of the press of settlement, the need for virgin land for tobacco cultivation and the urge to eliminate the aboriginal middleman from the still-thriving fur trade meant that piecemeal acquisition of aboriginal territory was no longer sufficient. If nothing else, such an inefficient system could not hope to keep pace with the flood of Anglo-Creole settlers. Indian lands would have to be torn off in state-sized chunks. More than state-sized; of the twenty-four states (including Minnesota, but excluding Alaska and Hawaii) which lie wholly or in part west of the Mississippi River, nineteen are among the twenty-five largest states in the Union, including numbers two through ten, and twelve through twenty-one. Of those states,

parts of Kansas (#15), Oklahoma (#20) and Arkansas (#29), and all of Missouri (#21) were carved from what had been Osage hunting grounds.<sup>13</sup>

Christian made the valid point that the advent of Anglo-Creole settlers on land that had already been claimed and possessed by Euro-American and Franco- and Hispano-Creole settlers raised difficult issues of proving the validity of French and Spanish land grants. She wrote, “The first land commission began its work in St. Louis in 1805, and the last did not finish until 1833 ... some of [the land commissioners] came with the impression that the longtime residents of the territory were claiming land to which they had no valid right ...”<sup>14</sup> The operative word in that quote is “valid”; a Franco-Creole settler with a *valid* land grant from the Spanish authorities possessed a property that could not be vested in an Anglo-Creole (that is, Virginian) settler.

Ultimately, however, the sheer size of the new territory largely rendered moot the issue of pre-existing, valid claims by white men to the land of the Great Plains. With the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory, enough land became available whose only prior claimants were aboriginals (and their claims could be purchased for token amounts of trade goods) that Creole landholdings could be bypassed. Thus there was no need to dispossess the Creoles, who were both white (or at least mestizo, which was still better than full-blooded Indian) and Christian, of their property. Such dispossession would have been unpalatable, both on racial and religious grounds. Furthermore, as noted above, the humility with which the Franco-Creoles submitted to the United States’ authority militated in favor of gentle treatment, and suitable respect for their valid land claims.

Thus we see that the final triumph of the Lewis and Clark expedition was the acceleration of the process of disposing the Indians (most notably, the Osages, the largest tribe in terms of hunting area) from their land. Having quantified, at least on a limited basis, the natural resources

of the Louisiana Purchase and the area to the west of it, it was arguably necessary that the explorer captains should “finish the job” by ensuring that the United States actually took possession, and not merely title to the land. Although William Clark famously opined that if his soul were eventually to be cast into hell, it would be for the Treaty of Fort Osage, the process of dispossessing the aboriginal tribes of their land was a necessary element of the Virginians’ exercise of their self-claimed right to overspread the whole country beyond the Mississippi.

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<sup>1</sup> J. Frederick Fausz, “‘Pacific Intentions’: Lewis & Clark and the Western Fur Trade,” class handout for HIST5014, Fall 2006, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Hiram M. Chittenden, The American Fur Trade of the Far West, vol. I (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Shirley Christian, Before Lewis and Clark: The Story of the Chouteaus, the French Dynasty that Ruled America’s Frontier (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 103.

<sup>4</sup> Christian, 100.

<sup>5</sup> Pedro Piernas to Alejandro O’Reilly, quoted in Louis Houck, The Spanish Régime in Missouri (Chicago: R. R. Donnelly & Sons, 1909), 1:66-75. Quoted in Christian, 57. For the specific date of Piernas’ report, which included a general description of the land of the “Ylinoeses,” I consulted Houck directly.

<sup>6</sup> Auguste Chouteau to Manuel Gayoso de Lemos, 24 June 1797, quoted in Christian, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Christian, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Jefferson, Instructions to Meriwether Lewis, 20 June 1803, accessed 6 November 2006 at <<http://www.monticello.org/jefferson/lewisandclark/instructions.html>>.

<sup>9</sup> Fausz, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Robert V. Hine, review of Paul Russell Cutright, Lewis & Clark: Pioneering Naturalists (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1969), in The Journal of American History, Vol. 56, No. 3 (December, 1969), 660.

<sup>11</sup> Treaty between the United States of America and the chiefs and warriors of the Great and Little Osages, 10 November 1808. In Walter Lowrie and Matthew St. Clair Clarke, eds., Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, vol. IV. (Washington, D.C.: Gales & Seaton, 1832), 763.

<sup>12</sup> Treaty between the United States and the Great and Little Osages, 10 November 1808. In Lowrie and Clarke, 763.

<sup>13</sup> “US States (including Washington D.C.: Area and Ranking”, accessed 6 November 2006 at <<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/usa/states/area.shtml>>.

<sup>14</sup> Christian, 122.