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Reuben Gold Thwaites and the Historical Resurrection of Lewis and Clark

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Reuben Gold Thwaites and the Historical Resurrection of Lewis & Clark

By Matt Blessing

"It is a peculiarly noble work to rescue from oblivion those who deserve immortality."
—Pliny the Younger

Tribute to Reuben G. Thwaites, in The Wisconsin State Journal

Reuben Gold Thwaites, the second director of the Wisconsin Historical Society, first came into contact with the original records of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in early 1893, ninety years after the event. While examining twenty thousand pages of historical manuscripts and three thousand books bequeathed to the Society by his predecessor, Lyman Copeland Draper, Thwaites noticed a slim, worn notebook within a stack of larger journals written by Draper. It turned out to be the original journal kept by Sergeant Charles Floyd, a member of the “Corps of Discovery.”

Thwaites probably had to brush up on the history of the expedition in order to verify that Floyd was on the journey. In 1893 most educated Americans viewed the transcontinental expedition as a romantic episode in western exploration, but what little knowledge they had of it was limited to its two captains, to the near exclusion of other members of the corps. The first official edition of Lewis and Clark’s journals, an abridged version edited and published by Nicholas Biddle in 1814, had focused on the most romantic and literary sections of the captains’ accounts. In 1893 a retired Army surgeon and respected ornithologist, Elliott Coues, (pronounced “cows”) published an annotated edition of Biddle’s earlier work. Coues’s four volumes highlighted Meriwether Lewis’s scientific contributions, while demonstrating the cartographic skills of William Clark.

Coues had also rediscovered the original journals in the vaults of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. Unexamined for decades, Coues’s “find” no doubt made
him feel that he had done enough sleuthing for original documentary sources. However, some scholars questioned why Coues had not mounted a search for the lost journals of the other participants known to have kept journals, and James Davie Butler suggested in *The Nation* in October of 1893 that “in perusing Coues’s samples, [the] appetite grows... The limited edition which Dr. Coues has now issued will soon be exhausted.” Despite these criticisms, scholars reviewed Coues’s edition favorably and many Americans were first introduced to Lewis and Clark by his book. Nonetheless, the expedition remained largely neglected in American classrooms and among general readers.

So when Reuben Gold Thwaites happened upon Floyd’s slim volume among the papers of Lyman C. Draper, even he, although an established scholar and editor, was not familiar with other individuals among the group. In fact, Thwaites’s identification of Sergeant Floyd’s journal among the Draper Papers was to set him on his own journey of discovery, which would enrich the collections of several research repositories, and ultimately enhance the general understanding of the Corps of Discovery in both Thwaites’s time and our own.

Charles Floyd, author of the journal that Thwaites saved from the dustbin of history, was born in 1782, and was one of nine young men from Kentucky on the expedition. In 1801, at the youthful age of nineteen or twenty, he was appointed the constable of Clarksville Township, Ohio, an appointment that reflects both his character and ability. Gary E. Moulton, editor of the most recent volumes of the journals, suggests that Floyd may have been a distant relative of William Clark. Merritt-wether Lewis regarded him as a “young man of much merit,” selecting him for errands into Cahokia and St. Louis while the undisciplined Corps trained at Camp Dubois along the Wood River in present-day Illinois during the winter of 1803–1804. In April of 1804, the captains promoted Floyd—along with Nathaniel Pryor and John Ordway—to the rank of sergeant.

Charles Floyd’s fifty-six-page journal lets us hear the voice of a young, semi-literate frontiersman under orders from his commanding officers to maintain such a record. The text documents the struggles of the Corps to ascend the lower Missouri River, swollen with spring runoff from the distant Rocky Mountains. Floyd’s entries typically recorded weather conditions, distances, hunting and fishing (including a haul of 709 fish caught on a single day), and the richness of the Missouri River bottomlands and surrounding prairies. When a certain Private Moses Reed deserted the expedition, Sergeant Floyd recorded details that the commanding officers ignored: “pon examining his nap-Sack we found that he had taken his Cloas and all His powder and Balles, and had hid them out that night and had made that an excuse to Desarte from us with out any Jest Case.” Floyd also helped document the party’s encounters with several tribes along the lower Missouri, who, he observed, had recently been weakened by a smallpox epidemic.

Floyd maintained his journal through August 18, when, some 950 miles north of St. Louis, he prepared his final entry. The next day William Clark recorded in his own diary on August 19, 1804, that “Floyd was taken violently bad with the Beliose Cholick and is dangerously ill.” Captain Clark and his slave, York, attended to the hardworking sergeant that evening, unknowingly hastening his death by administering a purgative and using lancets to bleed him. Floyd died shortly after noon the next day, probably the victim of a ruptured appendix. Buried in a riverside bluff near present-day Sioux City, Floyd was the...
only member of the Corps who died during the expedition.

Just how Lyman Draper acquired the journal of Charles Floyd is open to speculation. A letter to Thomas Jefferson prepared by Lewis in present-day North Dakota in the spring of 1805 suggests that Floyd's journal was sent east with a party from the expedition which descended the Missouri after wintering with the Mandan Indians. Yet although Draper corresponded with Mary Lee Walton, Floyd's sister, their letters from the 1870s contain no mention of the journal. It is possible that William Clark retained the journal, or reacquired it in the years just prior to the publication of Biddle's volumes in 1814. In any case, Lyman Draper was a great admirer of George Rogers Clark, western military hero of the American Revolution and older brother of William Clark. In the 1840s, Draper had acquired a large collection of Clark Family Papers from John Croghan, the brothers' nephew. Josephine Harper, former manuscript curator at the Historical Society, believed that the Floyd journal may have been mixed with the Croghan materials. Finally, there is a chance that Draper acquired the journal from an unknown person on one of his nine collecting trips to Border States like Kentucky and Tennessee between 1843 and 1852. Like many of his contemporaries, Draper routinely annotated documents or added notes concerning the provenance of individual items, but Sergeant Floyd's journal lacks any such evidence and it is unlikely that the provenance of the notebook will ever be determined. Considering the richness and depth of the Draper Papers, Reuben Gold Thwaites must have been frustrated by the lack of a paper trail.

Following his chosen motto, “we aim to be useful,” Thwaites quickly made Floyd's twelve-thousand-word journal available to historians. As a result, two months after the dis-
three-volume *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*. Described by historian and Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner as a collection of “the invaluable monument” of the French colonial era in North America, it remains one of the most significant historical editing projects in the nation’s history. During this project, Thwaites mentored a highly skilled team of translators, transcribers, and editorial assistants. At the same time, he completed *Chronicles of Border Warfare* (a history of settlement in the western Alleghenies that had been partially drafted by Draper) and also wrote two popular biographies of Father Marquette and Daniel Boone. As a result of all these projects, by the early years of the new century Thwaites had established his reputation as one of the nation’s preeminent historical editors.

So in 1901, with the centennial approaching and numerous cheap reprints of the journals appearing, the American Philosophical Society (who owned the originals) decided that the authentic text of the journals ought to be published once and for all. Elliot Coues, in preparing his successful 1893 edition of the official narrative, had modernized quotations, inserted a new chapter as if it were part of the 1814 book, and liberally marked up Lewis and Clark’s handwritten manuscripts. APS approached the New York publishers Dodd, Mead, and Co., who engaged Thwaites for a sum of $1500 to carry out the work in time for the centennial.

Thwaites began to work on the journals, which were on loan to the Wisconsin Historical Society from the American Philosophical Society. Each evening, Thwaites made sure to replace the red-morocco-bound journals in the Historical Society’s modern fireproof vault. Thwaites’s contract with Dodd, Mead and Company required him to produce an edition entitled *The Original Journals of Lewis and Clark*. He initially anticipated that the project would require four volumes, and that publication of all volumes would coincide with the centennial of the expedition in 1904.

Reporting to the American Historical Association after he had completed the project, Thwaites suggested that “The story of the records of the transcontinental exploration of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (1803–1806) is almost as romantic as that of the great discovery itself.” As early as 1897 Thwaites had met some of William Clark’s grandchildren. During the winter of 1901–1902 he began systematically writing letters to the descendants of the expedition, inquiring to see if any other enlisted men’s journals might have survived. Thwaites wrote to a colleague that this research required “considerable expenditure of time and money.” Indeed, in searching for these journals Thwaites had embarked on his own kind of exploration. An archivist venturing outside the walls of the archives, decades ahead of his time, Thwaites was not content to rely upon source material that had been deposited by Thomas Jefferson and...
William Clark at the American Philosophical Society. Learning from both Draper’s techniques and his own collecting work in Wisconsin, Thwaites was confident that he could unearth more important new documentary sources. He was apparently especially motivated to locate the journal of Sergeant John Ordway. Lewis and Clark indicated that Ordway had maintained a good journal, but it had long been lost to historians.

The letter-writing campaign bore fruit in early 1903, when Thwaites learned about a woman in San Francisco who had in her possession the journal of Joseph Whitehouse, the only known documentation produced by a private among the Corps. Bound in rough-tanned elk hide, the 292-page journal included annotations and several short entries by Captain Clark, and these remarks helped to document the journal-
keeping process. Throughout the journal Whitehouse confidently assigned original place-names to numerous tributaries, islands, and other features of the surrounding landscape. Unfortunately Whitehouse apparently never consulted with his officers on these matters and none of his place-names appear on Captain Clark's maps.

Joseph Whitehouse maintained his journal from the official start of the expedition on May 14, 1804, to November 6, 1805. He struggled with language—his spelling was arguably worse than Clark's—and many historians believed that the enlisted man eventually tired of keeping the daily journal. Yet in early 1966 a manuscript written in another hand was discovered in an antiquarian bookstore in Philadelphia. It appears that this “fair copy” had been lost prior to publication in the early nineteenth century. Spanning May 14, 1804, to April 2, 1806, it demonstrates Private Whitehouse’s perseverance in maintaining a journal for a full twenty-three months. Both the original journal and fair copy now reside at Chicago’s Newberry Library. Thwaites used the original, and Dodd and Mead arranged for the full text of the Whitehouse journal to be included in the expanding editorial project.

By August, 1903, Thwaites learned that his letter-writing had identified more material. Writing to Frederick Jackson Turner, who was vacationing in Maine, Thwaites spoke of “a big find of Lewis and Clark material.” What was this find? To his publisher, Thwaites explained almost matter-of-factly how his inquiries about Ordway had led to an “unexpected situation.” A century after the expedition, Mrs. Julia Voorhis of New York City still had in her possession additional journals written by William Clark, her paternal grandfather. By contacting her, Thwaites made one of the great documentary “finds” in the nation’s history. However, another version of this find surfaced recently in a doctoral dissertation by Sherri Bartlett-Brown, who describes how novelist Eva Emery Dye tracked down Clark descendants in St. Louis and New York between 1899 and 1901, and found in the possession of Julia Clark Voorhis the large cache of hitherto unknown manuscript material described by Thwaites. After Dye stopped in Madison in 1901 and informed Thwaites of what she had seen, he entered into negotiations with Voorhis, asking to include the newly discovered manuscripts in his edition. Unfortunately, in his introduction and correspondence he allowed it to appear as if he himself had unearthed these crucial materials. In 1923 Dye recollected, “I, at one time, had the credit of discovering those documents.”

Mrs. Voorhis also brought forth more than sixty maps, including a cartographic masterpiece depicting the American west that was over nine feet in length! Finally, there was important correspondence, including Meriwether Lewis’s letter to Clark of June 19, 1803, offering detailed notes on the purpose of the expedition. In another lengthy letter, Lewis offered Clark co-command of the expedition and concluded by emphasizing his deep respect and affection for him: “I should be extremely [sic] happy in your company. . . .”

Describing the discovery in an issue of Scribner’s Magazine published in mid-1904, Thwaites suggested that the “ladies themselves were as yet unaware of the full significance of their treasures.” Thwaites probably should have been more circumspect in relating this episode in a popular magazine, since negotiating the right to publish extracts from journals in the possession of the business-minded Mrs. Voorhis proved extremely arduous for him and publisher Robert Dodd. Usually unflappable, Thwaites complained to a friend that the women were “conducting a holdup game” for a large sum,
when, in his view, all the material “really belongs to the United States government.” The calm persistence of Robert Dodd, however, eventually led to the inclusion of the journals in the *Original Journals* project.

In 1904–1905, 750 eight-volume sets of *The Original Journals* were published, containing more than 2,700 pages in all and an atlas with 66 maps. Thwaites’s footnotes were sparse compared to those provided by Elliott Coues, but he included a comprehensive bibliography prepared by New York State Historian Victor Paltsits, and a detailed index as well. A limited edition set of fifteen folio-size volumes—containing artwork by Karl Bodmer completed in the 1830s—was also printed. The project received glowing reviews, and popular interest in Lewis and Clark surged. Historians and buffs quickly began referring to the project as “Thwaites.” The *Original Journals* also offered other writers a complete documentary record. Soon, scores of articles, books, novels, and historical pageants based on the journals flowed forth.

Thwaites, of course, was not solely responsible for the rise of interest in Lewis and Clark. Clearly, the national celebration of the centennial of the expedition in 1904–1906 had an impact as well. Moreover, the professionalization of the historical discipline, in addition to the rise of the biological sciences in the early twentieth century, had an important and longer-lasting effect. Also, the closing of the frontier and accompanying romanticized views about early western exploration undoubtedly contributed to the rise of Lewis and Clark. Nonetheless, just as the historian Stephen Ambrose successfully raised awareness of World War II veterans over the last decade, Thwaites did much to promote the importance of
Lewis and Clark. He not only wrote for the scholar, but also penned articles in popular magazines and lectured before diverse audiences.

Thwaites died in 1913, having served as director of the Wisconsin Historical Society for twenty-seven years. Eulogizing him, Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that the newspaperman turned historical editor-archivist had “met and conquered difficulties that proved him an editor of the very first rank. He ferreted out from their concealment missing documents necessary to complete the journals, deciphered the difficult writing . . . mastered the problem of correlating and printing several journals . . . [and] enriched them with a wealth of historical and geographical annotation . . . setting forth the development and historic significance of this epic of American transcontinental exploration.”

Archivists, historians, and editors can all learn valuable lessons from Thwaites. His important collective work demonstrates just how brief the nation’s history is, and it reminds us that many important documentary sources may remain in the hands of record creators and their descendants. Although his was hardly an innovative technique, it may serve as a model of how archivists, historical editors, and diligent researchers can effectively work as partners in acquiring valuable sources. Indeed, many recent manuscript collections acquired by the Wisconsin Historical Society have been team efforts, including war letters documenting World War II and Vietnam that were identified and sometimes included in the “Voices of the Wisconsin Past” book series. Anyone with an interest in the Corps of Discovery, average citizen or trained professional, owes an immense debt of gratitude to Reuben Gold Thwaites. For exactly half a century, the “Thwaites” edition was the indispensable tool, for anyone with a serious interest in the expedition, including studies of their science, diplomacy, ethnology (topics researchers can now find with a quick internet query) depended on Thwaites. Important caches of additional William Clark Papers were found in St. Paul and Louisville, in 1954 and 1988, respectively. The exhaustive, thirteen-volume edition of expedition journals directed by Gary E. Moulton from 1983 to 2001 provided the interdisciplinary approach that contemporary scholars required. But if history demonstrates a pattern, additional materials may again surface. In the words of James Davie Butler, the Thwaites and Moulton editions may both be “limited editions,” whetting the appetites of readers of the nation’s “epic poem.”

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