

1806

By Christmas, the men had nearly finished their winter quarters, which they called Fort Clatsop after the local Indian tribe. The explorers spent the cold, rainy, generally miserable winter updating their journals, trading with the Indians for food and other needed items, and preparing for the long return journey.

On March 23, 1806, Lewis and Clark presented Fort Clatsop to Chief Coboway (a Clatsop Indian) and the Expedition began its trek home. The party reached the Nez Perce lands in May but had to wait there until late June for the snows to melt on the Bitterroots. Once it crossed the mountains and reached Traveler's Rest, the Expedition split up. Lewis took part of the men north and Clark led a party down the Yellowstone River. On July 26, Lewis and his men became engaged in a fight with Blackfoot warriors, who were attempting to take horses and guns. Two of the warriors were killed. On August 12, the entire Expedition was reunited at the point where the Yellowstone flows into the Missouri River.

Traveling with the Missouri's current, the Expedition was able to cover up to 70 miles in a day. The explorers reached the Mandan villages on August 14, and there parted company with Charbonneau, Sacagawea, and young Jean Baptiste. The Expedition finished its journey when it reached St. Louis on September 23, 1806. President Jefferson had thought that the men would be gone for about a year, and consequently had feared for their safety. In fact, it took the Lewis and Clark Expedition two years, four months, and nine days to travel across the western part of the continent and back.

President Jefferson's instructions to Lewis were so extensive as to be almost impossible to fulfill, yet he viewed the Expedition as a tremendous success. The discoveries made by the explorers changed the vision of this young country. No water route to the Pacific was found, but accurate and detailed maps were drawn. Peaceful contact was made with Native American tribes and trade was discussed. The body of knowledge added to the scientific community proved to be truly invaluable and vast reaches of North America had been explored. Lewis and Clark's "voyage of discovery" turned out to be one of Thomas Jefferson's most enduring legacies.

1. What is significant about the encounter with the Blackfoot warriors on July 26th?
2. Even though the return trip to St. Louis was quicker than their trip to the Pacific, it was all much longer than President Jefferson thought. What does that say about his expectations of the terrain and rivers?