

Lewis and Clark at Big Bone Lick

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Since the 1780s, President Jefferson had been interested in finding a water route to the Pacific. However, until 1803, he had been unable to put together an expedition to explore the territory west of the United States. By the time the Louisiana Territory was purchased from France (for \$15 million) in May 1803, Meriwether Lewis had agreed to lead Jefferson's western exploration and Congress had set aside funds for the voyage. In June, Meriwether Lewis invited Kentuckian William Clark to join the expedition as co-leader. Lewis headed west from Washington, gathering supplies and enlisting crew members, with the goal of meeting up with Clark at the Falls of the Ohio in Clarksville, Indiana (across the river from Louisville, Kentucky) before winter. This portion of the expedition set the stage and was critical to the success of the Corps of Discovery. It has been called the Eastern Legacy.

After securing guns and ammunition from the Federal Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Meriwether Lewis headed to Pittsburgh to supervise the construction of the 55-foot long keelboat that served the expedition. Lewis began his voyage down the Ohio River on August 31, 1803, leaving Pittsburgh with 11 hands, the keelboat, and another small boat. Throughout the month of September, Lewis and his party traveled the Ohio River. Lewis acquired supplies at various points, enlisted new expedition members, and discharged others. John Colter, one of the "nine young men from Kentucky" joined the expedition at Maysville.

On September 28, 1803, Meriwether Lewis and his party reached Cincinnati. The party was weary from their 500-mile trip down the Ohio River so they slowed down a bit and spent a few days in Cincinnati. There, Lewis wrote a lengthy letter to Thomas Jefferson, detailing his activities in and around Cincinnati. Lewis described an excavation conducted in May, 1803, at Big Bone Lick by Cincinnati physician Dr. William Goforth, who was keenly interested in the fossil remains of mammoth and mastodon. In his letter to Jefferson, Lewis described Dr. Goforth's collections - both those in Cincinnati and those still at Big Bone Lick.

Thomas Jefferson had known of Big Bone Lick for decades and had even received a tooth from the site through George Rogers Clark in 1781. In a November, 1782, letter to George Rogers Clark, Jefferson states his desire for additional fossils from the site, saying that "a specimen of each of the several species of bones now to be found is to me the most desirable object in Natural History." President Jefferson promoted the Corps of Discovery as a means for finding an all water route to the Pacific and a way to establish trade with Native Americans in the west. Jefferson also believed that huge mammals like the mammoth may still live in the remote western regions of western North America. In fact, he gave Lewis and Clark specific instructions to be on the lookout for evidence of such animals on their voyage.

When Meriwether Lewis came through Cincinnati in 1803, he had already been directed by Thomas Jefferson to meet with Dr. Goforth and visit Big Bone Lick with the goal of obtaining the bones of giant mammals. Although he was a product of the Age of Enlightenment, Jefferson's keen interest in these animals and their remains goes far beyond the goals of scientific inquiry. For the third President of the newly formed United States, these bones were critical to American national identity. Proving their existence and origin would give America an ancient past and demonstrated prehistory, based on nature and scientific principles. These bones were viewed as America's equivalent to the ancient Greek and Roman ruins of Europe!

On October 1, 1803, Meriwether Lewis sent his men and the keelboat down river from Cincinnati to Big Bone Lick. Anticipating that the 53-mile trip would take 3 days by water, Lewis traveled the 17-mile overland route on horseback. The last few miles of Lewis' overland trip closely follow the modern route of Big Bone Road in Boone County. Lewis sent Jefferson several specimens from Big Bone Lick, including a large tusk, several "grinders" (molars), and "such other specimens as I may be enabled to procure." In the spring of 1804, the bones were sent down river, but were eventually lost when the boat sank at Natchez, Mississippi. The frustrating loss of these specimens, in part, compelled Jefferson to send William Clark back to Big Bone Lick in 1807.

William Clark returns to Big Bone Lick in 1807

President Thomas Jefferson viewed Meriwether Lewis' 1803 trip to Big Bone Lick as an opportunity to gather bones of the giant mammals he believed were still living in western North America. The loss of those bones on the Mississippi River prompted Jefferson to again send someone on his behalf to collect specimens from famed Big Bone. For years, Jefferson had maintained contact with owners of the property around Big Bone Lick and had permission for another expedition to the Lick. He had a list of particular bones of the mammoth's anatomy needed to complete an assemblage of the creature for the American Philosophical Society collection in Philadelphia. He also wanted to gather enough duplicate bones to supply a complete mammoth skeleton to the National Institute of France.

President Jefferson wanted someone in whom he had complete faith and confidence, someone with the skills, discipline, and physical ability to complete the task. William Clark was the only man considered for the job. Accompanied by Cincinnati physician Dr. William Goforth and at least 8 "hired hands," William Clark went to Big Bone Lick on September 6, 1807. William's brother George Rogers Clark was also present. York, who had not yet been freed from slavery by William Clark, was almost certainly there as well. Thomas Jefferson funded the expedition.

Camp, Big Bone Lick, September 20, 1807:

"Sir, I have been employed two weeks at this place with ten hands searching for the bones of the mammoth?" - excerpt from a letter from William Clark to Thomas Jefferson.

While the first two weeks Clark and his party spent at Big Bone Lick were not very production, they eventually recovered a huge collection of bones. These specimens were packed and sent down river to Locust Grove - George Rogers Clark's home at the Falls of the Ohio. In 1808, Jefferson finally received his long-awaited shipment of bones from Big Bone Lick. He had 300 of these specimens unpacked and arranged on the floor in a room at the White House, where he could study them at his leisure. He invited Dr. Caspar Wistar of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia to view the magnificent collection.

Although Thomas Jefferson never personally visited Big Bone Lick, he made it famous worldwide. Thanks to Jefferson, Big Bone Lick is recognized as the birthplace of American Vertebrate Paleontology. Monticello is considered the legacy of Jefferson's passion for architecture. Big Bone Lick is the legacy of his passion for paleontology. With the help of Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and George Rogers Clark, Thomas Jefferson realized his passion for this place in Kentucky known as Big Bone Lick.

Some of the fossils from this collection can be seen today at Monticello and in the National Natural History Museum Paris France.

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