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# George Drouillard and John Colter: Heroes of the American West

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**CLAREMONT McKENNA COLLEGE**

**GEORGE DROUILLARD AND JOHN COLTER: HEROES OF THE AMERICAN WEST**

SUBMITTED TO  
PROFESSOR LILY GEISMER

AND  
DEAN GREGORY HESS  
BY  
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FOR  
SENIOR THESIS  
SPRING/2012  
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## Introduction

The United States underwent a dramatic territorial change during the early part of the nineteenth century, paving the way for rapid exploration and expansion of the American West. On April 30, 1803 France and the United States signed the Louisiana Purchase Treaty, causing the Louisiana Territory to transfer from French to United States control for the price of fifteen million dollars.<sup>1</sup> The territorial acquisition was agreed upon by Napoleon Bonaparte, First Consul of the Republic of France, and Robert R. Livingston and James Monroe, both of whom were acting on behalf of the United States. Monroe and Livingston only negotiated for New Orleans and the mouth of the Mississippi, but Napoleon in regard to the territory said “I renounce Louisiana. It is not only New Orleans that I will cede. It is the whole country without reserve.”<sup>2</sup> The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the young nation and marked the beginning of one of, if not the greatest period of American exploration and expansion. Within a century of its purchase, the Louisiana Territory population grew from roughly fifty thousand to about fourteen million and the development of the area led to new and great sources of wealth and growth for the young American nation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Treaty Between the United States of America and the French Republic*, in the Avalon Project, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/louis1.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/louis1.asp) (Accessed January 17, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Grace Raymond Hebard, *The Pathbreakers from River to Ocean: The Story of the Great West from the Time of Coronado to the Present 2<sup>nd</sup> edition*, (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1912), page 16.

<sup>3</sup> The territorial growth of the United States and the impact that it has had on the nation is covered in detail by William A. Mowry in his book *The Territorial Growth of the United States* (first published in 1902) and

In order for the land of the Louisiana Purchase and the unclaimed territories of the Far West to be settled there was a need for exploration. The majority of this exploration was conducted by two main groups; governmental exploration groups and fur trappers. The most famous and successful governmental exploration group was the Corps of Discovery, better known as the Lewis and Clark expedition.<sup>4</sup> After purchasing the Louisiana Territory, President Thomas Jefferson chose his private secretary Meriwether Lewis to command, alongside Captain William Clark<sup>5</sup>, an expedition to explore the Louisiana Territory and the unclaimed territory beyond the newly purchased territory.

Ray Allen Billington's book, "Westward Expansion," provides a good overview on the objectives and accomplishments of the expedition, while also providing context for how the expedition fits into the overall picture of westward expansion.<sup>6</sup> President Jefferson laid out his expectations of the expedition in a letter he wrote to Meriwether Lewis prior to the departure of the expedition. President Jefferson instructed the Corps of Discovery to complete two main objectives; establish good relations with the Indian

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similar analysis of the territorial growth of the nation and the impact of it can be found in the following books: *Westward Expansion* (first published in 1949) by Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge and *The Era of Expansion: 1800-1848* (first published in 1969) by Don E. Fehrenbacher.

<sup>4</sup> While there were other governmental exploration groups and explorers such as Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long, these other explorers had nowhere near the same impact as the Corps of Discovery.

<sup>5</sup> While William Clark is referred to as Captain by the Corps of Discovery, he was actually commissioned as a Lieutenant. When Lewis recruited Clark to command the Corps of Discovery alongside himself he asked President Jefferson to promote Clark to the rank of Captain and President Jefferson sent paperwork to promote Clark. However due to internal politics of the Army at the time, the promotion did not go through and Clark was still just a Lieutenant. The other members of the Corps of Discovery referred to Clark as Captain and Clark was a Captain in all but name.

<sup>6</sup> Billington's *Westward Expansion* is one of the most comprehensive histories on the opening of the American West. It provides a broad overview of many of the important occurrences of the American West. For more information on the history of American territorial growth can be found in William A. Mowry's book *The Territorial Growth of the United States* and for more information on the specific era of expansion covered in this paper, Don E. Fehrenbacher's *The Era of Expansion: 1800-1848* provides solid information on some of the political and economic issues that arose during the era.

nations and learn the geography and nature of the territory.<sup>7</sup> The reason behind these objectives was to facilitate the expansion of American into the newly purchased and uncharted territory beyond the Mississippi River. Billington's history covers President Jefferson's motivation behind the exploration of the West, focusing on the aspect of trade across the continent. Billington wrote that Jefferson, as a loyal patriot, believed that the United States "must locate unrevealed riches before any European power was tempted to settle uncomfortably close to the American borders," and as a scientist and president "he wanted to know what plants and animals abounded in the unexplored West, whether the fur trade could be developed there, and how the Missouri River might be used as a route across the continent."<sup>8</sup>

The expedition set out on July 5, 1803, traveled to the Pacific Ocean, made the return journey, and arrived back in St. Louis on September 23, 1806. Along the way the Corps of Discovery explored thousands of miles of unknown country, discovered and mapped several usable passes through the Rocky Mountains, made valuable scientific observations, and established a friendly relationship with half-a-dozen Indian tribes, all of which only cost the nation \$49,000.<sup>9</sup> The accomplishments of the Lewis and Clark expedition helped to pave the way for the fur trade industry which completed what the Corps of Discovery had started and "opened the gates of the West to settlers."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *President Thomas Jefferson's Instructions to Captain Meriwether* in, vol. 2 of *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents*.

<sup>8</sup> Ray Allen Billington and Martin Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier 5<sup>th</sup> edition*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1982), page 387.

<sup>9</sup> Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier 5<sup>th</sup> edition*, page 392.

<sup>10</sup> Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier 5<sup>th</sup> edition*, page 408.

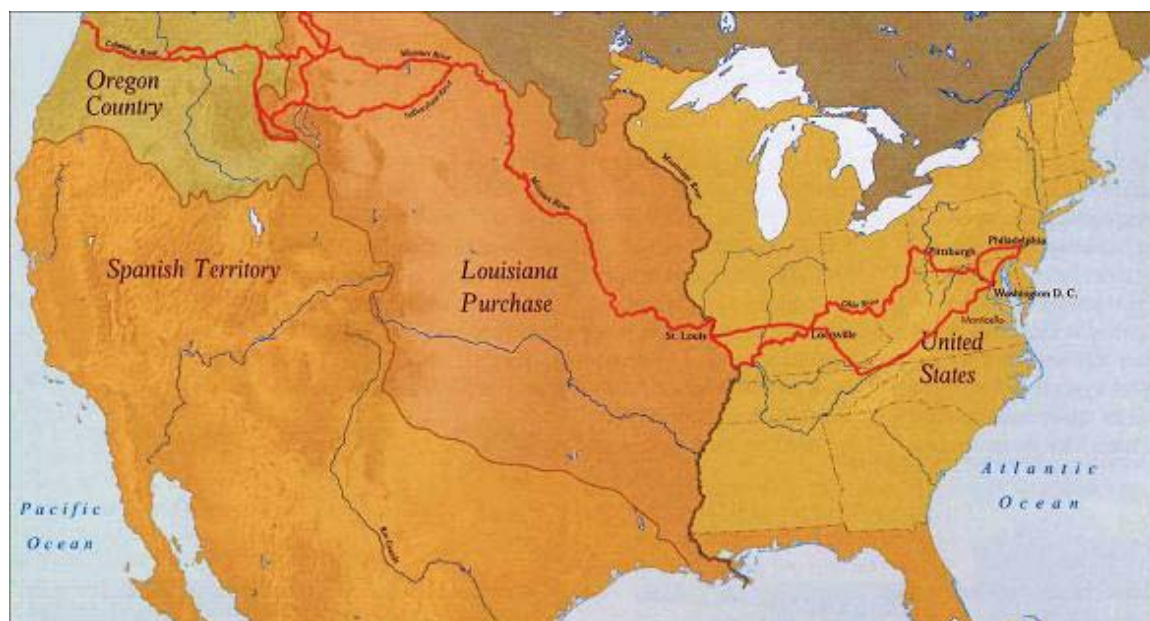


Figure 1. Route taken by the Corps of Discovery. From *Roanoke Times*. 2011, "Proposed Eastern Legacy for Lewis and Clark Expedition May Have a Botetourt Component," January 10. <http://blogs.roanoke.com/botetourtview/2011/01/proposed-eastern-legacy-for-lewis-and-clark-expedition-may-have-a-botetourt-component/> (accessed April 20, 2012).

Once again, Billington is the respected voice on the broad history of the fur trade industry and its impact on the expansion of the American West. Billington focuses on the efforts of the four main fur trading companies; the Missouri Fur Company, the American Fur Company, the Hudson's Bay Company, and the North West Company. The first American company was set up and ran by Manuel Lisa and was called the Missouri Fur Company. Lisa was inspired by the news from the Lewis and Clark Expedition. After hearing the news of "mountains teeming with beaver, of friendly Indians, and an all-water route along the Missouri River to the rich hunting ground," Lisa set out with a group of forty-two trappers and built Fort Manuel on the mouth of the Big Horn River.<sup>11</sup> The Missouri Fur Company only lasted as a strong power in the region until 1813 but it

<sup>11</sup> Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier* 5<sup>th</sup> edition, page 395.

just one of the fur trading enterprises that helped to make the American West into a trading mecca.

While they were primarily driven by economic goals, the fur trading enterprises helped to fill in the many gaps that the governmental explorers left in the exploration of the American West. The fur traders developed friendly relationships with the Indian nations and traveled up and down the majority of the rivers and streams all in a quest for profit. Inadvertently, these “unofficial explorers” unlocked the “secrets of the West,” plotted out the courses of its rivers, discovered and mapped the passes through its mountains, and by establishing contact with the Indians, the traders prepared the West for settlers. Another history similar to Billington’s, called “The Era of Expansion: 1800-1848,” provided a view on the haphazard nature of exploration by fur traders and their eventual impact. Fur traders “spied out the passes, valleys, and streams, established the first crude trails, and carried word of their discoveries back to frontier settlements,” and even though their excessive trapping cut the fur trade era short, they “had opened the Far West in spectacular fashion.”<sup>12</sup> Billington, along with other historians of the American West, gave the fur trading enterprises resounding credit with his statement that “no single group contributed more to the conquest of the trans-Mississippi region than those eager profit seekers who drew from the environment a valuable resource.”<sup>13</sup>

Most of the available histories on the exploration and expansion of the American West share a few common themes. The histories give a great deal of credit for the

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<sup>12</sup> *The Era of Expansion: 1800-1848* by Don E. Fehrenbacher. Fehrenbacher’s book only provides a surface level evaluation of the fur trade and its impact on the American West. For an in depth look at the history of the American fur trade, the best source is Hiram M. Chittenden’s *History of the American Fur Trade of the American Far West*. The importance of this book is widely recognized and was heavily used by Billington in his book *Westward Expansion*, in which he wrote that for information on the general works of the fur trade the most useful source is Chittenden’s book.

<sup>13</sup> Billington and Ridge, *Westward Expansion: A History of the American Frontier 5<sup>th</sup> edition*, page 395.



expansion of the West to governmental exploratory groups and fur trading enterprises. Another common and important theme is that the histories tend to focus solely on the leaders of the explorations or enterprises. In the two examples of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the Missouri Fur Company, the only people consistently mentioned are the three leaders; Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and Manuel Lisa. This is true of the accounts of the other exploratory groups and fur trading enterprises that are mentioned in Billington's "Westward Expansion" and other similar histories.

But what these histories fail to do is to make any mention of the other people involved in the exploratory groups or fur trading enterprises. It is understandable that men such as Lewis, Clark, and Lisa would garner this kind of attention because the first two were the leaders of arguably the most important exploratory mission in American history and the latter man was the head of one of the first and most successful fur trading enterprises of the American West. Looking at the leaders of exploration and the fur trade provides a good lens with which to view the West on a broad scale in order to get a basic sense as to what happened and why. However, by only focusing on the figure heads of the era and neglecting the smaller players, the histories of the era run the risk of overlooking significant contributors to the exploration and expansion of the American West.

With the histories of the era neglecting to mention other secondary contributors there is a risk of giving credit or blame to the wrong people. If the histories only mention the leader of an exploratory expedition or fur trading enterprise, then a reader of the history will attribute all of the success or failures of the expedition or enterprise to the leader. This becomes a problem because in actuality, different secondary persons may

have been the driving force behind a specific success or failure. By ignoring the efforts of secondary contributors, histories end up distorting history and the secondary contributors who may have had a significant impact, will be forgotten by subsequent generations and their contributions will not get the recognition they deserve.

A close examination of primary evidence from the Corps of Discovery and other journals kept by fur traders reveals the tremendous efforts and achievements of secondary members of the Corps of Discovery and the fur trade. Many of the contributions of these secondary persons were comparable or even more important than the contributions made by the figures that history usually attributes the accomplishments of westward expansion to. Two prime examples of this phenomenon are George Drouillard and John Colter. Both men were members of the Corps of Discovery and played important roles in the exploration and expansion of the American West and have been largely overlooked by the broader histories of the expansion of the American West. Primary evidence of Drouillard and Colter's involvement in the Corps of Discovery and later exploration efforts shows the impact that the two men had during their time in the West.

## Chapter One: George Drouillard, Interpreter and Hunter



Figure 2. Artist's representation of Drouillard standing with his rifle. From "George Drouillard," Lewis and Clark in Kentucky, <http://www.lewisandclarkkentucky.org/people/drouillard.shtml> (accessed April 20, 2012).

President Jefferson put a strong emphasis on Indian relations as an objective of the Corps of Discover's journey and Corps of Discovery member George Drouillard's significant and necessary role in this area highlights the fact that many of the non-

Meriwether Lewis and William Clark members of the Corps of Discover have been largely overlooked by historians of the American West such as Ray Allen Billington.<sup>12</sup> Drouillard's skills as an interpreter and more importantly as a negotiator were not only essential for the completion of President Jefferson's objective of fostering Indian relations, but his skills were also vital to the survival of the Corps of Discovery. His role as an Indian go between helped to start an essential dialogue between the United States and the Indians of the West that would later prove to be of value in the settling of the American West. And most importantly, Drouillard's ability to communicate and negotiate with the Indians in order to ensure the (mostly) safe passage of the Corps of Discovery to and back from the Pacific Ocean. Drouillard's contribution to the Corps of Discovery went beyond Indian relations, he was also the principal hunter for the group and on many occasions his hunting skills kept the Corps of Discovery from starvation. Drouillard's importance to the expedition has received some recognition by modern historians, with one historian writing that "Drouillard became one of the most valuable members of the expedition as both an interpreter and a hunter."<sup>3</sup>

George Drouillard was the son of Pierre Drouillard, a French Canadian, and a Shawnee Indian mother. His father served as a British Indian interpreter and George

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<sup>1</sup> Billington is joined by the other histories that were previously mentioned in conjunction to the Billington history. Billington does not mention Drouillard once in his history. This is largely due in part to the lack of depth that the book goes into, and thus, for information on the individual members of the Corps of Discovery the only reliable source are the expedition's journals.

<sup>2</sup> This lack of emphasis on the role that interpretation played in the expedition was just recently touched upon in an article by Robert R. Hunt called "Eye Talk, Ear Talk." Hunt writes that "The story of communication (and miscommunication) between Lewis and Clark and Native Americans could fill a book – one that has yet to be written." The article goes into some detail about the methods of communication and it provided essential information for writing the interpretation parts of this paper. Also Hunt's recognition of the lack of scholarship on this issue is a step in the right direction and with the continuation of scholarship such as his, hopefully the book that "has yet to be written" will soon be written.

<sup>3</sup> Robert R. Hunt, "Eye Talk, Ear Talk: Sign Language, Translation Chains, and Trade Jargon on the Lewis & Clark Trail," *We Proceeded On* 32, no. 3 (August 2006): 12-19, *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 19, 2012).

most likely picked up his interpretation skills from his father. In his early twenties, Drouillard was an established hunter, woodsman, and interpreter and spent some time at Fort Massac, an American Army base where Drouillard served under Captain Zebulon Pike.<sup>45</sup> Little else is known about Drouillard's pre Corps of Discovery life, except that it was spent along the American frontier where he had ample time and opportunity to hone his interpreting, hunting, and wilderness skills that helped to keep the Corps of Discovery alive during its journey.

President Jefferson instructed the Corps of Discovery to "endeavor to make yourself acquainted, as far as a diligent pursuit of your journey shall admit, with the names of the nations & their numbers," in reference to any of the Indians they came across in their journey.<sup>6</sup> The insistence on bettering the relations with the Indian nations was important for a few different reasons which help to show Jefferson's intentions behind sending out the expedition. Jefferson felt that the United States had to make contact with the native people that inhabited the land which the United States had just purchased. If American citizens were going to successfully use the West as a trading ground and eventual place of settlement, then it would be important for the first official American envoy into the area to establish friendly relations with the Indian nations. This would help to set up a future cooperation that would benefit the use and expansion into the West by the American people. With such an emphasis put on interacting with Indians, the role of interpreter was an important one, and with this in mind, Lewis hired

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<sup>4</sup> John C. Jackson, "The Man Hunter," *We Proceeded On* 35, no. 1 (February 2009): 12-18, *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 20, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Captain Zebulon Pike was the father of the famous explorer Captain Zebulon Pike.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *President Thomas Jefferson's Instructions to Captain Meriwether* in, vol. 2 of *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents*.

Drouillard “in the public service as an Indian Interpreter” on November 11, 1803.<sup>7</sup>

Drouillard was proficient in the use of the Indian language of signs and it was through this method that he was able to serve as an interpreter for the Corps of Discovery. Lewis wrote that Drouillard “understood perfectly the common language of jesticulation [sic] or signs which seems to be universally understood by all the Nations we have yet seen.”<sup>8</sup> In his edition of the Lewis and Clark Journals, Reuben Gold Thwaites wrote about how “a regular code of signs has arisen... among the Plains tribes of Indians, among whom so many varying languages exist, while their mutual need of intercourse has been much greater than among the mountain tribes.”<sup>9</sup> It was not until August 3, 1804 that the Corps of Discovery came in contact with any Indians and Drouillard’s interpreting skills were needed, but after that day, the Corps of Discovery relied upon his skills throughout the journey.

According to Corps of Discovery member Private Joseph Whitehouse’s journal entry for August 3, 1804, Lewis held a council with twelve of the Indian chiefs, six of them from the Missouri tribe and six from the Otoe tribe.<sup>10</sup> Lewis, through the interpretation of Drouillard, delivered a speech to the chiefs in which he informed them “of the change which had taken place, the wishes of (the American) government to cultivate friendship and good understanding,” and an exchange of advice and directions.

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<sup>7</sup> Meriwether Lewis, November 11, 1803 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gary Moulton (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press / University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries-Electronic Text Center, 2005), <http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/journals.php?id=1806-09-04>

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, August 14, 1806 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>9</sup> Reuben Gold Thwaites ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1904), pages 346-347.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Whitehouse, August 3 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> Lewis and Clark gave the chiefs various gifts and medals and after the council they informed Lewis and Clark that they were “well contented with what their fathers (Lewis and Clark)” had said and they were also very gracious about the gifts that the captains had given them.<sup>13</sup> With the Drouillard’s help, the Corps of Discovery’s first Indian interaction was a peaceful and successful one, but even in this first instance there are immediate problems in the journal keeping and its reliability.

Out of the five different Corps of Discovery members that wrote a journal entry for August 3, 1804, only Whitehouse directly acknowledged Drouillard’s involvement and importance as the interpreter for the council. In his journal for the day, Clark wrote down a very detailed amount of information taken from the council, including such valuable information as; the size of the various surrounding tribes, the names of those tribes, and the language that each of them spoke.<sup>14</sup> But nowhere in his journal entry did Clark mention Drouillard or his involvement in the council. This instance brings up the unreliability of the journals that documented the journey and makes it easy to see how integral members of the Corps of Discovery can go unrecognized. However, even though it is a very likely possibility that much of Drouillard’s contributions went unrecorded, from what was recorded, Drouillard was an indispensable member of the Corps of Discovery.

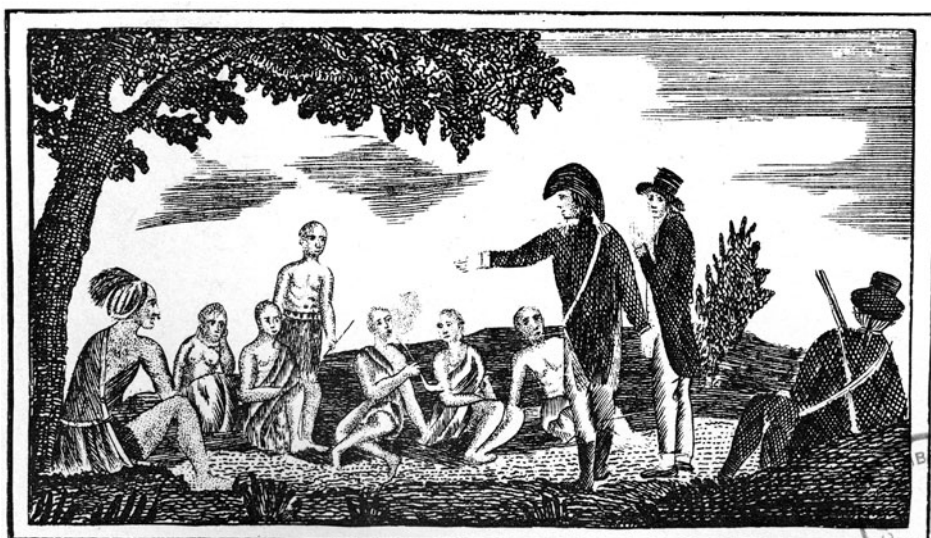
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<sup>11</sup> The change that had taken place was in reference to the United States’ Purchase of the Louisiana Territory.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, August 3, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>13</sup> Whitehouse, August 3, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, August 3, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.



*Captains Lewis & Clark holding a Council with the Indians* Page 17

Figure 3. Illustration of "Captains Lewis & Clark Holding Council with the Indians" published in "Gass's Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition" in 1904. From "Native American Contributions," Revealing the West: Lewis & Clark and the Shaping of America, [http://www.umsl.edu/mercantile/mexhibevents/Past%20Exhibits/lewis\\_and\\_clark\\_maps/main.htm](http://www.umsl.edu/mercantile/mexhibevents/Past%20Exhibits/lewis_and_clark_maps/main.htm) (accessed April 20, 2012).<sup>15</sup>

After this first Indian interaction, Drouillard took on more responsibility in Indian interactions. He was almost always one of the select few Corps of Discovery members that accompanied one of the captains to Indian councils and was one of the only members that the captains trusted and allowed to interact with the Indians on his own. Drouillard accompanied Lewis and was needed to interpret on August 14, 1805 when the Corps of Discovery first came in contact with the Shoshone tribe. Through quick thinking and successful communication, Lewis succeeded in fostering a valuable cooperation with the Shoshone tribe.

On the 14<sup>th</sup>, Lewis, Drouillard, and two privates were scouting for Indians ahead of the rest of the Corps of Discovery when they came upon three female Shoshone

<sup>15</sup> This illustration of an Indian council is another representation of how the role of the interpreter went unrecognized. Only Lewis and Clark are pictured talking with the Indians, something they would have been unable to do without the help of Drouillard or another interpreter.



Indians. Upon seeing the men, one of the women “immediately took to flight” while “an elderly woman and a girl of about 12 years old remained.”<sup>16</sup> By laying down his rifle and directing his men to do the same, Lewis was able to assure the remaining women that they meant no harm. Drouillard then convinced the old woman to fetch the fleeing woman so as to not alarm the tribe and “exasperate the natives that they would perhaps attack us without enquiring who [Lewis and his men] were.”<sup>17</sup> After the old woman brought back the young woman, Drouillard went on to tell the women that Lewis wanted to accompany them to their village and “become acquainted with the chiefs and warriors of their nation.”<sup>18</sup> When they came upon the rest of the Shoshone tribe, the women relayed Drouillard’s words to the chief and to Lewis’s relief, the chief and two others “advanced and embraced me very affectionately in their way which is by putting their left arm over you right shoulder clasping your back, while they apply their left cheek to yours and frequently vociferate the word *âh-hi'-e, âh-hi'-e,*” thus marking the beginning of a partnership between the Corps of Discovery and chief Cameahwait which was instrumental to the success of the Corps of Discovery.<sup>19</sup>

During the first council with the Shoshone, in which the first bonds of cooperation and promises were made that would end up being essential to the Corps Discovery, Drouillard was the only way in which Lewis was able to communicate with Cameahwait. Through Cameahwait, Lewis learned important information about the surrounding geography which would greatly shape the upcoming decisions about how to navigate across the Bitterroot Mountains. When asked about crossing the mountains at the Corps

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis, August 13, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>17</sup> Lewis, August 13, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>18</sup> Lewis, August 13, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis, August 13, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

of Discovery's planned course, Cameahwait informed Lewis that if they were to continue of the river that they would encounter

“vast mountains of rock eternally covered with snow through which the river passed. That the perpendicular and even jutting rocks so closely hemmed in the river that there was no possibility of passing along the shore; that the bed of the river was obstructed by sharp pointed rocks and the rapidity of the stream was such that the whole surface of the river was beat into perfect foam as far as the eye could reach,” and if they were to leave the river that “the mountains were also inaccessible to man or horse.”<sup>20</sup>

This information must have devastated Lewis, but Cameahwait gave him a glimmer of hope. Drouillard translated Cameahwait's information that there was “an old man of [Cameahwait's] nation a day's march below who could probably give [Lewis] some information of the country to the [Northwest],”<sup>21</sup> which was how the Corps of Discovery first heard of the Indian named Old Toby who would guide them across the inaccessible Continental Divide.

During its contact with the Shoshone and other Indians during its journey, the Corps of Discovery was able to pick up valuable information about the Indian ways of life. This knowledge was highly sought after by President Jefferson and other Americans. The knowledge that the Corps of Discovery and its journals brought back regarding the Indians was very influential on the emergence of the fur trade. The fur traders would be able to use this knowledge to model their approach in ways that would be advantageous to them and help them to better cooperate with the Indians which were essential to success of the different fur trading enterprises.

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<sup>20</sup> Lewis, August 14, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, August 14, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

There were two other notable instances in which Drouillard's interpretation skills were useful. The first instance was when the Corps of Discovery was preparing to leave their winter quarters at Fort Clatsop at the mouth of the Columbia River in present day Oregon. The Corps of Discovery was in need of canoes which they would have been able to easily purchase from the Clatsop Indians if it were not for their lack of resources with which to purchase the canoes.<sup>22</sup> Even with the lack of resources or any other kind of leverage, Drouillard was able to acquire the canoes that were vital in getting the Corps back to the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains. Once the Corps of Discovery returned to the Bitterroots, in a situation that mirrored the first time they stood in front of the mountains, Drouillard's greatest act of Indian relations secured the Corps of Discovery a guide to once again get them across the Bitterroots.

Drouillard's singular effort in securing a guide for the trip across the Bitterroots was perhaps one of the most important acts that ensured the success of the journey. After attempting to cross the Bitterroots without a guide, Lewis came to the conclusion that "if we proceeded and should get bewildered in these mountains the certainty was that we should lose all our horses and consequently our baggage instruments perhaps our papers and thus eminently risk the loss of the discoveries which we had already made if we should be so fortunate as to escape with life," leading Lewis and Clark to the realization that they needed a guide.<sup>23</sup> The captains sent Drouillard, along with Private Shannon, to the Nez Perce village to hire a guide. Drouillard was given the full responsibility and authority to negotiate for and hire an Indian guide to take the Corps of Discovery across

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*, (New York: Touchstone, 1997) pages 334-335.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis, June 17, 1806 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

the Bitterroots. Drouillard and Shannon were gone for six days and finally returned on June 23, 1806 with “three Indians who had consented to accompany [the Corps of Discovery] to the falls of the Missouri for the compensation of two guns.”<sup>24</sup> The three Indian guides successfully led the Corps of Discovery across the mountains, thus ensuring the safe passage home for the Corps and ending the Corps of Discovery’s relations with the Indians west of the Continental Divide on a successful note. These examples of Drouillard’s role as interpreter are just some of many instances of when Drouillard was instrumental as an Indian go between and perhaps the only area in which Drouillard was more essential was hunting.

Hunting was of the utmost importance to the Corps of Discovery and if it were not for successful hunting then the expedition would not have had the same outcome as it did. The aspect of hunting is not covered by most of the histories that cover the expedition, with historians focusing instead on matters such as Indian relations and exploration.<sup>25</sup> But without successful hunting, the Corps of Discovery would have starved and all of their Indian relations and discovery would have been for nothing. George Drouillard, the primary hunter of the Corps of Discovery, kept the Corps of Discovery from starvation and improved Indian relations through his successful hunting, providing one of the most essential services of the journey.

Once the Corps of Discovery left the settled lands of the eastern territory and entered the newly purchased western territory, the Corps of Discovery was without any

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<sup>24</sup> Lewis, June 23, 1806 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>25</sup> Once again, looking at the Billington history, there is no mention of any hunting or the importance and necessity of hunting for the success of the journey. The best source that does mention hunting are the journals themselves, and it is hard to find broader histories that make mention of hunting. Such histories choose to instead focus on other aspects of the journey.

means of acquiring food besides hunting or the infrequent meeting of Indian tribes. Even when in contact with Indians, in order to preserve their tradable goods for improving Indian relations, the Corps of Discovery still hunted on their own. Due to their unbalanced diets, the Corps of Discovery required enormous amounts of food to survive their cross country journey. According to Captain Lewis, the Corps of Discovery ate “an emensity [sic] of meat; it require[d] 4 deer, an Elk and a deer, or one buffaloe [sic], to supply [the Corps of Discovery] plentifully 24 hours.”<sup>26</sup> Even in the game rich lands of the west, this diet was difficult to provide for over the entire course of the journey and in the end, in the best estimate by Raymond Darwin Burroughs, editor of *The Natural History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, the Corps of Discovery consumed a total of 1,001 deer, 375 elk, 227 bison, 62 antelopes, 35 big horn sheep, 43 grizzly bears, 23 black bears, 113 beavers, 16 otters, 104 geese, 46 grouse, 9 turkeys, 48 plovers, 1 wolf, 190 dogs, and 12 horses.<sup>27</sup>

Captains Lewis and Clark would usually send out parties of two men out in front of the rest of the Corps of Discovery to do the hunting. While the rest of the men were hauling all of the equipment, the hunters, almost always led by Drouillard, would find and hunt game and leave the carcasses along the way for the main party to clean and prepare for consumption. During these constant hunting excursions, Drouillard was in command and Lewis and Clark were completely reliant upon his decisions and ability to maintain the Corps of Discovery’s food supply. Countless times Drouillard would out hunt his companion, one example being a hunting excursion on July 11<sup>th</sup> 1804 when

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<sup>26</sup> Lewis, July 13, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>27</sup> Raymond D. Burroughs and Robert C. Carriker, eds., *The Natural History of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995).

Drouillard and Joseph Fields went hunting and Drouillard killed six deer while Fields only killed one and another hunting party came back empty handed.<sup>28</sup> As the Corps of Discovery hunger grew their spirits sank accordingly and Drouillard's successful hunting combated the men's sinking spirits. In one instance, after the Corps of Discovery had gone a few days without food, Drouillard brought in two bears which caused the men to be "very [sic] lively Danceing [sic] & Singing."<sup>29</sup>

In addition to combating the hunger and depression of the Corps of Discovery, Drouillard's hunting abilities also indirectly helped to improve Indian relations, one example of this was the Corps of Discovery's interaction with the Shoshone Indians during August of 1805. While searching for the Shoshone Indians during early August, the Corps of Discovery was running out of food so "having nothing to eat [Lewis] set Drewyer to the woodlands to [Lewis's] left in order to kill deer." Drouillard and the other hunters returned to the camp with three deer and four elk, which gave the Corps of Discovery a "plentiful supply of meat once more."<sup>30</sup> In their continuing search for the Shoshone, the Corps of Discovery was still struggling to find sufficient food and had to rely upon Drouillard who consistently kept the men from starvation bringing in deer which the Corps of Discovery "Stood in great need off."<sup>31</sup> Once the Corps of Discovery did find the Shoshone, both the Corps of Discovery and the Indians were struggling to find food and the task of providing for both parties fell on Drouillard who succeeded in maintaining the food supplies of both the Corps of Discovery and the Shoshone. His

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<sup>28</sup> Clark, July 11, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>29</sup> Clark, July 11, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis, August 6, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>31</sup> John Ordway, August 7, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

ability to keep both parties from starving was a big advantage in cultivating a working relationship with the Shoshone which later came in use.

After making contact with the Shoshone tribe on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 1805, Captain Lewis wrote the following in his journal which shows the need for food from both the Corps of Discovery and the Shoshone: “This morning I arose [sic] very early and as hungary [sic] as a wolf. I had eat nothing yesterday except one scant meal of the flour and berries except the dryed [sic] cakes of berries which did not appear to satisfy my appetite.”<sup>32</sup> The next day, recognizing the need for food, Lewis sent “Drewyer and Shields before this morning in order to kill some meat as neither the Indians nor ourselves had any thing to eat.” What followed the successful hunt of Drouillard showed just how much the Corps of Discovery and the Indians were in need of food and the importance of Drouillard’s hunting abilities in keeping the Corps of Discovery alive and helping to bring about a working relationship between the Corps of Discovery and the Shoshone. Lewis’s description of how the Indians approached the two deer that Drouillard killed, while fairly gruesome, helps to show the necessity of the kills:

“[The Indians] dismounted and ran in tumbling over each other like a parcel of famished dogs each seizing and tearing away a part of the intestens [sic] which had been previously thrown out by Drewyer who killed it; the seen was such when I arrived that had I not have had a pretty keen appetite myself I am confident I should not have taisted [sic] any part of that venison shortly. Each one had a piece of some description and all eating most ravenously. Some were eating the kidnies [sic] the melt and liver and the blood running from the corners of their mouths, others were in a similar situation with the paunch and guts but the exuding substance in this case from their lips was of a different description. One of the last who attacted [sic] my attention particularly had been fortunate in his allotment or reather [sic] active in the division, he had provided himself

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis, August 15, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

with about nine feet of the small guts one end of which he was chewing on while with his hands he was squeezing [sic] the contents out at the other. I really did not until now think that human nature ever presented itself in a shape so nearly allied [sic] to the brute creation.”<sup>33</sup>

Lewis then took the actual meat of the deer and divided it among the Corps of Discovery and the Indians, staving off starvation for both parties. The same scene ensued with a second deer that Drouillard killed and left behind, with most of the meat going to the Indians. Drouillard then returned to the party with a third deer which Lewis split among the Corps of Discovery and the Indians. The much needed food left the Corps of Discovery members and Indians in high spirits and all the Indians “appeared now to have filled themselves and were in a good humour.”<sup>34</sup> In this instance, Drouillard’s hunting abilities were able to save both the Shoshones and the Corps of Discovery from starvation while at the same time improving the Corps of Discovery’s relationship with the Shoshone tribe. While it is impossible to say how much impact Drouillard’s hunting had on bringing about the friendly relationship with the Shoshone tribe, his efforts definitely helped forge the strong friendship with a tribe, that as previously mentioned, was essential in getting the Corps of Discovery across the Continental Divide ensuring a successful journey to the Pacific Ocean.

Drouillard and the Corps of Discovery as a whole were successful hunters because of their tools and hunting experience. Most of the men in the Corps of Discovery, especially Drouillard and John Colter, were experienced outdoorsmen. They had spent much of their lives on the American frontier hunting for survival and even though they had no experience hunting in the area in which the expedition explored, their

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<sup>33</sup> Lewis, August 16, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis, August 16, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.



experience gave them the knowledge and ability to track and hunt game. Still, the experience of Drouillard and the other Corps of Discovery members still did not give them any advantage over the native Indian tribes who had just as much experience and knew the land better. The one advantage that the Corps of Discovery had was the tools with which they hunted. Compared to the bows and arrows or at times unreliable firearms that the Indians used to hunt, the Corps of Discovery was equipped with the latest rifles. The rifle used was called the U.S. Model 1803, was the first designed specifically for the U.S. Army, fired a .54 caliber slug with sufficient velocity and accuracy to kill a deer at a range of roughly one hundred yards, and could be reloaded fast enough to allow a skilled marksmen to fire two shots every minute.<sup>35</sup> These rifles gave the Corps of Discovery an advantage in hunting that impressed the Indians that they sometimes hunted alongside, which caused a group of Clatsop Indians that had witnessed Drouillard shooting elk to have “a very exalted opinion of us[Corps of Discovery] as marksmen and the superior excellence of our rifles compared with their guns.”<sup>36</sup> With marksmanship that far surpassed that of the Indians, the Corps of Discover and later frontiersmen were able to outhunt the Indians and often overhunt the precious game that the Indian nations depended on for survival.

One last situation that exemplified the unpredictability of hunting and the Corps of Discovery’s dependence on Drouillard occurred while the Corps of Discovery was spending the winter at Fort Clatsop. On December 13, 1805 Drouillard and George Shannon went out hunting and returned having killed eighteen elk, providing meat for

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<sup>35</sup> Carl Russell, “The Guns of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,” *North Dakota History*, vol. 27 (Winter 1960), pages 25-33.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis, January 24, 1806 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

days.<sup>37</sup> The successful hunting continued throughout December with Drouillard and a part of hunters killing four elk on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December, providing the Corps of Discovery with a “Sumptuous [sic] Supper of Elk Tongues & marrow bones which was truly gratifying.”<sup>38</sup> But the Corps of Discovery’s good fortunes did not last into January. On January 8, Lewis wrote that the meat was becoming scarce and he sent out Drouillard and Collins to hunt.<sup>39</sup> When they returned from the hunt two days later, they had only killed two elk, one of which spoiled before it could be eaten, and after sending Drouillard and Collins back out to hunt, Lewis wrote that “meat has now become scarce with us.”<sup>40</sup> But luckily for the Corps of Discovery, Drouillard was a superior hunter, and where another Corp’s three day hunting party came back empty handed, he was successful. On January 12, 1805 Lewis gave Drouillard high praise when he wrote “This morning [I] sent out Drewyer and one man to hunt, they returned in the evening, Drewyer having killed seven Elk; I scarcely know how we should subsist were it not for the exertions of this excellet [sic] hunter.”<sup>41</sup> In one of many instances, Drouillard was able to bring food to the table when other members of the Corps of Discovery were unable to do so, once again keeping his fellow Corps of Discovery members from starving and helping to bring about the completion of the journey.

Without George Drouillard’s contributions to the expedition, it is hard to imagine the Corps of Discovery being as successful or even completing its journey. The example of Drouillard begins to show the importance the interpreters or hunters can have on the

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<sup>37</sup> Clark, December 13, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, December 30, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, January 8, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis, January 10, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>41</sup> Lewis, January 12, 1805 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

success of a mission. Their lack of recognition does not come from a lack of contribution; rather it comes from a lack of understanding as to the integral nature of a hunter and interpreter.

## Chapter Two: John Colter, Trailblazer of the Fur Trade



Figure 4. Artist's representation of Colter dressed in typical mountain man garb with his rifle and knife. From William Ahrendt, "John Colter, Out For Beaver," <http://www.williamahrendt.com/portfolio.php> (accessed April 20, 2012).

Just as George Drouillard's importance as a hunter and interpreter is often overlooked in the Lewis and Clark Journey, so too is the role of the mountain man, best represented by John Colter, overlooked in its importance in exploring the west. The adventures of Colter and other mountain men are more than just mythical tales of a lone hunter in the wilderness, instead they provided valuable information on the geography of the land, helped to foster important Indian relations which made the fur trade of the far

west profitable, and their experiences provided valuable knowledge on how to survive in the West. With their knowledge of the land, these courageous men helped to lead the first parties of American fur trappers into the untapped riches of the western rivers and their ability to map out the unknown and travel the vast wilderness was essential to the eventual settlement of the west. Mountain men were some of the first Americans to come in contact with the western Indian nations and the connections that they made with the tribes served important purposes to later westward expansion. Lastly, the mythical tales that were told about mountain men's adventures were more than just entertainment, instead they served as important tales of caution that helped other frontiersmen survive the west. John Colter was one of the first mountain men and played an important role in expansion of the American West.

Colter is best known for two things; his discovery of Yellowstone and "Colter's Run," both of which contributed to advancement in the knowledge of the western territory. He rose from a member of the Corps of Discover to one of the most prominent mountain men who helped to establish one of the first American fur trading enterprises. John Colter was a member of the Corps of Discovery and was enlisted at the rank of private. Little is known of Colter's life before his time in the Corps of Discovery, but it is evident that he picked up knowledge of the wilderness and a skill set that helped him to survive in conditions that would kill most other men. He was, as described by General James Thomas, "about five feet ten inches in height, and wore an open, ingenuous, and

pleasing countenance of the Daniel Boone stamp. Nature had formed him, like Boone, for hardy endurance of fatigue, privations, and perils.”<sup>1</sup>

John Colter first entered the American West as an important member of the Corps of Discovery, with his main contributions being his hunting and path finding skills. Colter was one of the men that usually accompanied Drouillard on hunting trips and his skill as a hunter kept the Corps of Discovery from hungry nights many times on the expedition. He also was one of the few men that Lewis and Clark would send out on his own or in a small group. One notable instance of their trust in Colter was when he was sent out “with provisions in pursute [sic] of Shannon,” another member of the expedition who went missing after a hunting expedition.<sup>2</sup> Although not as integral of a member as Drouillard, Colter contributed with his exceptional hunting and wilderness skills which enabled him to provide food and act as a scout in numerous occasions throughout the journey.

Colter’s time as a Corps member was essential to his later success. The experience that he gained from the expedition helped to establish him as one of the premier experts on the American West. After his journey with the Corps of Discovery, most importantly his countless hunting excursions with Drouillard, Colter knew the land better than any other American with the only possible exception being Drouillard. His hunting and navigating skills that were refined during the expedition made him a valuable and sought after asset to any fur trading enterprise. But however important his

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<sup>1</sup> General Thomas James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1953), 56.

<sup>2</sup> William Clark, August 29, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, ed. Gary Moulton (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press / University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries-Electronic Text Center, 2005), <http://lewisandclarkjournals.unl.edu/journals.php?id=1806-09-04>

contributions to the Corps of Discovery were, Colter had the greatest impact on westward exploration in his adventures after his time in the Corps of Discovery.

In August of 1806, on their way back to St. Louis, the Corps of Discovery crossed paths with a pair of trappers who were about to head out into the unexplored west to tap into the rivers teeming with beavers. After seeing the West's bounty and the chance of wealth for a man of his own skill set, Colter relished the chance to trek back into the wilderness to make his fortune in beaver pelts. When Colter expressed a desire to join "some trappers who offered to become Shearers with and furnish traps &c. the offer a very advantagious [sic]one, to him," Lewis and Clark decided that "his Services Could be dispenced [sic] with from this down and as we were disposed to be of Service to any one of our party who had performed their duty as well as Colter had done, we agreed to allow him the prvilage" of once again setting off into the wilderness.<sup>3</sup> Colter spent all of the next winter in the upper country of the Louisiana Territory and although his exact whereabouts are unknown, it is likely that he spent his time trapping in the valley of the Yellowstone River.<sup>4</sup> That spring he made his way back to St. Louis to finally return to civilization, but along the way he came across the expedition of Manuel Lisa and once again he set out into the wilderness with Lisa. Lisa recognized Colter's knowledge of the territory and his outdoor abilities and planned to use Colter as a key member of the Missouri Fur Company.

Early during his time with Lisa, Colter was mainly a guide for trappers going in and out of Lisa's fort. Colter guided trappers such as General James, who remarked on

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<sup>3</sup> Clark, August 15, 1806 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>4</sup> Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West: A History of the Pioneer Trading Posts and Early Fur Companies of the Missouri Valley and the Rocky Mountains and of the Overland Commerce with Santa Fe*, (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), page 713.

Colter's thorough knowledge of the land which enabled him to keep trappers alive during dangerous situations.<sup>5</sup> However, much of Colter's time with Lisa went unrecorded and little is known about it, but the information that is available provides a tale of one of Colter's two remarkable solo journeys through the west. Once the expedition reached the mouth of the Bighorn River, Lisa sent Colter out on his own to make contact with the Blackfoot nation and the surrounding Indians to inform them of Lisa's presence and intentions of trapping and trading.<sup>6</sup> His mission was a dangerous one in which he would have to be completely self-reliant while traveling through dangerous terrain and potentially hostile Indian Territory.

Due to the fact that he traveled alone, Colter's journey to the Indian nations was arguably much harder and dangerous than the Corps of Discovery's initial interactions with the Indians. However, there are some differences in the two cases which make it difficult to directly compare them. First of all, even though Colter would be traveling alone, he had the added benefit of following in the footsteps of the Corps of Discovery. Colter would have been able to use the information that he had acquired during his time with the Corps of Discovery and the initial contacts made by the Corps of Discovery to his advantage. Also, Colter was acting on behalf of a fur company and would therefore be far less threatening to the Indians than an official group sent by a nation that was telling the Indians that the United States now owned their land.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of how

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<sup>5</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 47.

<sup>6</sup> Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West: A History of the Pioneer Trading Posts and Early Fur Companies of the Missouri Valley and the Rocky Mountains and of the Overland Commerce with Santa Fe*, page 714.

<sup>7</sup> Although the Indians of the area had not had any contact with the American government prior to the Corps of Discovery, they had been in contact with various fur trading enterprises from all across North America. This prior contact with the fur trade endeared many of the tribes and eased the implementation of the major American fur trading enterprises.



Colter's journey compared to others, it was a dangerous mission which only a man such as Colter could hope to accomplish.

Since Colter kept no journal of the journey and did not write anything down about any of his adventures later in life, all of the information comes from second hand telling of the story. But even removed from the experience and writing in a very straightforward manner, Henry Brackenridge conveyed a sense of courageous adventure in his recounting of Colter's journey. "This man [Colter], with a pack of thirty pounds weight, his gun and some ammunition, went upwards of five hundred miles to the Crow nation; gave them information, and proceeded from them to several other tribes. On his return, a party of Indians in whose company he happened to be was attacked, and he was lamed by a severe wound in the leg; notwithstanding which, he returned to the establishment, entirely alone and without assistance, several hundred miles."<sup>8</sup> While the exact timing of the Indian attack is likely wrong in Brackenridge's account, this short passage is some of the only information of the journey and while many of the details of the journey are up for debate and interpretation, the journey undoubtedly made a large contribution to the knowledge of western geography. As one of the first Americans to bring news of the fur trade to the Indian nations, Colter helped to spread the word of the new economic opportunity that awaited the Indians. With this news, Colter succeeded in bringing enough Indians to Fort Manuel to make the Missouri Fur Company into one of the more successful fur trading enterprises.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views on Louisiana: Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811*, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books Inc., 1962), page 92.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the Missouri Fur Company see Hiram Chittenden's *The American Fur Trade of the Far West: A History of the Pioneer Trading Posts and Early Fur Companies of the Missouri Valley and the Rocky Mountains and of the Overland Commerce with Santa Fe*.

In his 1902 history on the American fur trade of the far west, Hiram M. Chittenden pieced together what information he could find, most of it coming from William Clark's *Map of the West*, to provide a rough description of Colter's journey. According to Chittenden, Colter likely "secured the services of a party of the Crows to guide him by the best trail across the mountains," because it would have been nearly impossible for him to have crossed the mountains without a guide. From that point, Clark's map of Colter's Route indicates that he "traveled directly from Wind river to Pierre's Hole, crossing the Wind River mountains by Union or Two-gwo-tee passes and the Teton range by the pass of the same name."<sup>10</sup> A more recent and somewhat less contentious hypothesis on the route was proposed by Burton Harris in 1952. Harris believed that Colter went west across the Bighorn Mountains into the Bighorn Basin and then south into the Wind River valley. He then moved west into Jackson's Hole and the Teton country and then crossed the Teton Range into Pierre's Hole. Colter then backtracked and proceeded westward to Yellowstone Lake (Lake Eustis on Clark's map) from which he followed the Yellowstone River north. From the Yellowstone River he came upon the Shoshone River which he took to Lisa's fort.<sup>1112</sup> Colter went on to relay his route to William Clark and the information went into Clark's map of the West.

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<sup>10</sup> Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West: A History of the Pioneer Trading Posts and Early Fur Companies of the Missouri Valley and the Rocky Mountains and of the Overland Commerce with Santa Fe*, pages 714-5.

<sup>11</sup> Burton Harris, *John Colter: His Years in the Rockies*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) pages 73-114.

<sup>12</sup> Burton Harris book *John Colter: His Years in the Rockies* provides both a sound biography of Colter. The book is one of the best accounts of Colter's journey and at its time of its publishing it was one of the most widely accepted descriptions and unpacking of "Colter's Route," however recent scholarship has found some problems in his account. John C. Jackson's article "Revisiting the Colter Legend" delves into some of the problems in Harris's account of the journey.

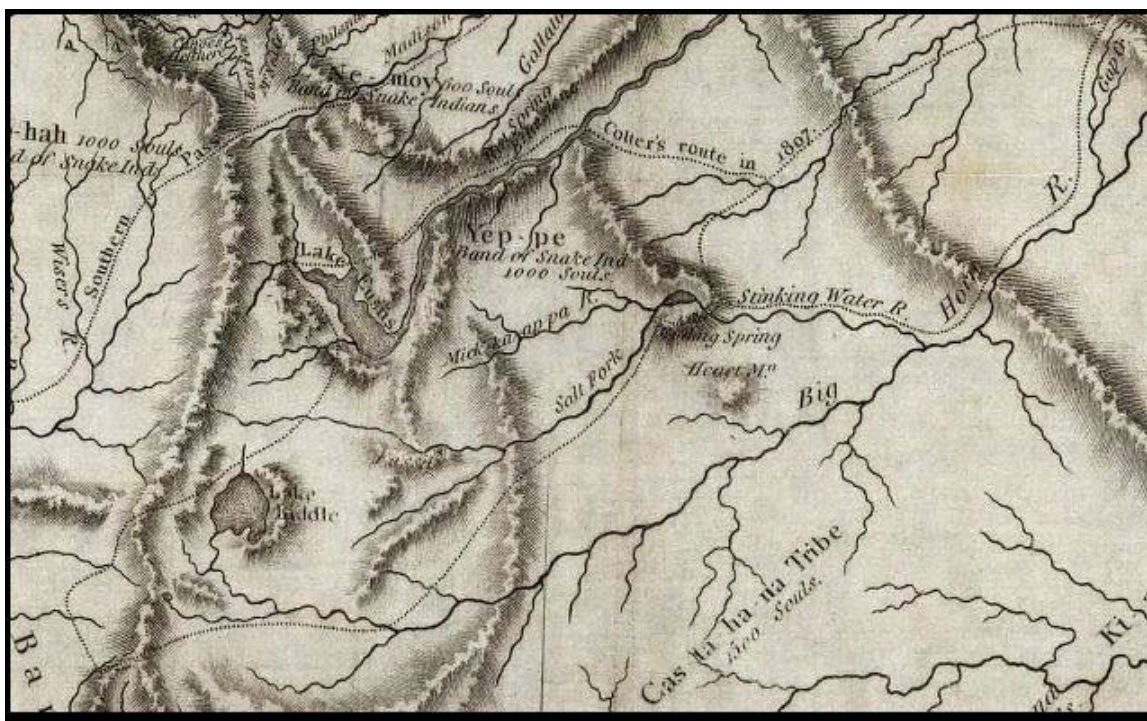


Figure 5. Reprint of Clark's Map of the West, featuring the dotted line of Colter's route in 1807. From "Lewis and Clark map showing John Colter's route," discovergrandteton, <http://www.discovergrandteton.org/park-history/fur-trappers/> (accessed April 20, 2012).

Once Colter returned to St. Louis he met up with Clark to discuss his travels.

Clark combined the geographical knowledge from Colter and combined it with information that he got from the Corps of Discovery's exploration, George Drouillard's and other early explorers such as Zebulon Pike to produce his 1810 map of the West.<sup>13</sup> Through the collaboration of these men, Clark was able to construct a basic map of the explored western territory. Clark's map helped to give an initial sense of the west and according to historian John Logan Allen, the map "gave form and substance to thousands of square miles of previously unknown territory, and the resulting view was essential in

<sup>13</sup> Drouillard was also part of Lisa's fur trading enterprise and traveled along the same paths that Colter did and later relayed that information to Clark.

the overall view of western geography.”<sup>14</sup> Even with the discrepancies in the details of the journey and lack of consensus on the facts of Colter’s Route, Colter’s journey into what was likely Yellowstone and its surrounding area, did provide valuable information about the geography of the region which was of importance to the fur trade enterprises, pioneers, gold miners, and other Americans who helped to push America westward.

The little attention that Colter does get generally overlooks his meaningful contribution to a map of such great significance and instead focuses on the story like quality of his adventures. The adventures of his that follow have been placed in a more mythical light when in actuality they were of great importance and had a significant impact on the west. Burton Harris recognized this and wrote that “many books, written with more concern for entertainment than the accurate reporting of historical events, include at least one fanciful version of a Colter exploit.”<sup>1516</sup>

Due to a lack of information on Colter’s journey to contact the Indian nations, little is known about the details of that aspect of the journey. From what can be pieced together, he had mixed results in persuading the various tribes to conduct trade with Lisa’s fur trading enterprise. The involvement of the Indian nations in the fur trade was essential to the success of the Missouri Fur Company as well as the American fur trade as a whole. According to David Wishart, an expert on the fur trade, the Indians of the Great Plains “was the producer and a primary influence on the patterns of the American fur

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<sup>14</sup> John Logan Allen, *Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 378.

<sup>15</sup> Harris, *John Colter: His Time in the Rockies*,” page 11.

<sup>16</sup> At the beginning of his second chapter, Harris goes into depth about how historians have been known to make “positive statements without the slightest qualification.” He provides some valuable insight into looking at history with a skeptical eye in order to pick out inaccuracies.

trade.”<sup>17</sup> Lisa, with the help of Colter helped to set the standard for a fur trading company by making relations with the local Indians so that instead of just trapping themselves, Lisa could also trade for fur with the Indians. This strategy was described by Thomas Biddle, who wrote that the “objectives of this company [Missouri Fur Company] appear to have been to monopolize the trade among the lower tribes of the Missouri, who understand the art of trapping, and to send a large party to the headwaters of the Missouri capable of defending and trapping beaver themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Colter had already been instrumental in one part of the strategy by guiding American trappers to the Missouri River and with his Indian interactions he helped to make the Missouri Fur Company a model for later fur trading companies.

While it is unknown exactly when Colter’s interactions with various Indian tribes happened, General Thomas James provides a direct account of Colter’s first recorded Indian encounter. James obtained his information firsthand from Colter and it is generally accepted as fact. While out contacting various Indian nations in 1808, Colter was leading the Flatheads to “Manuel’s fort to trade with the Americans, when the Blackfeet fell upon them in such numbers as seemingly to make their destruction certain.”<sup>19</sup> The encounter that follows shows both Colter’s bravery and survival skills as well as his aforementioned positive and negative relations with the Indian nations. James passed over the battlefield a year after the battle and looked on at the skulls and bones that were lying around in vast numbers, the aftermath of a battle between fifteen hundred Blackfeet on one side and eight hundred Flathead and Crows along with one American

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<sup>17</sup> David J. Wishart, *The Fur Trade of the American West: 1807-1840 A Geographical Synthesis*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), page 22.

<sup>18</sup> T. Biddle to Col. H. Atkinson, 1819, *Indian Trade Papers* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society).

<sup>19</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 52.

fur trapper. Colter fought alongside the Flatheads and Crows and was wounded in the leg which disabled him from standing, after which he “crawled to a small thicket and there loaded and fired while sitting on the ground.”<sup>20</sup> The Blackfeet had first engaged with about five hundred Flatheads, whose “noise, shouts and firing” brought a reinforcement of Crows. After a “desperately fought” battle, the Blackfeet were repulsed, “but retired in perfect order and could hardly be said to have been defeated.”<sup>21</sup>

The courageous fighting of the Crows and Colter allowed the Flatheads to avoid a massacre and reach Manuel’s fort to trade with the American fur trappers at the fort. Colter’s efforts to bring the Flathead nation to do trade with Lisa’s fort was an important step in the furthering of trade between Indians and American trappers that perpetuated the successful enterprise which was an important part of the settlement of the American West. Commenting on his ability to develop a relationship with the Indian nations, Lisa said “I appear as a benefactor, not as a pillager of the Indian... My establishments are the refuge of the weak, and of the old men no longer able to follow their lodges; and by these means I have acquired the confidence and friendship of the natives and the consequent choice of their trade.”<sup>22</sup> Colter’s efforts to bring Indians to Lisa’s fort in conjunction with Lisa’s relations with the Indian nations were instrumental in setting up a framework for American and Indian trading that made the westward expansion of America a possibility. Without Indian cooperation and an economic codependence that was established by the fur trade, further settlement and expansion into the American West would have played out far differently. Indians were far less likely to attack Americans if

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<sup>20</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 52-3.

<sup>21</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> Manuel Lisa, quoted in W.E.S., “Journal of James H. Bradley”, in *Contributions to the Historical Society of Montana*, vol. 2 (Helena: State Publishing Company, 1896), 228.

those same Americans were their trading partners and with less violence between Indians and Americans, there was more incentive to move westward.

Sometime after his first near deadly Indian encounter, Colter had his famous and almost mythical second encounter with the Blackfeet which is now known as Colter's Run. This tale is usually just looked at as an amazing story of bravery and courage, but it was also an important source of information to other frontiersmen. While trapping out of Lisa's fort somewhere along the Jefferson River, Colter and another former member of the Corps of Discovery named John Potts were paddling their canoes up the river when they crossed paths with a war party of about eight hundred Blackfeet Indians. Colter related the encounter to both James and Bradbury and the stories match closely with just a few minute discrepancies, but because James' account is more detailed, his account will be used in this recounting of Colter's Run.

When the Indians saw Colter and Potts, the chiefs ordered the men ashore. Colter, due to his experience with the Blackfeet nation, "hastened to obey their mandate," and upon reaching shore he was "seized, disarmed, and stripped entirely naked."<sup>23</sup> Potts listened to neither the chiefs' demands nor Colter's requests to come ashore and remained in his canoe, causing an Indian to fire on him, hitting him in the hip. Colter called out to his companion who replied by saying that he was "too much hurt to escape; if you can get away, do so. I will kill at least one of them." He then aimed his rifle and killed one Indian and in an "instant at least a hundred bullets pierced his body, and as many savages rushed into the stream and pulled the canoe, containing his riddled corpse, ashore. They dragged the body up onto the bank and with their hatchets and knives cut and hacked it

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<sup>23</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 57.

all to pieces, and limb from limb. The entrails, heart, lungs, &c., they threw into Colter's face."<sup>24</sup> The relatives of the dead Indian immediately tried to reach Colter to get more revenge, but a council was held and the chiefs decided upon a more sporting but perhaps crueler method of punishment for Colter.

After the council, one of the chiefs pointed Colter towards the prairie and motioned Colter away with his hand, leading Colter to believe that he was to be shot once he was out of the crowd of Indians. But as he looked back and saw an old Indian gesturing violently for him to go faster and the younger Indians throwing of their blankets, leggings, and any other encumbrances, Colter realized that he "was to run a race, of which the prize was to be his own life and scalp." As soon as the realization dawned on him, he sprinted off "with all the strength that nature, excited to the utmost, could give; fear and hope lent a supernatural vigor to his limbs."<sup>25</sup> His speed astonished him and once he had ran an estimated two and a half miles he felt his strength beginning to fail as blood gushed from his nostrils. With every bound causing a red stream to spurt from his nostrils and his limbs weakening, Colter stopped and looked back at his pursuers and saw only one Indian approaching with a spear in one hand and a blanket in the other.

Colter waited for the Indian to reach him and pleaded for his life in the Crow language, but the Indian did not seem to hear him and instead dropped his blanket and "seizing his spear with both hands he rushed at Colter, naked and defenseless as he stood before him, and made a desperate lunge to transfix him."<sup>26</sup> In a desperate defense, Colter grabbed the spear near its head and with his whole strength aided by the momentum of

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<sup>24</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 58-9.

<sup>26</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 59.



the Indian, he broke off the head of the spear while the “savage fell to the ground and lay prostrate and disarmed before him. Now was his turn to beg for his life... but Colter was not in a mood to remember the golden rule, and pinned his adversary through the body to the earth by one stab with the spear head.”<sup>27</sup> Colter was far from safety and after collecting the fallen Indian’s blanket he raced to the Madison River where he jumped into the water and hid in a beaver house while the Blackfeet searched all around and above him. After the Indians moved on from his hiding spot, Colter swam the river for about thirty miles to a mountain pass. Colter was fearful that the Indians would be guarding the pass so he ascended the mountain itself, “the tops and sides of which a great way down were perpetually covered in snow.”<sup>28</sup> Colter was able cross the mountain undetected, a mountain crossing which according to James “seemed impassable, even by the mountain goat,” and from there Colter had to travel about three hundred miles back to Lisa’s fort. He travelled nonstop for eleven days with only the Indian’s blanket and spear, and he finally reached the fort, “nearly exhausted by hunger, fatigue, and excitement.”<sup>29</sup> “His beard was long, his face and whole body were thin and emaciated by hunger, and his limbs and feet swollen and sore” so much that the men at the fort did not recognize him until he identified himself.<sup>30</sup> While Colter’s Run and his battle alongside the Flatheads are obviously fascinating tales of adventure, they also served an important service to his fellow fur trappers and other western settlers.

This is more than just a gripping story; instead tales such as these and these kinds of experiences lent valuable knowledge to other fur trappers. Tales like Colter’s gave

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<sup>27</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 59-60.

<sup>28</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 62.

<sup>30</sup> James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, 62.

other frontiersmen information on how to act with Indians and which nations to trade and associate with. Obviously much of the details of this tale and others like it would have been distorted after multiple retelling, but the information in the tale would still be useful. A great example of how this tale would have spread comes from General James and his time with Colter. Colter told James his stories while he was acting as a guide. After Colter told James his story, it is easy to imagine James retelling the story any chance he got to a captivated audience. Colter would have likely told the same stories to many other trappers that he was around and those trappers would tell other trappers and so on. After multiple retellings, the story would become legend that was known by most frontiersmen and would act as the same kind of cautionary and instructional talk as a children's book might today.

The journeys of John Colter and other mountain men helped to build the foundation for the overall geographical knowledge of the western United States, knowledge that was of immeasurable value to the development of the American West. Even without written details of his journey to bring the Indian nations to trade, the effects of his journey helped to jumpstart the fur trade which was the catalyst for later settlement of the west. And even with all of the confusion and debate about the exact details of where Colter traveled to, his contributions to the geographic knowledge of the west as portrayed in Clark's Map of the West made his journeys some of the more important exploratory missions in the history of the American West.

Colter's accomplishments mirror those of George Drouillard and the two of them played very similar roles in the expansion of the American West. Both Drouillard's interactions with Indians during the Corps of Discovery expedition and Colter's travels

among the Indians as an envoy of the Missouri Fur Company were essential in setting up the relationship between the United States and the Indian nations of the West.<sup>31</sup> Drouillard and Colter's Indian interaction were the two beginning stages in a progression of United States and Indian contact that came to define the era of expansion and the eventual downfall of the Indian nations. Drouillard's translation work for the Corps of Discovery marked the first contact between the western Indian nations and the new owners of the territory they called home.<sup>32</sup> This initial contact helped to establish that the solitary Colter was part of something larger and more powerful.<sup>33</sup> The second step of the progression, Colter, came into contact with Indian tribes that had either come into direct contact with the Corps of Discovery or had likely heard word of the Corps of Discovery and the news that the expedition brought with it. Colter then used the promise of increased trade to establish the Indian relations with the Missouri Fur Company, which led to an easier transition to trade for the influx of other fur trading enterprises that came to dominate the region for the first half of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>31</sup> George Drouillard was also a part of Lisa's Missouri Fur Company and in the beginning he played a similar role as Colter. Drouillard traveled across many of the same routes and interacted with many of the same Indians as Colter did. Drouillard and Colter were two main pathfinders and lead trappers of the early American fur trade. One explanation as to why Drouillard does not garner the same amount of attention for his post Corps of Discovery activities as Colter is that even though he accomplished many of the same things that Colter did, his adventures did not have the same story like quality and did not become the same kind of mythical tale of adventure that many of Colter's adventures did.

<sup>32</sup> The Corps of Discovery in addition to all other of its tasks had to inform the Indian nations that resided in Louisiana Territory that the United States had just purchased the Louisiana Territory and that those nations were now residing in United States territory.

<sup>33</sup> Although the majority of the Indian encounters that the Corps of Discovery had were positive, they did have a fight with and end up killing two Blackfeet. The death of the two Blackfeet led to a negative relationship between the Blackfeet and the United States and gave many fur traders difficulty. But even with this incident, the expedition by the Corps of Discovery did have a positive impact on the future Indian relations of the United States.

### **Chapter Three: Problems with Second and Firsthand Histories**

Even with all of the evidence of their contributions, George Drouillard and John Colter do not receive ample credit for their contributions to the westward expansion of the United States. For the most part Drouillard and Colter do not get the recognition they deserve because of a lack of firsthand written accounts of their activities and a distortion of their contributions in the firsthand accounts that do exist. In Colter's case all of his post Lewis and Clark adventures and contributions to the fur trade were solely recorded as second hand histories in more of a frontier tale style rather than a firsthand account rooted in details.<sup>1</sup> In Drouillard's case his post Lewis and Clark adventures underwent the same treatment as Colter's, but more importantly his time as a member of the Corps of Discovery was documented by the journals of different members of the Corps of Discovery. However his significant contributions were downplayed because he was not the leader of the Corps of Discovery. His and other members' contributions were overshadowed by Lewis's and Clark's impact on the journey, both in the journals and in later interpretations and assessments of the journals. The examples of Clark and Drouillard make it clear that for scholarly work, secondhand histories and later interpretations of firsthand histories need to be scrutinized for their accuracy and assessment of which actors truly deserve credit.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the frontier style of tale telling see Don Walker's "The Mountain Man as a Literary Hero."

The reason for Colter's lack of recognition is simply because there is very little if any solid evidence for the majority of the activities during his post Corps of Discover time. What little is known does not come directly from Colter, rather it is told as secondhand histories from writers who heard about the stories from Colter or other contemporaries. There are, along with William Clark's suspect addition of Colter's route in his 1810 Map of the West, only three accounts of Colter's adventures written by contemporaries of Colter; Henry M. Brackenridge's *Views of Louisiana*, John Bradbury's *Travels in the Interior of America*, and General Thomas James' *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*. Compounding the lack of accounts covering Colter is that these accounts that do exist contain very few details. This lack of details led to discrepancies in the subsequent histories and retellings of Colter's adventures. The discrepancies bring up significant questions as to the veracity of the histories which in Colter's case leads to his adventures being looked at in more of a mythical light rather than in a historical light. This mythical aspect of Colter is a direct result of the lack of detail about Colter and takes away from any actual contributions that Colter had to the expansion of the west and turns him into more a literary figure rather than a historical one.

The one thing that Brackenridge's, Bradbury's, and James' accounts all have in common is that they lack detail on Colter's activities. The only Colter story which is constant in the different histories and is backed by any kind of evidence is "Colter's Run." Both Bradbury and James relate Colter's harrowing sprint from danger and as a whole their retellings are the same. The only difference in the stories was that in James' version Colter swam into a "beaver house, where he found a dry and comfortable resting place on the upper floor or story of this singular structure," whereas in Bradbury's

version Colter hid beneath “a raft of drift timber.”<sup>23</sup> This minor discrepancy results from the fact that both authors were retelling the story after Colter had told them about the adventure sometime after it had happened and Colter undoubtedly messed with certain parts of his stories after telling them so many times. But overall, the accounts of “Colter’s Run” are very detailed and tell the story of Colter’s only adventure that has been sufficiently documented and can be taken as a truly historically accurate event.

Whereas “Colter’s Run” was well documented, the rest of Colter’s post Corps of Discovery life went either unrecorded or what was recorded was vague and contained obvious mistakes or discrepancies. Of the period between his leaving of the Corps of Discovery and Colter’s joining of Manuel Lisa’s Missouri Fur Company, there is no evidence whatsoever to document Colter’s time spent trapping beavers in the Rockies. There is only speculation by historians as to what happened during Colter’s time trapping with Dixon and Hancock. In regards to Colter after leaving the Corps of Discovery, Hiram Chittenden went as far as to guess that “Colter remained in the upper country all the following winter, but in what precise locality is not known. It is probable, from subsequent events, that it was in the valley of the Yellowstone.”<sup>4</sup> It may not seem too surprising that there is no record of this time of Colter’s life because it was relatively insignificant to overall American westward expansion, but what is surprising is the same lack of record of Colter’s journey in 1807. As argued in the previous chapter, Colter’s journey for Manuel Lisa to contact the Indian nations for trade purposes had a significant

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<sup>2</sup> General Thomas James, *Three Years Among the Indians and Mexicans*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1953), 60.

<sup>3</sup> John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America*, (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., 1966), page 20.

<sup>4</sup> Hiram Martin Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West: A History of the Pioneer Trading Posts and Early Fur Companies of the Missouri Valley and the Rocky Mountains and of the Overland Commerce with Santa Fe*, (Stanford: Academic Reprints, 1954), page 713.

impact on the westward expansion of America, but other than a dotted line marked as “Colter’s Route in 1807” on Clark’s 1810 Map of the West there is virtually no account of the journey. Bradbury makes no specific mention of Colter’s journey even though he “received from him [Colter] an account of his adventures after he had separated from Lewis and Clark’s party,” of which Colter’s 1807 journey must have been a part of.<sup>5</sup> Brackenridge gives the best account of the journey, an achievement that comes from being the only one to specifically mention the journey. Brackenridge’s entire account of the journey which can be accepted at face value is that Colter, “with a pack of thirty pounds weight, his gun and some ammunition, went upwards of five hundred miles to the Crow nation; gave them information, and proceeded from thence to several other tribes.”<sup>6</sup> He then goes on to write about Colter’s return to Lisa’s fort and the battle that took place between warring Indian nations, a battle that was also told about in much more detail by James. Through James’ more detailed account of the battle it seems much more likely that the battle took place following a different journey by Colter than the one in which Brackenridge writes about. If this is true, then James’ account of Colter contains nothing on Colter’s 1807 journey and half of Bradbury’s account of the journey is wrong. With the only two accounts of Colter’s journey contradicting themselves on one of the key parts of the journey, the only other source of information about the journey is Clark’s Map of the West which in itself has plenty of problems which have already been discussed.

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<sup>5</sup> Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America*, page 17.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views on Louisiana: Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811*, (Chicago: Quadrangle Books Inc., 1962), page 92.

This assessment of the different accounts of Colter's 1807 journey goes to show the difficulties that arise from a lack of detail in historical accounts; a lack of detail that comes from the absence of any detailed firsthand accounts of an event. By comparing Colter's journey, arguably an instrumental event in the expansion of the fur trade and the expansion of the American West, to a relatively insignificant journal entry from the Corps of Discovery's journey, one can begin to see the effect that the details of a firsthand account can have. A section of Captain Clark's journal entry for July 11, 1804 is as follows; "proceeded on at about ½ miles from the river about 3ms. and observed fresh Sign of a horse, I prosued [sic] the track, with an expectation of finding a Camp of Indians on the river."<sup>7</sup> This one part of a journal entry is but a fraction of the total journals written by the Corps of Discovery, but by itself it has more concrete detail and historical usefulness than all of the accounts of Colter's 1807 journey combined. Having a firsthand account helps a reader to get a sense of the journey and details about the objectives and success of the journey. The only thing a reader can get from the secondhand accounts of Colter's 1807 journey is the equipment that he brought with him, he traveled somewhere to the west, and came in contact with some Indian nations. It is possible that there was at some point a collection of Colter written journals. Colter was literate and was encouraged by Lewis and Clark to document his time with the Corps of Discovery and there is a small shred of hope in Colter's property inventory that was taken at the time of his death. A part of Colter's estate was a collection of "three histories," (sold for a total of \$2.25) the content of which is unknown. One historian hypothesized that one of the histories "could have contained Colter's handwritten account of his travels

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<sup>7</sup> Clark, July 11, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.



along the Missouri, Yellowstone, Bighorn, Shoshone, Snake and Columbia rivers,” a history which if ever found would be a treasure trove for historians which could help to fill in the gaping holes of Colter’s adventurous life.<sup>8</sup> However, it is a near certainty that no Colter journals will ever be found and therefore, all that will be left of Colter is the vague myth of his adventures with little detail to provide any real historical usefulness.

The current portrait of Colter as a mythical and almost literary figure is a direct result of the lack of information of his travels and the inaccuracies of the secondhand histories. Colter’s adventures were told as tales to other trappers and frontiersmen by Colter and those that had heard his stories before. The telling were more of heroic adventure tales about a lone adventurer rather than a detail laden history complete with scientific and geographic observations. During all their time spent trapping and exploring, mountain men perfected the art of a frontier yarn which took a tale and elaborated on it after various tellings, turning the tale into a good story. In a paper on the literary tradition of the American West, William Moreau, the most recent editor of David Thompson’s adventure narratives, commented on the unreliability of travel and adventure narratives.<sup>9</sup> Most adventure stories, such as Colter’s start with some small fact and then become polished and rewritten by authors who are more interested in books sales than historical accuracy. So while Colter’s adventures documented by secondhand histories do make fantastic stories, without the detail of a firsthand account it is difficult to ascertain many of Colter’s historical contributions. From the vague secondhand histories

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<sup>8</sup> Larry E. Morris, "The Life of John Colter," *We Proceeded On* 34, no. 4 (November 2008): 6-15, *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 17, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> John C. Jackson, "Revisiting the Colter Legend," *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* 3, (January 2009): 1-19, *America: History & Life*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 17, 2012).

and the faint dotted line on Clark's Map of the West the broad importance of Colter can be seen, but the lack of detail keeps Colter from getting the historical recognition that he deserves and relegates him to a mythical figure that just makes for a good story.

Many of the problems with Colter and the remembrance of his adventures would have been solved by the existence of a journal or some other kind of firsthand account of his life. However, as shown by the example of George Drouillard, journals can also leave out valuable information, especially in the oversight of secondary actors such as hunters and interpreters. A great example of this phenomenon is the journal entries on August 3, 1804. The happenings on this day have already been mentioned and the significance of the day has been examined, but to put it briefly it was one of the more important Indian encounters of the journey and only one of five journal entries mentioned Drouillard's crucial role as an Indian interpreter. Neither Lewis nor Clark mentioned Drouillard's involvement in the day's events, providing a great example of one of the problems with using journals as verbatim historically accurate documents. All but one of the day's journalists neglected to mention Drouillard's role as interpreter, instead glossing over the day as if there was no need for an interpreter, a style which is evident in part of Clark's journal entry for the day which read that they "Deliver[ed] a Speech informing thos [sic] Children of ours of the Change which had taken place, the wishes of our government to Cultivate friendship & good understanding, the method of have good advice & Some Directions, we made."<sup>10</sup> When Clark references "we" he is writing about himself and Lewis and nowhere in his entry for the day does he mention the need of an interpreter or the involvement of Drouillard at all.

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, August 3, 1804 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

This critique of the journal entries of August 3<sup>rd</sup> and the expedition as a whole is not meant to imply that Clark and the others did not think that Drouillard or interpretation as a whole was unnecessary, but rather it is meant to point out that important acts such as that of interpretation did go unmentioned in the journals. While the firsthand accounts of the expedition were priceless contributions to the exploration of the West and were instrumental to the expansion of America, they were not perfect and their example facilitates a discussion on the accuracy and usefulness of journals in general as a historical tool. Journals, especially the Corps of Discovery's journals were one of the most useful pieces of information of the overall condition of the newly purchased Louisiana Territory. The journals were and still are an amazing source of information on the geography, flora and fauna, and Indian population of the previously unexplored territory and for this kind of information the journals can be used as a reliable historical tool. However, one has to scrutinize the journals when using them for attributing the involvement of the different individuals in the journals. The journals were written by people who for whatever reasons may have distorted other Corps of Discovery member's contributions during the expedition. Looking at the journals from a critical viewpoint, it is easy to see how a writer might record an event slightly different in order to shape how the event will later be viewed.

However, it is important to step away from such a cynical view of the journals because there were countless instances where a journalist provided an account for a heroic or instrumental action by a Corps of Discovery member other than themselves, one such instance was a part of Lewis's January 24, 1806 journal entry when he wrote that "the Indians witnessed Drewyer's shooting some of those Elk which has given them a

very exhaled opinion of us as marksmen and the superior excellence of our rifles.”<sup>11</sup>

Lewis gave Drouillard plenty of praise in this and countless other journal entries, which goes to show that Lewis along with the other Corps of Discovery members who wrote journals were not shy about giving praise where it was due, which makes way for another reason as to why some members’ contributions did go unrecorded. In Drouillard’s case, much of his contributions to Indian interaction went unrecorded because frankly there were more important things to include in the journal than who was the interpreter during Indian councils. The journals were not meant to tell a riveting story of adventure, but rather they were meant to be a scientific tool of the utmost importance, an importance that is clear in President Jefferson’s instructions to Lewis that his “observations are to be taken with great pains and accuracy; to be entered distinctly and intelligibly for others as well as yourself; to comprehend all the elements necessary,” and the journals “shoud [sic] be made at leisure times, and put into the care of the most trust worthy of your attendants to guard, by multiplying them against the accidental losses to which they will be exposed. A further guard would be, that one of these copies be on the cuticular [sic] membranes of the paper-birch, as less liable to injury from damp than common paper.”<sup>12</sup> From his instructions it is clear that Jefferson viewed the journals as an essential part of the expedition and meant for them to be written in a scientific matter that would be of use to the government in further exploration and use of the territory. With the emphasis of Jefferson’s orders it is easier to see why Lewis, Clark, and the other Corps of Discovery members sometimes skimmed on some of the unnecessary details and instead focused on

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis, January 24, 1806 entry in *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *President Thomas Jefferson’s Instructions to Captain Meriwether* in, vol. 2 of *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents*.

the more scientific details. Further, it is important to realize that the Corps of Discovery members were writing their journals during one of the more difficult journeys of their time which undoubtedly left them exhausted at the end of each day making their lack of attribution of credit to Drouillard and others completely understandable. Not to mention the fact that the journals do record many of the accomplishments of different Corps of Discovery members, which begs the question of what else could be the reason that historical figures such as Drouillard have been forgotten overtime.

Even though some of Drouillard's contributions were undoubtedly left out of the journals, the information that is in the journals is more than enough to portray Drouillard as one of if not the most important member of the Corps of Discovery in ensuring the success of the expedition. If there is evidence in the journals that suggests the importance of Drouillard then it must be a matter of interpretation by later historians that contributes to the lack of recognition for Drouillard and other figures such as him. The best explanation for the lack of recognition in latter interpretations of the journals and expedition as a whole is an unwillingness to give substantial credit to secondary persons such as Drouillard. In other words there is an unwillingness to give substantial credit to persons who were not leaders of the expedition or whatever historical event that is being interpreted. This kind of interpretation of the journals has led to an undeserved amount of credit being placed at the feet of the leaders of the Corps of Discovery, Captains Lewis and Clark. It is natural to attribute most of the success to a leader and in the case of the Corps of Discovery, the credit is given to Lewis and Clark instead of many of the secondary persons that were instrumental in the success of the expedition. Lewis and Clark do deserve credit as they did lead the expedition and recorded most of the useful

scientific information that was the whole point of the expedition, but in most modern recollections of the journey Lewis, Clark, and maybe Sacagawea are the only names ever associated with the success of the journey. This modern interpretation of the expedition completely distorts the finer details of the expedition and leaves all the secondary members with no credit for their many contributions to the success of the expedition. The same kind of interpretation undermines the contributions of John Colter and other mountain men who helped to blaze the trails of the west, and instead the interpretation only gives mention of the leaders of the fur trading enterprises and exploratory groups such as Manuel Lisa and Lewis and Clark.

## **Conclusion**

The lack of recording, problems in recording, and misinterpretation of the recorded firsthand accounts of the American West has caused a misrepresentation of the expansion and exploration of the American West. Because of this phenomenon, broader histories of the American West, such as Billington's "Westward Expansion," have left out the contributions of secondary historical figures. Figures such as George Drouillard and John Colter have been relegated to a footnote in the history of the American West when they were in fact indispensable contributors to the considerable amount of expansion and exploration that took place in America during the nineteenth century.

If not for Drouillard's ability to establish a friendly communication between the Indians and the Corps of Discovery it is likely that America's push westward would have been considerably more difficult. Without the connections established by the Corps of Discovery, the subsequent emergence of the American fur trade would have been that much more difficult and without the economic push into the region and its success, there would have been little reason for western settlement. Drouillard ended up being left out of large portions of the Corps of Discovery's journals, which neglected to mention many of his contributions to the expedition. Drouillard's example provides a powerful case study of how even firsthand accounts of history can leave out important information, which can eventually change the perception of the events.

Building off of the success that the Corps of Discovery had in fostering Indian relations, John Colter continued the effort and was instrumental in bringing various Indian nations to trade with American fur trading enterprises. Beyond that, Colter helped to advance the geographical knowledge of the West and combined with the instructional qualities of the tales of his adventures, Colter's time in the West made further westward expansion possible. Yet he, like other mountain men and other similar figures, did not receive credit for many of his contributions. Due to the lack of details regarding his time in the West, Colter is recognized more as a mythical character rather than a historical contributor. Colter's transformation into mythical character is a direct relation of the amount of evidence about his life. Due to the lack of hard evidence about Colter, there were only frontiersman tales that the other fur traders and frontiersmen told about Colter which caused him to be remembered in more of story like quality rather than in a historical way. This historical process that mythologizes Colter happened to other figures during the era who also did not have a great deal of evidence covering their lives, figures such as Daniel Boone and Sacagawea.

But why is it even important for men such as Drouillard and Colter to be recognized, what is wrong with Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and Manuel Lisa getting all the credit, some of which belongs to Drouillard and Colter? If historians do not mention Drouillard's and Colter's contributions then those histories become a distorted memory of what really happened. The problems with second and firsthand histories must be recognized and dealt with if history is going to match actuality. If Drouillard and Colter did get as much or more of the historical attention as Lewis, Clark, and Lisa, the current view on the era of westward expansion would be entirely different.



Certain aspects of the era, such as the fur trade and Indian relations would get more attention if history focused more on Colter and Drouillard.

The mistakes or oversight in the broader histories of the American West can be used as a warning of what can happen when historical events are either misrepresented in firsthand accounts or are lacking in detail in secondhand accounts. With this in mind, there needs to be more detailed in-depth research and scholarship on such secondary historical figures, research and scholarship that sifts through the problems in first and secondhand evidence and provides a complete view on a historical event. Recently there have been efforts to bring attention to these issues. John C. Jackson in his article "The Man Hunter," calls Drouillard the "most valuable member of the expedition," and sheds light on some of Drouillard's contributions that get left out by some of the broader histories.<sup>1</sup> Burton Harris's "John Colter: His Years in the Rockies," gives serious attention to many of Colter's contributions, but due to a lack of evidence, there are still many questions surrounding Colter. These two examples open the door to further research into numerous secondary figures in not just the American West, but throughout all of history. Hopefully further research will help to uncover other important figures and bring them the recognition they deserve.

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Jackson, "The Man Hunter," *We Proceeded On* 35, no. 1 (February 2009): 12-18.

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