

# LEWIS AND CLARK— Tackling the West with Pennsylvania’s Best

by Brady J. Crytzer

From May 1804 to September 1806, the United States Army’s Corps of Discovery explored the vast western frontier. Led by Captain Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, the expedition was powered by some of Pennsylvania’s finest anglers. From east to west, the Commonwealth played a critical role in the success of America’s most legendary adventure.

After signing the Louisiana Purchase, President Thomas Jefferson assigned Captain Meriwether Lewis to lead a force to the Pacific Ocean. America’s new lands purchased from France totaled 828,800 square miles, and Lewis knew that his men would need to hunt and fish to survive. The Corps of Discovery would begin its journey in Pennsylvania, and the vast Ohio River would be their superhighway west.

Before setting out for the frontier city of Pittsburgh in the spring of 1803, Lewis stopped at the Old Experienced Tackle Shop in Philadelphia for supplies. The fishing shop was located between Front Street and Second Street downtown. It supplied “a complete and general assortment of all kinds of fishing tackle, for the use of either Sea or River.”

Owned by George R. Lawton, the store had everything that Lewis needed to support his men. That day, Lewis purchased 125 large fishing hooks and fishing lines made of horsehair,

➔ An original sketch of a “White Salmon Trout” (Coho Salmon) by William Clark, 1805.



paintings-courtesy of Independence National Historical Park

William Clark (left) and Meriwether Lewis (right) explored 8,000 miles and changed American history.



scan-courtesy of Missouri Historical Society via Wikimedia Commons



silk, cotton, hemp and “Indian Grass.” He also secured a “sportsman’s flask” and an “8 stave reel.” Besides these essentials, Lawton sold cork floats adorned with goose or swan feathers, fishing rods and artificial flies including moths, hackles, minnows, chubs, grasshoppers, frogs, mice and birds.

In total, Lewis outfitted the Corps of Discovery for \$25.37.

After arriving in Pittsburgh that summer, Lewis began the task of constructing a keelboat suitable for river travel. Although the ship would not be finished until August, Lewis spent the season recruiting Pittsburgh’s best anglers and hunters to join his Corps. As Pittsburgh was a western settlement, its residents were expert outdoorsmen well-suited for the challenges of wilderness life.

Lewis and his men set sail from Pittsburgh on August 31, 1803. As they sailed down the Ohio River, Lewis made careful notes of the places he passed including the sites of modern Ambridge, Conway, Freedom, Rochester, Beaver and Midland, Pennsylvania. Along the way, the Corps picked up a Newfoundland dog named Seaman, a breed famous for its work on fishing boats. William Clark would join the force near Louisville, KY, a short time later.

Over the next 2 years, the Corps of Discovery would use its Pennsylvania anglers and George Lawton’s Philadelphia tackle to snag lunkers of legendary proportion. During their expedition, they sailed up

the Mississippi and Missouri rivers catching catfish, measuring more than 4 feet long and weighing upwards of 130 pounds.

When they dropped their lines in America’s western waters, Lewis and Clark discovered new species including Channel Catfish (*Ictalurus punctatus*) and the Westslope Cutthroat Trout (*Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi*), which still carries their names. Lewis described the Channel Catfish as having “eyes Small & tale much like that of a Dolfin.”

During their mission, the Corps of Discovery would eventually reach the Pacific Ocean eating salmon harvested along the Columbia and Snake rivers. Whether fried, smoked, dried or boiled, fish were a critical part of Lewis and Clark’s survival in the backcountry.

Traveling 8,000 miles for more than 2½ years, Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery captured America’s imagination. Their journey to the Pacific and back sparked a spirit of excitement and fueled the dreams of a brighter national future. Their incredible achievements would not have been possible without the frontier anglers of the Keystone State. ☐

---

*Brady J. Crytzer teaches history at Robert Morris University. The author of seven books studying the early history of Pennsylvania, he lives and fishes outside of Pittsburgh.*

