

Excerpts of Jefferson's Letter to Lewis

Italicized vocabulary words and their definitions are listed at the end of the letter.

Instruments for ascertaining by celestial observations, the geography of the country through which you will pass, have been already provided. Light articles for barter and presents among the Indians, arms for your attendants, say from 10 to 12 men, boats, tents, & other travelling apparatus with ammunition, medicine, surgical instruments and provisions you will have prepared with such aids as the Secretary at War can yield in his department; & from him also you will receive authority to engage among our troops, by voluntary agreement, the number of attendants above mentioned, over whom you, as their commanding officer, are invested with all the powers the laws give in such a case.

The object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river, & such principal stream of it as by its course and communication with the waters of the Pacific Ocean whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purposes of commerce.

Beginning at the mouth of the Missouri, you will take <careful> observations of latitude & longitude at all remarkable points on the river, & especially at the mouth of rivers, at rapids, at islands, & other places & objects distinguished by such <durable> natural marks & characters of a durable <nature> kind as that they may with certainty be recognized hereafter. The course of the river between these points of observation may be supplied by the compass, the log-line & by time, corrected by the observations themselves. The variations of the compass too, in different places should be noticed.

The interesting points of the portage between the heads of the Missouri, & of the water offering the best communication with the Pacific ocean, should also be fixed by observation, & the course of that water to the ocean, in the same manner as that of the Missouri.

The commerce which may be carried on with the people inhabiting the line you will pursue, *renders* a knowledge of those people important. You will therefore endeavor to make yourself acquainted <with> as far as a *diligent* pursuit of your journey shall admit, with the names of the nations & their numbers;

the extent & limits of their possessions; their relations with other tribes of nations;

their language, traditions, monuments;

their ordinary occupations in agriculture, fishing, hunting, war, arts & the implements for these;

their food, clothing, & domestic accommodations;

the diseases prevalent among them, & the remedies they use;

moral & physical circumstances which distinguish them from the tribes we know;

peculiarities in their laws, customs & dispositions;

and articles of commerce they may need or furnish & to what extent.

And considering the interest which every nation has in extending & strengthening the authority of reason & justice among the people around them, it will be useful to acquire what knowledge you can of the state of *morality*, religion, & information among them; as it may better enable those who may *endeavor* to civilize & instruct them, to adapt their measures to the existing notions & practices of those on whom they are to operate.

Other objects worthy of notice will be

the soil & face of the country it's growth & vegetable productions, especially those not of the US.

the animals of the country generally, & especially those not known in the US.

the remains & accounts of any which may be deemed rare or extinct;

the mineral productions of every kind; but more particularly metals; limestone, pit-coal, & *salt-petre*; *salines* & mineral waters, noting the temperature of the last & such circumstances as may indicate their character;

volcanic appearances;

climate, as characterized by the thermometer, by the proportion of rainy, cloudy, & clear days, by lightening, hail, snow, ice, by the access & recess of frost, by the winds prevailing at different seasons, the dates at which particular plants put forth or lose their flower, or leaf, times of appearance of particular birds, reptiles or insects.

Given under my hand at the city of Washington this 20th day of June 1803.

– Thomas Jefferson, President U.S. of A.

Vocabulary

ascertaining: finding out, discovering

barter: exchange or trade goods for one another, without using money

provisions: supplies

latitude and longitude: The horizontal (latitude) and vertical (longitude) lines on a map that make up a system of geographical coordinates. Allows for any place on the planet to be named by a set of numbers. For

example, Helena, Montana's (Latitude, Longitude) is
(49.5884° N, 112.0245° W).

portage: the carrying of a ship and its cargo across the land between navigable waters

renders: provides

diligent: dedicated, hard-working

peculiarities: strange or unusual features

morality: a system of rules that decide between right and wrong behavior

endeavor: to try and achieve a goal

salt-petre: a salty-tasting powder use to preserve meat, as a fertilizer, and in explosives

salines: salt water mixtures

[Source: *Thomas Jefferson to Meriwether Lewis, June 20, 1803*. [Page 2](#) – [Page 3](#) – [Page 4](#).
Letterpress copy of manuscript letter [instructions for the Corps of Discovery]. [Manuscript Division](#), Library of Congress (57).]