Brigham Young University

From the SelectedWorks of Jay H. Buckley

February, 2001

“The Price of Used Paper: How a Treasure Trove of William Clark Documents Was Rescued From the Scrap Heap.”

Jay H. Buckley, Brigham Young University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/jayhbuckley/8/
Contents

Letters: Russell's view of Ross's Hole; L&C apocrypha  2

From the Directors: Down the years with WPO  3

Bicentennial Report: New HQ and initiatives  4

Trail Notes: Updates on Pompey's Pillar, Missouri Breaks  6

The Price of Used Paper  7
How luck and initiative rescued a treasure trove of William Clark documents
By Jay H. Buckley

For Whom the Guns Sounded  10
Sergeant Floyd's funeral revisited
By Robert A. Hunt

Reconstructing Charles Floyd  16
Putting new flesh on old bones
By V. Stude Hindman

Forensic Conservation and Lewis and Clark  20
An "inside look" at instruments that may or may not have traveled on the expedition
By Carolyn Gilman

A "New" Portrait of Patrick Gass  26
Its owner recalls his grandmother's recollections of the last living member of the Corps of Discovery
By J. L. Merritt

Reviews  33
1814 map; The Only True America; The Lewis & Clark Cookbook; Bicycle Guide to the Lewis and Clark Trail; CD's from Makoché; plus Sacagawea novels, birds, Council Bluffs, and Mother Lucy

Soundings  40
Pomp's bier was a bar
By Joseph Musulman

On the cover
On a hill overlooking the Missouri River on May 26, 1805, Meriwether Lewis gazes for the first time on the Rocky Mountains. The painting, by Olaf Seltzer, shows the captain holding a telescope. A telescope and a pocket watch owned by Lewis were recently examined by forensic experts to determine whether he carried them on the expedition. Our story about the investigation and its results begins on page 20. Seltzer's painting is reproduced courtesy of the Gilcrease Museum, of Tulsa, Oklahoma.
The Price of Used Paper

How a treasure trove of William Clark documents was rescued from the scrap heap

by Jay H. Buckley

In 1953, some of William Clark’s expedition field notes from 1803 to 1805 were found among the possessions of General John H. Hammond in an old roll-top desk in an attic in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Minnesota Historical Society acquired the field notes. A lengthy court battle involving the National Archives over the rightful ownership of the Clark notes ensued. After the court ruled in favor of General Hammond’s grandson, the Clark material was sold to Yale University. Since Ernest S. Osgood had already been working on transcribing the notes while they were at the Minnesota Historical Society, he was given the task of editing the papers. In 1964, he published The Field Notes of Captain William Clark, 1803-1805. Osgood later described the field notes—far and away the most significant find among the many letters, ledgers, and notebooks among Hammond’s possessions—as “an ingot of gold in a bale of hay.”

Other discoveries followed. Donald Jackson added valuable insights in bringing forward new unpublished Lewis and Clark material with his magisterial collection, Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854, first published in 1962. This publication included 33 letters and documents written by Clark, many of them donated to the Missouri Historical Society by Clark descendants Julia Clark Voorhis and her daughter Eleanor Glasgow Voorhis. In 1988, 51 original letters written by Clark to his brother Jonathan were discovered in an attic in Louisville, Kentucky, and are now in the archives of The Filson Club Historical Society there.

How many additional “missing” pieces of American history await “discovery” in some attic or basement? Unfortunately, numerous historical documents have been lost forever through fire and water damage or discarded by persons unacquainted with their value. And some, doubtless, were sent to paper mills and unceremoniously pulped. Such was almost the fate of many of the records kept by William Clark during his years as the federal government’s officer in charge of Indian affairs west of the Mississippi.

Clark’s superintendency records

In 1833, 29 handwritten volumes of St. Louis Superintendency records, mainly correspondence and account books kept by Clark and his agents between 1813 and 1838, were rescued and deposited in the Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS), in Topeka. Although the books show evidence of wear, the heavy sheepskin-over-board-backing covers have protected the writing on the high-quality rag content paper. These important historical sources contain valuable primary information, for example, on Indian villages, treaties, land surveys, Indian agents and traders, white and Indian depredations, and steamboat transportation.

The collection, certainly one of the KSHS’s most valuable, was acquired for a pittance—$33, the price they would have brought as scrap had their owner at the time carried through on his plan to sell them to a paper mill.

The story of how these records were rescued from oblivion and ended up in Topeka begins in St. Louis, where Clark lived and worked for the last 30 years of his life. Following the Corps of Discovery’s return, in 1806, President Thomas Jefferson appointed Lewis the governor of Louisiana Territory and made Clark the principal Indian agent west of the Mississippi. In 1813, with the creation of the Missouri Territory, President James Madison appointed Clark territorial governor and ex-officio super-
intendant of Indian affairs. He served in this dual capacity until Missouri became a state, in 1820. In Missouri's first gubernatorial elections, Clark was defeated by Alexander McNair.

Congress, however, created a special position for Clark as superintendent of Indian affairs, a position he held from 1822 until his death, in 1838. From his headquarters, in St. Louis, Clark oversaw all aspects of Indian affairs for tribes along the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. He served as a commissioner for more federal treaties with Indian nations than any other person. In addition to supervising numerous agents and fulfilling treaty obligations with tribes, he assisted eastern Indians forced by the government to relocate to the West. He issued licenses to fur traders, sent surveyors to plot tribal boundaries, and tried to keep white settlers out of Indian lands. Tribes mentioned in his superintendency correspondence include Delawares, Peorias, Kaskaskias, Weas, Piankashaws, Sacs, Foxes, Shawnees, Ottawas, Kickapoos, Chippewas, Kansas, and Osages.7

In addition to materials pertaining to Clark's superintendency between 1813 and 1838, other portions of the collection reflect on Clark's involvement in the Missouri Fur Company in 1812-13 and 1817. One can find here references to such principals in “La Compagnie des Fourures du Missouri” as Silvestre Labbadie, Charles Gratiot, Pierre Menard, Manuel Lisa, Pierre Chouteau, August P. Chouteau, Andrew Henry, and Reuben Lewis. The materials also include letters and records kept by Clark's successors from 1839 to 1855: Joshua Pilcher, David D. Mitchell, Thomas H. Harvey, and Alfred Cumming.

The St. Louis Superintendency operated from 1824 to 1851. From 1822 to 1834, its jurisdiction included the agencies located on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers. In 1834, new legislation creating the Bureau of Indian Affairs expanded its jurisdiction to include all tribes west of the Rocky Mountains.8

As new territories were created, the superintendency's area of jurisdiction shrank and shifted farther west. In 1851, its name was changed to the Central Superintendency. Its headquarters moved upriver to St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1859 and to Atchison, Kansas, in 1865. During its last 11 years (1869 to 1880) the superintendency was headquartered in Lawrence, Kansas.

Indian agent John H. Hammond, among whose papers Clark's field notes were found in St. Paul, also played a role in saving Clark's superintendency records. Hammond was ordered "to examine, classify, and arrange for shipment to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs" the superintendency papers at Lawrence after the office closed, in 1880. Many records were sent in bulk to Washington, while some were taken by Hammond to St. Paul and the remainder were discarded.

At some point, the 29 volumes that were eventually placed in the Topeka archives of the Kansas State Historical Society ended up on a sidewalk outside a used bookstore in downtown Lawrence. One day in 1883 they were noticed by retired newspaper editor John Speer, a Lawrence resident and member of the KSFS. How and why they got there remains a mystery, but evidently the store's owner had no intention of selling the documents for anything but scrap. William E. Connelley, the longtime secretary of the KSFS, wrote the following account of their rescue, which was related to him by Speer and published in 1947.

A prosperous William Clark, superintendent of Indian affairs, strikes a pose in 1832 for artist George Catlin.
One day John Speer was walking down a street in Lawrence. He passed by a secondhand book store and noted a pile of leather-bound books piled on the sidewalk in front of the store. He stopped and looked at some of the books and noted what they were and realized at once their extreme value as historical documents.

He did not ask the proprietor of the store the price or make any other inquiry. He went straight to the Santa Fe railroad station, boarded a train and came to Topeka. He told Judge Adams [Franklin G. Adams, one of the first secretaries of the KSIS and in charge of acquisitions] what he had seen. The two men took the next train back to Lawrence and together walked to the secondhand store. Speer stopped a short distance away because he was fearful that the proprietor may have noticed him looking at the books earlier that day and might get the idea there was some value to them and thus put a high price on them.

Judge Adams went to the store, looked around a bit and then casually began examining these books. In an indifferent sort of way he asked the proprietor what he wanted for them. The proprietor said he hadn’t fixed any particular price but he thought he ought to get about what he would be paid if he sold the books to the paper mill. Judge Adams agreed that he thought this was a fair price and they discussed the weight of the books some more and finally the store man said he would take $33 for the entire twenty-nine volumes. Judge Adams dug that much money out of his pocket, paid the man, motioned to Speer to come up and the two carried the books to Speer’s office. There they were boxed and shipped to Topeka.

Without Speer’s timely discovery and quick action, Clark’s papers would have wound up on the scrap heap, and history would have been the poorer. Instead, they were preserved and later microfilmed, so that today they are widely available to scholars of Lewis and Clark and the American West.

Jay H. Buckley is a doctoral candidate in history at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he is finishing his dissertation, entitled “William Clark: Superintendent of Indian Affairs at St. Louis, 1813–1838.”

Notes


5 A list of contents of the collection is described in Transactions of the Kansas State Historical Society 3 (1883-1885), pp. 49-51, 125. A microfilm roll list for the William Clark Papers (MS 94-99) is available upon request through the Kansas State Historical Society, 6425 SW 6th Avenue, Topeka, KS 66615-1099; telephone 913-272-8681 or on the Internet at http://www.kshs.org.


7 The Clark papers also include correspondence and account books of Benjamin O’Fallon, George H. Kennerly, John Dougherty, Richard Graham, James Latham, Nicholas Boilvin, John F. A. Sanford, Lawrence Taliaferro, Thomas Forsyth, Felix St. Vrain, Joshua Pitcher, M. S. Davenport, Alexander McNair, John F. Hamtramck, and Paul L. Chouteau—all Indian agents—as well as other agents and sub-agents of the period.

8 The 1834 legislation defined the new limits of the superintendency as follows: “The superintendency at St. Louis will include all the Indians and Indian country west of the Mississippi River, and north of the Osage reservation, as far west as De Mun’s Creek, and thence the said superintendency will be bounded on the south by the Santa Fe road, to where it crosses the Arkansas, and thence, by the Arkansas, to its source in the Rocky Mountains. And the said superintendency shall include all the Indians and the Indian country west of the Rocky Mountains.” See Edward E. Hill, The Office of Indian Affairs, 1824-1880: Historical Sketches (New York: Clearwater Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), p. 155.

9 Boyd, pp. 159-60.

10 Kansas City Times, March 17, 1947; information gathered on a personal visit, December 1999.

11 The KSHS also has microfilm of the originals in its repository (MS 94-99). Other microfilm copies can also be accessed at the National Archives–Kansas City Branch (Mo.), the Missouri Historical Society (St. Louis), and the State Historical Society of Missouri (Columbia).

12 For their help with this article, the author wishes to thank his dissertation adviser, Gary E. Moulton, Sorensen Professor of History at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and editor of The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the staff of the Kansas State Historical Society and the Missouri Historical Society, and Linda Ratcliffe of the Center for Great Plains Studies.