All in the Family: The In-House Honorifics of Lewis and Clark

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During the Lewis and Clark expedition, landscape features were named for all 33 people who made the round trip to the Pacific. Names were sometimes linked to events involving party members, but more often they seemed to be assigned randomly. Early re-visits by expedition veterans helped some of these names to survive.

The Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-1806 offers much raw material for students of the "psychological and social process of naming," as the discipline of onomastics has been defined (Grimaud, 7). President Thomas Jefferson sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to find a trade route from St. Louis across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. On a round trip lasting two and a half years the travelers crossed a vast area of North America that had never been mapped. That landscape was thick with features needing names.[1] This study deals with a particular source of Lewis and Clark names: the members of the exploring party themselves. A landscape feature was named for each of the 33 people who made the trip to the Pacific and back. The names of 15 were used twice. Lewis's name was given to three different features and Clark's to four.

Of course, the explorers drew on other sources for their map names. They used existing names, such as *Big Horn River* (a translation from the Mandan) and *Mt. Hood*, mapped during the British Navy's 1792 survey of the Pacific Northwest. They applied their own descriptive names (*Milk River*, *Gates of the Rocky Mountains*), and

Names 42.4 (December 1994):269-277
ISSN:0027-7738
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daily events inspired others: *Mast Creek* was where the party's keelboat suffered a broken mast. And where did *Roloje Creek* come from? Clark said it was "given me last night in my Sleep" (Moulton, *Journals* 2:500).

Lewis and Clark were regular U.S. Army officers commanding a military unit formally called the "Corps of Volunteers for North Western Discovery." They led 26 enlisted men to the Pacific, plus two hired civilian interpreters, one of whom was accompanied by his wife and infant son. Clark also took a slave named York. For Lewis and Clark this personnel roster was a handy reservoir of names to tap when nothing else seemed appropriate.

It was the officers' prerogative to decide whose name would go on which feature. A page-by-page examination of the expedition's maps and journals (Moulton *Atlas, Journals*) has been undertaken to uncover patterns that may have guided these selections. The findings suggest that in-group humor and random whim have an interesting place in the onomastics of exploration. Additional insight is provided on the reasons why some explorer-bestowed names survive while others do not. The examination even throws indirect light on the question of a reputed romance between Clark and the famed Sacagawea.

There is a long tradition of explorers lending their own names to landmarks they encounter. The 1792 British naval survey led by Captain George Vancouver sprinkled the Pacific Northwest with the names of his shipmates, Lieutenant Peter Puget providing the best-known example. U.S. Army Major Stephen Long likewise wanted to "compliment" a colleague during an 1820 reconnaissance of the Front Range of the Rockies. Long put the name *James' Peak* on a conspicuous height in modern Colorado after a successful climb to the summit by Edwin James, the expedition's botanist. The peak, however, never shook its association with Lieutenant Zebulon Pike, who had seen it on a previous trip in 1806.

A commander who names a new-found landmark for a subordinate can intend it simply as a morale-building reward. That seemed a reasonable surmise to George Stewart, describing in *Names on the Land* how Captain John Smith came to name Keale's Hill for his ship's lookout while exploring Chesapeake Bay in 1608: "And though that hill 'was but low,' yet Richard Keale must have felt

warm toward his Captain for that courtesy, and was perhaps the better soldier in the days that came" (32).

Early in the trip Lewis and Clark explicitly named Missouri River landmarks for party members linked with some particular event. The first such instance occurred on July 4, 1804, not far from modern Leavenworth, Kansas and involved Private Joseph Field, one of two brothers in the unit. Clark reported "a Snake bit Jo: Fields on the Side of his foot" (Moulton, *Journals* 2:345-6). That prompted the unpracticed captain to put the awkward label *Jo Fields Snake Prarie* [sic] on a swath of nearby grassland.

Floyds River, which enters the Missouri near Sioux City, Iowa, still commemorates the death on August 20, 1804, of Sergeant Charles Floyd, the party's only fatality of the entire trip. A month later, in modern South Dakota, the other Field brother, Reubin, was memorialized for a specific deed. The party's keelboat passed the mouth of a modest stream which, said Clark, "we Call *Reubens Creek*, as R Fields [sic] found it" (Moulton, *Journals* 3:106).

The event-specific naming pattern for expedition members stopped in the spring of 1805. Clark's map for the Missouri River route which the expedition followed on April 14 of that year shows a small stream labeled *Frasures Run* — an Eastern generic that seems out of place on the North Dakota plains, but one that came naturally to the Virginia-born officers. Neither captain's journal bothered to give a reason for singling out Private Robert Frazer, but he was indeed involved in a specific event, which can be identified only in the separate journal of Sergeant John Ordway. He said Frazer, a novice hunter, had to shoot a buffalo "several times" with his musket before killing it (Quaife, 167). Clark's unexplained map name very likely reflected some teasing by his chortling comrades. At any rate, the captains were no longer consistently spelling out such name-event linkages for posterity.

Now began the gratuitous naming of a series of landmarks for various expedition privates, apparently just for the feat of showing up that day: *Werner's Creek*, for William Werner; *Brattens Creek*, for William Bratton; *Wisers Creek*, for Peter Weiser; *Goodrich's Island*, for Silas Goodrich; *Windsors Creek*, for Richard Windsor. On May 28 Clark tied the memorialization of Private John Thompson to general

merit, describing a stream which "I call *Thompsons Creek* after a valuable member of our party" (Moulton, *Journals* 4:213).

At this point, anyone seeking patterns to this naming might ask whether Lewis and Clark tried to rank their esteem for various subordinates according to the size or importance of the feature(s) named for them. Were, for instance, the bigger streams named for the more able members of the party?

The answer is clearly no. Apart from the officers the party's brightest star was unquestionably George Drouillard, a half Shawnee civilian interpreter. "Drewyer," as the captains usually spelled his name, was the group's top hunter and woodsman. Lewis warmly recommended him for a big mission-end bonus. His sole reward in the coin of a named landmark, however, was *Drewyers R*, described by Clark as "a large Creek" (Moulton, *Journals* 5:281), passed by the explorers on October 13, 1805, as they rode the Snake River through the dry plains of eastern Washington State. It's now called Palouse River, just a skinny blue thread on the highway maps.

Private John Colter was another of the party's most valued members, but the naming of *Colters Creek* (an unremarkable branch of the Clearwater River in Idaho) rated only a passing mention in Clark's summary of daily compass courses. Conversely, Clark inscribed one of the Columbia River's bigger tributaries in Oregon (now the John Day River) as the namesake of one of his least enterprising soldiers, Baptiste Lepage.

In assigning these in-house honorifics the captains seemed to work randomly through the personnel roster, honoring stars and ciphers alike as the need arose. After the expedition's arrival at the Pacific Ocean in November, 1805, the name of every adult in the party had been given to at least one feature along the way.

The honorees included Sacagawea, the Shoshoni wife of Toussaint Charbonneau, the other civilian interpreter. When in May, 1805, the explorers came to the junction of the Missouri and Musselshell rivers in eastern Montana, scouts reported seeing "a handsome river" branching off the Musselshell. It went on the route map as *Sar kar-gah wea Fork* (Moulton, *Atlas*, Map 51). Clark's slave, York, was commemorated at a multi-channeled division of the

Missouri within the Rockies; the route map for July 23, 1805, shows a marking for *York's 8 Islands*.

The leaders' conscious decision to use everyone's name on the westward journey required a belated catch-up entry for one member who had been overlooked earlier. On the Pacific Coast Clark checked over his outbound route maps and discovered that nothing had been named for Pierre Cruzatte, the party's popular fiddle player. The captain earlier had put the name *New Timbered river* on a modest stream entering the lower Columbia. He scratched that out and wrote *Crusats River* instead (Moulton, *Journals* 5:356-7).

The explorers had fun with a name bestowed during the expedition's winter encampment at the Columbia estuary. In January, 1806, Clark led a detachment to an Indian village to see the carcass of a beached whale. He camped on one side of a small creek and, "while Smokeing with the nativ's," heard a scream from the other side. An Indian had lured Private Hugh McNeal across the creek in hopes of robbing him. McNeal was rescued with the help of a native girl ("an old friend"), and everybody went back to the expedition's fort (Moulton, *Journals* 6:189). McNeal's creekside adventure was related, doubtless with much joshing, to Sergeant Ordway and others who had stayed behind. Ordway wrote "this Creek was named by Capt Clark Mcneals folley" (293). However, Clark later decided to be less whimsical with map names. On his sketch of that neighborhood he called the creek *Eculah*, a Chinookan term meaning 'whale.'

The expedition began the return journey in the spring of 1806. By July the party was back in the Montana Rockies, where it split to investigate two routes not covered on the outbound trip. As a horseback group led by Lewis rode toward a pass on the Continental Divide, the captain saw a chance to correct an injustice done to his dog Seaman, a floppy Newfoundland who had made the entire trip thus far. A remote mountain stream thus became *Seamans Creek*. Lewis decided to name a bigger nearby creek for William Werner, a member of his detachment, though Werner already had been memorialized by a creek in eastern Montana the year before.

With Clark's eastbound detachment, double naming was the rule for nearly the entire party. The captain led 12 people over Bozeman Pass to the upper Yellowstone River where he encountered numer-

ous features needing map names. The first was a northern feeder stream of the Yellowstone which Clark named *Shield River*, for Private John Shields, the party's blacksmith. Shields' name previously had been given to a creek near the Great Falls of the Missouri on the outbound trip. Now, on the Yellowstone, the captain saw no difficulty in recycling it.

As the party moved down the Yellowstone, Clark continued to re-use the name of each soldier. William Bratton got his second creek of the trip. Sergeant Nathaniel Pryor's name went on an important-looking tributary running from some squat mountains in the south. Privates George Shannon, Hugh Hall, Richard Windsor, Francois Labiche and George Gibson all had their names placed on Yellowstone feeder streams. York got a "river," though it was only a dry bed, and so did the interpreter, Charbonneau.

The captain didn't forget himself, either, marking a *Clark Fork* of the Yellowstone on his map. And, at last, he was able to honor a likable expedition member whose name previously hadn't been used at all. By now Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, the interpreter's son, was a year and a half old. The boy had utterly captivated Clark, who called him *Pomp*. When the party came to an isolated sandstone bluff on the Yellowstone's south bank, Clark called it *Pompys Tower.*[2] And for good measure a nearby stream became *Baptiests Creek* [sic].

On August 3, 1806, Clark reached the junction of the Yellowstone and Missouri rivers for his planned reunion with Lewis. The name of every member of Clark's party had been used on the Yellowstone except one: Sacagawea, Charbonneau's wife and Pomp's mother.

A number of novels and films purportedly "based upon" the expedition have spiced the story with a love affair between Clark and Sacagawea. A 1955 movie, *The Far Horizons*, depicted Charlton Heston grappling with an unlikely Donna Reed in swarthy makeup. There is nothing, however, in any of the journals to support this romance — or to disprove it, either. It's one of those open-ended historical mysteries that can only be weighed with indirect evidence. However, Clark's failure to honor his supposed sweetheart with a Yellowstone creek — even a dry one — while so memorializing her husband weighs against the novelists' claim.

The onomastics of the expedition say something about the survivability of landscape names bestowed by transient explorers. Only a few of the names bestowed by Lewis and Clark appear on today's maps, and these tend to be concentrated on the upper reaches of the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers in Montana. We might well ask why these and not others?

When Lewis and Clark returned to St. Louis on September 23, 1806, they dazzled the townspeople with tales of western streams alive with beaver. Their word-of-mouth accounts, plus probable Clark sketchmaps of the best beaver country, energized fur trade entrepreneurs such as Manuel Lisa and Auguste and Pierre Chouteau. The very next spring Lisa headed toward the Yellowstone in the company of two expedition veterans, George Drouillard and John Colter.

Thus, by 1807, men already familiar with Clark's map names were on the Yellowstone, making *Shield River*, *Clark Fork*[3] and *Pryors River* (and ultimately the *Pryor Mountains*) part of their regular vocabulary.

These same men were also early defenders of the expedition's greatest naming triumph. In southwestern Montana three streams join to form the Missouri River. The explorers in 1805 gave these three tributaries the names of three political celebrities back home: the *Jefferson*, the *Madison* and the *Gallatin*, for the President and the Secretaries of State and Treasury. These were important people, and that fact alone explains in large part why today's maps still show the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers converging at the town of Three Forks, Montana.

Perhaps equally important for their survival, these names were used early on. Sergeant Patrick Gass in 1807 scooped his sluggish captains by publishing a narrative account of the Pacific expedition. Gass's widely-circulated book made the first published references to the celebrity names given by Lewis and Clark to the three forks of the Missouri. Also, in 1810 a Lisa-financed trapping team — again including Drouillard and Colter — returned to the area, further ensuring that the names of those rivers would remain in general use.

Thus, by 1814, when an authorized account of the expedition was finally published by Philadelphia lawyer Nicholas Biddle (ghostwriting for Clark; Lewis was dead), a few of the original names on the

upper Yellowstone and Missouri were already locally current. Biddle's narrative was accompanied by a continental-scale map which Clark had compiled from his smaller expedition route maps. The engraver had to squeeze out the names of party members originally applied to some of the smaller features, but Clark's published map still showed landmarks named for himself and 29 of his companions. Of these, only the names of seven features given by the explorers survive. Perhaps we may learn from this the lesson that "the naming of places is not an act of permanence" (Jackson, 89), and names parceled out by people "just passing through" tend to vanish unless they are nourished soon and often by local usage.

It may also take government intervention to save a name from local natural extinction. No old Lewis and Clark soldiers returned to that neighborhood on Montana's Musselshell River where the captains had named a fork for the then-obscure Sacagawea in 1805. With no defenders the explorers' name gave way to *Crooked Creek* when settlers arrived. By the twentieth century, however, Sacagawea had become a celebrated feminist heroine, and many wanted the explorers' old honorific restored on government maps. In 1979 the U.S. Board on Geographic Names decided that *Crooked Creek* would officially be known as *Sacagawea River.*

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Notes

1. Lewis and Clark went 80% of the way on rivers, so they mostly named tributary streams, islands and other riverine features. Mountains generally went unnamed unless they were conspicuous stand-alone features, such as *Mt. Jefferson*, a volcanic cone in the Oregon Cascades missed by the 1792 British naval survey. Several mountains in the Rockies today honor expedition members, but they were named decades after the trip.

2. In his 1814 narrative of the expedition, Nicholas Biddle altered Clark's original name, *Pompys Tower*, to *Pompey's pillar*, which survives today without the apostrophe. Biddle was mimicking an Egyptian monument to a Roman general of that name.

3. Besides *Clarks Fork* (with a modern *s*) of the Yellowstone, another surviving expedition name marks *Clark Fork*, a distant tributary of the Columbia. Both are in Montana but on opposite sides of the Continental Divide.

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