Naming with Lewis and Clark

2002 Presidential Address, December 28, 2002

Thomas J. Gasque
University of South Dakota

Thank you for allowing me the honor to serve as the president of the American Name Society for the last two years. My membership in ANS extends back twenty years, a short time in comparison to many of you here, but I well remember my first annual meeting in 1983, right here in New York City. I attended the banquet, held in the dining room of a hotel across the street from the Hilton, the MLA headquarters hotel. It was also the first time that I had met Don Lance, the man whose passing just a few weeks ago we have lamented tonight. Don and I were eager to attend an MLA panel on the Old English language, and we unceremoniously slipped out before Grace Alvarez-Altman began her presidential address. I am happy to see that none of you has similar urgent needs and everyone has remained to hear me speak.

There is an occasionally honored tradition of timeliness in these talks. Last year, as many of you will remember, Len Ashley gave an excellent history of the American Name Society to honor the fiftieth anniversary of our founding. In 1984, my second meeting, which was in the elegant surroundings of the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C., John Algeo gave a charming and witty talk on George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*. Since the year 2003 marks the centennial of the flight of the Wright Brothers, I considered basing my remarks on that significant event, but I know little about the Wright Brothers. The year 2003, however, does mark the rounded anniversary of another event of great significance to American history, the bicentennial of the beginning of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, a topic with which I have more than passing familiarity. Perhaps, I thought, I could talk about Meriwether Lewis's time in New York City. But there is no evidence that he was ever here, so I have decided to link my interest in Lewis and Clark and my interest in names and will

Names 51.1 (March 2003):3-11
ISSN:0027-7738

therefore speak tonight on the topic, "Naming with Lewis and Clark."

The bicentennial commemoration of the Lewis and Clark Expedition begins next month, in January 2003, at Charlottesville, Virginia, and continues until September 2006, marking the date of their return from the West to Saint Louis. Signature events will occur on the appropriate dates at a number of sites along the trail, among them Louisville, Kentucky; Saint Louis, Missouri; Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; Omaha, Nebraska; Chamberlain, South Dakota; Bismarck, North Dakota; Great Falls, Montana; and Astoria, Oregon. In the more than three years of this commemoration, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Lewis and Clark enthusiasts and tourists will follow all or part of the trail, in buses, in automobiles, in boats, on bicycles, on horseback, or even on foot. For the states along the trail, these years are expected to bring in major tourist dollars and boost the economies.

Most people know that the Lewis and Clark expedition is connected in some way to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. President Thomas Jefferson bought the entire drainage area of the Missouri River from France for the bargain price of fifteen million dollars. But even before that purchase was in the negotiation stage, Jefferson and Lewis had begun to plan an exploration across the continent, primarily to determine the feasibility of a water route to the Pacific Ocean. The final official transfer of Louisiana from French to U. S. ownership took place while Lewis and Clark and their contingent were camped along the Mississippi River opposite Saint Louis. This meant that the explorers would be moving through land claimed by the United States, at least to the headwaters of the Missouri, and would not need the passports that Jefferson had arranged for them.

Most people also know that Lewis and Clark were helped by a young Indian woman named Sacagawea. In fact, until recently, most of us would have called her Sacajawea, a name used in the first edition of the journals and made familiar by numerous fictional and marginally historical accounts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most scholars now, however, use the spelling *Sacagawea,* as that seems to be the form preferred by the captains on the few occasions they actually wrote the name in the journals. Clark usually refers to

her as "the squar" ["squaw"] or, strangely, as "Janey." It is logical to assume that the name is in Hidatsa, the language spoken by those people who had kidnapped her from her Shoshone people a few years earlier. If the name is Shoshone, then *Sacajawea* is possible, but in that case it would mean "canoe pusher." On a sketch map included in the journals, Clark labels a small river in Montana named in her honor "Sah-car-gar-wea or Birdwoman's River." In North Dakota, the preferred spelling even today is *Sakakawea,* and a large reservoir in that state bears the name *Lake Sakakawea.* Most scholars agree, if the Hidatsa forms are strictly followed, *Sakakawea* is the best spelling. But Clark, judging from his journal entries, must have heard a *g* rather than a *j* or a *k.* It is possible that Nicholas Biddle misinterpreted Clark's handwriting, since in the original journals his *g*'s often look like *j*'s.

The name that Clark gave this little river did not survive, and it soon became *Crooked Creek.* In 1979 the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, responding to requests from people in Montana, officially changed the name to *Sacagawea River.*

Manuscript map evidence also is responsible for correcting another long-held misinterpretation of a name, that of Lewis's dog, a black Newfoundland. The late Donald Jackson, one of the preeminent Lewis and Clark scholars, took a close look at a name on a creek in Montana and saw that it clearly read *Seaman,* challenging the assumption that the dog was named *Scannon,* which is how earlier editors interpreted the handwritten journal entries. Jackson argued his case in an article titled "A Dog Named Scannon—Until Recently." The current name is Monture Creek, but I understand that Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs, daughter of the late Stephen Ambrose, and her husband John, who live along this creek, plan to submit a proposal to restore the name *Seamans Creek.*

In recent years, so much has been written about the Lewis and Clark Expedition that it requires a good bit of time just to keep up. The most important books are the recently completed thirteen volumes of the original journals, edited by Gary Moulton and published by the University of Nebraska Press. In addition to the complete journals by the two captains, this set includes the journals kept by four of the enlisted men. There is also a volume devoted to the plants collected by the

explorers, many of which still survive in the Botanical Museum in Philadelphia. And one over-sized volume, an atlas, includes all of the maps used by and created by the members of the Corps of Discovery. Much of the attention in recent years has been on such important matters as the health of the men, the weapons they carried, and the clothes they wore. Others have studied the important relations with the various Native American groups they encountered.

Some attention has been devoted to the language of the journals, often pointing out the casual spelling habits of the writers, especially Clark. It has been pointed out, for example, that he found 19 different ways to spell the word *mosquito*, a word he found to write on numerous occasions; and *Sioux*, the name of the Native Americans encountered in present-day South Dakota, is spelled 29 different ways.

Very little, however, has been written about the names that Lewis and Clark either discovered being used by earlier travelers and Indians or gave to the landscape in the course of their explorations. Donald Jackson, whom I mentioned earlier, has a list of the names in Montana, but the other states along the trail await a careful study.

Tonight, I would like to mention just a few of the names that we can trace to the members of the Expedition and explain how those names came to be applied. Since the part of the trail that I am most familiar with is along the Missouri River from about Omaha, Nebraska, to the headwaters in Montana, I will limit my examples to that stretch, still over 2,000 miles.

On the east bank of the river opposite Omaha is the city of Council Bluffs, Iowa. Lewis and Clark are responsible for this name, but the bluff on which they had their first council with Indians was on the west side of the river and about fifteen miles upstream from the city of Council Bluffs. The captains, who had looked in vain for Indians most of the summer, finally met with a few representatives of the Missouri and Oto tribes in early August 1804. (Lewis and Clark had hoped to meet with the Omaha, but they were out on the plains on their annual buffalo hunt.) Clark, ever mindful of the future, wrote on August 4 that "The situation of our last Camp *Councile Bluff* or Handsom Prarie . . . appears to be a verry proper place for a Tradeing establishment & fortification." Later travelers up the

river frequently referred to the Council Bluff (or Bluffs), and when a village was established about 1850 it took the name of this familiar landmark.

Just over two weeks later, on August 20, 1804, Sergeant Charles Floyd, who had been ill with "a Biliose Chorlick," as Clark calls it, died "with a great deal of Composure." The specific nature of this disease has been debated for years, but the usual diagnosis is a ruptured appendix. Floyd was buried with military honors on a bluff just south of present-day Sioux City, Iowa. The Corps agreed to call the bluff *Sergeant Floyd Bluff* and to name a small river nearby *Floyd's River*. The river is still called Floyd River, and a town near the bluff has the name Sergeant Bluff. Floyd's grave, which like the Council Bluffs, was a major landmark for decades of river travel, is rather ostentatiously marked today by a one-hundred foot obelisk, placed there a century ago at the centennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

All of the names that the captains applied have not remained. In fact, in Montana, according to Donald Jackson, only 17 of the 148 names (other than translated or transcribed Indian names) applied by Lewis and Clark remain in use today. I don't know what the total count for the whole voyage might be, but an example of one name that was short-lived is *Roloje Creek*, just a few miles upstream from Floyd River. *Roloje Creek* is now called *Aoway Creek*, but Clark says, in his entry for August 22, "this creek I call Roloje a name I learned last night in my Sleep;" he literally dreamed it up.

Lewis and Clark approached the site of the present capital of South Dakota, Pierre, on September 24, 1804. Here they met, as they had anticipated, members of the Teton band of Sioux. A map drawn by an earlier explorer named John Evans identified the river which enters the Missouri at this point as the Little Missouri River, but Clark, while acknowledging the name given by "Mr. Evins," chose to ignore it, writing, "The Tribes of the Scouix Called the Teton, is Camped about 2 miles up on the N W Side and we Shall Call the River after that nation, *Teton*." The present name of the river is the *Bad River*. I should add that the name *Teton* is not at all the same word used of the mountains in Wyoming, the *Grand Tetons*. That word is French, and it means, of course, "breast." The Sioux *Teton* is from ti-tohn-wahn (the *n*'s represent nasalized

vowels), which means "dwellers on the plains" or "dwellers in the village."

One of the most important tributaries of the Missouri River is the Yellowstone, which begins in Yellowstone Lake in the heart of America's first national park. Controversy over this name continues, but it is most likely that the name does not come from the yellow-colored stones of the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, in the park. It was a name known by the Hidatsa from whom Lewis and Clark gathered much information about the route ahead. To them it was the *Meé,-ah'-zah,* which the French had translated as *Roche Jaune* 'yellow rock' and Clark wrote as *Rejone.* This and several others were thus identified by name before the explorers ever saw them.

Another river that the Hidatsa told them about was one that they called *Ah-mâh-tâh, ru-shush-sher,* or "River which scolds at all others." When they reached this river, on May 8, 1805, they were not as impressed as they expected to be, but Lewis noted its whitish color and described its shade precisely: "the water of this river possesses a peculiar whiteness, being about the colour of a cup of tea with an admixture of a tablespoonful of milk. from the colour of it's water we called it Milk river." The name is still *Milk River.*

A few weeks later, Lewis and Clark saw a river that looked as if it deserved to be explored. Lewis wrote on May 29 that "Cap. C who ascended this R. much higher than I did has thought proper to call it Judieths River." The name honored Miss Julia Hancock, of Fincastle, Virginia. Apparently Julia was also called Judith. At any rate, in 1808, two years after the return of the explorers, Miss Hancock became Mrs. William Clark.

Although Lewis never married, he took an opportunity to honor a young woman who in his eyes must have rivaled Julia Hancock. On June 2, the Corps encountered a fork in the river which the Hidatsa had not mentioned. In the eyes of Lewis and Clark and all of the men, the two forks seemed to be of the same size; it was unclear which was the true Missouri River. After a delay of some days, the captains decided to take the South Fork, which turned out to be the correct one, and Lewis decided to name the fork not taken "in honour of Miss Maria W—d. called it Maria's River. it is true that the hue of the waters of this turbulent and troubled stream but illy comport

with the pure celestial virtues and amiable qualifications of that lovely fair one; but on the other hand it is a noble river." Maria W—d has been identified as Maria Wood, one of Lewis's cousins.

Both the Judith and the Marias River remain on the maps of Montana. Other rivers in that state still bear the names of people known to the captains, and as they went further west, they began to be more diplomatic in their choices. Smith's River (now Smith River) and the somewhat larger Dearborn's River (now Dearborn—the apostrophes and *s*'s have been eliminated) honor Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith and Secretary of War Henry Dearborn respectively. On July 27, 1805, Lewis reached what he called and which is still called *Three Forks*. None of the three rivers that come together at this point is larger enough than the others to justify the continuation of the name Missouri River, so Lewis named the three for three men largely responsible for his being there: Jefferson's River, Madison's River, and Gallatin's River. These names—without the genitive indicator—survive today, and it is at this point that the Missouri River name officially begins, more than 2,000 river miles from Saint Louis. Lewis logically surmised that the westernmost fork would take them toward their Pacific Ocean goal and named it for President Jefferson. The other two, both of which have their sources in Yellowstone National Park, were named for James Madison, Secretary of State, and Albert Gallatin, Secretary of the Treasurer.

Three tributaries of the Jefferson River earned fancy names: Philosophy, Philanthropy, and Wisdom, "in commemoration of . . .those cardinal virtues, which have so eminently marked that deservedly selibrated character [Jefferson] through life." These names did not last, as one might expect in the ranching country of western Montana, and the streams are now called, respectively, *Willow Creek, Ruby River*, and *Big Hole River*. Ruby River, named because of the presence of garnets, was for a while in the nineteenth century, called *Stinking Water Creek*. So much for high ideals, though, to be fair, a small town along the Big Hole River still goes by the name *Wisdom*.

Not long afterwards, Lewis and Clark reached the Continental Divide and eventually the Pacific Ocean, but the

worst part of the voyage still lay ahead in the terrible Rocky Mountains. Many more names would be placed on their maps, some to stay, some to pass away like those in Montana, but that's a topic for another time.

I thank you for listening.

A Note on Sources

I have used much of the material in this talk on previous occasions, for instance at the 40th Names Institute in New York in 2001, at the Canadian Society for the Study of Names in Toronto in May 2002, and at the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences in Uppsala, Sweden, in August 2002. The paper read at the Names Institute was published in January 2003 in *A Garland of Names: Selected Papers of the Fortieth Names Institute*, edited by Wayne H. Finke and Leonard R. N. Ashley. My earlier discussion of names in Lewis and Clark appeared as "Lewis and Clark's Onomastic Assumptions," *Midwest Folklore* 21.1–2 (Spring–Fall 1995): 30–38.

Indispensable to the study of any Lewis and Clark topic is the recently completed *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, edited by Gary E. Moulton and published by the University of Nebraska Press (13 volumes, 1983–2001), from which most of the quoted material in this presentation was taken. It should be noted that in several cases Lewis and Clark made similar statements, and in much of what Clark wrote in 1804 the reader has a choice to use the field notes, discovered in the twentieth century, or the actual journal; the wording often varies. Among Donald Jackson's many books about Lewis and Clark is a collection of miscellaneous essays under the title *Among the Sleeping Giants: Occasional Pieces on Lewis and Clark* (University of Illinois Press, 1987). I refer to two of these, "A Dog Named Scannon—Until Recently" (43–54) and "Lewis and Clark Place-Names in Montana" (75–123). An early study of the language used by the members of the Expedition is *Lewis and Clark: Pioneering Linguists*, by Elijah Harry Criswell, University of Missouri Studies 15.2 (1940).Anyone who wants to understand Lewis and Clark's relationships with the various Indian tribes must start with James P. Ronda's *Lewis and Clark among the Indians* (University

of Nebraska Press, 1984). An excellent source of information about the etymology of Siouan names, including Sacagawea and Teton, can be found in the website maintained by John Koontz at the University of Colorado:
(http://spot.colorado.edu/~koontz/default.htm).