

**“The Forgotten Years: William Clark’s Post-Expedition Career”
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In September of 1806 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark returned to a rousing welcome in St. Louis before they set off on a triumphal parade eastward that ended in the national capital where a grateful president offered Lewis the governorship of the Louisiana Territory and named Clark to serve as the principal U.S. Indian agent for tribes west of the Mississippi and as brigadier general of Louisiana’s territorial militia. Clark’s acceptance of those positions marked the beginning of his lengthy and productive post-expedition career that frequently placed him at center stage in the national quest to possess and occupy North America’s vast westward expanses and made him an important player in the U.S. government’s efforts to shape the region’s future development.

Compensation from the Pacific expedition along with the promise of the two posts in the Louisiana Territory emboldened the charming red head at long last to seek a wife. He was almost giddy as he teasingly hinted to those in his immediate circle that he had marriage on the mind. His intended Judith Hancock was a pretty, well-born Virginia lass, twenty-one years his junior. In January 1807 Clark even passed up attending a gala dinner in the federal city honoring the expedition’s coleaders to tarry a bit longer in Virginia to continue his courtship. Despite the difference in their ages—Clark was thirty-six and Judith only fifteen—the attraction was mutual. No doubt the young girl was drawn to the handsome blue-eyed soldier just returned from his celebrated tour of the West, and he, long desirous of marrying, was finally financially able to court someone from a proper social circle. Before he departed to take up residence in the Louisiana Territory, Julia, as Clark always called her, had consented to marry him early the following year, and her father had given the match his blessing.

The echoes of the cheering crowds had long since faded when William Clark

headed for St. Louis to take up his new duties. His friend Lewis, never really keen about moving to the frontier territory he had been appointed to govern, lingered in the east and entrusted Clark to keep him apprized of conditions in St. Louis. In the governor's absence, Brigadier General Clark took steps to counter the growing restiveness among the western Indian tribes, which he blamed on British instigators, and to shore up Louisiana's inadequate territorial defenses. Late in 1807 he headed back to Virginia where he and Julia were married early the following year. When the newlyweds arrived in St. Louis to set up housekeeping in June of 1808 Governor Lewis, who by then had made it to the Louisiana Territory, welcomed them with open arms. Accommodations were scarce in the river town, and Lewis had taken the liberty of renting a home on Main Street with the intent that he would share it with them. He correctly sensed that the cramped quarters might not be adequate to accommodate the three of them along with William Clark's niece Ann Anderson and the Clarks' numerous slaves, for he hastened to add "Should we find on experiment that we have not sufficient room in this house, I can obtain an Office somewhere in the neighbourhood and still consider myself your messmate." His somewhat poignant letter suggests that the lonely bachelor was somehow hoping that he and his former partner might be able to pick up where they had left off at the end of their Pacific journey. But Clark was now married and prepared to move on to a new life, while Lewis sadly seemed more focused on recapturing the "most perfect harmony" that he had once shared with Clark and their little traveling family. While the two old friends would once again have an opportunity to work together, it was never to be quite the same.

Not long thereafter Governor Lewis dispatched Clark on a mission to establish a combined U.S. trading factory and military fort on the Missouri River and to persuade the influential Osages to relocate their villages nearby. Clark oversaw the construction of the new installation known as Fort Osage, and on his own initiative he seized upon the occasion to persuade Paw-Hiu-Skah, a compliant Osage leader eager to retain the favor of his American benefactors, to agree to a treaty ceding most of the tribe's expansive Missouri and Arkansas homelands to the United States. That agreement soon came under fire and had to be renegotiated when angry members of the fragmented Osage nation rejected Paw-Hiu-Skah's claims to leadership and questioned his authority to represent them in negotiations. Under pressure the Osages eventually acceded to a modified treaty, but when the dust finally settled, Clark's action had dispossessed them of an immense tract of land that threatened to transform the once proud commercial hunters into hapless farmers. Years later, with the benefit of hindsight, a wiser and more reflective Clark appears to have developed second thoughts about the terms he exacted from the Osages in 1808, but that agreement was the first of thirty-seven Indian treaties negotiated under his superintendence designed to implement U.S. policies of dispossession and removal. Although Clark had been willing to do what was necessary to secure tribal acquiescence to the Osage land cession, he

occasionally defied local sentiment to defend the interests of peaceable and well-disposed Indians against lawless intruders.

William Clark did not allow his public responsibilities in the Indian Office to keep him from doing business on the side. With a family to support, he was eager to supplement his government salary. In January of 1809, Julia had given birth to their first child, a son whom they proudly named Meriwether Lewis Clark. He was the first of the couple's five children. Shortly after his son's birth, Clark joined forces with Manuel Lisa, Pierre Chouteau, and several other prominent western merchants and traders to form the St. Louis Missouri Fur Company, and for a time he acted as the firm's principal agent in St. Louis. He dabbled in other mercantile ventures as well, and also served as St. Louis agent for the western-most U.S. trading factories, notwithstanding the potential for a conflict of interest.

Governor Lewis's decision to give the Missouri Fur Company a lucrative government contract for returning the long-stranded Mandan chieftain Sheheke-Shote or White Coyote to his village on the Upper Missouri drew fire in Washington and prompted the distraught territorial leader to undertake a trip to the federal capital to defend his actions. Clark shared Lewis's assessment that the arrangement was justified and defensible, but the official censure was simply one more disappointment for the already despondent governor. His tragic death on the Natchez Trace was a blow to William Clark, but the shocking news had not come as a total surprise and Clark always believed that his partner had taken his own life. He declined an invitation to replace Lewis as governor, but elected to remain in St. Louis in his current government posts. Clark also had to assume the added burden of arranging for the long-delayed publication of the expedition's journals. With neither the time nor the inclination to take on the task that his partner had failed to accomplish, Clark secured the services of Nicholas Biddle to write a narrative of the expedition based upon the journals. For his part, he consented to provide a master map of the West for inclusion in the publication. That cartographic masterpiece launched a new generation of American maps, but by the time Biddle's work finally appeared in print in 1814, Lewis and Clark's once celebrated feats had largely faded from the public memory. The publication generated little general interest and was a financial flop.

Clark, then caught up in the throes of the War of 1812, had no time to ponder what might have been. The outbreak of that conflict presented him with new and more serious challenges that increased substantially in 1813 when he relented and finally agreed to serve as Missouri's territorial governor, a post he occupied until Missouri became a state. With the limited means at his disposal, Governor Clark sought to defend the besieged and exposed territory. In 1814 he led a controversial military expedition to Prairie du Chien on the upper Mississippi in the heart of British country, a move that his critics would later

question. At war's end, Clark played a key role in conducting peace negotiations with the numerous western tribes that had taken up arms against the U.S.

Although Indian affairs occupied much of Governor Clark's time, he also had to address the problems of governing a frontier territory where personal feuds and animosities frequently exacerbated disagreements over public policy. Despite an inclination to favor influential members of the territorial establishment, Clark proved to be the best by far of Missouri's territorial governors. With his steady hand at the helm the fractious and culturally diverse Missouri Territory successfully weathered the tempests of political and economic transformation that prepared it for membership in the American Union.

But his noteworthy record as a public servant proved insufficient to counter a growing popular perception, encouraged by his political opponents, that he was stiff, reserved, inhospitable and too friendly with Indians. As a consequence, Missouri voters overwhelmingly rejected his bid to become the new state's first elected governor in 1820. On the eve of that election, Clark's nephew John O'Fallon attempted to rescue his uncle's looming defeat with the publication of a campaign biography intended to remind residents of the soon to be twenty-fourth state of Clark's past glories. Among other things, O'Fallon lamented that his fellow countrymen had failed to grasp the value and importance of Lewis and Clark's pioneering scientific expedition, but his detailed recounting of the Corps of Discovery's actions and of Clark's numerous other accomplishments fell largely on deaf ears, and in his only attempt to win elective office, Clark failed miserably.

But the election defeat was only one of a succession of blows that befell Clark in quick order. On the eve of the election, his beloved wife Julia died all too soon after a lengthy illness, leaving her bereaved husband with five children, all under the age of eleven. The tragedy was compounded when his seven-year old daughter Mary Margaret followed her mother to the grave barely a year later. The collapse of the Bank of Missouri, on whose board of directors Clark served, added to his woes and intensified the financial stresses of the soon-to-be out-of-work official. O'Fallon, once again lamented his uncle's plight: "I sympathize most sensibly for the irreparable loss of uncle Wm. I am gratified to hear that he bears it so well. I fear he will not spend the evening of his life as serenely as he desires. The failure of the Bank and the embarrassments here will I apprehend hurt him more than he is aware of; I wish he could get something from the Genl. Govt. to contribute to his support."

O'Fallon, a perpetual worrier, underestimated William Clark's resilience and his perseverance in the face of adversity. Back in St. Louis, the grieving husband and father found solace in the company of Julia's cousin and girlhood friend Harriet Kennerly Radford. A widow with three children, she had come to St.

Louis to live with her brother following her husband's death. Clark soon married her, and the happy couple had two more sons prior to Harriet's death in 1831. Their second child Edmund lived less than a year, and thirteen year-old John Julius, a son from Clark's first marriage impaired by severe disabilities had died a few short months before his stepmother. Clark's four remaining sons survived him, but they all struggled in different ways and their welfare was constantly in their father's thoughts. Second-born William Preston Clark was in many ways the most tragic of all. Perhaps the brightest of the boys he attended the University of Virginia and Harvard, but never found his calling. Within a year after William Clark's death in 1838, family members briefly had the troubled young man committed to a Kentucky asylum, an action that his father would not likely have tolerated.

The 1820 election marked the end of William Clark's political career, but it did not terminate his role as a public servant. He put his losses behind him and decided to stay in St. Louis, the place he now considered home. His past service soon brought him a new federal appointment as the superintendent of Indian affairs in that city, which enabled him to play a prominent role in the administration of U.S. Indian policy until his death. During his later years, Clark's power and influence slowly declined as he increasingly relied on subordinates to manage operations in the largest U.S. Indian agency. Thomas Forsyth, a disgruntled former agent, even blamed his inattention for having contributed to the outbreak of the Black Hawk War. As always Clark made his family a priority, but he also found time for the parade of distinguished writers, artists, and western travelers who routinely sought out his advice and assistance. He especially delighted in conducting them through his little museum filled with Indian artifacts and miscellaneous curiosities.

Like many of his contemporaries William Clark succumbed to the evils of slavery. An indulgent parent who found it difficult to deny the whims of his prodigal sons, Clark could be cruel and indifferent to his slaves. His treatment of York following the expedition was particularly reprehensible, but his longtime servant and companion, was not alone in receiving his master's wrath. Clark did show solicitous concern for his old and infirm slaves, but his insistence on viewing his African American slaves as possessions made it possible for a man who modeled decency and integrity in most facets of his life to treat them shamefully.

When William Clark died at the home of his eldest son Meriwether Lewis Clark on September 1, 1838, St. Louis was, by all accounts, a city in mourning. Persons of all descriptions came to pay their final respects. Sensing that the western patriarch's passing marked an important historical milestone, many individuals not personally acquainted with him had turned out to witness his funeral procession. Henry B. Miller, a young tradesman relatively new to the city, was among those who joined the throng that autumn to honor a man whom he

called “a departed hero, venerable sage, hardy pioneer, amiable father and respected citizen.” It was unlikely that Miller had ever met Clark, but the young stranger’s final thoughts recorded in his diary come closer than he perhaps realized to capturing the true measure of William Clark’s greatness: “If excessive [excessive] toil and Peril, and a life of Laborious Servitude spent in the service of his country entitle a man to honours, there are none more deserving than Gen. Clark.”

Today, nearly two centuries later, William Clark stands as a national icon representing American exploration and discovery, even though he was neither a pathfinder nor a trailblazer in the truest sense. He and Meriwether Lewis and not been the first to traverse the North American continent, nor did they discover the most practicable route westward. Moreover, they could not have completed their journey without assistance from countless Native Americans along their route of march. Those realities do not diminish the value of Clark’s endeavors, nor do they render him any less historically significant. His grand map of the West, depicting North America’s vast trans-Mississippi expanses as a single region, graphically portrayed the West’s potential importance for the American nation’s future and encouraged his westward surging countrymen to continue their advances. In many ways his actions helped sow the seeds of Manifest Destiny and the bittersweet harvest it yielded.

While his maps and the journals of his western tour with Lewis acknowledged a large-scale Indian presence throughout the sprawling domains he had traversed, they likewise fostered expansionist designs that consigned the West’s native inhabitants to a far different and less promising destiny. William Clark’s role in that unfolding drama did not end with his return from the Pacific. Strange as it may seem today, the Voyage of Discovery was simply a prologue to his most enduring legacies. Clark’s post-1806 labors as a soldier, diplomat, territorial governor, head of the largest western U.S. Indian agency, and patron of western exploration and travel facilitated the ongoing avalanche of white settlement that forever altered the western landscape. A loyal and dependable public servant, he worked tirelessly to secure the region’s peaceful incorporation within the American Republic and to advance its political and economic transformation. Mindful that however beneficial those changes might be for national development, they had exacted a heavy toll on Native Americans, Clark also struggled unsuccessfully to rescue his beleaguered Indian friends from the tragic consequences of the very forces he had helped unleash. More than most of his contemporaries Clark exhibited a bona fide compassion for besieged Indian people threatened with extinction, but his benevolence came with strings attached. He expected and demanded Indian acquiescence to U.S. authority as the price for his support.

In a larger sense, William Clark’s story mirrors the youthful and restless beginnings of the United States of America. His sixty-eight year life spanned an

era of relentless change. He entered the world in time to witness the birth of the American Republic, and he lived long enough to observe its transformation from thirteen rustic and struggling states along the Atlantic seaboard into a sprawling and far-flung nation encompassing a significant part of the North American continent and poised on the threshold of a new industrial age. During most of those years Clark inhabited a world of racial and cultural diversity that foreshadowed the makeup of modern America, but his upbringing and cultural biases blinded him to his own prejudice and intolerance.

William Clark in many ways reflected the virtues and the vices of the rising young nation and its restless citizenry. His devotion to family and to country, his commitment to republican principles, his determination, energy, and enterprise, his ability to face and overcome adversity, and his willingness to come to the aid of downtrodden Indians personified many of the noblest attributes of the nation he loved and served. At the same time, his adherence to slavery and racial prejudice, his support for policies of exploitation and conquest, unmasked the ugly faces of discrimination, abuse, and injustice also abroad in the land.

The privileges of birth and inheritance presented Clark with special advantages and opportunities, but his life was never easy. It is not difficult to identify William Clark's shortcomings, but his modern critics would do well to remember that he lived in a time and place far removed from their own. Even though the core issues he struggled to address may not be so very different, the setting was. In the final analysis, those toils defined who he was and guided him along the way during his lengthy wilderness journey. Only at life's end had he achieved the economic success that he had so long coveted. At the time of his death, William Clark was able to bequeath princely sums to each of his surviving sons, but the family patriarch had long before learned the fleeting nature of fame and fortune.

Clark would likely not be particularly surprised to discover that within a few short years after his death, his attainments had been all but forgotten, the celebrated artifacts and curiosities he spent a lifetime collecting had been lost or dispersed, and even the wealth he worked all of his life to accumulate gradually had been dissipated in the hands of his sometimes-profligate progeny. To the contrary, he undoubtedly would be astounded to learn that twenty-first-century Americans have rescued him from obscurity and awarded him a celebrity unlike anything he ever experienced. All of the fuss surrounding the bicentennial of his voyage to the Pacific would no doubt please him but he might choose to caution his modern devotees that honor and distinction seldom come quickly or easily.

As he entered the twilight years of his life, William Clark sought to convey that message to his own children. Six years before his death, Clark advised his

sixteen-year-old son George Rogers Hancock Clark: “You have capacity and can make of yourself any thing you please, do not suffer yourself to be unhappy from misfortune or disappointment; we all have to meet them and should bear them with firmness, resolved to use every exertion to better our situation and gain the good will of our fellow creatures.” And in many ways those words represent the sum of William Clark’s life and provide a fitting epitaph for him.