

Lewis and Clark at the Mouth of the Columbia River
(before, during & after)
 by Tom Laidlaw

American naturalist and founder of the Sierra Club, John Muir, once wrote: “If you grasp at anything in nature you find it is attached to the whole world.” This is exactly what I experience in my study of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Their story, as complete and compelling as it is in itself, is just one in a series of dramatic stories about the search for the Northwest Passage and the claims of several nations to the Oregon Country. This essay, while centering on Lewis and Clark at the mouth of the Columbia, will touch on the events immediately preceding and following them. Thus there are three important stories here; the American discovery of the Columbia River by Sea, Lewis and Clark, and Astoria, the first settlement at the mouth of the river. With Lewis and Clark in the center, we will see how they were affected by the first story and how they in turn affected the third. Taken together, these three ventures provide the basis for the claim of the United States to the territory drained by the Columbia River.

Discovery of the Columbia River

In a very real sense this story begins with Christopher Columbus. You remember Columbus, he started out from Spain with four ships, to prove he could get to the East Indies by sailing West. What’s that you say? Three ships? I heard one of them fell off the edge. Well, of course that’s a stupid joke, they knew the world was round long before 1492; the problem was they didn’t know how round, at least Columbus didn’t.

When other navigators finally figured out that Columbus not only did not reach the Indies, but there was a whole continent in between they made up their minds, on no evidence, that there must be a waterway through the continent. I believe the concept of the Northwest Passage sprang simply and wholly from man’s desire and arrogance. As if someone said: “We want there to be a water passage through the continent, and therefore there must be one.” In the next 300 years Spain, Russia, England, France, and the United States, all sent people looking for the elusive passage. England even offered 20,000 pounds to anyone who would discover it and sail through it.

There are many names connected with this search: Balboa, Aquilar, Juan de Fuca, Bering, Cook, Drake; but there are really only four main players in the drama. One Spaniard, two Englishmen, and one American. Two of them were private sea otter traders, the others were on government missions, but they were all charting the Pacific Coast of North America. All four of them stood their ships just off the mouth of the Columbia and considered whether or not it could be the outlet of the Northwest Passage., but only one of them had the undaunted courage to cross the dangerous bar and enter the Columbia River.

Bruno de Hezeta (1744-1807)

First, in 1755, there came Bruno deHezeta (or Hecata) of Spain. with his partner Bodega y Quadra. It seems that most of these navigators worked on the buddy system. Two ships would go out together. Spain had not recently paid much attention to the northern coast, but she still claimed it, and Hezeta’s mission was in response to Russia’s increasing exploration and sea otter trade in Alaska, since Vitus Bering discovered it in 1741. Hezeta was ordered to chart the coast and, if possible, find the mysterious Northwest Passage. Because of the wind, the ships in those days generally sailed north out to sea to gain latitude, and then came south along the coast doing their charting.

As they came near the mouth of the Quinalt River, just 80 miles north of here, deQuadra's ship, Sonora, got into shallow water and had to wait for high tide to take him out to sea again. He sent six men ashore to replenish the water supply and cut some poles for topmasts. They were attacked and killed by Indians, leaving the Sonora shorthanded. Hezeta sent some of the men from his Santiagoh over to help out Bodega. He could spare only a few since a great many of his men were sick with scurvy. Hezeta thought it was time to go back, but y Quadra wanted to continue, so they parted. Y Quadra continued north and Hezeta headed south.

A few weeks later, on August 17, 1775 Bruno de Hezeta was near the coast at the mouth of the Columbia River. In his journal he writes: "In the afternoon of this day I discovered a large bay that I named *Bahia de Asuncion...*" **The swirling currents were so swift that despite having a full press of sail it was difficult to get clear or separate myself from the cape... These currents and the seething of the waters have led me to believe that it may be the mouth of some great river or the passage to another sea.** [Hezeta, 86]. He named the northern cape Cabo de San Roq, and the south Cabo Frondoso.

But he did not enter the river. He writes: "**I did not enter and anchor in the port that appears on the map..., despite my ardent desire to do so. This was because, having taken the opinion of my fellow officers, they insisted that I should not attempt it, for in letting go the anchor we did not have men with which to get it up.**" [Hezeta, 86].

So there went Spain's chance to discover the great River of the West. On his way down the coast Hezeta also named Cape Falcon

John Meares (1756? – 1809)

Thirteen years later came the Englishman, Captain John Meares. Meares was something of a trickster and, in my opinion, a very foolish man. Meares had been a British Naval Officer during the revolution, but after the Treaty of Paris in 1783, he was put on the reserve list. He had learned from Captain Cook's accounts about the fortunes to be made in gathering sea otter on the Pacific Coast and trading with China. It was Cook, in 1778, who had first entered Nootka sound on Vancouver Island, and began white man's trade with the Indians, but he totally missed the Columbia River. In 1785 Meares outfitted himself for that same sea otter trade. But the East India Company had a monopoly on British trade in China, so Meares registered his ship as Portuguese and hired a Portuguese trader to act as the Captain.

Meares was trading for sea otter furs up in Alaska in 1786, but he could not get a full cargo that year, and here is where he made a foolish, fateful, and tragic decision. Most traders would retreat to Hawaii for the winter and come back the next spring, but Meares was anxious and greedy. He decided to winter in Prince William Sound and work on the boat. Soon, however, the boat work had to stop because of the cold, and the men built fires below decks to keep warm. But the smoke sickened them, and they soon ran out of provisions and scurvy began. Amazingly enough there was a cure for scurvy quite nearby. Chief Mate Ross chewed some pine needles and cured himself, but none of the other men would avail themselves of that opportunity. "They turned their faces to the bulkhead and died rather than swallow the evil-tasting brew. They did not then know about fresh fruit and vitamin C.

Twenty-three men died of scurvy that winter, including the surgeon, and Meares wrote: "**Having lost our surgeon we were now deprived of all medical aid, too often did I find myself called to assist in performing the dreadful office, of dragging the dead bodies across the ice, to a shallow sepulchre, which our own hands had hewn out for them on the shore. The sledge on which we fetched the wood was their hearse, and the chasms in the ice their tombs.** [Nokes, 14]" Even though they were eventually rescued, the tragedy prevented their getting a full cargo. But they had enough to finance a second expedition the next year 1788.

Meares's idea was to establish a trading base in Nootka Sound, on Vancouver Island. Here he continued the British trade with the Indians, which made them the skillful traders encountered by Lewis and Clark. Like most navigators, Meares did his homework. He was a believer in the concept of a Northwest Passage, so he obtained the charts of Cook, and also of the Bruno de Hezeta. After establishing his base, Meares explored South, first into today's Willapa Bay which he called Shoalwater Bay, and then to latitude 46 degrees, 10 minutes where he noticed a promontory which he thought might be Hezeta's Cape de san Roq.

Beyond that he saw a large bay into which he steered. But the water "shoaled to nine, eight and seven fathoms, when breakers were seen from the deck, right ahead" [Nokes, 69]. The breakers were observed to stretch totally across the bay. So they hauled out and Meares wrote: "The name Cape Disappointment was given to the promontory, and the bay obtained the title of Deception Bay. ... We can now with safety assert, that no such river as that of Saint Roc exists, as laid down in the Spanish charts." [Nokes, 69].

Think about that name, Deception Bay. It is a wonderfully apt name, but for the very opposite reason that Meares named it. The elusive Columbia River mouth had deceived Meares into thinking it was only a bay, when it really was the entrance to the Columbia River.

Robert Gray (1755 – 1806) / George Vancouver (1758 – 1798)

In the next several years, Meares built some buildings in Nootka Sound and carried on trade. At the same time John Kendrick and Robert Gray, Boston traders, were establishing the American coastal trade. Kendrick was in the Columbia Rediviva, while Gray commanded the Lady Washington. But Kendrick was a slowpoke and Gray got to Nootka sound well ahead of him. In 1788 he met Meares and other English captains, and they began an amicable relationship, though rivals. Gray was ready to leave for China to get the sheet copper the Indians prized, when Kendrick finally showed up and ordered that both ships would winter at Nootka Sound. But Gray was very resourceful and spent the winter making chisels, which became best sellers and gathered him hundreds of sea otter pelts.

1789 brought a Spanish ship into Nootka Sound, with the object of reestablishing their claim to the coast. They confiscated one of Meares's ships and took control of his buildings. When word of the Spanish threat got back to England, the fourth player in this drama got into the act, George Vancouver. He was ordered to go to Nootka Sound to negotiate with the Spanish, and left England in 1791. Vancouver's opposite number was Bodega y Quadra, Hezeta's former partner.

The Americans stayed another winter at Nootka and in 1790 Kendrick and Gray switched ships. Gray took his load of furs to China, and returned to Boston around the Cape of Good Hope, thus becoming the first American to circumnavigate the globe. When he set out again in Sept. of 1790 he was warned by the government not to go to Nootka Sound because of the British-Spanish conflict there, so he established operations in Clayoquot Sound, still on Vancouver Island, but a few miles south.

In the winter of 1791-1792 Gray built the first American ship on the Pacific, the Adventure. Another officer took the new ship north to continue trading and Gray began scouring the coast down as far south as 42 degrees. Near the end of April he turned north again and, nearing the latitude of the great river reported by Hezeta, he saw the same conditions the Spaniard had seen. Gray waited for nine days, looking for an opportunity to enter, but none came so he continued North again and he soon sighted the British ships Discovery and Chatham of George Vancouver and his second, William Broughton. Gray told Vancouver about the river he had seen, but Vancouver was not interested.

As a matter of fact, Vancouver had, on April 27, 1792 and at the proper location, written in his journal: "The sea has now changed from it's natural, to river coloured water, the probable consequence of some streams falling into the bay, or into the ocean to the north of it, through the low land.....Not considering this opening worthy of more attention, I continued our pursuit to the Northwest, being desirous to embrace the advantages of the prevailing breeze..."

Vancouver continued north to discover and name Puget Sound after one of his lieutenants, Peter Puget, and Gray went South again for another try at entering the river he had noticed. And, on May 11, 1792 one day after his 37th birthday, the American fur trader Robert Gray wrote in his log: "At eight a.m., being a little to windward of the entrance of the Harbor, bore away, and run in east north-east between the breakers, having from five to seven fathoms of water. When we were over the bar we found this to be a large river of fresh water, up which we steered. Vast numbers of natives came alongside; people employed in pumping the salt water out of our water casks, in order to fill with fresh, while the ship floated in." [Fransen, 128-29]

Gray stayed nine days getting water and trading with the local Indians. He named the river Columbia's River, after his ship. Cape Disappointment he named Cape Hancock, and the southern point became Point Adams. America now had a solid claim to "all lands drained by the Columbia River. But that is still not the end of the story.

After filling his casks and doing a great deal of trading Gray headed north again to Nootka Sound where he found y Quadra, and told him of the discovery. He gave the Spaniard a sketch of his route into the river with depth readings, then continued to China and back to Boston.

Vancouver got back to Nootka after going all around Vancouver's Island naming and claiming many landmarks for Great Britain. He and Bodega could not reach agreement so they parted, but not before Bodega showed Vancouver Gray's chart. Wow, what a deal. Here are three countries trying to discover the great River of the West and their navigators are sharing information like they were great buddies. I guess their bond as seamen outweighed their national differences. Some books say that Gray did not even formally claim the Columbia River for the United States.

Vancouver decided it was worth a look after all, and in October he went South to find the Columbia River. His ship, Discovery, could not get in but the smaller ship, Chatham, Lt. William Broughton commanding, did cross the bar and enter the river. They soon navigated the 20 miles to Gray's Bay, where Broughton, cautious about the depth of the unknown river, took several men and started upstream in one of his cutters. Broughton came up the river about 100 miles, to the Sandy River, naming Mount Hood along the way for a British admiral. Broughton also formally claimed the land for England, saying that Gray had not really entered the river, only the estuary. Vancouver named Baker Bay after a British captain who began trading there even while Broughton was upriver.

To cap it off, during the time Gray was on his Voyage of Discovery, the American congress had set aside a district on the Potomac River to be devoted to National Government. The District of Columbia. All of these great navigators named features of the coast which are retained today, and all of their names are also on the land. Gray's Bay, Heceta Head, Cape Meares, Vancouver Island