

Chapter 41

THE JOURNEY COMPLETED
The Accomplishments of the
Corps of Discovery

St. Louis, September 23, 1806

Sir,

It is with pleasure that I announce to you the safe arrival of myself and party at 12 Oclk. today at this place with our papers and baggage. In obedience to your orders we have penetrated the Continent of North America to the Pacific Ocean....

Beginning with those words, Meriwether Lewis wrote to President Thomas Jefferson about the completion of their mission. At least 50 years earlier, a teenage Jefferson had heard speculation of such a route across the continent. Four previous attempts to organize an exploration had been unsuccessful. Lewis' letter must have been a sweet reward to the patient President. Almost....

The primary purpose for sending the Corps of Discovery was to find the Northwest Passage, a trade route across the continent, south of the Canadian border. The commercial possibilities of such a route for Americans were endless. It also held the promise of drawing the fur trade farther south, making it an American-Indian enterprise rather than the existing British-Indian one. That route was expected to be by water, with a short land portage from the headwaters of the Missouri River, over a single ridge of low, forested mountains, to the headwaters of the Columbia or Oregon river.