

Chapter 1

THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

The Dream of Nations

Perhaps the idea was born when he was just a boy. His father was a member of the Loyal Land Company, which had received a King's grant of several hundred thousand acres beyond the mountains to the west. On at least two occasions, that company made plans to send someone to explore their holdings. One of those explorations was to go even farther west, to discover whatever lay beyond the holdings of the Loyal Land Company.

One of the planners for that ambitious undertaking was another Company member, Reverend James Maury. He wrote in 1756, "Some persons were to be sent in search of that river Missouri in order to discover whether it had any communication with the Pacific Ocean."

Reverend Maury was also a teacher, and one of his students was the boy mentioned above. Chances are that the youth heard stories both at home and at school about that vast and mysterious land to the west. The father was Peter Jefferson. His son's name was Thomas.

The French and Indian War arose in the same year Reverend Maury was planning the exploration. Nothing came of those plans, except perhaps in the lingering memory of a young boy. Almost three decades later, in 1783, 40-year-old Thomas Jefferson would lend his support to the first of four unsuccessful efforts to do what Reverend Maury had originally proposed. Two more decades would pass before Jefferson, as President of the United States, would finally commission Meriwether Lewis for that same quest.