EPISODE 102: WILLIAM CLARK: AN AMERICAN HERO?

Peter Coyote: Welcome to “Unfinished Journey: The Lewis and Clark Expedition” from PRI, Public Radio International. I’m Peter Coyote. In this hour, we assess the legacy of William Clark, co-leader of the Corps of Discovery.

James Ronda: William Clark for better or worse is one of the architects of the American empire.

Peter Coyote: Join me as we explore the life of Clark after the day’s news.

Optional cutaway for News

Allison Frost: Welcome to this edition of the Latest Tidings, a special feature produced in cooperation with the Daily National Intelligencer. In 1838, it’s been America’s Newspaper for nearly four decades. I’m Allison Frost. This time, we mark the passing of the famed explorer General William Clark. The General breathed his last on the first of September, 1838. His funeral in St. Louis, Missouri, the Latest Tidings has learned, was the largest in the city’s history. A thousand souls mourned his passing and the procession stretched for an entire mile. He was buried with Masonic honors at his family’s St. Louis estate. General Clark was honored with a grand military salute. As the funeral party approached the cemetery, a cannon was fired on the minute until all were assembled at the gravesite.

I spoke earlier with renowned scholar Landon Jones, who has been a careful observer of William Clark in life and death. Jones says the general will be remembered largely for his relations the Indians and, of course, for the Western expedition he helped lead with Meriwether Lewis in 1804. But the scholar says he will also be remembered for being a devout family man.

Landon Jones: There was nothing more important to him that his children and Clark loved his children. He was a wonderful father. And he loved his two wives, Julia and his second wife Harriett Radford. The sadness is they both died sand left him twice a widower. The comforts of home and hearth were extremely important to him.

Allison Frost: General Clark was for many years Superintendent of Indian Affairs. Do you think he considered he had done a good job carrying out the government policies? And do you think he was moved by the some of the stories we’ve heard about the widespread displacement and poverty that resulted from those policies?
Landon Jones: I think at the end of his life, he was fully [appreciative] and very saddened by what he had seen happen. I think earlier in his life he thought saw his job was to acquire as much land as fast as he can in the name of the federal government so settlers could move in there…But it was only in the 1820’s when he really began to see the tragedies that were ensuing as part of the treaty process and the acquisition of the land and the poverty the Indians were living in and the failure of the federal government to feed and clothe and arm and house them that he began to say, if only I had been enabled to do more for the tribes.

Allison Frost: Finally, Mr. Jones, is there a contribution to society at large that future generations living in the 20th or even 21st century, will remember him for?

Landon Jones: His master map of the West was the first map of the interior continent and it became the defining map of the American West for a full generation. And you could say that the map that he made showing the real West was the map that turned our eyes from the eastern seaboard on, West.

Allison Frost: That was scholar Landon Jones, helping us bring you the latest tidings. Finally, we have an update on an unprecedented westward movement of Cherokee Indians from Georgia and the Carolinas. A treaty was signed with the tribe to relocate an estimated 20,000 of their people. But the U.S. Army is having difficulties moving them, as it appears not many of them want to leave. Correspondent Kristian Foden-Vencil has more.

Kristian Foden-Vencil: President Andrew Jackson authorized the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The treaty of New Echota was signed in 1835, and this year, President Van Buren ordered that treaty be implemented. The discovery of gold on Cherokee-occupied land in Georgia has made that state more eager to be rid of the Indians. Nevertheless, this large relocation has not been without its detractors. Notably, eloquent speeches by Senators Daniel Webster and Henry Clay have been heard. But the removal is proceeding. So far, only about three of 20,000 have been taken by water routes to Indian territory. Drought and disease have made a long journey even more difficult. But it’s surely preferable to a land route. I’m Kristian Foden-Vencil.

Allison Frost: In business news, The Great Western Steamship company has begun regular transatlantic service with its S.S. Great Western, the first such ship built exclusively for that purpose. And inventor Samuel Morse publicly demonstrated a new device in Philadelphia. It transmits electrical pulses to produce a kind of code that can be read by wire over a long distance. Experts say this so-called telegraph has the potential to make nearly instant communication possible between far-flung cities. That concludes this edition of the Latest Tidings, I’m Allison Frost. Our program is produced in cooperation with the Daily National Intelligencer, celebrating nearly four decades as America’s Newspaper, since 1800.

[Program theme music]

Peter Coyote: Today we’re going to explore the man who usually gets second billing in the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Clay Jenkinson: You mean the Clark and Lewis Expedition, or at least that’s how some people are now seeing it.

[Theme music continues]
Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. The Lewis and Clark Expedition left St. Charles, Missouri on May 14, 1804 and traveled 7,689 miles to the Pacific Ocean and back again. The trip took more than 28 months. The expedition was President Jefferson’s brainchild, commanded by his friend and protégé Meriwether Lewis and his old Army friend, William Clark. It is considered the most successful exploration in American history. Joining us to take a closer look at William Clark is Clay Jenkinson, humanities scholar-in-residence at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Clay, help us understand what kind of man William Clark was. He’s usually seen as a genial man in buckskins, able, but clearly subordinate to Meriwether Lewis in talent.

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, he was a genial man, but he is a good deal more complicated than popular history has suggested. Clark was a strong, intelligent, extremely able man, with a deep capacity for friendship. It’s not easy to distill his character from the rather prosaic journal he kept. What I have done here is assemble what might be called a portrait of William Clark from the thousands of pages of expedition journals.

Peter Coyote: It sounds like an episode of This Is Your Life in the making.

Clay Jenkinson: Not a bad idea, Peter. Step into my screening room, if you will…and let’s see what Clark’s life would have looked like on film. William Clark was a no-nonsense sort of man. President Jefferson had appointed Meriwether Lewis to lead the expedition, and Lewis had significant interest in scientific matters. Clark was no slouch, but his interest in science was relatively low. In fact, he sometimes failed to record anthropological information that today we would regard as priceless. Here’s Clark in the fall of 1804 talking about the culture of the Arikara people whose homeland he was at that moment exploring.

*This chief tells me of a number of their treditions about turtles, snakes, & the power of a perticuler rock or cave on the next river which informs of everything. None of those I think worth while mentioning.*
*William Clark, October 17, 1804*

Clay Jenkinson: Clark was a sociable man. No matter how busy he was, he never failed to make sure that the men were as comfortable as they could be on a military mission. Here is Clark on Christmas day, 1804, in what is now North Dakota. Notice that there is no mention of Captain Meriwether Lewis. Let’s roll the tape.

*I was awakened before day by a discharge of 3 platoons from the party and the French, the men merrily disposed, I give them all a little taffia and permitted 3 cannon fired, at raising our flag, some men went out to hunt & the others to danceing and continued untill 9 o’clock p.m. when the frolick ended.*
*William Clark, December 25th, 1804*

Peter Coyote: This sounds like a bunch of guys on a weekend camping trip. I hope Clark got more serious as they got further west.

Clay Jenkinson: Clark’s sense of duty was profound. He had periodic health problems throughout the 28-month journey, yet he never let those problems get in the way of his work. Here’s a clip from the very difficult journey of the expedition through the Bitterroot Mountains in Montana and Idaho.

*I continu verrry unwell but obliged to attend every thing. All the canoes put into the water and loaded, fixed our canoe as well as possible….*
*William Clark, October 7, 1805*
Clay Jenkinson: Meriwether Lewis never complained in the journals. He was a stoic and an ironman. But Clark was the kind of man who was perfectly willing to speak up when he felt miserable. Here’s a famous example from the early winter snowstorm in the nearly impenetrable Bitterroot Mountains.

*I have been wet and as cold in every part as I ever was in my life, indeed I was one time fearfull my feet would freeze in the thin mockersons which I wore.*  
*William Clark, September 16, 1805*

Clay Jenkinson: Things only got worse when the expedition reached the storm-tossed estuary of the Columbia River.

*O! How horriable is the day. Waves brakeing with great violence against the shore throwing the water into our camp &c. All wet and confined to our shelters....*  
*William Clark, November 22nd, 1805*

Clay Jenkinson: Everyone who reads the journals senses that Clark was the more likable of the two captains. And we have independent proof of it from a Canadian trader’s journal. Charles McKenzie of the British North West company had the chance to spend some time with the Corps of Discovery at Fort Mandan in today’s North Dakota during the winter of 1804-1805. In his journal, McKenzie summarized his assessment of the two American officers:

*La Rocque and I having nothing very particular claiming attention, we lived contentedly and became and intimate with the gentleman of the American expedition; who on all occasions seemed happy to see us, and always treated us with civility and kindness. It is true Captain Lewis could not make himself agreeable to us-he could speak fluently and learnedly on all subjects, but his inveterate disposition against the British stained, at least in our eyes, all his eloquence. Captain Clark was equally well informed, but his conversation was always pleasant, for he seemed to dislike giving offence unnecessarily.*  
*Charles McKenzie, North West Company, 1805*

Peter Coyote: Clark sounds like a decent fellow.

Clay Jenkinson: Clark was a deeply humane man, who seems to have cared about others as much as about himself. He had a capacity for basic decency that distinguishes him as an explorer. The journals indicate that he formed a bond with Sacagawea, her infant son Jean Baptiste, and to a certain extent with her husband, Charbonneau. Charbonneau could be something of a brute at times. Here, for example, is an instance where Clark intervenes in a domestic dispute. Somehow Clark’s character is epitomized by this moment, which was probably much more dramatic than his one line mention in the journals.

*We encamped on the lard side near the place the river passes thro’ the mountain. I checked our interpreter for strikeing his woman at their dinner.*  
*William Clark, August 14, 1805*

Clay Jenkinson: Indians were always giving Clark gifts: horses, moccasins, robes, food. There is little evidence that they gave gifts to the expedition’s actual leader, Meriwether Lewis.

Peter Coyote: And what was his relationship with the expedition’s Indian woman by this time?
Clay Jenkinson: Clark’s kindness to Sacagawea seems to have won her affection. At a time when the expedition was truly malnourished, Sacagawea gave Clark a morsel that she had been saving for her child.

_The squaw, gave me a piece of bread to day made of some flower she had earfully kept for her child, and had unfortunately got wet._

*William Clark, November 30, 1805*

Clay Jenkinson: A few weeks later, on Christmas Day, 1805 at Fort Clatsop near the Pacific Ocean, Clark lists the Christmas presents he received that day. Notice that there is no mention of anyone giving gifts to Meriwether Lewis.

*I recvd a presnt of Capt L. of a fleece hosrie shirt draws and socks, a pr. mockersons of Whitehouse a small Indian basket of Gutheric, two dozen white weazils tails of the Indian woman, and some black root of the Indians before their daparture._

*William Clark, December 25, 1805*

Clay Jenkinson: On the return journey, with all their trade goods gone or nearly so, the expedition had to find new ways to buy services and hospitality from the Indians they met. In the Columbia River valley they began to provide very rudimentary medical treatment to their Indian hosts.

Peter Coyote: I know that Lewis had some medical training, but from what I’ve heard so far, I think I’d rather have Clark treating me.

Clay Jenkinson: Given the differences in their personalities, it was perhaps inevitable that Clark, not Lewis, had the better bedside manner. Let’s listen to Captain Lewis describe their medical operation.

_They now informed us that they wished to give an answer to what we had said to them the preceeding day, but also informed us that there were many of their people waiting in great pain at that moment for the aid of our medicine. It was agreed between Capt. C. and myself that he should attend the sick as he was their favorite phisician while I would here and answeer the cheifs._

*Meriwether Lewis, May 12, 1806*

Clay Jenkinson: Near the end of the expedition, when Lewis and Clark returned to the Mandan and Hidatsa villages in today’s North Dakota, they said goodbye to Sacagawea, her child Jean Baptiste, and Toussaint Charbonneau. That was August 17, 1805. And yet, three days later, William Clark wrote a remarkable letter to the Charbonneau family. In essence, Clark informed the Charbonneaus that although their services to the expedition had terminated, he was not ready to say goodbye to them forever! He invited them to relocate in St. Louis, and even offered to sponsor Charbonneau in a business or a farm if they would do so. Here is one excerpt from this amazing and rather sentimental document.

_To Charbonneau: You have been a long time with me and have conducted your self in such a manner as to gain my friendship, your woman who accompanied you that long dangerous and fatigueing rout to the pacific ocian and back diserved a greater reward for her attention and services on that rout than we had in our power to give her at the Mandans. Wishing you and your family great succcess & with anxious expectations of seeing my little dancing boy baptiest. I shall remain your friend._
Peter Coyote: If Clark’s life were indeed an episode of *This Is Your Life* then perhaps it should conclude with a word from one of his direct descendants, William Clark’s great-great-grandson, Bud Clark.

Bud Clark: It’s important to recognize that William Clark was a man that was duty-bound and honor-bound to fulfill his duty and to live his life with honor. And he saw others as having that same obligation, that you are morally obligated to play the hand that fate deals you. Firm but fair, and that’s the kind of man Clark was. He expected people to live their lives and perform their duties, play the hand fate dealt them, and do it with honor and integrity.

Peter Coyote: There’s a full portrait of the man who helped lead America’s most successful military expedition. Well, the provisions have run out, so we’ll take a short break. Before we do, let’s test your knowledge of the Lewis and Clark Expedition: what word did Clark have the most trouble spelling? We’ll have a discussion of Clark’s struggles with the English language later in the program.

I’m Peter Coyote. You’re listening to “Unfinished Journey,” on PRI.

[Program Break: Aaron Meyer/Bill Lamb-The Unfinished Journey soundtrack “Clark’s Theme”]

Peter Coyote: Though he’s traditionally been the “second banana” in the Lewis and Clark story, the bicentennial has offered a new perspective on William Clark, with new biographies, even new documents—letters that Clark wrote to his brother—have come to light in recent years. We’re developing an increasingly complex portrait of Clark. University of Tulsa history professor and Lewis and Clark scholar, James Ronda, says Clark embodies a number of different qualities:

James Ronda: I’ve often thought about William Clark as the Horatio Alger figure for his time. He certainly doesn’t come from nothing but he rises to great wealth and power and he does that because he understood the personal connections in his age and he knows how to go along and get along. He’s a person of both idea and experience. I think that he’s a remarkably successful player in the game of both public life and a private life... he’s a man who embraces danger. He embraces friendship. He embraces challenge.

Peter Coyote: So where and how do we find Clark today? Correspondent Colin Fogarty volunteered for the search.

Colin Fogarty: My son Elliot is a three year old bundle of questions.

Elliot Fogarty: Why?

Colin Fogarty: We get that one a lot. If it’s not here and now, it’s hard to make him understand. But I want him to take some lessons from one of my heroes William Clark, even though he lived 200 years ago. So to look for the modern William Clark, I brought Elliot to a place near our home in north Portland where the famous explorer once stood, or at least rowed. We’re standing on the banks of the Willamette River in Portland. This is Cathedral Park, which sprawls under the vast St. John’s suspension bridge. Clark took a short detour here on his way back from the Pacific in 1806.

Elliot Fogarty: Where the water coming?

Colin Fogarty: Where’s the water coming from?
Elliot Fogarty: Yeah.

Colin Fogarty: It’s streaming down from the mountain. You know why we came here, bug?

Elliot Fogarty: Yeah.

Colin Fogarty: Once a long, long time ago, a great man came here.

Elliot Fogarty: Why?

Colin Fogarty: His name was William Clark.

Elliot Fogarty: Why?

Colin Fogarty: To see what was here.

Elliot Fogarty: Where long time ago came? Where is he?

Colin Fogarty: This has me stumped. I don’t actually know where William Clark would be today? To get an answer, I called him up.

Brian Krall: [on phone] This is the Clark residence. Can I help you?

Colin Fogarty: Captain Clark, how are you doing?

Brian Krall: Oh, well, I’m doing fine.

Colin Fogarty: It’s actually Brian Krall, a William Clark re-enactor, living in Las Vegas. He told me to tell Elliot that Clark today is that friend you can always depend on.

Brian Krall: He is very much a practical, common sense sort of fellow. He looks at things squarely, never overwhelmed by problems. One of my favorite quotes from Clark, he says, “It is too late to repint of my bargain when things are going on badly. It is then time to scuffle and get out of the difficulty.” He says you just got to keep working. You just got to keep going.

Colin Fogarty: Those are big words, a little hard to explain to a three year old, but a good lesson nonetheless. And maybe Elliot would understand something that Clark scholars all seem to agree on: that he was a wonderful father. Landon Jones is Clark’s biographer.

Landon Jones: There was nothing more important to him than his children. He loved two wives, Julia and his second wife, Harriet Radford. He was a very happily married man. The sadness is they both died and left him twice a widower. Three of his children died within infancy. So it is not without tragedy. The comforts of home and hearth were extremely important to him.
Colin Fogarty: And on the expedition, before he had his own children, Clark showed great affection for Sacagawea’s son, nicknamed Pomp, says Lewis and Clark expert Dayton Duncan.

Dayton Duncan: I think that there was a lot of the great qualities of fatherhood in William Clark and that traveling with this young mother and her little baby who would have gone in the course of their leaving Fort Mandan in April of 1805 and their return to it in August of 1806 is a time when a baby becomes a toddler and cute and starts to show personality, and Clark clearly responded to that.

Colin Fogarty: In fact, after the expedition Clark asked Sacagawea and her husband to bring the boy to St. Louis so he could oversee Pomp’s education. But where would we look for Clark when he wasn’t at home? One obvious place Clark might fit in today would be where he did 200 years ago: the military. Maybe the Oregon National Guard has some answers.


Colin Fogarty: Hal Stearns is a historian, a William Clark re-enactor and a brigadier general in the Montana National Guard. Two hundred years after the Corps of Discovery, Stearns frequently employs Lewis and Clark as examples of military leadership. Earlier this year, he told a group of Oregon National Guard soldiers that while Lewis was aloof and introverted, Clark was constantly with the men.

Hal Stearns: William Clark will be the backbone of the organization, the day to day operation. William Clark is going to have to get his men to buy into the fact that you are part of something bigger than anything than you have ever done before in your lives. These guys are like the Delta Force. They’re Rangers. They’re Seals. They’re Airborne, whatever you might want to call them. This was great leadership.

Colin Fogarty: Delta Force, the Rangers—it might be a little too soon to explain all that to Elliot. Of course, at some point my quest to explain William Clark to Elliot breaks down. Clark today would not own slaves. He could not hand out 50 lashes for punishment. Clark married Julia Hancock when she was 16, an arrangement that would not be legal in most states today. Those are issues I’ll have to leave for when Elliot’s older, too. Even then, I don’t know whether he’d even be able to relate to a wilderness explorer from two centuries ago.

Brian Krall: In many ways, I don’t know that there is a place in our modern society for Clark. He’s really rough cloth.

Colin Fogarty: Brian Krall, the Clark re-enactor in Nevada, says my search for the modern William Clark may just be a fool’s errand.

Brian Krall: I don’t think he was the kind of person who would have probably thrived in a high tech era. You almost have to imagine him in another less sophisticated, more primitive culture, I think.

Colin Fogarty: Especially since there’s not much geography in America left to explore. Maybe the lessons of William Clark aren’t for a three-year-old boy, they’re for me. Clark’s steady, engaging personality makes him the ultimate Dad. Tossing rocks in the river with Elliot where Clark once canoed, it’s time for our own exploration.

Colin Fogarty: Hey, Elliot, I thought I heard a frog.
Elliot Fogarty: Say ribbit, ribbit, ribbit.

Colin Fogarty: Oh, you know what, I bet it’s over here

Elliot Fogarty: Where?

Colin Fogarty: Hold my hand.

Elliot Fogarty: Yeah

Colin Fogarty: You hear them? (frog sound) In Portland, Oregon, I’m Colin Fogarty.

*The buffalo was round the lower camp in very great abundance. Some gangs of them swam the river. Captain Clark’s Negro man shot one of them which was very fat.*

*Joseph Whitehouse, June 22, 1805*

Peter Coyote: Clay, tell us about Clark’s “Negroe man” who’s mentioned here briefly … and why he’s important to Clark’s story.

Clay Jenkinson: York was Clark’s slave. They were exact contemporaries. They had been companions since early childhood. It was not particularly unusual for a white army officer to bring a slave on a command of this sort. York played a significant role in the success of the expedition, sometimes a surprising role. But one thing is critically important to remember: York himself did not keep a journal. He might have been illiterate. And what we know about him comes through the eyes of white men: Clark, Lewis, and others who were keeping journals. All of them were in a position to own an African-American, and all of them held attitudes towards black people that were characteristic of the early 19th century. If we don’t keep that in mind, it is impossible to re-construct York and his achievement on the expedition.

*In the course of the conversation, the chief observed that some foolish young men of his nation had told him there was a person among us who was quite black, and he wished to know if it could be true. We assured him that it was true, and sent for York. Le Borgne was very much surprised at his appearance, examined him closely, and spit on his finger and rubbed the skin in order to wash off the paint; nor was it until the negro uncovered his head and showed his short hair, that Le Borgne could be persuaded that he was not a painted white man.*

*William Clark, from Coues Edition, 1:243, Entry: March 9, 1805*

James Holmberg: York was kind of Clark’s shadow. He knew his master’s likes and dislikes. Clark trusted him to do any number of chores on the expedition, sent him out hunting, to get roots with the Nez Pierce, sent him out to get something to eat when they’re in dire need of that.

*The Indians much astonished at my black servent who made him self more turrible in their view than I wished him to doe as I am told telling them that before I caught him he was wild & lived upon people, young children was verry good eating. Showed them his strenth…*

*William Clark, October 10, 1804*
Harry Fritz: William Clark did not give York a kind or receptive ear, kept him as a slave, as a possession, as a piece of property, had him whipped on a public whipping post, threatened to sell him into slavery in the Deep South from time to time. So, it’s not the kind of relationship that we admire today.

Peter Coyote: We heard from Clark biographer James Holmberg as well as University of Montana history professor Harry Fritz. Clay, what happened to York after the expedition?

Clay Jenkinson: There is good evidence that York sought his freedom after the expedition and equally good evidence that Clark resisted that request. Much later, Clark told the writer Washington Irving that he eventually had granted York his wish, though Clark also told Irving that York didn’t like his taste of freedom and wanted to return to his old master. Modern scholars disagree about whether Clark ever really did free his slave:

James Holmberg: Of course, late in life, he told Washington Irving that he did free York and he freed some of his other slaves. There’s no reason in the world to doubt that.

William Foley: I don’t know that given Clark’s view on slavery that he would have told or felt the need to have told Irving that he’d freed him if he hadn’t. So, I’m inclined to take him at his word unless something new comes up. We don’t have any way to document that. All we have is what Clark said on the subject.

Landon Jones: I don’t think York ever left slavery. I think he was always a slave. I think York died a slave. And that in part to charm this Yankee writer Washington Irving, Clark invented a story that he had freed York. What he had done was he had sent York away from St. Louis and acceded to that desire, but that’s all he did.

Peter Coyote: That was James Holmberg, William Foley and Landon Jones, who wrote “William Clark and the Shaping of the West.”

We asked the distinguished legal scholar and historian Annette Gordon-Reed to reflect on the relationship between Clark and his slave. She’s among the scholars who believe Clark never freed York.

Annette Gordon-Reed: We will never know why Clark apparently did not do what was obviously the right thing for him to have done: immediately and enthusiastically give York his freedom. After returning from his journey West, this man who had provided services not only to William Clark personally, but to the United States of America, re-entered the world of slavery with all the hardship and uncertainty that condition entailed. A grant of immediate freedom, along with land, would have been the moral way to recognize York’s humanity and the fact that he had done the nation a great service.

It is perhaps fitting that Lewis and Clark were sent West by Thomas Jefferson, a man whose very famous internal conflicts about blacks and slavery mirror the nation’s—and apparently William Clark’s own—ambivalence. One would think that after so momentous an effort on York’s part that Clark would have seen that York deserved to be treated as other men who made the trek. York, as Clark well knew, was more than equipped to take care of himself. And there were, after all, instances when slave holders emancipated slaves and helped them get a start in life by finding them employment or giving them monetary support. Clark could have done that as well. It is not as though Clark never freed slaves. He had earlier freed a male slave, citing the services the man had rendered to him as the reason for emancipating him. And, like Jefferson, Clark had also proclaimed that slavery was against natural law. Instead, when York asked him for his freedom upon his return from the journey, Clark became angry and said that York was insolent.

In the end, Clark was unable to see York as a human being just like himself, an attitude that existed before they set out on their journey west. But the expedition had altered their relationship, because it had transformed one of
The trip across the continent, the experience of being a working and respected member of a team, had undoubtedly changed York’s attitude about himself. He had grown as a man, and his request to Clark indicates that he had thought that Clark had grown as well. York was mistaken. Clark had not grown in a way that allowed him to see York’s humanity. As a slave owner, he was unprepared to face the reality that circumstances and experiences could alter the basic nature of the master and slave relationship. It was one thing for Clark to have given a slave freedom out of his own benevolence. It was another thing to have a slave act as if he deserved his freedom. York’s presumptuousness went against the grain of Clark’s sense of himself as the total master of York’s fate. At some level, it may well have made him guilty and embarrassed, emotions that could have made Clark dig in his heels on the question of York’s freedom even further.

Actually, when we think of the magnitude of York’s contribution, we might conclude that the decision about York’s treatment should not have been left to the vagaries of Clark’s whim alone. In 1807, Congress recognized the nation’s debt to the westward explorers by passing an act to compensate Lewis and Clark and their companions by giving them grants of land in recognition of their services. Of all the people who took the journey, only York was left out of the nation’s show of gratitude. If other members of the expedition—even Sacajawea—received rewards for having risked their lives in the service of the country, perhaps Jefferson or other governmental officials should have suggested on the principal of fairness alone that York should have been rewarded as well. That did not happen, of course. And York continued in the ranks of so many other African Americans who worked to help build this country in one way or another and never received the recognition and payment they deserved.

Peter Coyote: Annette Gordon-Reed is the author of “Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings: An American Controversy.” She is a professor at New York Law School.

How do we see Clark in the context of his times, and balance his achievements against his mistreatment of York?

James Ronda: We need to judge them by the standards of the time and simply—and I say simply in quotation marks here—simply describe their behavior and they will praise or damn themselves. We need to describe what it is that they did so that we can begin that incredible journey of placing ourselves in another time. Nothing is more difficult than taking ourselves out of our time and placing ourselves in another time. Nothing is more transcendentally changing, more redemptive in our lives than to take ourselves out of our lives and put ourselves into other times and into other places. We become most fully human when we do that.

Peter Coyote: University of Tulsa history professor and Lewis and Clark expert James Ronda. Clay, we started off with you suggesting that this might have been called the “Clark and Lewis” expedition. Why is that?

Clay Jenkinson: Well, Peter, the journals suggest that Clark managed the day-to-day progress of the expedition while Meriwether Lewis was alone on shore as a kind of scientist-in-residence. Some scholars—though certainly not all—believe that Clark was the key leader on this journey. We spoke to a number of them about Clark’s centrality to the success of the expedition.

Landon Jones: You know when the expedition began, Lewis famously almost fell off the bluff at Tavern Cave. And what if Lewis had fallen and perished in the attempt, what would have happened then? Well, Clark would have been in charge, Clark would have probably appointed one of his sergeants as chief operating officer, and I think the expedition really would have done just fine. But what if Clark had fallen off that bluff and Lewis had been left in charge? I think it would have been up for grabs. He was impulsive, made erratic decisions at times, he lacked the sort of ballast that Clark gave Lewis personally and I think also gave the expedition during its journey.
Dayton Duncan: There could never have been a Lewis expedition even though that’s how Jefferson referred to it. There had to be a Lewis and Clark expedition. It required that to succeed. And, I would say that William Clark is one half of one of the great friendships ever forged in American history.

James Ronda: I think Clark provides some of the fundamental leadership. He provides some of the stability, some of the continuity that is necessary for a successful expedition voyage.

John Logan Allen: I think Clark had the ability, and this is why he’s such a great field cartographer, to imagine with a fairly high degree of accuracy what the back side of terrain looked like that he was viewing from the front side. He was able to visualize river course and river direction as if he were an eagle, flying high above the landscape as opposed to a man in a boat or somebody walking along the banks of the river. He just had this ability.

[Excerpt from Horizon Air “Clark and Lewis” radio ad]

Peter Coyote: Though Clark achieved his greatest fame as co-leader of the Corps of Discovery, afterward he played an important role in carrying out the policies of the United States government toward American Indians.

Harry Fritz: I think in some of the more egregious cases of removal, he had some regrets for what he was doing to Native American peoples, but when the chips were down, he always sided with the white population and with the state and federal governments that backed them.

Peter Coyote: Stay with us as we find out more about Clark’s role in the removal of Indians from their homelands. I’m Peter Coyote. This is “Unfinished Journey” on PRI.

[Program Break: Aaron Meyer/Bill Lamb-The Unfinished Journey soundtrack “Interlude”]

Peter Coyote: Some historians have now elevated Clark’s role in the expedition’s success. But how did Lewis and Clark see each other? Were they equals, or was one the clear leader?

Clay Jenkinson: That’s a complicated story that starts with Lewis writing Clark a letter describing President Jefferson’s goals for the journey, and extending an invitation to Clark to join him as his partner in discovery:

_I make this communication to you with the privity of the president, who expresses an anxious wish that you would consent to join me in this enterprise: he has authorized me to say that in the event of your accepting this proposition he will grant you a captain’s commission...your situation if joined with me in this mission will an all respects be precisely such as my own._

_Meriwether Lewis, June 19, 1803_

Peter Coyote: “Precisely such as my own”— that sounds pretty clear.

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, and here is Clark’s response to Lewis’s letter.

_Dear Lewis: the enterprise &c is such as I have long anticipated and am much pleased with and as my situation in life will admit of my absence the length of time necessary to accomplish such an undertaking I will cheerfully join you in an “official charrector” as mentioned in your letter, and partake of the dan-_
gers, difficulties and fatigues, and I anticipate the honors & rewards of the result of such an enterprise, should we be successful in accomplishing it.

William Clark, July 18, 1803

Peter Coyote: So that’s when it became the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Clay Jenkinson: Yes, and it’s interesting to note that in the original draft of this letter, Clark wrote that he would join Lewis “on an equal footing,” but later he substituted “as mentioned in your letter” in reference to his role.

Peter Coyote: So, what’s the confusion?

Clay Jenkinson: The War Department denied Clark his captaincy and informed Lewis that Clark’s rank could be no greater than lieutenant. Lewis was angered by the War Department’s response and he told Clark that he thought it best not to let on to the other members of the expedition that they were anything but equals. And Lewis swore that Clark would receive compensation equal to his own.

Peter Coyote: Beyond the formal title, how did Lewis and Clark function? Were they friends? Were they working partners?

Clay Jenkinson: They were both—and their partnership on the journey contributed greatly to its success. Historian Steven Ambrose said it is the most successful partnership in the course of American history.

Peter Coyote: Dayton Duncan and Bob Moore, a historian at the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial, have several observations about that.

Dayton Duncan: Lewis was described by different people at the time before he left—stiff, bowlegged, awkward, sometimes rash, capable of doing the wrong thing at precisely the wrong time. Clark took him on as his bosom friend and I think that Lewis responded to that somehow. I think Lewis realized that in Clark, here was somebody who wasn’t trying to challenge him for supremacy within the organization. It was a true, great, exquisite friendship.

Bob Moore: I think Lewis was not a real people person. And I think that’s why he turned over the daily routine to Clark and I think that’s why he wanted Clark to be on the expedition in the first place. I think he was remembering back to the type of commander Clark was when he was with Wayne’s army in the 1790s and I think he wanted that specific attribute that Clark had of being able to deal well with the enlisted men.

Peter Coyote: Clay, I’m looking at Clark’s journals here, and one thing I can’t help but notice is what a bad speller he is! I can hardly read some of these entries: weasels with a “z”; he’s wearing what he calls “mockersons.” What do we make of this?

Clay Jenkinson: Clark’s spellings are terrible. He has been a challenge to all editors and all readers of the Lewis and Clark journals. But don’t be fooled. He may be a bad speller, but he’s not an unintelligent man. By the way, the word that he misspelled most often appears to have been the word “Sioux”—S-i-o-u-x. He spelled it at least 28 different ways.
Dayton Duncan: Clark took spelling to new improvisational heights. I counted one sentence once where he spelled the word cherry three different ways in the same sentence. You’d think he’d take one spelling and stick with it, but he would just be going on. He spelt mosquito 19 different ways in the journals without spelling it the way we spell it today.

James Ronda: We always make jokes about William Clark and his spelling and his syntax. I think that gets it exactly wrong. I think that Clark is part of a tradition that in some ways comes to full flower with someone like Mark Twain, who tries to hear the American vernacular.

Peter Coyote: Clark, the hero. Clark, the slaveholder. Clark, the leader and friend. Clark, the down-to-earth chronicler of the expedition. Finally let’s examine the last phase of Clark’s professional life, his role as one of the prime forces for the United States’ Indian removal policy. Clay, what was Clark’s role in taking Indians off of their land?

Clay Jenkinson: Peter, this is one of the most controversial areas in the life and achievement of William Clark. And it’s not a very pretty picture. I had the opportunity to ask this question of Jay Buckley of Brigham Young University; Harry Fritz of the University of Montana; the distinguished Hidatsa scholar, Gerard Baker; and Jim Holmberg of the Filson Club. Let’s hear what they have to say about this extremely interesting and troubling aspect of Clark’s life.

Jay Buckley: From 1795 to 1840, it’s estimated that the U.S. acquired 420 million acres for about $81 million and some land exchanges. One hundred million of the 420 million were by Clark’s hand and what he paid was about $67 million. So if you look at it from that perspective, about three-quarters of the acres of the land that was acquired by the U.S. was acquired for less money or for no money than those that Clark administered.

Harry Fritz: And Clark is now in the position of carrying out Jefferson’s Indian policies, which ideally are based on benevolence and paternalism and assimilation, but in reality come down to removal...And I think in some of the more egregious cases of removal, he had some regrets for what he was doing to Native American people but when the chips were down, he always sided with the white population and with the state and federal governments that backed them.

Gerard Baker: I would ask him what his real impression was of the American Indian population as he saw it. What did that mean to him? And what did he see? What did he want? What did he really want for the future? And how could he take what he learned and use it to a positive side, to educate white America, not to push out the Indians? And I think he was doing his job, and to a certain extent he’s a scapegoat. But again, with the same thought, if he really wanted to do something, why didn’t he stop that removal? Why didn’t he try to make white America understand that, hey, this was somebody’s land, this was somebody’s sacred site, this was somebody’s creation area? So, again, I guess, you know, there’s many times that I think about this guy Clark and get angry with him for not stopping what he did.

James Holmberg: In William Clark’s world, whites were always at the top of the heap and even though you might respect Indians and in some ways feel they were co-equal, ultimately they were going to be at least a notch below. And Clark had a job to do and he was determined to do it. And he therefore administered U.S. policy. He took away those millions of acres of land for white expansion.

Peter Coyote: Clay, how did Clark see his own role in the displacement of Indian people?
Clay Jenkinson: Clark’s attitude changed over time. In 1826, he wrote to Secretary of War James Barbour pointing out the United States government’s obligation to save Indian tribes from extinction:

_The events of the last two or three wars...having entirely changed our position with regard to the Indians. Before these events, they were a formidable and a terrible enemy; since then their power has been broken, their warlike spirit subdued, and themselves sink into objects of pity and commiseration. While strong and hostile it was our policy and duty to weaken them; now that they are weak and harmless, and most of their lands fallen into our hands, justice and humanity require us to cherish and befriend them._

_William Clark_

Peter Coyote: Clark’s glimpse of the future was accurate, and his worst fears were realized in the generations that followed. Congress passed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, and it was signed into law by Andrew Jackson. But “removal” hardly describes the Trail of Tears traveled by the people of the Cherokee nation from their homelands east of the Mississippi to what is now Oklahoma. Clark himself died in September of 1838. In that year and the next, more than 4,000 Cherokee people died as they were removed from their homes, herded into holding forts, and then pushed west by U.S. troops under the command of General Winfield Scott. Hunger, outbreaks of disease and sheer exhaustion marked the forced march. At one point, Cherokee leaders petitioned Scott to delay the march until cooler weather came:

_We do not ask you to let us go free from being your prisoners, unless it should please yourselves. But we ask that you not send us down the river at this time of year. If you do we shall die, our wives will die or our children will die. Sir, our hearts are heavy, very heavy. We want you to keep us in this country until the sickly time is over, so that when we get to the West we may be able to make boards to cover our families. If you send us now the sickly time is commenced, we shall not have strength to work. We will be in the open air in all the deadline time of sickness, or we shall die, and our poor wives and children will die too. And if you send the whole nation, the whole nation will die._

Peter Coyote: It’s impossible to know how William Clark might have responded to such a heartfelt plea, but his attitude clearly would have been sympathetic. Whatever his response, it would have come from a man who left a mixed history in the annals of this young country: a man who was a loyal friend, but who could mistreat the slave he had known from childhood, a man whose diplomatic skills helped win over Indian tribes, and who showed a genuine affection for Sacagawea and her son but who also presided over the ruthless displacement of Indian people. What, then, is our final assessment of William Clark?

James Ronda: William Clark is one of the architects for better or worse of the American empire. Period.

Landon Jones: I can’t think of any other person in the American history of this time who more embodies the strengths of our national character and the contradictions and flaws in our national character. You see the frontiersman, the derring-do, the man whose own family had leapt across the Appalachians at the end of the Revolution, who grew up on a Kentucky frontier just like Daniel Boone and his contemporaries and then he crosses the Mississippi and he goes to the Pacific. This is a man who is America embodied.

Peter Coyote: So, at the bicentennial commemoration of the Lewis and Clark expedition, what portrait should we paint of William Clark? Our lead scholar, Clay Jenkinson, gives us his final thoughts.
William Clark labored under three great burdens in his life. First, he was the younger brother of George Rogers Clark, that great Revolutionary War hero, a man Thomas Jefferson revered. That would have been bad enough, to live in the shadow of a famous older brother. But George Rogers Clark’s post-revolution life was a mess and Bill Clark spent a part of his early manhood attempting to sort out the tangled legal, financial and political affairs of his renowned sibling.

The second great burden of William Clark’s life was serving as the shadow co-captain with Lewis on the great transcontinental expedition of 1804-06. Lewis was a remarkable even a gifted man, but he was high-strung, mercurial, emotionally detached and in some respects, unreliable. Clark discovered early on that for all the illusion of shared command, it was Lewis who wanted to be the first, and to be alone, at the great moments of discovery— at the confluence of the Missouri and the Yellowstone, at the Great Falls, at the source of what Lewis liked to call the “mighty and heretofore deemed endless Missouri River.”

To be Lewis’s partner in discovery, William Clark had to subdue his great will to that of a troubled and unfinished man. His challenge was that greatest of burdens: self-mastery.

The third burden for William Clark was the thankless task of trying to apply and enforce Jeffersonian Indian policy in the American West. That couldn’t help but be soul-shrinking and distasteful to a generous man like Clark. Some part of Clark, however deeply buried, must have recoiled at the inhumanity of a process he probably saw as inevitable and perhaps even good.

Thanks to the bicentennial and thanks to three new biographies, we know more about Clark than ever before, and what we are discovering about him does not put him in a very favorable light. His post-expedition treatment of his slave York was, by our standards, cruel and unconscionable. His efforts to move American Indians out of the path of white America’s inexorable march across the continent place him squarely in what we now see as one of the most disgraceful episodes in American history.

For many of us, the more we know about Clark, the less we actually like him. In some paradoxical way, he lived too long to be an American hero. It is important for us to remember that William Clark was a man of his times: steady, honest, intelligent, resourceful, dedicated to public service, a patriot, a reliable and unendingly loyal friend, an outstanding public servant, a loving husband and father, and he was a fabulous mapmaker.

Whatever his faults, we love Clark for his simple and candid expressions of joy, wonder and exasperation. We love him for his immense fund of strength and goodwill. We love him because no matter what the impediments, or how severe the burden, he proceeded on. We love him for his doomed struggle with the English language. We love him because he saw something endearing in the Shoshone-Hidatsa Indian woman Sacagawea and her baby boy, whom he called “my dancing boy Baptiste.” Above all, we admire him for his unwavering love for that troubled and broken soul Meriwether Lewis through thick and thin, for better and worse, in moments of heroic discovery and when Lewis could not even any longer hold a job.

And we know—even if we don’t like to admit it—that by any rational standard it should be called the Clark and Lewis Expedition. For the Unfinished Journey, I’m Clay Jenkinson.

Peter Coyote: I’m Peter Coyote. This program was produced by Lewis & Clark College and Oregon Public Broadcasting. The producer is Eve Epstein, audio engineer Steven Kray, assistant producer Sherry Manning. Original music composed and conducted by Aaron Meyer and Bill Lamb. The executive producers are Clay Jenkinson and Morgan Holm. Major funding is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding was provided by the National Park Service and the Jonsson Family Foundation. Support for this program also comes from this station and Public Radio International stations and is made possible in part by the PRI Program Fund whose contributors include the Ford Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

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