

PROJECT TITLE:	
STOP LEWIS AND CLARK!	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** – What was the Spanish reaction to the Lewis and Clark Expedition?

2. **Contextual Essay** –

“An express ought immediately to be to the governor of Santa Fe, and another to the captain-general of Chihuahua, in order that they may detach a sufficient body of chasseurs [soldiers] to intercept Captain Lewis and his party, who are on the Missouri River, and force them to retire or take them prisoners.” This is an excerpt from a letter written by an agent working for the Spanish government in North America. The agent was known as number 13. He was General James Wilkinson, a senior officer for the United States Army. His information helped shape how Spain approached the Lewis and Clark situation.

To understand the event, it is important to consider the history of the area in question. The territory explored by Lewis and Clark had changed hands of imperial governments various times before the U.S. acquired it from France in 1803. Robert LaSalle claimed it for France in the late 1600s, the Spanish acquired it following the Seven Years War (French and Indian War), 1800/02 it was returned to France under pressure from Napoleon and his conquests, and then the United States acquired it from France in 1803 due to various circumstances.

At first, the Spanish government had no real issue with the expedition up the Missouri River. True, they had just lost a massive tract of land to the French who basically handed it over to the United State, but they were willing to work with the young nation. A correspondence between two Spanish officials reads, “the group of travelers...would have no other view than the advancement of geography. (Jackson, 4) The Spanish government was willing to let the group pass through without any interference. The reason for their passiveness is a result of President Jefferson’s assurance that the expedition would be primarily scientific, but he was cloaking his main agenda in the name of science. Yes, Jefferson had an unquenchable thirst for all the sciences, and scientific observations were an objective of the expedition, but he kept his primary goals on a need to know basis. This is displayed in a letter from Lewis to Jefferson when Lewis mentions he “communicated the real extent and objects of [his] mission, but with strict injunctions to secrecy.” (Jackson, 37)

In the early 19th century, just as it is today, trade and commerce were the keys to power and wealth for a nation. Jefferson knew this. He knew that it would be greatly beneficial for the U.S. to gain favorable influence over the American Indian groups in the interior of the continent, and more

importantly, find the Northwest Passage to the Pacific, which would allow for trading with the East Indies among other places. This was so important to Jefferson and the U.S., and so threatening to Spain, that he needed to keep his main objective of trade a secret. Lewis to Clark, “During the last session of congress a law was passed in conformity to a private message of the President of the United States titled ‘An Act making appropriation for extending the external commerce of the United States.’”(Jackson, 57)

It must be noted that the transition of Louisiana from Spain to France to the U.S. happened so quickly that the boundaries were still in dispute, and the Spanish still had forts, posts, and officials along the Mississippi and in other parts of said territory. It was rather confusion, and it wasn’t cut and dry. With that in mind, the Spanish still had great influence over many of the tribes in the area and wanted to keep those relationships. They had made various attempts themselves, such as the Mackay and Evans Expedition of 1795, which was “Spain’s most ambitious endeavor to explore and control its acquired lands.” (Porter) As the Louisiana Territory passed quickly over to the U.S. from France, the Spanish became wary and threatened. An 1803 letter from one Spanish official to the Spanish governor of Louisiana reads, “[Lewis] adding also that his intention was to continue his trip penetrating the Missouri in order to fulfill his mission of discoveries and observations. I have hinted to him that my orders did not permit me to consent to his passing to enter the Missouri River and that I was opposing it in the name of the King, my master.” (Jackson, 142) Regardless of this minor resistance, the expedition did begin “penetrating the Missouri.” It isn’t until late in the winter of 1804 that the Spanish began to take considerable action.

It has since come to light that General James Wilkinson of the U.S. Army was agent 13, a paid informant for the Spanish government. It is still unclear what his intentions were, but his warning in the winter of 1804 became the trigger that set off four expeditions by the Spanish to capture the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He warned that the expedition’s goals were trade and commerce and influence over American Indian groups. He also cautioned that it was just the beginning of American involvement in the area. “Wilkinson emphasized the importance of winning the affection of various Indian tribes and increasing their jealousy against the United States. By providing arms and ammunition to the Indians, Spain could employ them not only in checking the extension of American settlements, but also, if necessary, in destroying every settlement located west of the Mississippi.” (Jackson/Belvins, 178)

The Spanish dispatched four different expeditions with varying objectives, but the main goal was to capture the Corp of Discovery. The first group made up of fifty men made it as far as the Platte River in present-day Nebraska, but failed to find the expedition. They only “urged the Pawnee Indians not to trade with the United States and to turn back anyone coming from the U.S.” (Jackson/Belvins, 180) Another expedition made up of “over one hundred men...was attacked by Indians (later confirmed to be Pawnee) near the junction of the Purgatory and Arkansas rivers” in present-day Colorado. (Jackson/Belvin, 181) The largest of the four groups consisted of over 500 men, including Spanish soldiers, Mexican militia, and American Indian allies. This last attempt set off in 1806, and as Warren Cook, author of *Flood Tide of the Empire*, observes, the Spanish force was “hamstrung by horse thieves and stalemated by determined Pawnee opposition...[the force] was too unwieldy for a surprise attack on Lewis and Clark...” (Cook) With all these hardships, plus the sheer size of the area, the Spanish “hit” squads failed in their objective to capture “Captain Merry” and his elusive group.

In closing, the Spanish government’s reaction to the Lewis and Clark expedition really isn’t that surprising when you consider the motives (laid out by Agent 13) As a Spanish official in Sonora warned in 1783, “A new and independent power has now arisen on our continent. Its people active, industrious, and aggressive.” (Galloway). The Spanish not only feared the trade influence of the United States, but also feared a possible invasion itself. The U.S.A. in only 25 years had not only beaten the powerful British Empire in all out war, but also negotiated a land sale to double their size with the other big kid on the block, Napoleon and the French. America was looking west, and the Spanish government did what it had to do to try to protect its claims and power in the region, which

we will see, was not effort enough. To have students, especially in the east, study the Spanish reaction to this very “American” event allows them to step outside the American/English bubble and view it through a more global lens.

3. Annotated Bibliography –

Jackson, Donald (editor), *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents*, (University of Illinois Press, 1978)

This two volume set contains over 450 primary source documents relating to the Lewis and Clark Expedition. The letters and documents are arranged in chronological order so the development, execution, and aftermath of the expedition unfold in a very concise manner. The author footnotes every document with great detail to help the reader understand not only what is being said, but also who was involved and, at times, how they might come into play later in the documents. A very valuable resource.

Jackson, Donald, edited by Belvin, Tim, *To Spare No Pains: Zebulon Pike and his 1806-1807 Southwest Expedition*, (Second printing, Pikes Peak Library District, 2007)

As the title suggests, the book is centered largely on the expedition of Zebulon Pike, which was eventually halted by the Spanish. The book does spend time on the Lewis and Clark Expedition because they were similar in nature and both groups were seen as a threat and hunted by the Spanish.

Wilson, Charles Morrow, *Meriwether Lewis of Lewis and Clark*, (Thomas Y. Crowell Co. 1934)

This is a biography of Meriwether Lewis. It is an older piece of work, but it was useful in certain areas when researching Lewis’ beginnings and personality. In dealing with the research of Spain, the book discusses the Spanish occupations along the Mississippi as well early encounters with Lewis.

Ambrose Tubbs, Stephenie, *The Lewis and Clark Companion*, (Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2003)

This is an encyclopedia guide to the voyage of discovery. It is useful as a quick reference when researching the expedition. Everything from tools used, to participants in the voyage are listed and detailed. The book is set up alphabetically like an encyclopedia so it is easy to use.

Galloway, Colin G., *One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West Before Lewis and Clark*, (University of Nebraska Press, 2003)

This book is largely dedicated to the tribal histories of Native Americans on the North American continent before the expedition of Lewis and Clark. It looks at the all aspects change and conflicts in American Indian societies throughout the centuries. It was useful in this research by taking a look at the European colonization on the continent in relation to the native people.

Florentine Films, *The Journals*, retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx_jou.html

These were compiled when making the film “Lewis and Clark: The Journey of the Corps of Discovery.” These are excerpts, which were pulled from the journals of both Lewis and Clark, as well as, five other men who were on the journey. It is easy to use an very useful when researching this event.

Ambrose, Steven, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*, (Ambrose-Tubbs Inc., 1996)

The book is centered greatly on the life of Meriwether Lewis. From his early life in Albemarle County, through the expedition, and the aftermath of the expedition with Lewis's death. The book reads like a story, which pulls from the various journals and letters of all parties involved. The journey itself is described in great detail.

Bannon, John Francis, *The Spanish Borderlands: 1513-1821*, (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1970)

The book is a detailed look of Spain's 300 year presence in North America. It was useful in researching Spanish history leading up to the expedition, which allows for a better understanding of the Spanish views of their neighbors and the Spanish reactions to the United States.

Porter, J., (2004) "A River of Promise" Historians Reconsider the Missouri River and Its Explorers. *Indiana Magazine of History*, 100(4)

This essay considers five contemporary works on the various exploration expeditions up the Missouri River. The author examines how some ideas have changed, as well as, how some lesser known explorers and ventures are also being examined.