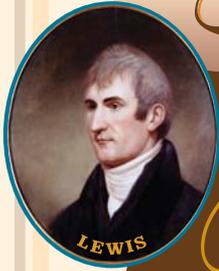


The Lewis and Clark Expedition.



Fishing and Boating

200 Years Ago

by Deborah Weisberg

Two hundred years ago, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark were well on their way to finding the Northwest Passage, having set out in a keelboat built and launched near Pittsburgh on a summer day when its rivers were treacherously low.

Corps of Discovery II re-enactors are now re-creating the 28-month, 8,000-mile journey, thanks to scores of organizations, including the PA Fish & Boat Commission, which supported the bicentennial launch in Elizabeth, a river town south of Pittsburgh, last August. Historians cannot agree on whether the boat was built in Elizabeth or in Pittsburgh. Nevertheless, by all accounts it was a marvel—a 55-foot long, eight-foot wide wooden craft designed for upstream as well as downstream travel.

Meriwether Lewis was the personal secretary to President Thomas Jefferson, who, eager for westward expansion and trade with American Indians, commissioned the \$2,500 military trip.

Jefferson had just made the Louisiana Purchase, and Pittsburgh, with its rivers, was a gateway to the west. It also was becoming an industrial hub, owing to hills rich with coal. As early as 1803, the banks of the Monongahela were being deforested for fuel, and there were

rumblings among the town's 2,000 settlers about water pollution.

Next to coal and textiles, boat-building was a thriving Pittsburgh industry, with eight builders crafting barges, flatboats, keelboats and canoes. Lewis' 11-man crew had to wait an extra six weeks for its vessel, forcing the launch when the Monongahela River had reached a record low.

In the days before locks and dams, Pittsburgh's rivers were shallow enough to walk across in some places. Sandbars between McKees Rocks and Neville Island—one of the Ohio River's hottest fishing spots today—grounded the keelboat, and the crew repeatedly had to transfer cargo



VIEW OF THE CITY OF PITTSBURGH IN 1817.

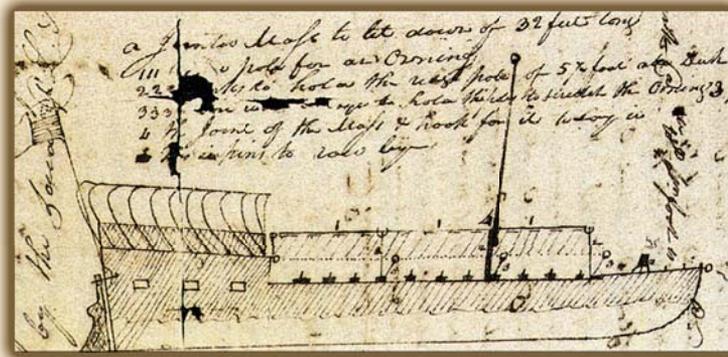
Taken from a sketch drawn by Mrs. E.C. Gibson Wife of Jas. Gibson Esq. of the Philada. Bar. while on her Wedding Tour in 1817.

Lewis and Clark portraits courtesy of Independence National Historical Park. Image of Pittsburgh's Point courtesy of Sen. John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center. Next page: Keelboat sketch courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Keelboat replica photograph courtesy of the Sen. John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center.

to flat-bottomed boats, called piroques, to keep it afloat.

The boat had enough room for 10 tons of provisions, some of which Lewis had gathered in Philadelphia. George Lawton's tackle shop sold him 125 large fishhooks tied onto leaders, mostly for trade with American Indians. Because it was America's center of enlightenment, Philadelphia was where Lewis spent three months training for the trip, learning about first aid, American Indian culture, celestial navigation and other natural sciences.

Four days after the launch, Lewis, who would ultimately document 178 plant and 122 animal species and subspecies, wrote in his journal that the Ohio River at the mouth of Mill Creek was so shallow and clear, "we see sturgeon, bass, pike, etc." but that the party had "too much of importance to do than gigging fish."



The sketch of the expedition's keelboat, which was built in Pittsburgh, was completed by William Clark and included in his journal. The full-scale replica keelboat, built by the Discovery Expedition of St. Charles, was displayed in Pittsburgh last summer.

Catfish and "perch" were noted in subsequent entries. Those "perch" would have included walleyes and various sunfishes, such as largemouth bass. Lake sturgeon, once native to the Ohio River Watershed, have been gone from the river for more than a century, though they remain in Lake Erie. Lewis also may have been referring to paddlefish, a sturgeon cousin that the Commission is now attempting to reintroduce to Pittsburgh's rivers. They, too, were as native to the Ohio River Watershed as were sturgeon and catfish, but they were all but extirpated by industrialization along the rivers over the last 85 years, and by the installation of locks and dams that stemmed free flow, and, hence, their spawning migration.

Lewis and Clark learned from American Indians how to smoke fish. They also learned noodling, or catching fish barehanded, a practice that is still allowed in the Midwest in some circumstances today but is banned in Pennsylvania. The expedition's most effective means of fishing was with trail, trammel and brush nets that the crew wove with linen, cotton and other fibers, or with traps, called weirs, which they fashioned from willow branches.

Fish were gutted and cleaned of fat. Then they were preserved in salt water to keep down bacteria, or jerked (dried) on racks made of willow or cottonwood. Kegs of salt were kept on board and, because it was so valuable, recycled after every use. For meals, according to Army regulations, fish were broiled in brass kettles with whatever else had been harvested, including woodchuck, elk, antelope, bear, wolf, fox, pelican, prairie dog, duck, mule deer, badger, coyote, plover and porcupine (Clark's favorite). With luck, wild onions and prairie turnips could be added to the mix.

Eight wooden stave reels—which are wound mechanically—were purchased along with hooks. Fishhooks were then a thriving manufacturing business. Steel hooks were the up-and-coming thing, but they had no eyes and were instead splayed, or shaped like spoons. They were tied to



line with a hangman's knot. In the absence of rods, these rigs might have been fished by hand or tied to tree branches. Lewis and Clark probably used the hooks in barter, along with their handmade nets.

Though trade with American Indians was a big success, finding a water route from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean was not, and the crew was thwarted at the Continental Divide. Though the Northwest Passage was a bust, the day-to-day discoveries documented in the Lewis and Clark journals of a trip, which began in Pennsylvania, have proven to be the far more valuable yield. Besides providing historical insight, they symbolize Americans' pioneering spirit and the role our rivers have played—and still play—in bringing adventures to life. ☐

Water Trails Then and Now

Even though Lewis and Clark's water-trail expedition pursued economic goals in an adventurous setting, today's Pennsylvania 17 water trails still invite adventurous anglers and boaters to explore Pennsylvania's waterways.

The Pennsylvania Fish & Boat Commission designates official Pennsylvania water trails and offers a full range of technical support to local water trail partners. For more information, contact the Commission at 717-705-7807, or email thoford@state.pa.us. Visit the Commission's web site water trail pages at www.fish.state.pa.us.