

Voyage of Discovery

On the Lewis and Clark Trail – St. Louis, Missouri to Council Bluffs, Iowa

8 July 2021



In Collinsville, Illinois, less than 10 miles east of St. Louis as the crow flies, I'm standing atop Monk's Mound at Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site. This mound is an earthen pyramid 100 feet / 30 meters tall built one basket of dirt at a time between 900 and 1100 CE by a Native American culture that had disappeared before the first French settlers arrived in the 17th century. The footprint of this pyramid – largest of a complex of about 100 – is about the size of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt. It was the focal point of what is believed to have been the largest city in the Americas north of the ancient Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, today's Mexico City, and larger than London in 1250. This mound-building "Mississippian" culture built similar sites in the Ohio River Valley, as far east as Town Creek Indian Mound in North Carolina and as far south as the Gulf Coast. The reason for Cahokia's abandonment is unknown.



A man stands atop Monks Mound, which is one of 24 World Heritage Sites designated in the United States by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Culture Organization (UNESCO).

Saint Louis in Lewis & Clark's time

Saint Louis,¹ where Julie and I began our trip, is where the Missouri River joins the Mississippi River. There was a settlement of various American Indian tribes in this region on both sides of the Mississippi for a thousand years before the first French explorers arrived in 1673 and the first French-Canadian settlers began arriving a couple of decades later. The natives' huge complexes of temple and residential mounds spread for miles, abandoned for unknown reasons by the time whites arrived.

The largest of these pre-French urban centers, Cahokia,² may have been home to as many as 20,000 people. It was directly across the Mississippi from today's St. Louis in what is now Illinois, one of 26 U.S. states whose name comes from a Native American language.³ Twenty-six states – not all the same as the previous 26 – lie at least partly within a huge basin in the center of the continent covering 1.15 million square miles / 2.98 million square kilometers. That basin is drained by a massive river system the Ojibwe called Mee-ze-see-bee, meaning “big river” or “father of waters.”⁴

Today's St. Louis remains the center of a water transportation network that linked the first inhabitants of North America's interior and which the Lewis and Clark Expedition would use to go west. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived here in winter 1803 to continue organizing their expedition, which would depart in May.

Clark and his men camped for the winter across the river in Illinois at Camp Dubois (Camp Wood) because the Louisiana Purchase Treaty was still being negotiated. That meant Saint Louis was still part of France. Lewis spent most of his time in Saint Louis gathering information about the region and its inhabitants in what was a French-speaking town of a thousand-plus inhabitants, founded in 1764 by fur traders Pierre Laclède and his assistant and stepson Auguste Chouteau.

Saint Louis, named for the canonized French King Louis IX – not to be confused with Louis XIV, the French king who built the palace at Versailles and whose name was given to the colony of *la Louisiane* – stood on two frontiers, the formal one between France and the United States and a permeable one between white settlement and Native American tribes.

It was not, however, on the edge of “civilization” in the dictionary sense of that word, although in the understanding of many white people, civilization did end here.

When Lewis and Clark left Saint Louis, their first major stop would be for the winter of 1804-05 at a place in what's now North Dakota – “dakota” means “allies” in the Sioux language⁵ – where the Hidatsa and Mandan tribes occupied adjacent settlements. Before Spanish explorers in Mexico accidentally introduced smallpox to North America, more than 10,000 Natives of multiple tribes lived in this agriculture and trading center⁶ now partly submerged by the dammed waters of the Missouri. Though smaller when Lewis and Clark arrived, the settlements still were triple the population of Saint Louis, larger even than Washington, D.C.⁷

The expedition built Fort Mandan to spend that winter, where temperatures dropped to minus-50°F / minus-45°C. This cross-cultural place where many tribes, English and French traded, is where Lewis and Clark encountered Frenchman Toussaint Charbonneau and Sacagawea. She was his teen-age Shoshone wife or slave. Charbonneau purchased her from the Hidatsa, who had kidnaped her as child from the Shoshone. They joined the expedition with their infant son Jean Baptiste, who was born that winter, as translators and guides. Sacagawea's presence in this traveling group of white guys among other things, assured the Natives this was not a war party. There will be more about Sacagawea in a few days.

Notes

¹ **St. Louis**, Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St._Louis

² **Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site**, a video produced for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization by the Japan broadcaster NHK and published on YouTube in 2013 <https://youtu.be/3vN4S1jFU0>

³ **Native Language State Names**, part of a website Native Languages of the Americas by Orrin Lewis <http://www.native-languages.org/state-names.htm>

⁴ **River Facts**, National Park Service <https://www.nps.gov/miss/learn/education/upload/brifact.pdf>

⁵ **Ibid**, Native Language State Names

⁶ **Mandan**, Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mandan>

⁷ **Demographics of Washington, D.C.**, Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Washington,_D.C.



The Missouri River from downtown Kansas City's Case Park, where the Lewis and Clark Expedition stopped Sept. 15, 1806.

at 11 A. M. passed the entrance of the Kansas river which was very low, about a mile below we landed and Capt Lewis and my Self ascended a hill which appeared to have a Commanding Situation for a fort, the Shore is bold and rocky immediately at the foot of the hill, from the top of the hill you have a perfect Command of the river [...]

Captain William Clark, Monday 15th of September 1806

This chart will track the 78 counties in nine states that we're traveling through from St. Louis to the Pacific coast. The counties are listed in the order we enter them. Counties that the Corps of Discovery traveled through or had some other connection with have red explanation cells.

TOMORROW - County-by-county in Iowa

Start Day 3 at Council Bluffs, Iowa

Via Interstate 29 (part of the Lewis and Clark Trail)

County	Population	County seat	Source of name / significance to Lewis and Clark
22. Harrison	14,134	Logan	President William Henry Harrison. On the Missouri.
23. Monona	8,679	Onawa	Believed to be Native word for "beautiful valley." Lewis and Clark State Park at Onawa is a county attraction. On the Missouri.
24. Woodbury	102,539	Sioux City	Sgt. Charles Floyd, a relative of Clark and one of the first members of the expedition to join, died of what is now believed to be a burst appendix on Aug. 20, 1804, and was buried here. He was the only member of the expedition lost on the trek. Floyd's Bluff where he died, the Floyd River, another Iowa county and the Interstate 129 bridge across the Missouri into South Sioux City, Nebraska, are named for him. On the Missouri.

County-by-county in South Dakota

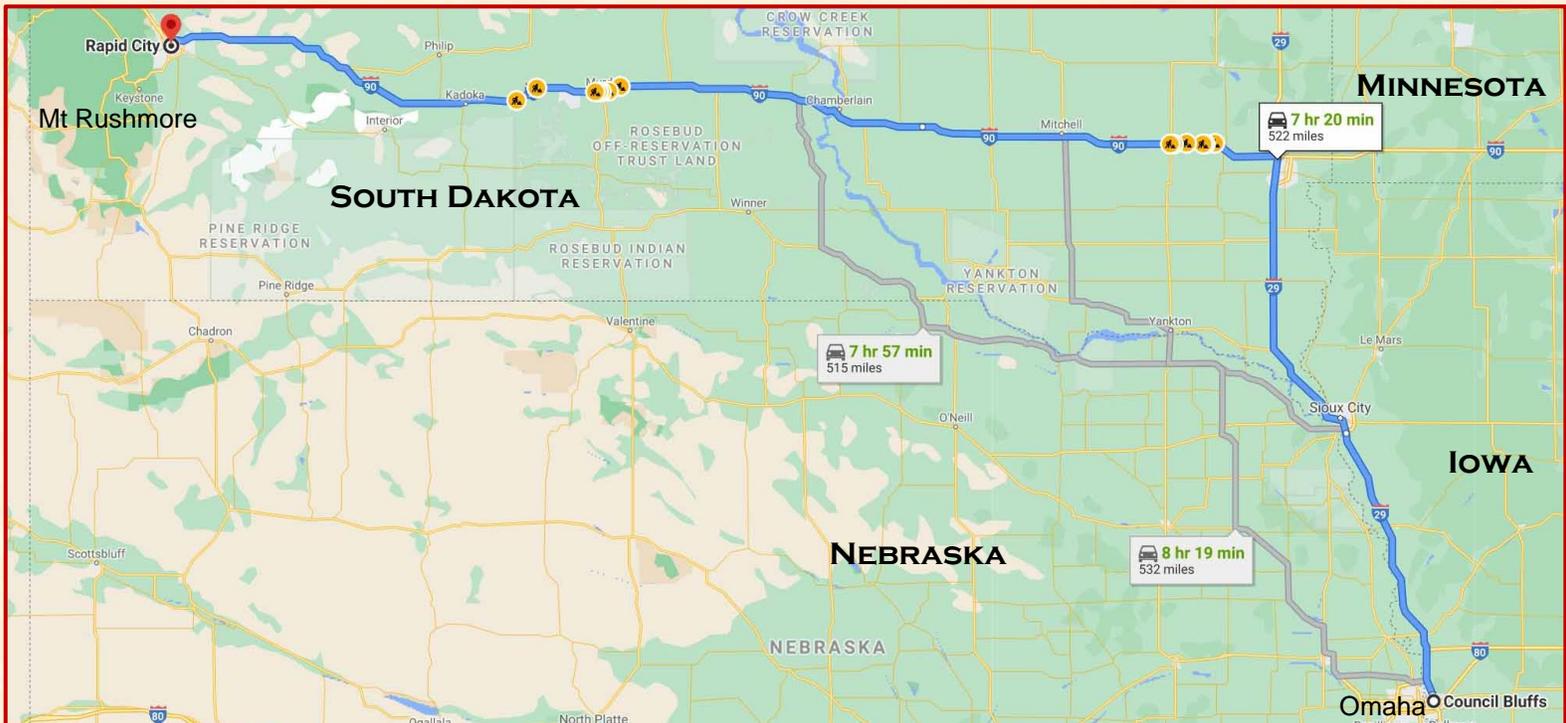
Via Interstate 29 (part of the Lewis and Clark Trail)

25. Union	15,932	Elk Point	Local sentiment during the Civil War. On the Missouri.
26. Lincoln	61,128	Canton	President Abraham Lincoln.
Via I-90			
27. Minnehaha	193,134	Sioux Falls	Lakota word for "rapid water" or "waterfall."
28. McCook	5,586	Salem	Dakota Territory governor and Civil War general Edwin Stanton McCook.
29. Hanson	3,453	Alexandria	James R. Hanson, first clerk of the state legislature.
30. Davison	19,775	Mitchell	Henry C. Davison, county's first settler.
31. Aurora	2,751	Plankinton	Roman goddess of the dawn.
32. Brule	5,297	Chamberlain	Brule (Burned Thighs) band of the Teton Sioux. On the Missouri.
33. Lyman	3,781	Kennebec	W.P. Lyman, local politician. On the Missouri.
34. Jones	903	Murdo	George Wallace Jones, pro-slavery U.S. Senator from Iowa.
35. Jackson	3,344	Kadoka	J.R. Jackson, member of the Dakota Territory legislature.
36. Pennington	113,775	Rapid City	John L. Pennington, fifth governor of the Dakota Territory.

End of Day 3 at Rapid City, South Dakota

Day: 522 miles / 840 kilometers

Trip: 952 miles / 1,532 kilometers



Sacajawea, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark look toward the Missouri from Kansas City's Case Park.



Before Julie and I left St. Louis this morning, we had breakfast at a chain restaurant I'd never heard of called First Watch, which also has an outlet where she lives in North Carolina. It was good, and four strips of its Million Dollar Bacon was on the menu for \$4.79. So I got five pounds "for the road." When we finished our drive for today in Council Bluffs, Iowa, across the Missouri River from Omaha, Nebraska, we had dinner at Gorat's. It's the favorite restaurant of hometown boy Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway and a billionaire more than 100 times over. Julie told Buffy how much she enjoyed her steak and then he asked me for First Watch's phone number.

