

A Quest for the Best Man:



This 1905 watercolor by Charles M. Russell depicts Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on the expedition to explore the Louisiana Territory. Both men served as territorial governors of Missouri.

Missouri's First Governors

BY RON SOODALTER

IT ALL BEGAN with the bargain of the century. A savvy deal negotiated between France and the United States more than two hundred years ago would set the stage for the first major challenge of this young nation in the New World. Someone—actually four someones—would be called upon to oversee the administration of the vast expanse that would become Missouri Territory. Our story of heels and heroes begins with the land sale known to history as the Louisiana Purchase.

ART OF THE DEAL

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, Napoleon Bonaparte was running out of money to fund his conquest of Europe. In 1803, he sold to President Thomas Jefferson—for about three cents an acre—the 828,000 square miles then known as Louisiana Territory. The purchase instantly doubled the size of the fledgling United States. Originally, Jefferson had sought only to purchase the port city of New Orleans, since its location at the mouth of the Mississippi River on the Gulf of Mexico rendered it ideal for commercial shipping. Not only did Napoleon agree to sell New Orleans for \$10 million; for another \$5 million, he

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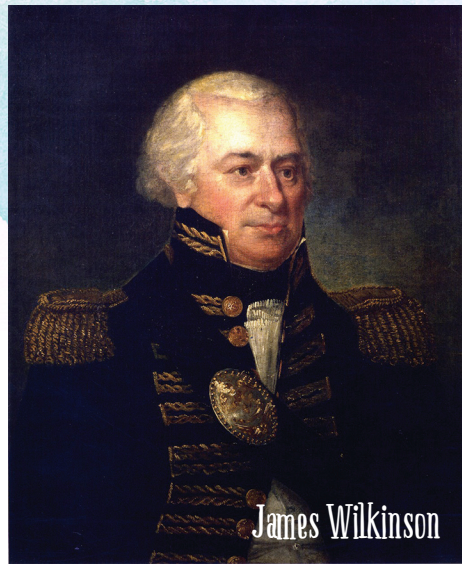


Missouri existed as a territory for less than a decade (1812-1821) before admission to the Union as a slave state.

tossed in the rest of the Louisiana Territory—an area that stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, and from the Gulf of Mexico to the Canadian border. It was, as one chronicler put it, “the real-estate deal of the century.” Had Jefferson accomplished nothing else of value during his presidency, the nation would have been amply well served by this one act.

The newly purchased territory was divided into two sections the following year: the upper portion—everything north of the thirty-third parallel (the approximate modern-day border between Arkansas and Louisiana)—was

dubbed the District of Louisiana; the southern portion, which ran down to the Gulf, was called Orleans Territory. The district that included modern-day Missouri initially fell under the jurisdiction of Indiana Territory, whose capital was the slave-free city of Vincennes, Indiana. The slave-owning Missourians, however, wanted their own capital, closer to home. In 1805, Congress accommodated by redesignating the region as Louisiana Territory, and placed the seat of government at St. Louis. Only seven years later, it was renamed yet again: Missouri Territory. And so it would remain until statehood.



James Wilkinson

The newly created position of territorial governor called for a man with a strategic mind, and a thorough sense of national purpose. Acquiring the land was relatively simple compared to the task of finding the right men to govern it. The challenge proved almost insurmountable.

A VILLAIN IN OFFICE

The first man to fill the position was an unmitigated disaster. His name was James Wilkinson, an unscrupulous scoundrel and self-aggrandizing provocateur of the first order. A century later, Theodore Roosevelt would write of Wilkinson, “In all our history, there is no more despicable character.”

Born in Maryland to a wealthy planter, Wilkinson served in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. By first ingratiating himself to Benedict Arnold, and then to General Horatio Gates, he charmed his way into a generalship and was assigned the position of secretary to the newly formed Board of War. However, after taking part in a notorious cabal that sought to replace George Washington with Horatio Gates as commander-in-chief, he was forced to resign both his rank and his position on the Board of War.

Wilkinson then wheedled an appointment from Congress as clothier-general of the army, only to resign again under widespread charges of corruption. He landed on his feet again, however, and briefly served in Pennsylvania’s legislature before seeking opportunity on the raw and roiling frontier known as the Kentucky District. After leading a group of Kentucky volunteers against hostile Indians,

and despite his efforts to separate Kentucky and Tennessee from the Union, Wilkinson received a lieutenant colonelcy in the army—a rank he soon parlayed back to that of brigadier general.

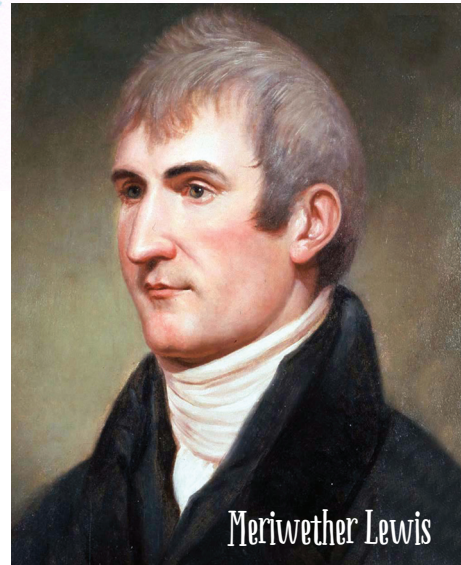
While serving under General Anthony Wayne, Wilkinson secretly established contact with the Spanish government, which employed him to help gain control of America’s western territories. Spain, which owned New Orleans at the time, also gave him a trade monopoly on all goods entering the city from the north.

By accepting the position of paid secret agent of a foreign government, Wilkinson was courting treason, but he yet again proved skillful at promoting himself to those in power. When General Wayne died in late 1796, Wilkinson became the senior ranking officer of the US army. By this time, Spain had paid him \$32,000 (the equivalent of nearly \$600,000 in today’s currency) for his services, which included providing reports on American plans and troop movements.

In 1803, Wilkinson informed Spain of the Lewis & Clark Expedition, advising the Spanish to send an armed party to stop it. Hundreds of Spanish cavalry set out to find the explorers but failed to do so. That same year, President Jefferson gave Wilkinson the honor, as senior army officer, of taking possession of the Louisiana Purchase on behalf of the United States.

Two years later, purportedly at the urging of Vice President Aaron Burr, Jefferson appointed Wilkinson the first governor of the newly formed Louisiana Territory. Not surprisingly, he immediately proved himself corrupt and a failure as an administrator. Among his other transgressions, Wilkinson distributed trading licenses by the score, to foreigners as well as Americans, and profited handsomely on each one. In his brief tenure, he drank to excess and managed to alienate all his fellow officials, as well as most of his constituents.

Wilkinson’s egregious performance in office was hardly the worst of it. That same year, he entered into a conspiracy with Burr to separate the Mississippi Valley region from the United



Meriwether Lewis

States and create their own western empire.

Perhaps realizing that he had gone too far this time, Wilkinson betrayed Burr and revealed the conspiracy to Jefferson, who ordered his vice president tried for treason. Wilkinson was the star witness at Burr’s trial. In the absence of firm evidence, Burr was acquitted, although his political career was in tatters. Congress investigated Wilkinson, too, but his Spanish connections remained hidden and he managed to escape indictment. His involvement with Burr and his heavy-handed, blatantly corrupt practices as territorial governor prompted Jefferson to remove him from office in 1807.

A HERO STEPS IN

For his next candidate for the governor’s chair, Jefferson turned to an unblemished hero. Meriwether Lewis had been the official commander of the Lewis & Clark Corps of Discovery, and alongside his co-captain, William Clark, he had opened and charted the West all the way to the Pacific Coast. Jefferson nominated Lewis for territorial governor in February 1807, and Congress immediately approved the appointment. Lewis had been back in civilization only a few months, and at age thirty-three, was one of the most celebrated Americans of his time. A fine officer and an exceptional explorer, Lewis seemed—at least on the surface—the perfect choice to govern the new territory.

Since his return, however, Lewis had behaved erratically. Simply put, the Lewis that President Jefferson had bargained on was not the one who assumed the governor’s mantle. For one thing, Lewis was inexcusably late in reporting to his new appointment. Jefferson needed him in St. Louis as soon as possible, to bring order to the fast-growing frontier city. Lewis had promised the president he would set out in short order for his new assignment; yet he did not arrive in St. Louis until March 1808—a full year after his appointment. In the interim, he showed no interest in requesting reports from Jefferson’s chosen territorial secretary and acting governor, Frederick Bates. Nor had he done any work on formalizing his expedition journals for publication, a project to which Jefferson was almost obsessively committed.

To those with whom Lewis was acquainted, he appeared to be growing increasingly morose and apathetic. Biographer Stephen Ambrose points to several possible reasons for Lewis’s apparent lethargy: malaria, alcoholism (he was drinking heavily at this point), a manic-depressive psychosis, and repeated failures in love. He adds that Lewis “had had more success than was good for him [and] missed the adulation that he had been accustomed to receiving.” Whatever the symptoms, it is clear that he suffered from what Ambrose refers to as a “disposition to melancholy.”

Nonetheless, once Lewis was finally ensconced in the governor’s position, he became proactive. Depressed though he clearly appeared to be, he mustered the energy to draft a position paper before traveling to St. Louis, and at more than 10,000 words, it was an impressive document. The two areas Lewis stressed as requiring immediate focus were improved conditions for the territory’s Indians and the growth of the American fur trade. To accomplish these goals, which he saw as a swift route to enriching the territory, the nation, and himself, Lewis pointed out the need to drive the British fur trappers and traders from America’s rivers and streams. “Can we begin the work of exclusion too soon?” he



Benjamin Howard

wrote, and sought the authority and resources to build fortified trading posts on the Missouri River and other western waterways, and to populate them with soldiers.

This policy excluded hunters and settlers from moving westward, at least for the immediate future. Encroaching civilization, as Lewis saw it, would only bring on war with the Indians and ruin the fur trade for America. Aside from his request for a vast expenditure from the federal government, Lewis was proposing to hold back the tide of westward expansion. The country was burgeoning with Americans eager to move west, and as events would shortly prove, they would not be denied. Ambitious though it was, the governor’s plan was unrealistic and made Lewis many enemies.

Lewis had other, more personal, concerns as governor. In a very short time, he and territorial secretary Frederick Bates grew to loathe each other, and their mutual enmity occasionally expressed itself in public. Driven by jealousy, as well as possessing a wholly different approach to the job of governing the territory, Bates sought to undermine the governor at every opportunity, spreading calumnious stories and levying false accusations that Lewis was misusing public funds.

By all accounts, Lewis was an honest man, but admittedly, a poor keeper of accounts. He had submitted reimbursement requests to Congress for extensive personal funds he had

laid out both during and after his expedition. However, early in Lewis’s governorship, James Madison assumed the presidency, and he neither knew Lewis as Jefferson did nor approved of his bookkeeping practices. Ultimately, Congress refused to pay Lewis the monies owed, and when the new Secretary of War echoed Bates’s charges in a letter to Lewis, he indignantly responded, “I have been informed Representations have been made against me, all I wish is a full and fair Investigation ... I have never received a penny of public Money.”

Lewis had gone into debt—largely through the purchase of land—and the government’s refusal to pay what was owed put him in desperate straits. As he saw it, the only solution to salvaging his reputation and recouping his finances lay in traveling to Washington and defending himself personally. “I shall take with me my papers,” he wrote, “which I trust when examined will prove my firm and steady attachment to my Country.”

Lewis lacked a politician’s thick skin, and his drinking and moodiness increased. On the way to Washington in late 1809, he wrote his last will and testament, and twice attempted suicide, but was saved by his companions. Finally, at a crude roadhouse along the Natchez Trace where he had stopped for the night, he shot himself and died.

Lewis had occupied the governor’s office for less than three years. Many were saddened at the news of his death, but few who knew him well—including William Clark and Thomas Jefferson—were surprised. Meanwhile, Congress posthumously approved payment of his expenses.

In the end, Meriwether Lewis had lacked the temperament, training, and ability for the post. As Stephen Ambrose puts it, “[I]f he was a near-perfect army officer, Lewis was a lousy politician. He was entirely unsuited to the job. Jefferson’s appointment of Lewis to the governorship was a frightful misjudgment.”

THE WANNABE SOLDIER

The third man to fill the governor’s chair—and technically, the first governor of the newly

PAINTINGS BY JOHN WESLEY JARVIS (WILKINSON) AND CHARLES WILLSON PEALE (LEWIS). RETRIEVED FROM WIKICOMMONS

PAINTING BY RALPH OTT. RETRIEVED FROM WIKICOMMONS

named Missouri Territory—was Kentuckian Benjamin Howard. Appointed by President Madison in 1809, Howard was a career politician who took on the governorship at a precarious time; another war with Great Britain was looming on the horizon.

When war broke out, the government's policy was to maintain neutral relations with the Indians, whereas the British pursued an aggressive campaign of allying with friendly tribes. With the British and their allies threatening the Missouri frontier, Governor Howard acted in accordance with federal policy and refused to accept Indian aid, although some one thousand Sac and Fox warriors had offered their support. According to Missouri historian Michael Dickey, "As an old Kentuckian, Howard distrusted all Indians whether friendly or not."

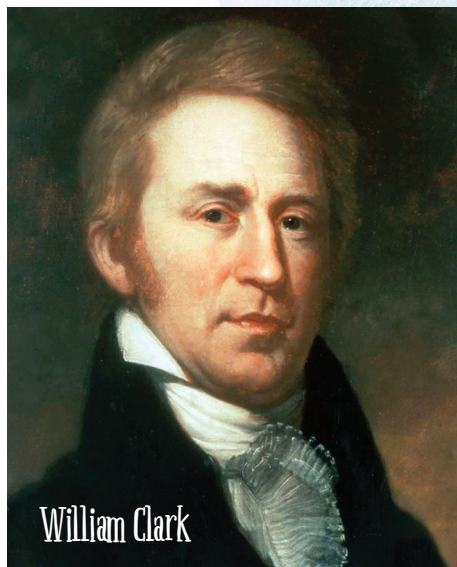
Fortunately for the Missourians, most of the enemy's attention was focused on the eastern states, and the territory was spared much of the fighting. Still, Howard's constituents felt abandoned by the federal government, and although fairly positive about the governor's brief administration thus far, they declared at a meeting in St. Charles, "We consider our lives, our property and our all neglected and measurably forgotten by the general government."

In 1813, Howard resigned the governor's position to assume the rank of brigadier general in the army. September found him leading a force of some 1,400 men up the Mississippi from St. Louis, with the dual intention of building a fort at Lake Peoria, Illinois, and engaging whatever hostile Indians he could find. He found very few, in fact, and after constructing a stockade and burning a few deserted Indian villages, he turned his men for home. Howard was taken ill along the way and died in St. Louis.

ANOTHER HERO

When President James Monroe appointed the fourth territorial governor, he chose the man who had earlier shared command of the Corps of Discovery with Meriwether Lewis. As events would prove, William Clark was a solid choice.

Clark assumed the governorship in 1813,



while the United States was still embroiled in the war with Britain. Observing the influence the British were wielding among the Indians, he set out to establish friendly relations with the various Western tribes. It was a familiar role for him; upon the return of the Corps of Discovery, President Jefferson had promoted him to the rank of brigadier general and appointed him principal Indian agent for the Louisiana Territory. In this role, he supported the so-called "factory system," in which government fur trading houses supplanted private concerns, stabilized prices, and promoted loyalty among the Indians.

Clark was also a realist. In addition to improving relations with the tribes of the Missouri and upper Mississippi rivers, he also worked to strengthen the territory's defenses against hostile attack.

When British and American representatives signed the Treaty of Ghent in late 1814 to end the war, Clark was one of three presidentially appointed peace commissioners charged with informing the tribes and ensuring a cessation of hostilities through treaties. While some tribes complied, others continued to resist Anglo-European encroachment onto their lands. Throughout the summer of 1815, Clark and his fellow commissioners met with representatives of the various tribes at Portage des Sioux, resulting in a series of treaties that avowed "perpetual peace and friendship" between them and the United States. Although some tribes refused to attend the meetings, the treaties represented a significant effort toward achieving peace in the region.

By 1818, Missourians had grown weary of

the area's territorial status and petitioned for US statehood, setting off a two-year controversy over the balance of slave states and free states that would end in Henry Clay's Missouri Compromise. On March 6, 1820, President James Monroe signed the Compromise Bill of 1820 into law, clearing the path for Missouri's admission to the Union as a slave state. That August, a full year before Missouri officially achieved statehood, the first gubernatorial election took place. Clark ran for governor against Alexander McNair, a St. Louis politician and successful businessman.

Clark lost badly; McNair received 72 percent of the vote. Over the past few years, Missourians had become disenchanted with the famous explorer who governed them, during the years of the statehood battle, settlers had poured into the Missouri Territory, many of whom resented what they saw as Clark's pampering of the Indians, especially when he used force to evict white squatters from Indian lands. When they got the chance to choose their next governor, the voters replaced him.

Ironically, two years after Clark left office, President Monroe appointed him Superintendent of Indian Affairs, in which capacity he helped facilitate the uprooting and wholesale removal of countless tribes and nations. Sympathetic though he was to the Indians' plight, Clark was a man who followed orders, in the course of which he helped make available for settlement millions of acres of Indian land. In the words of one chronicler, "Clark embodied the contradictions of his time."

MOVING FORWARD

The region that would one day become the state of Missouri owed its national existence to the miraculous land grab that enabled it to become part of a new country. The daunting task of finding the right man to govern it was one that would plague three presidents, but with the appointment of William Clark to the position, they finally got it right. After the chicanery of James Wilkinson, the ineptitude of Meriwether Lewis, and the mediocre and brief term of Benjamin Howard, Clark's tenure ensured that Missouri would join the Union solvent and solid.