By His Own Hand? The Mysterious Death of Meriwether Lewis

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Introduction by Clay S. Jenkinson
Foreword by Elliott West

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Foreword

ELLIOTT WEST

In darker moments I sometimes wonder whether we require our most favored historical characters to die in particular ways. Abraham Lincoln, John Kennedy, Martin Luther King, even Elvis Presley: Their extraordinary accomplishments are not enough. We elevate their lives from merely remarkable to mythic only if those lives end with a poignant heroism or irony that makes the deaths somehow fitting, and even (as loathe as we might be to admit it) satisfying. We insist on a final sacrifice.

Meriwether Lewis is a lesser light than Lincoln or King (or that other Memphis fatality, the King), but it is still worth asking whether the story of his and William Clark’s expedition would have had quite so powerful a grip on us if Lewis had died in bed at eighty or had fallen from the riverboat and drowned before starting on his journey up the Natchez Trace, the trip that ended with his death in the early morning of 11 October 1809. Certainly readers with a general interest in the expedition are much more likely to know something of Lewis’s demise than of Clark’s many later accomplishments and his peaceful death at sixty-eight, nearly three decades after Lewis’s passing.

Lewis died violently and in the midst of controversy and emotional storm, which makes his sad, unsettling end line up with his troubled character and turbulent life. The place and time add a painful, delicious irony. He died along a well-traveled (if notorious) road just a few years after completing an epic journey on which he survived daredeath escapes from Indians and grizzlies.

And then there is the mystery. When the news of his death broke,
everyone close to Lewis presumed he had taken his own life, but soon enough doubts were raised. Over the years the doubts have persisted, and during the past several years the question has found a new vigor: suicide or murder?

This book gives you an able introduction to the debate and presents arguments from both sides. It follows up with a judicious commentary on the ongoing spat, then lays out some of the basic documents so you can consider the evidence and judge for yourself.

Such a combination should appeal to three sorts of readers. First, those who have followed the question over the years will find here exceptionally fine summaries of both sides, as argued by John Guice and James Holmberg. Guice, a historian of the Old Southwest who is currently researching the story of the Natchez Trace, thoughtfully critiques the essential claims of those who say Lewis took his own life. He brings us up-to-date with key points raised on a recent well-received panel of the Southern Historical Association—the inspiration for putting this book together. Holmberg, editor of the letters from William Clark to his brother Jonathan, details the reasons why Clark, arguably the person who best knew Lewis's state of mind, was sure his friend died a suicide. Holmberg marshals as well the other sources that point toward that conclusion. In his commentary, Jay Buckley, author of an upcoming study of Clark's important work as Indian agent, stands between the two advocates, elaborates on what they say, and assesses each one's strengths and weaknesses. And finally, for any questions about how both sides are using the evidence, there are the documents to consult.

The most impassioned Lewis and Clark junkie will surely take away a better understanding of the incident and the issues—and will probably find some new insights as well. I certainly did. A good example is a point made by Clay Jenkinson in his introduction. Both a scholar of the Jefferson years and a historical reenactor of both Lewis and Jefferson, Jenkinson draws on his command of the documentary record. He points to a letter written by Lewis shortly before his death and in the wake of the scandal surrounding Aaron Burr's shenanigans on Lewis's political turf, the lower Mississippi valley. Lewis seems to allude to accusations of his involvement in treasonous conspiracies. This was an age when personal honor, to put it mildly, weighed more heavily in the scales of reputation than is the case with people in the public eye today, and the rumors seem to have stung Lewis painfully. How much, we can wonder, did they further upset his unstable personality?

It's an example of how another audience—general readers and students new to western and early American history—can enjoy and learn from this collection. The bloody events at Grinder's Stand and the facts of Lewis's situation, when we pick them apart, open wide a window onto the remarkable years when the republic was, paradoxically, both starting to come into focus and changing rapidly. The expedition itself, of course, was a revelation of Americans' expanding vision of themselves and of their first, tentative relations with the Far West and its peoples. Lewis's troubles are a case study in the era's cutthroat politics and the nature of political networking. Questions about John Pernier and James Neely easily broaden into questions about the shadowy side of black-white relations in the South. Pernier, like York in his later years, was a freedman, a status with its own special vulnerabilities. How might he have seen his situation, square in the midst of a highly visible mess and dealing with a dodgy character like Neely? The site of the tragedy, along the Natchez Trace, the bandit-ridden "Devil's Backbone," tempts us into another dark corner of Jeffersonian America—the violence that was chronic across the young nation and at its worst in the restless, loosely governed region where Lewis died.

Finally, and more broadly yet, this book might be a primer for anyone interested in how historians work. If nothing else, it makes one thing clear: We are an argumentative bunch. Nobody reading these pages could possibly think of history as a cut-and-dried record of the past, or of historians as people who simply write down what is obvious in the evidence. The record itself is slippery. A key document seeming to support the claims of suicide is Gilbert Russell's statement from 1811. But it seems to be in someone else's hand, so is it really Russell's or the work of someone trying to throw us off the trail? At certain points Mrs. Grinder's testimony has us furrowing our brows. Accounts of Lewis on the eve of his trip describe him as disturbed, even "deranged," but could they be describing the throes of malaria rather than a fatal mental unraveling? The possibilities of forgery and exaggeration lead to another set of questions, those of motive, that further muddy the evidence. Did Grinder and Neely have something to hide? Did Russell and others have their own political reasons to put the whole business behind them as quickly as possible?

Just as pertinent, and more uncomfortable, are questions for ourselves. Is there something in us that resists believing that a man like Lewis could choose such a sordid end? Something that wants to turn a
pathetic, lunatic moment into what is more dramatic and understandable—murder most foul? And ultimately, of course, questions of motive take us into the trickiest terrain of all, Lewis’s own mind. Advocates of murder point out all the reasons Lewis had to live; advocates of suicide observe that someone who kills himself is not acting within reason. Guice quotes a California gunsmith’s take on the fact that Lewis supposedly needed two shots to finish himself off. This fellow doubted the ability of anyone to shoot himself twice with this particular weapon, for according to him, “the learning curve ... would be quite nearly vertical.” It’s a great line, but it begs the question. A learning curve applies to rational persons, not those intent on self-destruction.

The arguments and documents between these covers, then, let us see the business of history for what it is—part advocacy, part forensics, part psychology, a mix of reasoned analysis, intuition, and self-reflection. The lesson is all the more enjoyable because its occasion is such a great story. Let’s face it: Whether Meriwether Lewis, our troubled hero, took his own life or fell at the hands of others, it is his violent death, as ambiguous and impenetrable as Lewis’s own character, that keeps him alive in our collective memory.

Preface

JOHN D. W. GUICE

Late in the afternoon on 10 October 1809 one of the nation’s great heroes reined his horse off the Natchez Trace to spend the night at Grinder’s Stand. The rustic homestead consisted of two rough-hewn log cabins a few paces apart and a distant barn. It was a pleasant fall day some seventy miles southwest of Nashville, Tennessee. What occupied Meriwether Lewis’s mind we will never know, but we do know that shortly after sunup the next morning he died there. Who held the weapon or weapons that fired the fatal shots during the night? Did Lewis take his own life or did an assassin? After nearly two centuries, this remains one of the most fascinating, puzzling, and enduring questions in all of American history.

Suicide or murder? What difference does it make? A lot of difference to historians concerned with the integrity of their profession, to Americans who expect accuracy in their nation’s written history, and to members of the Lewis family who still refuse to accept the report of suicide. In addition, this question offers an intriguing study in historiography. Why do some highly respected historians adamantly insist that Lewis shot himself, yet others argue just as vehemently that someone murdered him?

In his introduction, Clay Jenkinson, in his inimitable style, explores the depth and breadth of this historiographical challenge. Then two of the following essays present opposing viewpoints based on the latest scholarship. A third and final essay offers a balanced and unbiased analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments presented for both
suicide and murder. Barring the appearance of conclusive scientific evidence obtained through a forensic examination of Lewis's remains, the question of homicide or suicide will remain one of America's most perplexing mysteries. Meanwhile, this book allows readers to sit as a jury, so to speak, and to arrive at their own private verdicts after seeing both positions.

Such a comprehensive study of Lewis's death is long overdue, especially since the bicentennial of his demise is virtually upon us. Indeed, nearly two generations have passed since Vardis Fisher addressed this mystery in his 1962 book Suicide or Murder? and new evidence supporting both sides of the question has emerged. In addition, the debate intensified during the past decade as the Lewis family descendants futilely attempted, with forensic scientists representing them, to resolve the issue through an examination of his remains—a procedure that might determine whether his death was a homicide or a suicide. Hence the status of the debate over the manner of Lewis's death accents the timeliness of this anthology, which should serve as the authoritative treatment of the topic for the foreseeable future.

Despite the intensity of this debate and despite varying interpretations of the meaning of certain events, proponents of both views agree on certain basic facts relating to the life of Meriwether Lewis between the Lewis and Clark Expedition's return from the Pacific on 23 September 1806 and Lewis's arrival back in St. Louis as governor of Upper Louisiana Territory on 8 March 1808. These facts include:

- An adoring public saluted and feted Lewis and his co-captain, William Clark, as they made their way from St. Louis to the Atlantic seaboard in a manner not seen since the inauguration of George Washington. But no one awaited their triumphant arrival with greater anticipation and excitement than President Thomas Jefferson. As a measure of his appreciation for their heroic accomplishments, Jefferson rewarded Lewis with the governorship of Upper Louisiana and appointed Clark brigadier general of the militia and principal Indian agent for the same territory. Simultaneously, the president named Frederick Bates as territorial secretary, a decision that soon brought Lewis immeasurable grief.
- Though Jefferson signed his gubernatorial commission on 3 March 1807, Governor Lewis did not arrive at his post until
8 March 1808—one year and five days later. Why the delay? As will be shown later, historians are not in accord as to the precise answer. Indeed, the explanations for his tardiness are subject to speculation.

- While interpretations of the effectiveness of Lewis’s role as governor vary, there is general agreement on the sequence of events that brought him to Grinder’s Stand. His problems related directly to the change in federal policies and personnel after James Madison replaced Thomas Jefferson in the White House. Governor Lewis was so preoccupied with the complexity of territorial affairs that evidently he gave little thought to these changes until the War Department refused to honor a five-hundred dollar expense related to the return of the Mandan chief Big White (Sheheke) and his family to their people up the Missouri River. Personally responsible for unauthorized expenditures, Lewis instantly realized that now he faced a serious cash flow problem.

- On 4 September 1809 the enraged Lewis, accompanied by his free black servant John Pernier, boarded a boat for New Orleans to begin a sea voyage to Washington to straighten out matters with the parsimonious War Department bureaucracy. At New Madrid, Lewis went ashore and wrote a will Designating his mother as his sole beneficiary. By the time he reached Fort Pickering at Chickasaw Bluffs, the site of present-day Memphis, Lewis was too ill to proceed downstream. Captain Gilbert C. Russell, commander at the fort, placed Lewis under the care of his surgeon’s mate, who prescribed abstention from whiskey but allowed consumption of wine.

- While resting at Fort Pickering, Lewis decided that it was too dangerous to attempt a sea voyage, because he could not risk the loss of the expedition journals that were among his baggage. Another visitor at the fort was James Neelly, a former militia major who was then Chickasaw Indian agent. Two weeks after his arrival at Fort Pickering, the governor and his servant Pernier, together with Neelly and his slave, headed south along an Indian trail toward the Chickasaw Agency on the Natchez Trace. Originally a series of interconnected Indian trails, the Natchez Trace in 1809 was still an unimproved wilderness road that ran approximately 550 miles from Natchez on the Mis-

Notes

1. For a more detailed account of Lewis’s activities between 1806 and his arrival at Grinder’s Stand on the Natchez Trace in 1809, see Guice, “Fatal Rendezvous” (1998).

2. Descendants of the owner of this “stand,” or inn, contend that Griner is the proper spelling, though in many contemporary and historical accounts it is spelled Grinder. Because most accounts use the place-name Grinder’s Stand, we do also.
A Postmortem Trial concerning Meriwether Lewis’s Controversial Death

JAY H. BUCKLEY

On the afternoon of the second day of June 1805 in north-central Montana, the Lewis and Clark Expedition faced a defining moment when it arrived at a fork in the Missouri River. The stream flowing in from the northwest was wide and muddy, similar to the big muddy river they had ascended for the last two thousand miles. The western branch was swifter, shallower, clearer, and flowed out of the distant mountains. The Arrowsmith map and other references the captains had with them did not mention this fork in the river, nor did the information they had gathered from the Mandans and Hidatsas during the previous winter. Moreover, the sound of the Great Falls of the Missouri, which would have confirmed which one was the principal river, could not be heard.

The captains were convinced they were right in supposing that the western river was the object of their pursuit. Veteran watermen like Pierre Cruzatte and the rest of the party, however, believed the captains were in error. To make a wrong decision was unthinkable. It would cause the expedition to use up precious supplies and lose valuable time, perhaps even the entire traveling season. It would also demoralize the men, possibly threaten their lives, and could thwart the entire mission. It was time to reach the Rockies, find the Shoshones, trade for horses, portage the Continental Divide, descend the Columbia, and reach the Pacific before winter.

The captains, recognizing the importance of their decision, took extra precautions. They spent the day thinking about their decision. Lewis commented that “our cogitating faculties been busily employed all day.”4 They sent search parties up both forks and had them return and report. The results were inconclusive, prompting the captains to set out to see for themselves. Braving the rain and treacherous footing, Clark traveled nearly fifty miles up the Missouri and found that it ran to the southwest. Lewis ascended the northern branch about seventy miles and confirmed his suspicions that it ran too far north to lead to the Pacific. On 8 June 1805 Lewis wrote, “The whole of my party to a man except myself were fully peswaided that this river was the Missouri, but being fully of opinion that it was neither the main stream or that which it would be advisable for us to take, I determined to give it a name and... called it Maria’s River.”

The next day, despite field observations and reconnaissance, Lewis confided in his journal, “I devoured to impress on the minds of the party all of whom except Capt. C. being still firm in the belief that the N. Fork was the Missouri and that which we ought to take; they said very cheerfully that they were ready to follow us any when we thought proper to direct but that they still thought that the other was the river... it was agreed between Capt. C. and myself that one of us should set out with a small party by land up the South fork and continue our rout up it until we found the falls.”4 In other words, the captains still saw the western branch as the true Missouri and the men retained their hunches that the Maria’s (the modern-day Marias) was the principal stream. Nevertheless, even though many of them still felt the captains were wrong, they cached part of their supplies and equipment, packed their bags, and proceeded on. It took until mid-June before Lewis, traveling ahead on foot, arrived at the Great Falls of the Missouri and sent that welcome information back to the oncoming party to “settle in their minds all further doubts as to the Missouri.”

Just as the confluence of the Marias and Missouri rivers caused a difference of opinion on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the death of the leader of the voyage has generated equal disagreement and contro-
versy among the followers of the Lewis and Clark Trail and the tellers of the Lewis and Clark story. With so much written during the past two centuries by Lewis and Clark and about Lewis and Clark, it is amazing that the fateful ends of three of the most familiar expedition members—York, Sacagawea, and, especially, Lewis—continue to prompt debate. One would think that after two hundred years of historical research and a thorough examination of existing evidence historians would be able to put to rest discrepancies about these individuals, particularly about their deaths.

There is no controversy surrounding William Clark’s death. He died on 1 September 1838 at the seasoned age of sixty-eight in St. Louis. What became of his slave, York, however, still generates some disagreements. After 1815, York’s whereabouts remain unknown. Clark told Washington Irving in 1832 that he had eventually freed York and gave him a large wagon and team to operate between Nashville and Richmond. The story continued that York was unhappy, wanted to return to Clark, and eventually died of cholera in Tennessee sometime between 1816 and 1832. Nevertheless, rumors persisted that York escaped from Clark and the confines of slavery by fleeing up the Missouri, where he lived out his life in the Rocky Mountains among the Crows.5

Sacagawea’s death elicits additional controversy. Most historians believe that she died near Fort Manuel in South Dakota on 20 December 1812. Clark listed her as deceased in an account book list he compiled in the late 1820s. He should have known, especially since he was the legal guardian of Jean-Baptiste and Lisette, the two children she had with Toussaint Charbonneau.6 Yet oral traditions of the Comanches and Shoshones advance the possibility that she lived for decades, married a man named Jerk Meat, and had five more children before eventually dying on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming in 1884.7

Unlike some of the uncertainty surrounding the death dates for York and Sacagawea, Meriwether Lewis definitely died from the effects of gunshot wounds on 10 October 1809. Since death by natural causes has been ruled out, the controversy surrounds how those bullets entered his body: by suicide, by homicide, or by accident? Why does it matter? Would understanding the manner of Lewis’s death increase or diminish his life’s contributions? Would proving that his death occurred by suicide wreck his reputation, indicate that he failed to adjust to postexpedition life, and overshadow his expedition exploits? Could an exhumation of Lewis’s remains provide a definite answer to the cause of death and produce enough DNA evidence to support or refute the allegation that Lewis fathered a Sioux child named Joseph DeSomet Lewis?8 If the National Park Service allowed the exhumation of Lewis’s body, what precedent would it set regarding the exhumation of other famous historical figures? What about the fact that almost two hundred Lewis descendants want to exonerate the man some historians have stereotyped as a drunk, depressed, disease-ridden drug addict, a manic-depressive, a spurned suitor, and a suicidal syphilitic suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder?

In 1990 the editors of the American Heritage publication asked dozens of members of the Society of American Historians the following question: “What is the one mystery in United States history you would like to see resolved?” Dee Brown responded, “How Did Meriwether Lewis Die?”9 Whether or not Lewis died by his own hand or someone else’s matters to lots of folks: to Lewis’s descendants who want to clear his good name; to possible relatives who want to prove a biological connection; to people residing along the Natchez Trace who take pride in the accuracy of their local history; to residents of Lewis County, Tennessee; to members of the Lewis County Historical Society; to members of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation; to forensic scientists who assert that exhumation could help resolve this historical dispute; to those interested in using the advantages of modern science to help solve historical mysteries; to historians interested in presenting the nation with a history written as correctly and accurately as humanly possible; and to people everywhere who simply want to know.

Perhaps the best way to uncover the truth about what really happened that October evening at Grinder’s Stand is for readers to exercise their “cogitating faculties” while vicariously participating in a postmortem trial to determine whether or not Lewis’s death was self-inflicted, accidental, or caused by someone else. The preceding essays have addressed the uncertainties and historical controversies surrounding his death. Did Lewis, influenced by disease of body and mind, perish by his own hand as James Holmberg contends? Or did he, as John Guice suggests, die as the result of a murder conspiracy mounted by a litany of would-be suspects or perhaps at the hands of an unknown assassin frequenting the Natchez Trace? Like the decision Lewis and Clark faced at the Marias River, readers would be well served to keep an open mind about all of the possibilities and be willing to explore the available alternatives, or
even suggest new theories, before proceeding on. A fresh look at the evidence may be the only way to uncover the name of the person or persons responsible for Meriwether Lewis’s mysterious and controversial death.

Exhume the body! Oh, the story those bones might tell. Should forensic scientists be able to uncover vital evidence that might shed some light on what happened that fateful October night at Grinder’s Stand in Tennessee, what might they unearth? Would they find the entrance and exit wounds, signs of syphilis or malaria, the presence of black-powder residue or mercury, the lead balls that killed Lewis, or even, perhaps, a crumpled piece of paper in Lewis’s hand identifying the perpetrator or culprits? Lewis’s descendants and others want to add credence to the possibility that someone murdered this important American figure. What harm could be done?

There have been a host of historical figures who have suffered untimely deaths by assassination, disappearance, dueling, and murder. Exhumation should be considered only in a very select number of these cases and when descendants are willing to grant permission. Yet it is extremely rare to find an instance where suicide is suspected as the cause of death for these historical icons, as it is in the case of Lewis. Moreover, scientists have made inroads in resolving historical mysteries like Lewis’s through forensic evidence. For brevity, two recent examples must suffice. Zachary Taylor was presumed to have died by arsenic poisoning. In 1991, after his descendants granted permission for exhumation of his remains from a Louisville cemetery, neutron activation analysis tests performed by Larry Robinson and Frank Dyer ruled out that possibility. For hundreds of years people believed King Tut (d. 1323 B.C.) had been murdered by a blow to the head. In 2005 the National Geographic Society released 3-D images from a CAT scan of his body that revealed what he looked like as a healthy nineteen-year-old. More important, Dr. Zahi Hawass and his team of scientists overturned the murder theory by demonstrating that Tut likely died of complications resulting from a broken left leg suffered a few days before his death. These examples show that history and science can work together in seeking truth.10

This would not be the first time such a request has been made. In fact, Lewis’s remains may have been exhumed twice already! More than 150 years ago, the Tennessee legislature authorized a commission to exhume Lewis’s grave to authenticate his remains before establishing a national monument at the site. According to the Lewis Monument Committee report, they found some bones and other items, vouched for his remains, and concluded that Lewis probably was murdered. The evidence they found to justify their conclusion, however, is unverifiable.11 Later, a coroner’s jury convened in 1996 to hear the testimony of fourteen witnesses (comprising historians, pathologists, psychiatrists, firearms experts, document examiners, and other forensic scientists) who unanimously recommended disinterment.12

Another exhumation request came in 1998 from George Washington University professor of law and forensic sciences James Starrs, who, as a leading scientific sleuth involved in similar controversies surrounding figures like Jesse James and John Wilkes Booth, contends that Lewis’s story can best be told by his remains. Such an exhumation would not only provide skeletal clues about Lewis’s death, but would also enable DNA testing to support or refute DeSmet Lewis’s parentage claim.13

Alaska Senator Frank H. Murkowski, a former ranking member of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, made the most recent request of the National Park Service in 2002 when he asked the agency to settle the dilemma by exhuming Lewis’s body. Murkowski said, “Meriwether Lewis deserves better than to be in the middle of a mystery whose solution is within reach. . . . World-class scientists are standing by ready to give his family and history the answers.”14

Author Stephen Ambrose, Montana artist Larry Janoff, and others opposed exhumation. Janoff was “appalled that the so-called ‘experts’ can get away with making false and misleading statements in order to benefit possible financial gain from notoriety that a stunt such as this would generate.” Moreover, he added, shortly after the first burial, “hogs got into [Lewis’s grave] and unfortunately consumed much of the body.” The 1848 disinterment supposedly found only “a few small bones” and “a couple of buttons.”15 Those opposed to exhuming him recommended remembering Lewis’s accomplishments in life and not worrying further about the manner of his death.

The National Park Service agreed, denying the exhumation requests in 1996, 1998, and 2002 and cited as one of the reasons for denying the requests the undesirable precedent of disturbing graves not threatened by natural elements or by development. Adding to the irony is that only a short while after the Park Service denied the 1996 request, the monu-
ment over Lewis's grave was dismantled for renovation. In fact, excavation came within a few feet of any remains before the restored monument was rededicated on 11 October 2001.

Katherine Brock, interpretive specialist for the Natchez Trace Parkway, conceded that "There is no evidence to show one way or the other. . . . As the government you have to take a neutral side in it, whether you like it or not." Moreover, Brock said that there is no assurance that Lewis is even buried beneath or near the monument near Hohenwald, Tennessee, noting that she had "never read anything, in the archives or otherwise, that said his body had been moved to that spot" and that the Park Service was not going to "dig [around] looking for him."16 The manager of the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail, Richard Williams, has also taken a pragmatic approach. "It may be better that it is a mystery. . . . That way people can choose what to believe."17

So, until the bones are dug up—if they ever are—and before the extant evidence is reexamined, readers must be satisfied with current findings and interpretations. As the vicarious postmortem trial begins, readers should keep in mind that there are not many hard facts or pieces of primary evidence—physical remains, eyewitness accounts, exact time of death—that would help clarify the case. As a result, the court is left with an abundance of theories, opinions, hearsay evidence, supposition, and contestable contemporary accounts, all espoused by expert and lay witnesses who fall on both sides of the debate.

To begin the postmortem trial, the prosecution alleges Lewis is guilty of self-murder, of taking his own life. The attorneys for the prosecution fully believe they have a clear-cut case and that the relevant testimony suggests suicide. James Holmberg has ably laid out the evidence, but some of it bears restating briefly, as does a review of expert testimony from modern-day authors who have weighed in on the matter. Then, John Guice and other experts will present their defense.

Readers of this essay have hereby been duly sworn in as vicarious jurors, sequestered in their homes, cars, or offices until they are asked to render a verdict.

The prosecution's opening statement retells the story of the tragic ending of one of America's greatest heroes, Meriwether Lewis, co-commander of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Because of personal and public pressures, they argue, Lewis took his own life on the Natchez Trace in mid-October 1809. In fact, nearly all of the contemporary
enough evidence exists or remains disputed to raise reasonable doubt and even suggest he was killed by accident or murder.

The prosecution's case hinges upon the contemporary evidence that, they believe, categorically points to suicide. As James Holmberg has clearly outlined in his essay in this volume, the evidence supporting suicide fits into three general categories: first, at the time of Lewis's death, the verdict was suicide; second, all of the recorded accounts in the first few years agree on the cause of death; and third, nearly all who heard the news concurred. Finally, a litany of opinions and positions will be offered by proponents of the suicide theory. The case proceeds on.

During the summer of 1809, Lewis was a troubled man, concerned that his world was falling apart. Certainly he faced significant pressures as governor of Upper Louisiana. Not only did he lack the support of the territorial secretary, Frederick Bates, but his superiors in Washington disputed some of his expenditures and decisions. His confidence was shaken, his integrity questioned, and his credit ruined. Other difficulties resulted from his tardiness in going to St. Louis after his executive appointment and his inability to get along with many of the territorial residents once he took up his post. Lewis also apparently had difficulty adjusting to postexpedition life, failed in several attempts at courtship, and may have turned to alcohol for solace. His friend William Clark was concerned about his journey east in the fall of 1809, partly because of Lewis's ill health and partly because Lewis's mind seemed troubled about possible financial and political ruin. Lewis's mentor, Thomas Jefferson, had also chastised Lewis for not corresponding regularly and for not preparing the expedition journals for publication in a timely fashion.

In addition to these personal, political, and financial failures, the ten oral and written contemporary accounts of those who met Lewis during his last two weeks on earth—the majority of them attributed to Priscilla Grinder, James Neely, John Pernier, and Gilbert Russell—must be considered. All supported, more or less, the claim that Lewis took his own life. Later accounts by John Brahan and Alexander Wilson, as well as the anonymous friend who wrote Lewis's obituary, all concurred with the verdict of suicide, as did William Clark and Thomas Jefferson, the two men who knew Lewis best. As Jefferson later penned, "About 3 o'clock in the night he did the deed which plunged his friends into affliction and deprived his country of one of her most valued citizens." Moreover, when Bates, Clark, Jefferson, and people from St. Louis to Philadelphia
heard the news—either through gossip, newspaper reports, or letters—they apparently accepted the tragic details without raising any doubts to the contrary.

Bolstering all of this contemporary evidence are testimonials from modern-day experts who have weighed in over the course of the last fifty years, offering their expertise and professional opinions supporting the claim that Lewis committed suicide. A cursory examination of the witness list is impressive: Stephen Ambrose, Ken Burns, Paul Cutright, Jonathan Daniels, Thomas Danisi, Dayton Duncan, William Foley, James Holmberg, Reginald Horsman, Donald Jackson, Kay Jamison, Clay Jenkinson, Howard Kushner, Aaron Less, Ronald Loge, Boynton Merrill, John Moore, Larry Morris, Gary Moulton, David Nicandri, David Peck, Dawson Phelps, Reimert Ravenholt, James Ronda, and John Westefeld among others.

Dawson Phelps’s 1956 article was among the first to lay out some of the plausible reasons why Lewis may have committed suicide. His explanations for Priscilla Grinder’s interesting behavior, the assertion that the Natchez Trace was a safe place, and his conviction that Lewis suffered from depression were sufficient to convince a bevy of historians that suicide was not only likely but probable.19 The venerable Lewis and Clark scholar Donald Jackson stated in 1962 that “I am inclined to believe that Lewis died by his own hand.”20 His pro-suicide/anti-murder opinion did much to affect a generation of scholars who held Jackson in high esteem. Other writers added their convictions as well. In 1981 Howard Kushner’s psychoanalytical inquiry suggested, “[A]ny person not disturbed by the kinds of financial, political, and personal loss that Lewis suffered would be truly mad.” Kushner attributed Lewis’s suicide, in part, to the incomplete mourning Lewis experienced in the wake of his father’s death when the boy was very young, which helped to explain Lewis’s “repeated failure to establish lasting interpersonal relations, extreme risk-taking, and a compulsive desire for self-punishment.”21 Paul Cutright, too, listed the now-familiar pillars that support the suicide theories: (1) no wife; (2) depression and intemperance; (3) failure to publish; and (4) loss of Jefferson’s confidence and filial support.22

Most recently, professors John Westefeld and Aaron Less presented another psychological perspective. They conducted a suicide assessment “to evaluate the nature of Lewis’s historical, personal, psychosocial environmental, and clinical risk factors, and protective factors” and concluded that the evidence of mental illness, substance abuse, medical problems, temperament, and numerous stresses demonstrated that “Lewis was at a high suicide risk at the time of his death, and that the preponderance of the evidence indicates that he died by his own hand.”23

Adding credibility to the suicide theory, historian and editor Gary Moulton concluded in 1986 that after Lewis became Louisiana territorial governor “he encountered difficulties that caused him severe emotional problems. He died by his own hand on the Natchez Trace in Tennessee.”24 Lewis and Clark aficionados sat up and took notice when Jackson and Moulton weighed in on the argument. Since Jackson’s *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* and Moulton’s *Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* comprise the canon for Lewis and Clark scholarship, it is not too surprising that many authors of the last half century have adhered to their explanations as the definitive word. A decade after Moulton’s declaration, Stephen Ambrose’s *Undaunted Courage*, the most well-known and widely read biography of Lewis, placed the suicide theory firmly into the American mainstream, attributing Lewis’s demise to a combination of debts, depression, drinking, and drug use.25

Clay Jenkinson’s recent biography of Lewis accepted the suicide theory as well, but he expanded upon the reasoning and the context surrounding it. Jenkinson noted that Lewis was extremely busy from 1807 to 1809. Governor Lewis issued proclamations, employed a publisher for the territorial laws, helped organize the expeditions to build factories at Forts Osage and Madison, became the first Master Mason of St. Louis Lodge No. 111, orchestrated the return of the Mandan Chief Sheheke, approved Indian treaties negotiated by the Indian agents, and encouraged the efforts of the Missouri Fur Company to extend the fur trade up the Missouri. Certainly a person filled with despair could not accomplish so much. Yet, he concluded, Lewis probably was a manic-depressive, perhaps bipolar, unlucky at love, and faced pressures to get the journals published. Financial concerns over his political expenditures and opposition from his territorial secretary, Frederick Bates, in addition to all the rest on his mind, may have culminated in a self-examination of himself that did not meet his own standard and contributed to his early demise.26

Others have worked to find additional satisfactory explanations for suicide. In 1980, Marian White built upon the works of earlier scholars in a thorough discussion of how the effects of malaria had destroyed Lewis’s health.27 More recently, Thomas Danisi proposed that Lewis’s “hypochondria” could indeed be attributed to the great pain he suffered
because of the effects of malaria. Lewis did not intend to commit suicide, Danisi insisted, but in order to relieve his suffering, he accidentally wounded himself to alloy his pain as "a strange and tragic form of self-surgery [caused by the malady], not suicide."28

Others look to moments in the expedition to find reasons they think support suicide. Seattle epidemiologist Dr. Reimert Ravenholt suggested that it was the physical and mental effects of an advanced stage of _neurosyphilis paresis_, or syphilis contracted on the expedition, that compelled Lewis to end his life. This epidemiologist took the argument one step farther by pinpointing the likely liaison with a Shoshone woman on 13 or 14 August 1805, as to when Lewis purportedly contracted the disease.29 David Nicandri has postulated that "the first cracks in Lewis's psyche occurred in the Pacific Northwest." The physical challenges and hardships the expedition faced on the Columbia Plateau took a psychological toll on Lewis that may have led to disorders such as a weakened immune system, cyclothymia (a bipolar disorder that persists over a long time), unipolar depression, or perhaps even complex posttraumatic stress disorder.30

Despite all of the possible reasons—financial problems, alcoholism, addictions, failure to marry, mental illness, political pressures, depression, and the possible effects of syphilis, malaria, or posttraumatic stress disorder—the latest scholarship has returned to the statements offered by William Clark in 1809. Of Lewis's acquaintances, only Clark has never been implicated in causing or covering up Lewis's death. Clark's letters, then, offer some of the best evidence that he believed Lewis died by his own hand. Clark knew Lewis better than anyone except, perhaps, Lewis's mother, Lucy. Lewis's superior officer during Washington's Indian War in the Ohio Valley during the 1790s, Clark had then spent three years with him on the expedition sharing all of its difficulties and dangers, saw him on a daily basis in St. Louis, dined with him, lent him money, and agreed to witness the execution of his will. From the time Clark first heard the news of Lewis's death, in letter after letter to his brother thereafter, and even after visiting with Jefferson at Monticello, Clark apparently never doubted the suicide, unless it was later in his life. He, more than anyone else, would have done all in his power to investigate had he suspected anything out of the ordinary. Reading the newspaper reports that Lewis had taken his own life evoked an emotional response in Clark, and he lamented to his brother Jonathan, "I fear! I fear the weight of his mind has over come him, what will be the Consequence?"31

Two hundred years later, two recent biographers of William Clark have agreed with Clark's initial assessment. "It was suicide," Landon Jones wrote: "That was the unequivocal testimony from the scene by Neelly, Pernier, and Mrs. Grinder. Clark immediately came to the same conclusion, as did Jefferson."32 William Foley likewise reached the conclusion that "Lewis was dead, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound."33

The jurors are left to ponder what appears as a seemingly overwhelming contemporary record supporting suicide. Moreover, little evidence suggested foul play, few newspaper reports challenged the governor's death as a suicide, few accounts deviated from this conclusion, and only a few of Lewis's friends and associates suspected murder. In the words of the Natchez Trace historian Dawson Phelps, "In the absence of direct and pertinent contemporary evidence to the contrary, of which not a scintilla exists, the verdict of suicide must stand."34

The prosecution rests, with Clark's lamentation echoing in the courtroom: "I fear! I fear the weight of his mind has over come him, what will be the Consequence?"

The defense can now employ a variety of strategies to counter the suicide theory. These include discrediting the contemporary witnesses; refuting conflicting evidence surrounding the various accounts of his death; offering new evidence; naming potential murderers or accomplices; and providing experts to testify that murder is at least a possibility, if not a probability.

John Guice's essay in this volume lays the groundwork for the defense and postulates that Lewis's death was the result of foul play. Guice outlines at least sixteen reasons why some scholars favor the suicide interpretation and then tries to account for them. Lewis faced multiple pressures to publish or perish, to find and keep a wife, and to deal with some troubles at work. He had bounced a few checks and needed to rectify a bad credit report. Many academics deal with those same challenges today. What are the possible effects malaria, syphilis, and illness had on Lewis? Who has not ever been sick or depressed? It does not mean one is crazy. What about Lewis's use of alcohol and opiates to dull his senses? Even conservative talk-show host Rush Limbaugh recently admitted similar problems, and only a portion of America considered him insane. The defense contends that many of those who believe Lewis committed suicide arrive at that conclusion in advance, build their case around the evidence that seems to support it, and discount or reject out of hand additional evidence or questions that undermine their position.
Professor Guice ably presents the unexplained phenomena surrounding the case that suggest murder: Lewis's missing money and personal effects; the total darkness of that night due to the phases of the moon; a botched suicide attempt by a man skilled in using weaponry. Lewis had at least two wounds: one in the head and another in the chest from two deadly .49 caliber pistols (and, according to some accounts, razor cuts on his arms, legs, and neck). Incredibly, these wounds not only failed to kill him, but they did not even prevent him from wandering around the premises for several hours. That Lewis died of gunshot wounds is not disputed, but there were no actual witnesses to the shooting. The differing accounts of the killing were based on rumor and hearsay, and no official autopsy report was filed to provide a consistent account of the nature of the wounds that killed him. Without Lewis's body to prove otherwise, the crux of the controversy rests firmly in the court of public opinion.

Yet other questions remain: What happened to Lewis's dog, Seaman? If he was with Lewis that night, as the historical record suggests, why didn't he issue a warning bark? Who took the money from Lewis's trunks? Why did Neely take all of Lewis's weapons for himself? How can suicide supporters seemingly dismiss the inconsistencies in Priscilla Grinder's accounts as memory loss or hysteria? How can one explain how Lewis could have endured two wounds in vital parts of his body and still have wandered around the yard and the trace without leaving a bloody trail? What about the account of the post rider Robert O. Smith, who says he found Lewis's body near the trace and away from the buildings? If Lewis was coherent enough to ask the servants for water or to plead to be dispatched, why didn't he simply reload and finish the job? Did Lewis tell the servants someone had shot him? Perhaps his wounds were accidental? Why, if he had no intentions to do so, would Lewis write Amos Stoddard only a few weeks before his death that he intended to return to St. Louis? Why would he forward money to Washington if he did not intend to collect it? Why would Russell loan Lewis more than four months of pay and a horse and tack if he thought Lewis was mentally deranged and would not repay him? Where was Robert Grinder that night? Why didn't Jefferson launch an investigation or inquiry? Why didn't Lewis receive a proper Masonic burial? Where are the notes of the 3–2 decision reached by the first coroner's inquest and the alleged trial proceedings against Robert Grinder following the incident? What are the comparative value and credibility of the contemporary textual...
evidence and the oral sources? How does one reconcile the conflicting, emotional, doubtful, incomplete, and incorrect evidence? These are but a sampling of the unanswered questions that the defense suggests raise reasonable doubt. 37

Amazingly, with all of the evidence that has already been advanced, jurors must keep in mind that there were no eyewitnesses (who can be identified) who actually saw how the bullets entered Lewis’s body. There was one earwitness, Priscilla Grinder, who says that after hearing the shots of two different pistols she peered through the chinking in the logs during a pitch-black, moonless night to see Lewis stumbling about the yard. She refused to give him water and did not go or send for help. Almost every other shred of the suicide account stems from her recollection of the events, supplemented by Pernier, who was likely present just before Lewis expired.

There are several inconsistencies in the contemporary testimony that raise doubt and suspicion. The written accounts of Pernier, Neely, Russell, and especially Priscilla Grinder—nearly all of them possible suspects—contain inconsistencies and inaccuracies that call their testimony into question. Consider the possible motives of Lewis’s body servant, John Pernier, whom Gilbert Russell identified as a possible accomplice and whom Lewis’s mother, Lucy Marks, impugned as being somewhat responsible for the death of her son. To his credit, Pernier did travel to Virginia to visit Mrs. Marks and did report to Jefferson. Of course some might say he was simply trying to collect the $240 he claimed Lewis owed him. Tragically, he died within seven months, either by suicide or by murder made to appear self-induced. 38

Russell’s last account, offered two years after Lewis’s death, was based upon a composite sketch of what he had read and heard; he mentioned Lewis’s two alleged suicide attempts on the river but did not provide any details or methods. He did not say if Lewis sustained any wounds or explain why this gossip did not get picked up and printed by any of the local newspapers up and down the Mississippi. Nor do any of the earliest accounts say Lewis used a knife to cut himself. Therefore, why did Neely start rumors stating such in the tabloids? In fact, Russell’s 4 January 1810 correspondence to Jefferson indicated that Lewis’s indisposition required that he be detained, but conceded that after about a week Lewis was “perfectly restored” and remained at the fort another week to see if Russell could travel with him to Washington, a request that James Wilkinson denied. A year later, Russell’s story had changed. In his 26 November 1811 statement he related that Lewis arrived “in a state of mental derangement,” yet still conceded the fact that after about a week was “completely in his senses” before the heat and his illness (possibly the effects of malaria) returned. Under such duress, Russell concluded, Lewis “destroyed himself, in the most cool desperate and Barbarian-like manner.” After discharging two pistols into his body, he got his razors out and “buiuly engaged in cutting himself from head to foot.” Interestingly, however, the accounts of Grinder and Pernier are void of any mention of self-inflicted knife wounds.

Journalist David Chandler argued that Lewis was caught up in a political conspiracy beyond his knowledge that involved former president Jefferson as well as the scoundrel General James Wilkinson, the highest-ranking military officer in the West and a well-paid “Spy No. 13” for Spain. Wilkinson had served under Benedict Arnold during the Revolutionary War, had undermined the leadership of Generals George Washington and Anthony Wayne in the years following, and had conspired with Aaron Burr to create a new nation by encouraging the secession of the territories west of the Appalachians. Ironically, Wilkinson had also been the governor of Upper Louisiana immediately before Lewis. Lewis had opposed Burr’s traitorous plan and may have uncovered information linking Wilkinson to the intrigue. Certainly Lewis faced opposition in Missouri from Wilkinson’s cronies. 39

As historian J. Frederick Fausz noted, Wilkinson was a man “[s]carred by scandal, tainted by treason, and was already facing court-martial.” He had real reasons to stop Lewis from proceeding to Washington and was himself ascending the Mississippi River with troops. This news must have given Lewis pause and may have been another reason for him to leave the river and venture overland. Moreover, Wilkinson, Lewis’s political enemy, was responsible for the military promotions and positions of Captain Russell and Indian agent Neely. Wilkinson had promoted Russell to major in May of 1809 and placed him in command of Fort Pickering only a few months before Lewis arrived. Fausz suggested that with Russell’s “connections with, and possible obligations to, General Wilkinson, his observations about Lewis’s alleged ‘derangement’ and alcohol abuse need to be treated with greater skepticism than most historians have done.” 40

On 5 November 1809 Surgeon’s Mate W. C. Smith, the physician who cared for Lewis at Fort Pickering, wrote Secretary of War Eustis informing him that “Russell had arrested Lewis on ‘charges frivolous in
their nature,' had confined him to close quarters and caused him to fall ill." In addition, the Indian factor at Russell's post also sent correspondence to Washington complaining about Russell's inexperience and stability. As Richard Dillon wrote, suspect Russell "was no paragon of virtue." Yet Russell personally offered to escort Lewis to Washington. Wilkinson denied the request and instead sent another one of his political appointees, James Neelly, several hundred miles out of his way to do the job.

How honest was Major James Neelly, U.S. Indian agent to the Chickasaws and a traveling partner of Lewis's? It was Neelly who entrusted a prisoner he was transporting to Nashville to someone else, rode all the way to Fort Pickering, waited for Russell's request to accompany Lewis to be denied, and then offered to escort Lewis to Nashville. Then he encouraged Lewis to drink and left him alone during his hour of greatest need. Russell even implicated Neelly in foul play and contended Lewis would still be alive if Neelly had performed his duty. Neelly conveniently arrived on the scene after Lewis had already passed away, and his accounts, like those of Russell, were based on hearsay and circumstantial evidence. Neelly waited a week before writing to inform Jefferson: "It is with extreme pain that I have to inform you of the death of His Excellence, Meriwether Lewis... who died on the morning of the 11th Instant and I am sorry to say by suicide."42

It was Neelly, then, whose accounts contain substantial contradictions, who provided most of the information that found its way into the newspapers describing Lewis's death. It was his reports that Jefferson, Clark, and others read and drew their conclusions from even though Neelly claims to have been absent when it happened and to have received his information secondhand from Mrs. Grinder. No wonder, some historians argue, the written contemporary evidence tends to support the suicide argument; most of it came from the same source—a person who admittedly was not present at the scene, provided himself as his own alibi, and is considered by some a primary murder suspect!

Physician E. G. Chuinard, for instance, has suggested that Neelly is a primary suspect. Chuinard presented a likely scenario wherein Neelly entered Lewis's room after midnight, rifled through Lewis's trunk, dazed Lewis with a shot that grazed his head, and then shot him through the body as he attempted to rise. Then Neelly fled the building before returning the next morning shortly after Lewis had expired. Finally, Chuinard found it improbable that after being shot once, Lewis was in a condition to shoot himself again, let alone live for several hours after blowing holes in major organs. Chuinard suggested Lewis died quickly after being shot, which raises additional suspicion about the accounts given by Grinder and Neelly.43

Neelly, with his letter to Jefferson and his conversations in Nashville, was likely the chief source of information for almost all of the contemporary accounts and published reports that appeared within two weeks of Lewis's death. His character, too, has been called into question: Why did he not remain with Lewis and send the servants to collect the strayed horses? Where was he during the night of the incident? Why did he bury the body so quickly? Despite the opportunity to preserve Lewis's body with alcohol and transport it to Nashville or Louisville, Neelly instead did not even provide Lewis a decent burial, burying him so shallow that hogs could dig him up and scatter the evidence. Why? What was he trying to hide? And what about Captain Russell's 31 January 1810 letter to Jefferson that implicated Neelly and Pernier as possible accomplices because they encouraged Lewis to drink without moderation in the days leading up to his alleged destruction of himself? Why did Neelly not return all of Lewis's personal effects to his family? Finally, why did he claim the governor owed him money when Lewis had a tremendous amount of money on his person and Neelly arrived at Fort Pickering with less than a month's wages at his disposal?

It is also interesting that another Wilkinson crony, Thomas Freeman, undertook the task of conveying Lewis's belongings to Thomas Jefferson at Monticello instead of to President Madison. Perhaps, as Laurie Winn Carlson noted, "Lewis was on his way to a very important meeting with President Madison," and "[i]f there was anything in those trunks that might have reflected negatively on Jefferson and his legacy, we can assume he [Jefferson] removed and destroyed the evidence." This was made possible only because Freeman delivered Lewis's trunks and journals to Jefferson before anyone else could see them.44

There are also inconsistencies between the different versions of Priscilla Grinder's accounts that need to be examined. Mrs. Grinder's multiple stories—to Neelly, to Alexander Wilson, and to an unnamed schoolteacher years later—contain several different bits of important information. Her first and second accounts indicated that Lewis behaved strangely the evening before he shot himself but omitted vital information included in that 1839 account wherein she said two or three strange men rode up to the inn that night and quarreled with Lewis.
And, she suggested, Lewis and Pernier apparently exchanged clothes after the men left, perhaps as a precaution to protect Lewis should they return. She also stated that Pernier was later wearing Lewis's expensive gold watch. Finally, she testified to hearing three shots that night, not two, which would involve another person besides Lewis firing a weapon. Could these adaptations to her story be attributed to hysteria? to forgetfulness? or had she forgotten which version of the story she was supposed to tell?

Her accounts raise additional questions. How, exactly, does a crack shot who can hit a mouse at fifty paces miss his own head and his heart at point-blank range? How does a man who has shot himself at least twice, including blowing off a portion of his forehead, wander about the cabin and its vicinity for hours? If Lewis was conscious enough to do the things the accounts suggest—ask for water, make alternate requests of people to heal his wounds or to blow his brains out, and supposedly cut his body from head to foot with a razor—why didn’t he simply reload his weapons and have another go? Had Pernier taken charge of the gunpowder on purpose? Why did Priscilla Grinder, the inn’s proprietor and a frontierwoman used to rough crowds, turn a deaf ear to Lewis’s cries for help, particularly if his weapons were now empty? Was she acting as a cover for the real criminal, protecting a friend—or possibly her husband—or was she simply afraid of retribution from the real killer? Why didn’t the servants hear the shots in the still of night and come to Lewis’s aid? Where did Neely stay the night in order to conveniently arrive right after Lewis passed away? These key witnesses for suicide, then, all have some more explaining to do. After reading Vardis Fisher’s *Suicide or Murder?* (the handbook for the murder theorists), even the venerable Donald Jackson, a supporter of the suicide theory, admitted that James Neely was probably a shady character and Priscilla Grinder was a nut.45

As one can imagine, the rumor mill and conspiracy theories have multiplied the list of possible suspects. In addition to the ones already mentioned were added Frederick Bates, land pirate Tom Runions, British agents, and Natchez Trace thugs involved in a random act of violence. Some have even suggested Jefferson may have been involved in a cover-up. To these possible suspects are added Priscilla Grinder’s husband, Robert.46 Charles Wilson, one of the earliest biographers of Lewis in the twentieth century, recorded that the “Statute Records of Tennessee show that on October 7, 1810, Griner [sic] was brought before a grand jury at Savannah to answer a charge of having murdered Meriwether Lewis, Governor-general of Louisiana. The case was dismissed for lack of evidence.” Unfortunately, modern researchers have been unable to find the documents he cited.47 Some twenty years ago Dee Brown wrote an article quoting a person from the area who quipped, “[E]verybody knows what happened.] Robert Grinder came home that night, found Meriwether Lewis in bed with his wife, and shot him. The rest of the story she just made up.”48

In refuting the conclusions by Jefferson and Clark that seem to suggest suicide, one can argue that both of their opinions were based on supposition, since both of them were far removed from the scene and relied upon newspapers, letters, or accounts from noneyewitnesses who arrived at the scene when Lewis was already dying or after he had passed away. Jefferson, too, was advancing in years and did not record the specifics of what Pernier reported to him some five weeks after the event. Moreover, Jefferson’s epitaph for Lewis that appeared in the frontispiece of Biddle’s *History of the Expedition* was written several years after the event and was much more negative than positive regarding his protégé. Jefferson attributed Lewis’s supposed depression, hypochondria, and mental deficiencies to genetics. As a matter of fact, Jefferson’s own sister Lucy, who married a Lewis, suffered from mental instability. Jefferson knew of the dozens of intermarriages between the Meriwether and Lewis families and most recently had learned that Lucy’s two youngest sons, Liburne and Isham Lewis, “were involved in a bloody and bizarre mystery of their own in Rocky Hill, Kentucky,” where they apparently “de-capitated a young slave with an ax in a drunken rage” and then “botched a suspected double suicide” to escape legal consequences.49

Jefferson was many hundreds of miles from Grinder’s Stand, was retired at Monticello, and may have accepted suicide as a clean or easy way to handle the situation to protect his reputation or to prevent a possible scandal. Moreover, his slanderous comments about Lewis’s instability, as Fausz has noted, probably “carry more weight than they deserve,” especially since he neither witnessed nor investigated the event.50 Claims that he suppressed an official investigation to protect James Wilkinson do not seem too likely; he had, after all, launched an extensive investigation when he heard of the apparent suicide of Sally Hemings’s brother James in 1801. (The rumors proved to be true.) It is strange, however, that he apparently made no arrangements for a proper burial for Lewis, did not investigate the circumstances of his death, may have encouraged Clark to forget the whole thing, and made no record of
what transpired in his meeting with Pernier or his discussion of the incident with William Clark.\textsuperscript{51}

Lewis's mother, Lucy Marks, had reason to suspect foul play when her son's trunks were not returned to her with all personal effects—especially money, weapons, and other valuables Lewis was known to possess. Later still, an unsubstantiated story (which has since been disproved as impossible since Pernier was already deceased and Lewis's watch was listed in the personal effects turned over to Jefferson) stated that Meriwether's sister Jane and her husband supposedly met Pernier in Mobile, Alabama, and discovered that he was wearing the late governor's watch and carrying his gun. Upon being accused, the story goes, Pernier returned these articles to the Lewis family.\textsuperscript{52}

After two centuries, some Lewis family descendants such as Howell Carr and Mary Newton Lewis steadfastly maintain that Lewis was murdered. Mary Lewis lamented that it was unfortunate that "there was no government inquiry of any kind into his death. Circumstances and events, some at the time of his death and others uncovered over the years, seem (at least to me) to substantiate that it was murder; however, the issue has never been irrevocably resolved."\textsuperscript{53} Another relative, William Anderson, has been a vocal supporter of exhumation to help put the troubling matter to rest.

William Clark's optimism that Lewis would resolve matters in Washington and "return with flying Colours" does offset some of the trepidation he felt about his friend. In the same letter that Clark declared his fear that the weight of Lewis's mind had overcome him, he also expressed hope it was not so, saying, "I fear this report has too much truth, tho' hope it may have no foundation."\textsuperscript{54} The entry on Lewis in a recent reference work alludes to this same conclusion, saying, "Family tradition holds that in his later years Clark became convinced that Lewis had not committed suicide after all, but had been murdered on the Natchez Trace."\textsuperscript{55}

The murder theory gained additional momentum in the mid-nineteenth century when William Clark's eldest son, Meriwether Lewis Clark, sought to remove the perceived stigma attached to his namesake. Meriwether Lewis Clark wrote to a Reverend James Cressey of Maury County, Tennessee, "Have you heard of the report that Governor Lewis did not destroy his own life, but was murdered by his servant, a Frenchman, who stole his money and horses and returned to Natchez and was never afterwards heard of? This is an important matter in connection with the erection of a monument to his memory, as it clearly removes from my mind, at least, the only stigma upon the fair name I have the honor to bear."\textsuperscript{56} It must be remembered that Jefferson had a long talk with William Clark about Lewis's death after Clark arrived in the East. It may be that Jefferson told Clark not to pursue the issue any further and counseled him to focus on the task of getting the journals published. This may be a clue as to why some in the Clark family questioned how Lewis died and were willing to voice those concerns shortly after their father's death in 1838.\textsuperscript{57}

Note that Clark's son's neutral letter only presented a question, "Have you heard of the report?" and does not give proper support either way. The letter did arrive, however, about the same time the legislature of Tennessee approved spending five hundred dollars to build a fitting monument to Lewis's memory—a white granite shaft, broken at the top to indicate that Lewis died prematurely, with an inscription noting that Lewis's remains were buried at the spot. Moreover, the Meriwether Lewis Monument Committee also noted that while "the impression has long prevailed that under the influence of disease of body and mind... Governor Lewis perished by his own hands," it seemed "more probable that he died by the hands of an assassin."\textsuperscript{58} No additional evidence was provided, other than the tradition that the coroner's jury found no powder burns on Lewis's body or clothes and concluded that Lewis had been shot from behind. Another tradition said Lewis had been shot from behind and left for dead in a ditch before a mail rider passing over the trace discovered the body. This news, along with other local traditions and whatever evidence was presented them, convinced the majority of the committee members that Lewis was murdered.

The strong local tradition that foul play was involved was partially substantiated by another witness who had also come forth, a woman named Polly Spencer. Spencer claimed to have been a hired girl washing the dishes the night Lewis came to Grinder's Stand. That night she heard three shots, not two. Moreover, she said that Mr. Grinder, whose wife had reported his absence in two of her accounts, actually was there and fled the scene. Accordingly, Mr. Grinder apparently was arrested and stood trial for the murder but was acquitted because of a lack of evidence.\textsuperscript{59} These findings by Tennessee lawyer James D. Park came from Christina Anthony, a woman who had heard it from Spencer forty years previous while boarding with the Spencer family. In other words, it was hearsay evidence twice removed and more than half a century old.
Park presented another interview with a former innkeeper in Lewis County, Christina Ambrey, that appeared in the *Nashville American*. Ambrey also cast suspicion upon Robert Grind, recalling that soon after Lewis’s death, Grind “bought a number of slaves and a farm, and seemed to have plenty of money. Before this he had always been quite poor.” Despite the apparent problems with the Anthony and Ambrey accounts, Park concluded that for many Tennesseans, “It has always been the firm belief of the people of this region that Governor Lewis was murdered and robbed. The oldest citizens now living remember the rumor current at the time as to the murder, and it seems that no thought of suicide ever obtained footing here.”

In 1893 ornithologist and historian Elliott Coues agreed, and made the first significant effort to set Lewis free from the stigma of suicide. In his *History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark*, Coues thought Jefferson’s 1813 statement on Lewis’s death was flawed by both time and distance from the event. Coues apparently based his assertion that Lewis may have been murdered on the many inconsistencies found in another version of Mrs. Grind’s testimony, recorded by ornithologist Alexander Wilson and conveyed in an 1811 letter to his friend Alexander Lawson. This letter had been overlooked by historians. After comparing Priscilla Grind’s initial account and her subsequent story, Coues concluded that her testimony was unbelievable and that she was either a passive or active participant in a plot to murder Lewis. Her account, as recorded by Wilson, suggested that Lewis’s muttering had kept her up all night and that after the shots were fired, she did nothing for two hours before sending the children to the barn to rouse the servants, who apparently had not been awakened by gunfire in the still of the night. For two hours Lewis supposedly implored them to give him water and help heal his wounds, then offered to pay them money to blow his brains out, to which the heartless onlookers responded by doing nothing.

Once Coues had opened Pandora’s box, others continued to assert that they found the murder scenario at least a possibility. A partial listing includes John Bakeless, David Chandler, E. G. Chinnard, Jonathan Daniels, Bernard DeVoto, Richard Dillon, Vardis Fisher, Ruth Colter-Frick, John Guice, James Sturges, Reuben Thwaites, Olin Wheeler, the Tennessee monument committee of 1848, and the coroner’s jury of 1996. Other authors and historians also refused to accept the notion that Lewis would have the disposition or inclination to kill himself. Look at his reasons to live: He had several close friends, army acquaintances, and fellow Masons; he wanted to sell his family’s Virginia holdings and move his mother closer to where he could care for her; there were business opportunities in St. Louis in the fur trade and land investments; and he had successfully brought a newspaper to St. Louis and printed the laws of the territory. Even if he was not reappointed territorial governor, he likely could have received an army commission at a western post.

Ruth Colter-Frick and Grace Lewis Miller have both demonstrated that while Lewis had personal debts of about $2,750, with protested bills of about $1,958 on top of that, his land and personal assets were worth approximately $2,343. With the additional 1,600-acre land grant from Congress worth almost two dollars an acre and with his family’s Virginia holdings, Lewis was land-rich and cash-poor but could have weathered the financial storm, even if he had to eventually pay all of the protested drafts. Before traveling east, Lewis had named fellow Virginians Clark, Alexander Stuart, and William Carr as executors of his estate should anything happen. While stopped at New Madrid on 11 September 1809, Lewis wrote his will. He also wrote a letter to Clark that is now missing but that caused Clark to worry about his friend’s mental condition. The next week, while Lewis was detained at Fort Pickering, he wrote a second will, perhaps as a portent to the precipitous collapse that lay in his immediate future. Writing a will before leaving on a long journey should not be considered a suicide note but rather a responsible act by a dutiful son naming his mother as the beneficiary of his property in the event of his unforeseen death. Lewis also wrote letters to Amos Stoddard and James Madison; these letters do not indicate his troubled mental state but actually show a sense of caution in protecting his life and property so that his valuable papers would not fall into the hands of the British.

The Natchez Trace was a dangerous place, and Lewis was well armed and prepared for possible trouble. Even Alexander Wilson, when traveling to Grind’s Stand a few years later to find out firsthand about his friend, was armed to the teeth. The Natchez Trace was definitely frequented by highwaymen who made the passage along what one author referred to as the “Devil’s Backbone” a dangerous and, for some, a deadly journey. A recent guidebook alluded to a Natchez Trace Parkway exhibit that reads: “This early interstate road building venture produced a snake-infected, mosquito beset, robber-haunted, Indian-pested forest path. Lamented by the pious, cursed by the impious, it tried everyone’s strength and patience.” Historian John Guice has
added that not only was there "more than a trace of violence on that pathway to empire. The road was damned full of it."66

The final witnesses for the defense gave testimony in June 1996 at the National Guard armory in Hohenwald, Tennessee, about a dozen miles west of Grinder's Stand. A seven-member coroner's jury and two Tennessee district attorneys general heard the testimony of fourteen witnesses, including historians, pathologists, psychiatrists, firearms experts, document examiners, and other forensic scientists. After hearing two days of testimony from James Starrs, Arlen Large, John Guice, Ruth Colter-Frick, George Stephens, Thomas Streed, Jerry Thomas Francisco, Gerald Richards, Martin Pockler, Lucian Haag, Duayne Dillon, Reimert Ravenholt, and William Bass, the coroner's jury unanimously recommended that an on-site exhumation of Lewis's body was necessary to provide closure in this matter.67

Richard Dillon, author of the first full biography of Lewis, believed Lewis was murdered, likely through political intrigue, robbery, or foul play. "If there is such a person as the anti-suicide type, it was Meriwether Lewis. By temperament, he was a fighter, not a quitter."68 The last paragraph of Dillon's book will serve as the defense's closing statement: "In a democracy such as ours—to which Meriwether Lewis was so strongly dedicated—it is held in the courts of justice that a man is presumed innocent of crime until proven guilty. Meriwether Lewis has not been proven guilty of self-destruction at Grinder's Stand in the early hours of October 11, 1809. Therefore, let him be found NOT GUILTY of the charge—the crime of suicide."69

Lewis's actions during the final weeks of his life indicate he was interested in living and had his wits about him. He still had concern for his health, his possessions, and his future. He had an interest in settling his accounts, clearing his name, and returning to St. Louis. No doubt Lewis suffered from malaria and perhaps even from his own futile attempts to self-treat it. Yet no previous suicide attempts can be substantiated, using multiple weapons in suicide is extremely rare, and he left no suicide note. After showing numerous plausible motives, from political conspiracies and assassination to random acts of violence and robbery; after producing a long list of probable suspects (with Neely and the Grinders at the top); and after demonstrating that all of the contemporary evidence seemingly supporting suicide fails to hold up under scrutiny and is based on secondhand accounts and hearsay evidence emanating from some of the primary suspects, the defense rests.

As the trial concludes, one must remember who has the greater burden of proof. Since the suicide position is so widely held, the prosecutors are obligated to prove beyond a reasonable doubt that Lewis committed suicide. This creates an inequality in this particular case because the defense has only to raise doubts, which they can readily do, even though many may see their evidence and arguments as rather weak.70 While almost everyone concedes that the written record (if taken at face value) supports the suicide theory, primary support or direct evidence is lacking and there seem to be enough inconsistencies, contradictions, and unexplained phenomena to raise a reasonable doubt that Lewis took his own life. Yet, despite the motives, suspects, and rumors, not one murder theorist can definitively prove murder. Moreover, murder theories can only do damage to the suicide theory one at a time. They do not accumulate. In fact, until one strong murder theory is presented, the contradictory theories do as much damage to each other as they do to the suicide theory. No evidence of Jefferson's or Wilkinson's involvement in a conspiracy has been elevated beyond rumor or suspicion. Lewis's close friends—Clark, Jefferson, Wilson, and others—were convinced it was a suicide. It seems too easy, however, to simply say Priscilla Grinder, James Neely, Gilbert Russell, and everyone else lied about the events of that fateful night.

In other words, there is a good deal of evidence for suicide and not much for murder. And without a body (which may or may not even exist in a condition to recover), murder theory proponents can only raise doubts by presenting a long list of suspicions, motives, and probable suspects and dispute or try to disprove the documentary evidence supporting suicide.

Phelps's conclusion in 1956 that "[i]n the absence of direct and pertinent contemporary evidence to the contrary, of which not a scintilla exists, the verdict of suicide must stand," however, cannot be definitive.71 The American justice system is based upon the presumption of innocence until proven otherwise. Unfortunately, what has too often occurred, as E. G. Chuinard once noted, is that the so-called evidence presented is actually opinion and supposition, all too often leaving "historians quibbling over poor testimony."72 Nels Sanddal, president and CEO of the Critical Illness and Trauma Foundation in Bozeman, Montana, has recently concluded that "as suicidologists, we somehow feel cheated if we cannot sway the determination of death to reflect our area of academic and personal curiosity. In some cases there simply isn't
enough evidence. This is particularly true when the evidence is 200 years old, clouded by interpretation, and fictionalized to some unknown degree.” He continued, “There are many trained historians, as well as Lewis and Clark scholars, who have pondered the manner of Lewis’ death for decades. There simply is no consensus. There is no preponderance of proof to conclude that the death was either suicide, or conversely, murder. The death is, indeed, equivocal.”

James Holmberg and John Guice have ably addressed here the issues surrounding this important historical controversy that will likely continue to gain supporters on both sides. When numerous well-trained scholars can reach absolutely opposite opinions after consulting the same oral and written evidence, readers may do well to reconsider the factors that helped to determine their opinions and not be too hasty at reaching their own conclusions. Perhaps the National Park Services’s brochure on the Natchez Trace Parkway is as close to the middle ground as anyone can come: Meriwether Lewis “died of gunshot wounds . . . under mysterious circumstances.”

During the Corps of Discovery’s return journey from the Pacific through the summer of 1806, Lewis wanted to establish the exact location of the headwaters of the Marias River. While Clark exited Traveler’s Rest to explore the Yellowstone River, Lewis and nine men crossed over Lewis and Clark Pass. Lewis left six of them to travel down the Missouri and pick up the supplies left at the portage caches made at the Great Falls. Meanwhile, he, George Drouillard, and Joseph and Reuben Field headed north to determine the true course of the Marias River. To his chagrin, Lewis discovered the Marias did not reach the 50th parallel. He stopped that night to rest at a place he named to express his mood, Camp Disappointment. After a deadly confrontation with Blackfeet on a tributary of the Marias a few days later, Lewis’s party rode hard to be reunited with some of their men coming down the Missouri near the confluence of those two rivers that had posed such a mystery the previous year. Twice Lewis had been willing to search for additional, irreproachable information regarding the Marias River. First, he had redoubled his efforts to find those five glorious waterfalls that signaled to the Corps of Discovery that they had made the right choice of the true Missouri on the outbound trip. And second, he approached the Marias from another direction during the return journey. Anyone faced with understanding Lewis’s death would be well served to follow his example. Like the members of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, they can take the first step by accepting the notion that either scenario is possible.

The jurors have heard the arguments addressing the uncertainty and historical controversy surrounding Meriwether Lewis’s death. Their deliberation should take into consideration the comparative value of contemporary textual evidence that indicates one thing versus oral sources collected postmortem that indicate another. There is an absence of incontrovertible eyewitness proof. In addition, they should remember that most of the evidence is based on emotional responses, hearsay accounts, and information that is sometimes doubtful and occasionally incomplete or incorrect. Moreover, there are no surviving physical objects that can prove conclusively one way or the other. Without the additional physical evidence an exhumation of Lewis’s body might provide, historians, scientists, physicians, and others will continue wondering, theorizing, and, undoubtedly, arguing whether his death was accidental or occurred by homicide or by suicide. As a juror you have heard both sides of the case. Deliberate carefully. The solution to one of American history’s most interesting mysteries hangs on your verdict.

Notes

3. Ibid., 4:271.
4. Ibid., 4:286.
6. Missouri Fur Company clerk John C. Luttig recorded an entry on Sunday, 20 December 1812, that “this Evening the Wife of Charbonneau a Snake Squaw, died of a putrid fever she was a good and the best Women in the fort, aged abt 25 years she left a fine infant girl.” Drumm, Journal, 106. William Clark cited Sacagawea as dead in his 1825–1828 list. Jackson, Letters, 2:638. See also Morris, Fate of the Corps.
7. Ella Clark and Edmonds, Sacagawea.
10. I thank William Swagerty for pointing out these and other examples of exhumations of historical figures that have yielded conclusive results through forensic science. Personal communication, 21 March 2005.
12. Coroner’s Inquest.
lifeless remains, and when they were deposited in the earth no gentle means could draw him from the spot of interment. He refused to take every kind of food, which was offered him, and actually pined away and died with grief upon his master's grave!” Holmberg, “Seaman's Fate,” 8.

36. Very few scholars have addressed the possible connections between Freemasonry and Lewis's death. Quite a few acquaintances of Lewis's belonged to the fraternity, including some possibly connected with his demise, such as Frederick Bates, Aaron Burr, James Wilkinson, and, believe it or not, Robert Grinder. It is likely, though it has never been verified, that his mentor Thomas Jefferson himself was a Mason, being affiliated with the Neuf Soeurs Lodge in Paris. It is known with certainty that Jefferson's nephews Peter and Samuel Carr were members of the Virginia brotherhood.

Lewis had received his Masonic degrees in Virginia in 1797, being initiated into the Door to Virtue Lodge No. 44 of Albemarle County and affiliated with the Widow's Son Lodge No. 60 in Charlottesville. Following his appointment as governor of Louisiana Territory, Lewis applied for a dispensation to the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania for formation of a new St. Louis Lodge No. 111. When the new lodge was chartered on 8 November 1808, Meriwether Lewis was named its first Master of the Lodge. He served his term as master and shortly thereafter left for Washington, D.C. It was during this journey that he died on the Natchez Trace. On 18 September 1809, shortly after Lewis left St. Louis, William Clark earned his Master Mason's degree.

Freemasonry is full of allegory and symbolic meanings. Lewis had passed through the first degree, the Fellow Craft's degree, and the Master Mason's degree. These three degrees symbolize, among other things, the passage from youth to manhood and thence the sufferings and trials that culminate in death. Lewis would have been thoroughly familiar with the legend of Hiram Abif, the master architect of Solomon's temple. Even if legend, Abif's life has eerie parallels with Lewis's. Both were sons of widowed mothers. King Solomon trusted Abif with erecting a temple. President Jefferson trusted Lewis with building the American republic in upper Louisiana. Abif is said to have been killed when he refused to reveal Masonic secrets to three men involved in a conspiracy against him. Lewis may have been killed as part of a plot to protect the reputations of persons connected to the Burr conspiracy who felt threatened by information Lewis must have learned while serving as Wilkinson's successor. One of Priscilla Grinder's accounts of Lewis's death mentions three strangers who rode up to the inn that fateful night and had a passionate discussion with him before they left, opening the possibility that they, or others, returned and killed him. After his death, Abif was hastily buried in a shallow grave before his friends exhumed his body and properly reinterred it near the temple, marking the spot with a broken column to symbolize his untimely death. Lewis's body was hastily buried in a shallow grave. The three executors of his will, William Clark, Alexander Stuart, and William Carr, were
Lewis's Masonic brethren and most intimate friends, and it is curious that they, or someone else, did not recover his body and insist he be given the burial rites to which all Master Masons are entitled. Like Abil's monument, a broken pillar marked the spot of Lewis's tragic death. Finally, Elidon Chuinard noted that a member of the Grand Lodge in Helena, Montana, has claimed that his Masonic apron was in Lewis's pocket at the time of his death and that "the mysterious stains" on the apron were indeed human blood, though additional tests would have to be done to determine whether they are Lewis's blood.

In regard to Meriwether Lewis's connections to Freemasonry, see Baumer, "Masonic Apron," 54-59; Case, Fifty . . . Military Freemasons, 27-28; Chandler, Jefferson Conspiracies, 347n3; Chuinard, "Masonic Apron," 16-17; Denslow, Territorial Masonry, 170-95; and Adrienne Price Green, Grand Lodge of Missouri, personal communication, 25 August 2005.

37. See, for instance, Chuinard, "How Did Meriwether Lewis Die?" parts 1-3; Morris, Fate of the Corps, 203-209.


41. Smith and Bustis correspondence, quoted in Dillon, Meriwether Lewis (1965), 347.

42. Jackson, Letters, 2:467.


44. Carlson, Seduced by the West, 180; Jackson, Letters, 2:470-72.

45. Fisher, Suicide or Murder? 281.


47. Charles Wilson, Meriwether Lewis, 281. Wilson gave the tavern owner's name as John, not Robert, and the citation he provided, which cannot be verified, read, "Statusus, Commonwealth of Tennessee, vol. 123, pp. 1174-78."


49. Fausz and Gavin, "Death of Meriwether Lewis," 75. See also Merril, Jefferson's Nephews.

50. Fausz and Gavin, "Death of Meriwether Lewis," 74.

51. Chandler, Jefferson Conspiracies. Several mystery novels have also presented some creative interpretations of Lewis's death. See Hays, Meriwether Lewis Mystery, and Shuman, Meriwether Murder.

52. Kennerly and Russell, Persimmon Hill, 26. Note that this source contains numerous errors in addition to much credible material.


54. Holmberg, Dear Brother, 216-18.

1. Journal entry of Meriwether Lewis, 18 August 1805.

Suicide proponents cite this thirty-first birthday entry as evidence of depression, while others view it as an eloquent statement of ideals and plans for the future.
There is disagreement over whether this letter is credible evidence of Lewis's mental deterioration.

2. Meriwether Lewis to President James Madison, Chickasaw Bluffs, 16 September 1809.
3. Meriwether Lewis to Major Amos Stoddard, Chickasaw Bluffs, 22 September 1809 (page 1).

Lewis requests that Stoddard send Lewis’s money to Washington, D.C., and informs his friend of plans to return to St. Louis after rectifying affairs.

Nashville, Tennessee, 18th Ocr. 1809

Sir,

It is with extreme pain that I have to inform you of the death of His Excellency, Meriwether Lewis, Governor of upper Louisiana who died on the morning of the 11th Instant and I am sorry to say by suicide.

I arrived at the Chickasaw Bluffs on or about the 18th of September, where I found the Governor (who had reached there two days before me from St. Louis) in very bad health. It appears that his first intention was to go around by water to the City of Washington; but his thinking a war with England probable, & that his valuable papers might be in danger of falling into the hands of the British, he was thereby induced to change his route, and to come through the Chickasaw nation by land; I furnished him with a horse to pack his trunks &c. on, and a man to attend to them; having recovered his health in some degree at the Chickasaw Bluffs, we set out together and on our arrival at the Chickasaw nation I discovered that he appeared at times deranged in mind, we rested there two days & came on, one days journey after crossing Tennessee River & where we encamped we lost two of our horses, I remained behind to hunt them & the Governor proceeded on, with a promise to wait for me at the first houses he came to that was inhabited by white people; he reached the house of a Mr. Grinder about sun set, the man of the house being from home, and no person there but a woman who discovering the governor to be deranged gave him up the house & slept herself in one near it. his servant and mine slept in the stable loft some distance from the other houses, the woman reports that about three o'clock she heard two pistols fire off in the Governors Room. the servants being awakend by her, came in but too late to save him. he had shot himself in the head with one pistol & a little below the Breast with the other. when his servant came in he says; I have done the business my good servant give me some water. he gave him water, he survived but a short time, I came up some time after, & had him as decently Buried as I could in that place. if there is any thing wished by his friends to be done to his grave I will attend to their Instructions.

I have got in my possession his two trunks of papers (amongst which is said to be his travels to the pacific ocean) and probably some Vouchers for expenditures of Public money for a Bill which he said had been protested by the Secy. Of War, and of which act to his death, he repeatedly complained. I have also in my care his Rifle, Silver watch, Brace of Pistols, dirk & tomahawk: one of the Governors horses was lost in the wilderness which I will endeavour to regain, the other I have sent on by his servant who expressed a desire to go to the governors mothers & to montic[e]ilo: I have furnished him with fifteen Dollars to Defray his expenses to charlottesville; Some days previous to the Governors death he requested of me in case any accident happened to him, to send his trunks with the papers therein to the President, but I think it very probable he meant to you. I wish to be informed what arrangements may be considered best in sending on his trunks &c. I have the honor to be with Great respect Yr. Ob. Sert.

James Neely
U. S. agent to the Chickasaw nation the Governor left two of his trunks at the Chickasaw Bluffs in the care of Capt. Gilbert C. Russell, commanding officer, & was to write to him from Nashville what to do with them.

5. William Clark to Jonathan Clark, Mr. Shannons, Shelby County, Kentucky, 28 October 1809.

*In this letter Clark expresses his dismay regarding the reported suicide of Lewis and his belief that his partner in discovery might have taken his own life.*
6. William Clark to Jonathan Clark, Bean Station, Tennessee, 8 November 1809.

Clark's letter relates his hope to learn more about Lewis's death and confesses that the death was a "terrible Stroke to me."
7. William Clark to Jonathan Clark, Colonel Hancocks, 26 November 1809.

As he learns more concerning Lewis’s death, Clark reports it to his brother Jonathan. In this letter he reveals important news he has received from Gilbert Russell and John Pernier.


Wilson devotes part of his letter to an account of his visit to Grinder’s Stand and Lewis’s death as recounted by Priscilla Grinder.

Next morning (Sunday) I rode six miles to a man’s of the name of Grinder, where our poor friend Lewis perished. In the same room where he expired, I took down from Mrs. Grinder the particulars of that melancholy event, which affected me extremely. This house or cabin is seventy-two miles from Nashville, and is the last white man’s as you enter the Indian country. Governor Lewis, she said, came there about sunset, alone, and inquired if he could stay for the night; and, alighting, brought his saddle into the house. He was dressed in a loose gown, white, striped with blue. On being asked if he came alone, he replied that there were two servants behind, who would soon be up. He called for some spirits, and drank a very little. When the servants arrived, one of whom was a negro, he inquired for his powder, saying he was sure he had some powder in a cannister. The servant gave no distinct reply, and Lewis, in the mean while, walked backwards and forwards before the door, talking to himself. Sometimes, she said, he would seem as if he was walking up to her; and would suddenly wheel round, and walk back as fast as he could. Supper being ready he sat down, but had not eat but a few mouthfuls, when he started up, speaking to himself in a violent manner. At these times, she says, she observed his face to flush as if it had come on him in a fit. He lighted his pipe, and drawing a chair to the door sat down, saying to Mrs. Grinder, in a kind tone of voice, “Madam this is a very pleasant evening.” He smoked for some time, but quitted his seat and traversed the yard as before. He again sat down to his pipe, seemed again composed, and casting his eyes wishfully towards the west, observed what a sweet evening it was. Mrs. Grinder was preparing a bed for him; but he said he would sleep on the floor, and desired the servant to bring the bear skins and buffalo robe, which were immediately spread out for him; and it being now dusk the woman went off to the kitchen, and the two men to the barn, which stands about two hundred yards off. The kitchen is only a few paces from the room where Lewis was, and the woman being considerably alarmed by the behaviour of her guest could not sleep, but listened to his walking backwards and
forwards, she thinks, for several hours, and talking aloud, as she said, "like a lawyer." She then heard the report of a pistol, and something fall heavily on the floor, and the words "O Lord!" Immediately afterwards she heard another pistol, and in a few minutes she heard him at her door calling out "O madam! give me some water, and heal my wounds." The logs being open, and unplastered, she saw him stagger back and fall against a stump that stands between the kitchen and the room. He crawled for some distance, raised himself by the side of a tree, where he sat about a minute. He once more got to the room; afterwards he came to the kitchen door, but did not speak; she then heard him scraping the bucket with a gourd for water; but it appears that this cooling element was denied the dying man! As soon as day broke and not before, the terror of the woman having permitted him to remain for two hours in this most deplorable situation, she sent two of her children to the barn, her husband not being home, to bring the servants; and on going in they found him lying on the bed; he uncovered his side and showed them where the bullet had entered; a piece of the forehead was blown off, and had exposed the brains, without having bled much. He begged they would take his rifle and blow out his brains, and he would give them all the money he had in his trunk. He often said, "I am no coward; but I am so strong, so hard to die." He begged the servant not to be afraid of him, for that he would not hurt him. He expired in about two hours, or just as the sun rose above the trees. He lies buried close by the common path, with a few loose rails thrown over his grave. I gave Grinder money to put a post fence around it, to shelter it from the hogs, and from the wolves; and he gave me his written promise he would do it. I left this place in a very melancholy mood, which was not much allayed by the prospect of the gloomy and savage wilderness which I was just entering alone.


Governor Lewis left St. Louis late in August, or early in September 1809, intending to go by the route of the Mississippi and the Ocean, to the City of Washington, taking with him all the papers relative to his expedition to the Pacific Ocean, for the purpose of preparing and putting them to the press, and to have some drafts paid which had been drawn by him on the Government and protested. On the morning of the 15th of September, the Boat in which he was a passenger landed him at Fort Pickering in a state of mental derangement, which appeared to have been produced as much by indisposition as other causes. The Subscriber being then the Commanding Officer of the Fort on discovering his situation, and learning from the Crew that he had made two attempts to Kill himself, in one of which he had nearly succeeded, resolved at once to take possession of him and his papers, and detain them there until he recovered, or some friend might arrive in whose hands he could depart in Safety.

In this condition he continued without any material change for about five days, during which time the most proper and efficacious means that could be devised to restore him was administered, and on the sixth or Seventh day all symptoms of derangement disappeared and he was completely in his senses and thus continued for ten or twelve days. On the 29th of the same month he left Bluffs, with the Chickasaw agent the interpreter and some of the Chiefs, intending then to proceed the usual route thro' the Indian Country, Tennessee and Virginia to his place of destination, with his papers well secured and packed on horses. By much severe depletion during his illness he had been considerably reduced and debilitated, from which he had not entirely recovered when he set off, and the weather in that Country being yet excessively hot and the exercise of traveling too Severe for him; in three or four days he was again affected with the same mental disease. He had no person with him who could manage or control him in his propensities and he daily grew worse until he arrived at the house of a Mr. Grinder within the Jurisdiction of Tennessee and only Seventy miles from Nashville, where in the apprehension of being destroyed by enemies which had no existence but in his wild imagination, he destroyed himself, in the most Cool desparate and Barbarian-like manner, having been left in the house entirely to himself. The night preceding this one of his Horses and one of the Chickasaw agents with whom he was traveling Strayed off from the
Camp and in the morning could not be found.

The agent with some Indians Stayed to Search for the horses, and Governor Lewis with their two Servants and the baggage horses proceeded to Mr. Grinders where he was to halt untill the agent got up.

after he arrived there and refreshed himself with a little meal & drink he went to bed in a cabin by himself and ordered the Servants to go to the Stables and take care of the Horses, least they might loose some that night;

Some time in the night he got his pistols which he loaded, after every body had retired in Seperate Building and discharged one against his forehead without much effect—the ball not penetrating the Skull but only making a furrow over it. He then discharged the other against his breast where the ball entered and passing downward thro' his body came out low down near his back bone. after Some time he got up and went to the house where Mrs. Grinder and her children were lying and asked for water, but her husband being absent and having heard the report of the pistols She was greatly allarmed and made him no answer. He then in returning got his razors from a port folio which happened to contain them and setting up in his bed was found about day light, by one of the Servants, buisly engaged in cutting himself from head to foot. He again beged for water, which was given him and so soon as he drank, he lay down and died with the declaration to the Boy that he had Killed himself to deprive his enemies of the pleasure and honor of doing it. His death was greatly leamented. And that a fame so dearly earned as his Should finally be Clouded by Such an act of desperation was to his friends Still greater Cause of regret.

(Signed) Gilbert Russell

The above was received by me from Major Gilbert Russell of the [blank] Regiment of Infantry U. S. on Tuesday the 26th of November 1811 at Fredericktown in Maryland.

J. Williams

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