Preparing in Philadelphia

Unit: Preparing for the Trip (High School)

From *Lewis and Clark: Across the Divide* by Carolyn Gilman

> The preparations Lewis made during the spring of 1803 were focused on gathering equipment and gathering information. He and Jefferson had originally imagined a small expedition. Jefferson consistently referred to it as a party of about ten men. Once Congress had given its approval, Lewis's first stop for supplies was at the U.S. arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). There, he requisitioned only fifteen rifles, a number dwarfed by the eventual component of over forty men for the first leg of the trip, thirty-three in the "permanent company." His purchases of clothing and supplies were similarly frugal.
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> After leaving Harper's Ferry, Lewis went first to Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to meet with Andrew Ellicott. Then he traveled to Philadelphia, to get what has been described as a crash course in the scientific skills of an Enlightenment explorer. Here, the bargain-basement scale of the plan again became apparent. Whenever Captain Cook staffed an exploring expedition, he included artists, surgeons, and eminent scholars from the Royal Society of London; the United States did not put a single scientist on the payroll. In his letters to the men of learning deputized to train Lewis, Jefferson was apologetic: Lewis was "not regularly educated," but he

possessed “a great mass of accurate observation.” Besides, he added: “It was impossible to find a character who to a compleat science in botany, natural history, mineralogy & astronomy, joined the firmness of constitution & character, prudence, habits adapted to the woods, & a familiarity with the Indian manners & character, requisite for this undertaking.”

Philadelphia, where Lewis arrived in early May, was the intellectual capital of the United States; until 1800, it had been the political capital as well. Besides the assemblage of academic talent connected to the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia had two scientific institutions that Lewis undoubtedly visited: the American Philosophical Society and Peale’s Museum. Located in adjoining buildings, these institutions represented the nation’s aspirations to participate in the intellectual life of Europe.

The American Philosophical Society was the U.S. answer to the Royal Society. It could trace its origins back to 1743, when Benjamin Franklin proposed an association of “Virtuosi or ingenious Men residing in the several Colonies” to meet periodically and present papers, published after 1771 in its *Transactions*. Jefferson had been elected the society’s president in 1797 and remained so until 1815. Its library and meeting rooms occupied Philosophical Hall, next to the statehouse in Philadelphia. When Lewis and Clark returned, this would be the institution that Jefferson would designate to house their journals for the use of researchers. The journals remain there today.

Peale's Museum was the creation of one of the most remarkable Renaissance men of early America, Charles Willson Peale. He was first an accomplished artist, but he was also an inventor, naturalist, mastodon excavator, and public educator. Together with his seven sons—including Raphaelle, Rembrandt, Rubens, and Titian Ramsay—he created in his museum one of the premier scientific and educational institutions of early America. After 1802 Peale's Museum took over the upstairs rooms of the statehouse, where the Declaration of Independence had been hammered out.

Any visitors who came to Peale's Museum expecting the bizarre and miscellaneous collections of the early cabinets of curiosities would have been disappointed. Peale's objective was openly didactic: to make sense of the natural world by ordering it into a comprehensible system. The museum's encyclopedic collection of zoological specimens was arranged into a gridwork of boxes by species, using Carolus Linnaeus's newly developed taxonomic categories, an organizing scheme that naturalists were using in a project as ambitious as the human genome project today: to inventory and classify every plant and animal on earth. Visitors to Peale's Museum could not escape the impression that species were well-defined, separate categories; that they were arranged in an orderly progression of orders, phyla, and genera; and that those categories were fundamental and unchanging. In short, it appeared that there was a wondrously rational system behind creation, just waiting to be discovered. The extent to which

the organizing system was arbitrarily imposed for the convenience of researchers and could easily have been replaced by a different system probably never occurred to anyone but the specialists.

Peale's Museum was a three-dimensional expression of the great project of Enlightenment science: to comprehend the natural world through rational inquiry. The objective was to gather data without respect to any theory, since following theories would distort the information; eventually, patterns would emerge. (Of course, the underlying theory that the world was rationally organized didn't count.) The upshot of this grand project would be, according to the charter of the American Philosophical Society, to "let Light into the nature of Things" and, ultimately, reveal the underlying purpose of creation. The project led instead to the theory of evolution, but that is another story.

The American Philosophical Society and Peale's Museum linked American intellectuals to a cultural movement that was based in Europe but that would soon affect the entire globe, for better or worse. It was a universalist, egalitarian, individualist, rational, progressive, and materialist mindset. Science was to be its universal language, transcending race, nation, and creed—as the neutral choice of Latin for its nomenclature indicated. America's version of Enlightenment science was pragmatic; the colonists' emphasis was always on "useful knowledge," and the American Philosophical Society encouraged research on topics like ship pumps, stoves, peach blight, dyes, and street lighting as well as on more abstract subjects. The fact that the major institutions of the American Enlightenment were

housed in the same building in which the Constitution had been born was no coincidence. The United States itself was an invention of men who saw nations as rational orderings of society controlled by laws and divided into functional departments, not unlike the birds in Peale's Museum. Government, they believed, was perfectible if only more ingenious and logical thought could be applied to devising mechanisms impervious to the failures and corruptions of human beings. Knowledge was to be the great leveler and the best defense against tyranny. When he was elected president of the American Philosophical Society, Jefferson wrote wryly of his "ardent desire to see knowledge so disseminated through the mass of mankind, that it may at length reach the extremes of Society, beggars, and kings."

Lewis spent most of May 1803 absorbing the advice of the learned men who frequented Peale's Museum and Philosophical Hall: the astronomer and mathematician Robert Patterson; the botanist and ethnographer Benjamin Smith Barton; the anatomist Caspar Wistar; the physician Benjamin Rush; and the surveyor Andrew Ellicott. On their recommendations, he assembled an eclectic reference library of books to take on the expedition.