

**Thomas Hutchins
and the
Proposed Expedition to the Pacific Ocean**

Had plans of a talented, American surveyor and geographer been implemented in the tumultuous years immediately following the American Revolution, the names of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark might now be little more than obscure footnotes in the history of American westward expansion. This is the story of Thomas Hutchins and his unrealized expedition to the Pacific Ocean.

Thomas Hutchins is well known to students of American Colonial History for his detailed eighteenth century maps of the French villages within the Central Mississippi River Valley. These maps include "A Plan of the several Villages in the Illinois Country with Part of the River Mississippi & C" (Figure 1)(Good 1971), the Village of Cahokia (Figure 2)(Peterson 1949), and "A Plan of CASCASKIES" (Kaskaskia) (Figure 3)(Rea 1973).



Figure 1. Illinois Map. Thomas Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.



Figure 2. Village of Cahokia, 1770. Thoms Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

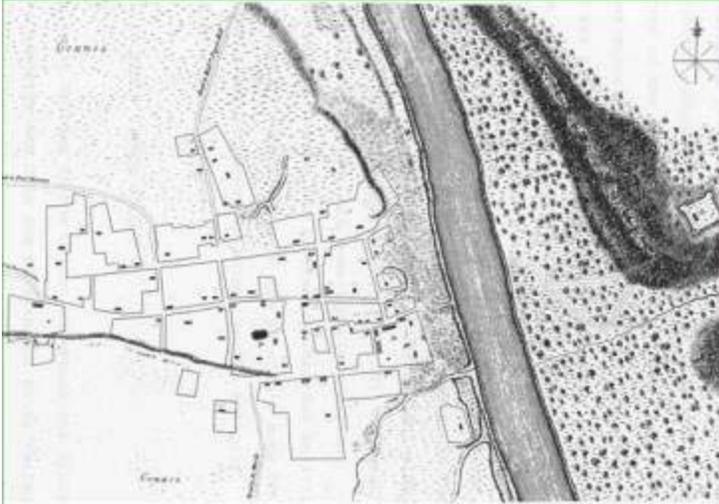


Figure 3. Village of Kaskaskia, 1771. Thomas Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In 1996, Mr. Charles E. Peterson, F.A.I.A. and founder (in 1933) of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) program of the National Park Service, located a document archived among the personal papers of Thomas Hutchins (1730-1789) at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This document was an itemized budget estimate for an expedition from the Mississippi River frontier to the Pacific Ocean (Figure 4)(Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1759-1788:XX189). The heading at the top of this document read **"An Estimate for Exploring the Country Westward of the Sources of the River Mississippi, towards the Pacific Ocean, or South Sea"**.

An Estimate for Exploring the Country Westward of the Sources of the River Mississippi, Towards the Pacific Ocean, or South Sea

To Purchase Boats, Canoes, Sacks, Anchors, Cables, Barken, Blisk &	1550-0-0
To Purchase Boards, Narrow Axes, Saws, Augers, Bundles, Hammocks, Adzes, Hovels, Nails, Hedges, Hand-knives, Tomawks, Knife-bits, and Whop-saws, with Files, Chisels, Gouges &	50-0-0
To Purchase Tents & Oil Cloaths	70-0-0
To Pay Indian Expenses for Carrying Messengers to the Tribes & Nations of Indians In way West, to acquirement of any good	100-0-0
Blankets	
To Amount of Presents for the Chiefs of the different Nations & Tribes In way West	1000-0-0
To Pay for Guides	300-0-0
To the Pay of 9 Men to Row my Boats two Years at 4/8 p ^m Day	1533-0-0
To Purchase Provisions for the above Men two Years	500-0-0
To two Years Pay for an Interpreter	365-0-0
To two Years Pay for myself	720-0-0
To two Years Pay for an Assistant to myself	365-0-0
To Unforeseen Accidents	500-0-0
	<u>£ 6163-0-0</u>

Figure 4. "An Estimate for Exploring the Country Westward of the Sources of the River Mississippi, Towards the Pacific Ocean, or South Sea." Thomas Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

The potential historical importance of this parchment was immediately clear to Mr. Peterson. He promptly forwarded the annotated reference for this document to the author along with a politely worded suggestion to pursue its origin and purpose. The following information was generated pursuant to that suggestion and request.

Thomas Hutchins was born in Monmouth County, New Jersey, around 1730 and died in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1789 (Quattrocchi 1944:4). Like many others at that time, Hutchins was orphaned at a young age. Prior to his sixteenth birthday he immigrated to the Western Country of the Ohio River frontier. For much of the remaining forty-six years of his life, Hutchins traversed and mapped that frontier. The first official record of him is from November 1, 1756, when he received a commission as an ensign in a Pennsylvania Regiment (Quattrocchi 1944:5). By 1757, he was the quartermaster of the Third Battalion. He was part of both the Forbes expedition and first English garrison to be stationed in the Ohio Valley (Quattrocchi 1944:5). Hutchins' outstanding conduct and heroism during

those assignments resulted in his appointment as the manager of both the King's and Contractor's stores and acting commissary at Fort Pitt (Quattrocchi 1944:6). There, Hutchins' mathematical ability and skills as a woodsman, surveyor, and tribal negotiator were frequently demonstrated. He was variously assigned duties of mapping supply routes and recording strategic natural and cultural features surrounding Fort Pitt (Figure 5) (Quattrocchi 1944:6).



Figure 5. "Plan of the Town of Pittsburg [sic]" by Victor Collot. Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

In 1762, the American-born Thomas Hutchins received a formal commission as an ensign in the British Army (Quattrocchi 1944:15). In 1766, Ensign Hutchins was transferred temporarily to an Illinois Country post, Fort Cavendish (Rea 1973:xxxiii). Fort Cavendish (formerly Fort de Chartres) was located on the Mississippi River, approximately 45 miles downstream of present-day St. Louis, Missouri. Hutchins remained at Fort de Chartres only a matter of months before being recalled to the East. However, Hutchins returned to Fort de Chartres in 1768 and remained stationed there until June 10, 1771 (Quattrocchi 1944:126).

The most significant event in Hutchins tour of duty at Fort de Chartres (as it related to the subject investigation) was Thomas Hutchins' acquaintanceship with the businessman George Morgan. Morgan had arrived in the Illinois Country in 1766, the same year as Hutchins. George Morgan was the principle agent of the Philadelphia-based trading company of Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan (Quattrocchi 1944:99). The company's trading post was located in the French Village of Cahokia and was one of the most successful establishments of its kind in the Illinois Country during the second half of the eighteenth century. Thomas Hutchins friendship with George Morgan was based, at least in part, on mutual self interests. Surviving records reveal that Thomas Hutchins' business

interests were frequently in concert with those of George Morgan. That is particularly evident later in Hutchins' career (Quattrocchi 1944:285).

From the time that Thomas Hutchins was first stationed at Fort Pitt, he was aware that his ability to survey and produce accurate maps was a marketable skill and potential source of significant income (Bedini 2001:520-527). George Morgan was also aware of that fact. As the local representative of a large trading company and land speculators, Hutchins' abilities would certainly not have gone unnoticed to either George Morgan or his distant Philadelphia associates (Alvord and Carter 1921:pp 415,445). This may explain why George Morgan and his partners remained close acquaintances of Thomas Hutchins throughout the remainder of his life.

Following Hutchins' tour of duty in the Illinois Country, he was assigned Pensacola and West Florida. Between 1772 and 1777, Thomas Hutchins (then Captain Hutchins) performed a variety of engineering/surveying duties along the Lower Mississippi River Valley and throughout West Florida. During that time, Hutchins purchased, or otherwise privately amassed a considerable amount of land east of present-day Baton Rouge, Louisiana (Quattrocchi 1944:166). However, Hutchins' continuing business interests with George Morgan (then Colonel George Morgan of the Continental Army) and representatives of the firm of Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan resulted in his arrest by British authorities on charges of treason while he was temporarily stationed in London. Hutchins was ultimately cleared of all charges, but not before weeks of solitary confinement in London, and the permanent forfeiture of a significant portion of his personal papers and financial assets (Quattrocchi 1944:187-198). On February 16, 1780, Thomas Hutchins left London never to return, either to England or the British cause (Quattrocchi 1944:198).

After leaving London, Hutchins, always the survivor, sold his British military commission and sailed for France. There, he immediately began correspondence with Benjamin Franklin. On March 6, 1780, Thomas Hutchins recited the Oath of Allegiance and pledged his cartographic services to the American cause (Quattrocchi 1944:201). Hutchins star rose quickly in the American ranks. By May 1781, he had been appointed by the Congress of the United States as "Geographer to the United States" (Quattrocchi 1944:208). Ultimately, Thomas Hutchins was appointed as "Geographer General to the United States", a post that he would hold until his death in 1789.

By the end of the Revolutionary War, the fledgling country desperately needed money. The sale of land throughout Northwest Territory was perceived by Congress to have been an expeditious means of filling the depleted coffers of the treasury. Thomas Hutchins was tasked with the mission of surveying the territory in advance of those sales. Hutchins developed a method of dividing the land into

uniform parcels. He patterned the new coordinate survey system on a concept he first devised for military settlements in 1765 (Bedini 2001:526). The system he crafted divided the territory into sections, townships, and ranges. Eventually, the entire country was mapped in this manner. The system is still in use today and is known as the Public Land Survey System (PLSS).

However, the Northwest Territory survey did not go as smoothly in practice as Hutchins had planned. Continuing hostilities and violent clashes between his surveyors, the newly arrived settlers, and various Native American groups in the region resulted in repeated and protracted delays in Hutchins' survey schedule (Quattrocchi 1944:286). Despite his relatively large salary, Hutchins was losing money on the endeavor. Over time, Hutchins concluded that Anglo-Native American hostilities in the Ohio River Valley were a long term prospect and that he would never realize his financial designs for wealth in that area (Quattrocchi 1944:286). That conclusion was enforced during correspondence with his old friend Colonel George Morgan. By early 1788, George Morgan had established a dialogue with Don Diego Gardoqui, the official Spanish Crown liaison in Upper Louisiana. The principle topic of their discussions concerned a plan to establish a substantial new settlement on the Spanish side of the Mississippi River (Quattrocchi 1944:282,287). The intended purpose of that settlement was to divert American emigrants away from the Ohio River Valley settlements and into Spanish Louisiana. A high bank on the west side of the Mississippi River, several miles below its confluence with the Ohio River, was selected for the town. Not surprisingly, the settlement was to be named New Madrid (Figure 6) (Quattrocchi 1944:289). Fostered by promises of title to generous tracts of land, the influential American Colonel Morgan convinced hundreds of American settlers to abandon their claims in the Ohio River Valley and to emigrate across the Mississippi River (Quattrocchi 1944:292). By the spring of 1789, the steady stream of new American arrivals to the Spanish side of the Mississippi River had turned into a flood (Quattrocchi 1944:292).



Figure 6. New Madrid and a Portion of the Middle Mississippi River Valley (1797 - 1798) by Nicolas de Finiels.

Thomas Hutchins, always the cautious opportunist, was intrigued by the prospects of instant wealth, even if it meant serving the Spanish Crown (Quattrocchi 1944:281). Written assurances from the Spanish authorities in New Orleans convinced Hutchins that Morgan's scheme was legitimate. Through a third party, on November 28, 1788, Thomas Hutchins requested that the Spanish Governor of Louisiana immediately appoint him as "geographer to His Spanish Majesty" (Quattrocchi 1944:284). In return, Hutchins offered to "have plans made of all the rivers communicating with the Mississippi together with a description of the country and its' produce..." (Quattrocchi 1944:285). By November 1788, Thomas Hutchins had decided that his long-term interests would be better served under the Spanish Crown.

Could the "**Exploring...**" document (Figure 4) discovered by Charles Peterson actually be Thomas Hutchins' proposed budget for the above-mentioned expedition? Despite the fact that the "**Exploring...**" document resided among the personal papers of Thomas Hutchins, attribution to him was not a foregone conclusion. The "**Exploring...**" estimate was neither signed nor dated. Inspection of a microfilm copy of the entire Thomas Hutchins collection identified additional budget-type documents within the collection. In addition to the "**Exploring...**" estimate, several others were present that were both signed and dated by Hutchins (Figure 7) (Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1759-1788:XX189). Comparison of the handwriting on those documents with the "**Exploring...**" estimate, revealed nearly identical handwriting characteristics (Figure 8). Hence, Thomas Hutchins appeared to be the author of the enigmatic budget estimate.

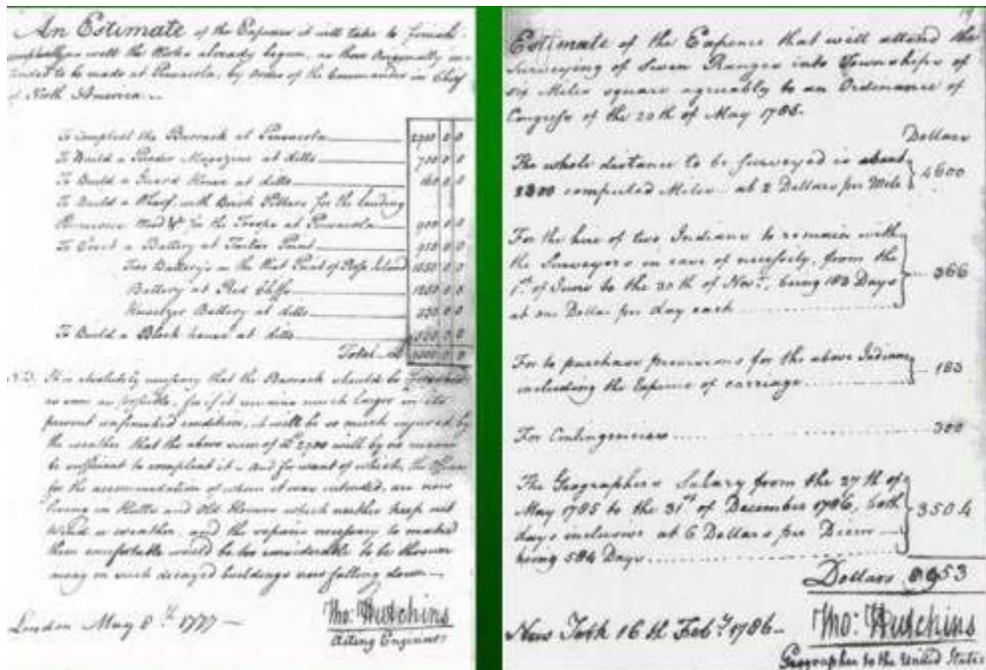


Figure 7. Examples of Thomas Hutchins' Handwriting. Thomas Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

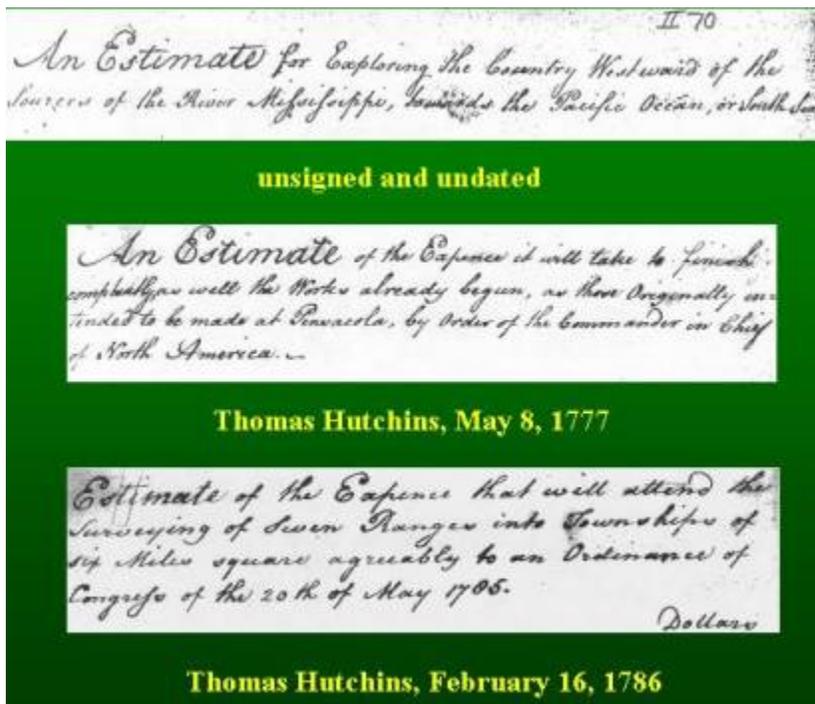


Figure 8. Handwriting Comparison Among the "An Estimate for Exploring the Country Westward . . ." with Other Documents Signed by Thomas Hutchins. Thomas Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

"An Estimate for Exploring the Country Westward of the Sources of the River Mississippi, towards the Pacific Ocean, or South Sea" was Thomas Hutchins' work. The fact that it is unsigned is consistent with much of Hutchins' surviving correspondence with the Spanish authorities. Thomas Hutchins had already been imprisoned once for corresponding with a perceived representative of an adversarial government. It is unlikely that he would have made that mistake twice. The plethora of unsigned correspondence with representatives of the Spanish authorities is testament to his caution.

The "**Exploring...**" document was most likely drafted for the Spanish authorities in late 1788 or early 1789. As previously noted, Thomas Hutchins' experiences in the Ohio River Valley had apparently convinced him that his speculative plans in that region would not materialize. Hutchins intended to formally cast his lot with the Spanish Crown as soon as he had completed his financial commitments to the Ohio Land Company (Quattrocch 1944:285). Thomas Hutchins was probably one of the most qualified individuals in North America to attempt such a perilous mission. He was completely familiar with Native American customs and behavior. In addition, he had already completed surveys of much of the Eastern Woodlands (Quattrocchi 1944:299-318). By that time in his life, Thomas Hutchins had almost five decades of experience surveying the frontier. By his estimate, the expedition would require two years to complete. The larger, less experienced, Corps of Discovery crew was back in about two and one half years (Jackson 1978:325). Hutchins' estimate of cost, converted to dollars was approximately \$28,000.00. The final estimated cost of Lewis and Clark Expedition was around \$39,000.00, not including the price of land bounties (Jackson 1978:428).

Thomas Hutchins died suddenly on April 28, 1789, of pneumonia and was buried in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, before he could act on any of his intended plans. With Hutchins gone, the Spanish authorities wasted little time in securing the services of another surveyor and geographer to accomplish some of what they had discussed with the late Hutchins. By 1798, a detailed survey map of the Middle Mississippi and Lower Missouri Rivers was completed by a French military engineer, Nicolas de Finiels, and was soon in their possession (Ekberg and Foley 1989)(Wood 2001, Plates A-E).

Epilogue

Today, Thomas Hutchins (1730 - 1789) (Figure 9) is regaled in academic circles as the father of the Public Land Survey System and as America's first and only Geographer General of the United States. Had he lived and completed his intended expedition to the Pacific Ocean, only the most ardent students of American Colonial history might today recognize the names of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark.

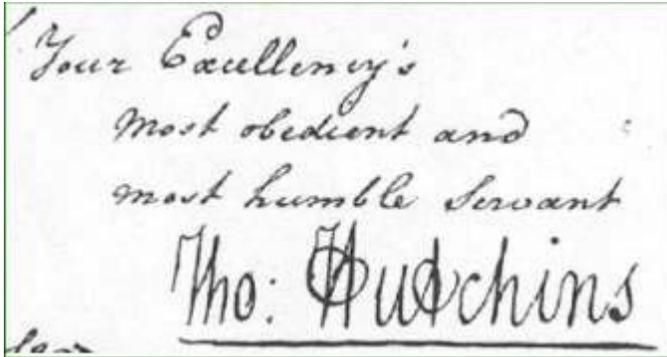
A handwritten note in cursive script. The text reads: "Your Excellency's most obedient and most humble servant Tho: Hutchins". The signature "Tho: Hutchins" is underlined. There is a small mark in the bottom left corner of the image.

Figure 7. Thomas Hutchins' Signature. Thomas Hutchins Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

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