

Chapter One

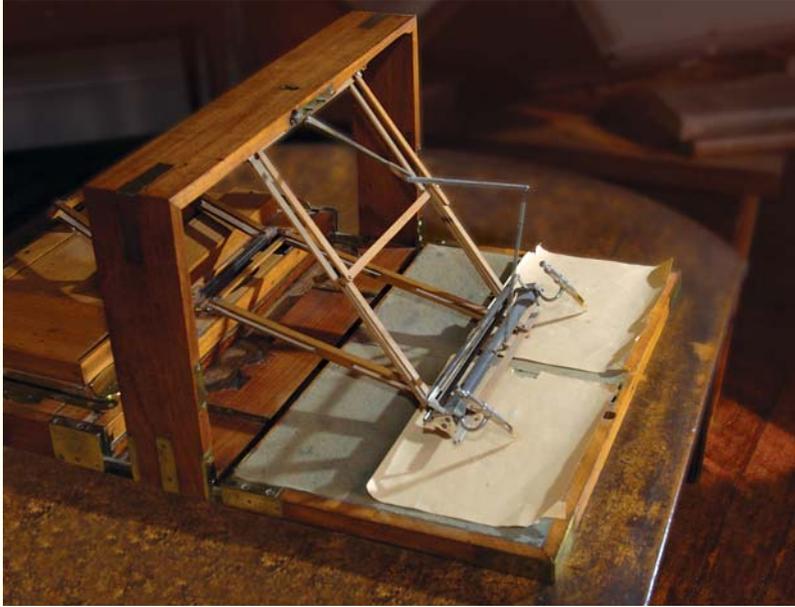
Thomas Jefferson and the West



Questions this chapter will answer:

- **How would the West make the United States stronger and safer?**
- **How would the West make the United States richer?**
- **What was the Northwest Passage?**

Thomas Jefferson was a man with many skills and many big ideas. He designed his own beautiful home on his farm in Virginia, which he called Monticello. He invented a machine that let him make a copy of a letter as he was writing it. He also invented a new kind of plow that made farming easier.



The machine that Jefferson invented to make an extra copy of a letter as he wrote it

Jefferson was a dreamer who was always excited by new discoveries. One day, he heard that men in France had flown in a hot air balloon. No one had ever flown before. Jefferson thought about how much time he could save if he could travel between Washington, D.C. and Monticello by balloon! Riding on horseback or in a carriage, the trip sometimes took more than a week.

Jefferson spent a lot of time dreaming up new ideas for his country. When he was elected president in 1800, the United States of America wasn't even 25 years old yet. There were just 16 states, and most of them were along the Atlantic coast. The states that were farthest west were Kentucky and Tennessee.

Most people had no idea what lay beyond these states. To most Americans, the West might as well have been as far away as the moon.

Yet Jefferson dreamed of a day when the West would become part of the United States. It was his dream that led to the Lewis and Clark expedition. In this chapter, you'll learn why Thomas Jefferson was so eager to explore the West.

Making the United States Stronger and Safer

Jefferson had several reasons for wanting to explore the West. One reason was that controlling the West would make the United States stronger and safer.

The safety of the United States was a big worry for Jefferson. The United States was still a very young and weak country compared to Great Britain and other powerful nations.

Look at the map on this page. It shows North America in 1802. You can see that the United States was much smaller at that time than it is today. You can see that large parts of North America were claimed by countries like France, Spain, Great Britain, and Russia. This means that these countries said the land belonged to them. They didn't actually control this land, but Jefferson was afraid that they would move in and take over. Jefferson wanted the United States to grow until it reached all the way to the Pacific Ocean.



North America as it looked in 1802

This was a huge dream at a time when most Americans lived very close to the Atlantic Ocean, all the way on the other side of the continent of North America.

The first step, Jefferson thought, was to send someone to explore and map the West. Then other Americans would follow. If enough people moved west, other nations wouldn't be able to control this land. Then the United States would be much stronger and safer.

Making the United States Richer

Jefferson had a second reason for being interested in the West. He believed that the West would make the United States a richer country.

There was a lot of money to be made in western lands, especially from the **fur trade**. People who were called trappers caught wild animals like beavers and otters and sold their furs. These trappers were Spanish, British, French, and Russian. People in Asia and Europe paid a lot of money for furs, and Jefferson wanted this money to go to Americans instead.



A trapper



Trapping animals like this beaver was big business.

Jefferson knew that Native Americans in the West also trapped animals and traded their furs to the British for guns and other goods. The British then made a lot of money by selling the furs. Jefferson wanted Native Americans to trade with people from the United States instead. Jefferson believed that explorers could convince the Native Americans to trade with American trappers. He thought this would help the United States become a richer country.

Finding the Northwest Passage

Jefferson had one other big reason for exploring the West. He wanted to find a way to travel by water across North America to the Pacific Ocean.

Jefferson knew that a boat could start in the East and move west along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The Mississippi connected with the Missouri River, which reached even farther west. From there, a boat could go up the Missouri to the place where the river begins. This is called the **source** of the river.

Jefferson also knew that many, many miles away in the west, the Columbia River flowed down into the Pacific Ocean. The Columbia had been found by explorers who traveled in ships along the Pacific coast. Jefferson wondered if the source of the Missouri River and the source of the Columbia River were very close to each other. If they were close, people who reached the source of the Missouri might be able to carry their boat for a short way to the Columbia. Then they could float down the Columbia to the Pacific.

This route across the continent was known as the **Northwest Passage**. The trouble was that nobody knew whether there really was a Northwest Passage.

Why was the Northwest Passage so important to Jefferson? The reason was that he thought it could make the U.S. even richer. Remember, it was easiest in those days to move heavy loads by boat. If Americans could travel by river all the way to the Pacific coast, then they could send furs and other goods on ships to countries in Asia.

As you can see, Jefferson had several reasons for wanting to explore the West. Now he just needed the right person to make the journey.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned why Thomas Jefferson wanted to send an explorer into the West. Jefferson wanted the United States to grow so that it would become stronger, safer, and richer. He also hoped that an explorer would find a way to travel by river across North America. In the next chapter, you'll learn what kind of person Jefferson needed, and why he picked Meriwether Lewis.