Fort Clatsop

National Memorial
Oregon

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide

Photo courtesy National Geographic Society

In 1805-6 Meriwether Lewis and William Clark wintered at Fort Clatsop after their trail-blazing journey from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. Their expedition across the North American continent between the Spanish possessions on the south and British Canada to the north provided the first detailed knowledge of the American Northwest. It also awakened an interest which lured a procession of trappers and settlers into the region and helped make Oregon U.S. territory.

President Thomas Jefferson had instructed Lewis and Clark to explore the Missouri River to its source, establish the most direct land route to the Pacific, and make scientific and geographic observations. In the interests of trade and peace, they also were to learn what they could of the Indian tribes they encountered and impress them with the strength and authority of the United States.

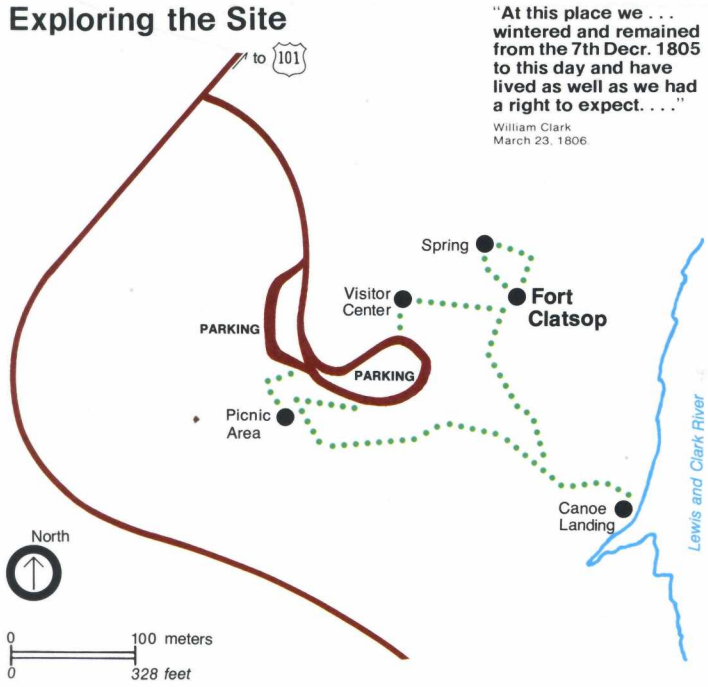
On May 14, 1804, the expedition of 45 men started from the mouth of the Missouri River near St. Louis in one 17-meter (55-foot) keelboat and two smaller boats called pirogues. After a tedious journey of five months, they spent the first winter at Fort Mandan, which they built among the Mandan Indian villages 2,600 kilometers (1,600 miles) up the Missouri. Here they acquired, from the nearby village of Minnetarre, the services of Toussaint Charbonneau, a half-breed interpreter, who joined the expedition with his young Shoshone wife, Sacagawea, and infant son.

On April 7, 1805, the party plus the Charbonneau family left Fort Mandan in two pirogues and six canoes and followed the Missouri and its upper branches into an unknown world. Near the Missouri's source the party cached the canoes.

Sacagawea's people provided horses and a guide, "Old Toby," for the gruelling trip over the Continental Divide. Once on the Clearwater River of Idaho, the expedition members built more canoes. After some 970 kilometers (600 miles) of water travel down the Snake and Columbia Rivers, they sighted the ocean in November 1805 near present-day McGowan, Wash.

Within 10 days Lewis and Clark decided to leave their storm-bound camp on the north shore and cross the river where elk were reported to be plentiful. Lewis, with a small party, scouted ahead and found a suitable site for winter quarters, evidence of enough game for the winter, and a salt supply. On December 8, 1805, the expedition members began to build a fort about 3 miles up Netul River (now Lewis and Clark River). By Christmas Eve they were under shelter. They named the fort for the friendly local Indian tribe, the Clatsops. It would be their home for the next three months.

Exploring the Site



"At this place we . . . wintered and remained from the 7th Decr. 1805 to this day and have lived as well as we had a right to expect. . . ."

William Clark
March 23, 1806

The Fort
Fort Clatsop was a log stockade 50 feet square located in a thick growth of pine. Two rows of cabins (three rooms on the west side and four on the east) were separated by a parade ground.

Most of the activities at the fort revolved around the Captains' Quarters occupied by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. Here the leaders of the expedition constantly worked on the maps and journals and saw to the overall day-to-day management of the fort.

The Charbonneau Quarters were on the south side of the Captains' Quarters. Toussaint Charbonneau, his wife Sacagawea, and their baby Jean Baptiste lived in this room during the winter encampment.

A guard shack was located outside the door to the Meat Room and to the Captain's Quarters. The guard had to check the meat room for spoilage at least once every 24 hours. He was also responsible for daily checking of the canoe landing and for clearing the fort of guests each evening.

The Spring
Sgt. Patrick Gass, a member of the expedition, noted in his journals that "near our camp the country is closely timbered with spruce pine, the soil rich, but not deep; and there are numerous springs of running water." This spring, located about 46 meters (50 yards) behind the fort, was probably the main source of fresh water.

The Canoe Landing
As close as can be determined, this is the site of the original canoe landing where the expedition stepped ashore on December 7, 1805. According to the journals kept by Lewis and Clark, this site was originally part of a large marsh area and about 183 meters (200 yards) from the fort on Netul River, now called Lewis and Clark River.

When the party's five canoes were not in use for hunting and exploring, they were kept in a little slough south of the canoe landing. Today the area is the site of demonstrations in the art of trapping and canoe building.

The visitor center, parking lots, and picnic area are accessible to the mobility impaired. The fort replica, the spring, and the canoe landing may be reached via wood-chip paths. Notify a park ranger for assistance.

About Your Visit

We suggest you first tour the exhibit room and see the audio-visual program at the visitor center.

Then stop at the reconstruction of Fort Clatsop, which was built through the efforts of many citizens and organizations in Clatsop County in 1955 on the occasion of the Lewis and Clark Sesquicentennial celebration. In reconstructing the fort, the floor plan dimensions drawn by Clark on the elkhide cover of his fieldbook were faithfully followed. In 1958 the Oregon Historical Society donated the site of the fort to the Federal Government, and it became part of the National Park System.

Besides touring the fort, you can walk the trails to the expedition's canoe landing and to the camp spring—possibly the same trails used by the explorers.

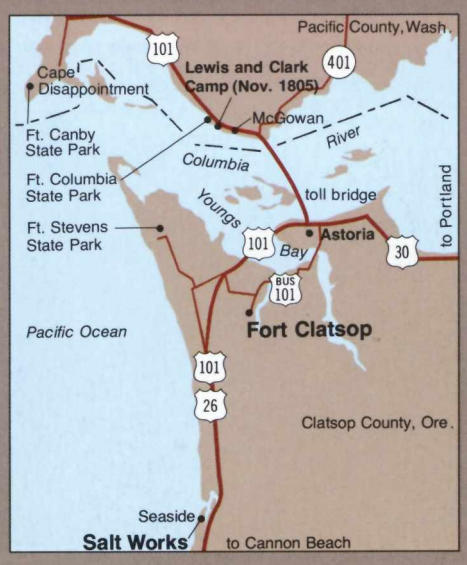
A picnic area is just west of the parking area. Overnight accommodations and meals are available in nearby towns. Camping facilities are at Fort Stevens State Park 8 kilometers (5 miles) away and at private campgrounds.

Within 40 kilometers (25 miles) are several sites described in the Lewis and Clark journals. These include the Salt Works at Seaside on Lewis and Clark Way, the trail over Tillamook Head to Cannon Beach in Oregon, and the trail sites at McGowan, Cape Disappointment, and Long Beach in Washington. Fort Canby State Park, also located in Washington, has a visitor center dedicated to the story of Lewis and Clark. It affords a beautiful view of the entrance to the Columbia River. For more information on these areas, please ask at the visitor center.

For Your Safety
Don't allow your visit to be spoiled by an accident. We ask that everyone work with the rangers to ensure safety in the demonstration areas. Please be cautious when visiting the canoe landing; the banks of the river and slough are often slippery and unstable. Please keep children away from the water and exercise common sense and caution at all times.

Where to Write for Information
Fort Clatsop is a unit of the National Park System. Contact: Superintendent, Fort Clatsop National Memorial, Route 3, Box 604-FC, Astoria, OR 97103.

If you would like information on daily and special activities, living history or school programs, or film loan, please write. You can also call 503/861-2471.



"Great joy . . . we are in view of the ocean . . . which we [have] been so long anxious to see, and the roaring or noise made by the waves breaking on the rocky shores . . . may be heard distinctly."

—From the Journals of Lewis and Clark, November 7, 1805

Lewis and Clark at Fort Clatsop

The members of the Lewis and Clark expedition remained at Fort Clatsop from December 7, 1805, until March 23, 1806. Perhaps the most important activity undertaken during their winter here was the reworking of the journals by the leaders, and the preparation of organized accounts of the scientific data gathered during the journey. Here also, Clark prepared many of the maps which were among the most significant contributions of the expedition. Some of the maps were based only on information supplied by Indians. Through use of the maps, Lewis and Clark determined that the way they had come was not the easiest and decided to change part of their return route.

Indians, whom Clark described as close bargainers, came to Fort Clatsop almost daily to visit and trade, which quickly depleted the expeditions' gift supplies. They traded for items such as otter skins, seal meat, fish, roots, elk meat, and canoes. (The Indians of the area had already been in touch with Europeans and this accounts for their expertise in the art of bargaining.) Lewis and Clark wrote often in their journals about the tribes, their appearance, habits, living conditions, lodges, and abilities as fishermen and hunters. Much of our information on past tribes comes from their observations.

All the men of the expedition hunted and trapped, but George Drouillard, an adept hunter, earned high praise from his commanders for his skills. The group killed and ate 131 elk and 20 deer. A few small animals were killed, such as otter and beaver and one raccoon. As spring approached, the elk took to the hills and it became increasingly difficult for the hunters to keep the camp supplied with meat and hides for food and clothing.

Life at the fort was far from pleasant. It rained every day but 12 of the 106 days at Fort Clatsop. Clothing rotted and fleas infested the furs and hides of the bedding. So bad was this pest that Lewis and Clark wrote often of a lack of a full night's sleep. The dampness gave nearly everyone rheumatism or colds, and many suffered from other diseases, which Lewis treated vigorously. Some suffered from dislocated shoulders, injured legs, and back pains. With all this adversity, the members of the expedition continued to prepare for the return trip that would take some home to family and friends, some to wealth and fame. Others would not return home, but remained in the "wilderness." All gained a place in history among the greatest of explorers. To the end of their days, this team of Native Americans, black, white, male, female shared vivid memories of their epic trip across the continent. They were truly the "Corps of Discovery."

Lewis and Clark and all the members of their party had to draw upon knowledge, skills, and a good deal of imagination to survive their tremendous ordeal. Many new skills, such as canoe building, were taught to them by Indians they met along the way. Each of the members gave something to the expedition and each was important to its success. Today, as part of the park's living history program, members of the park staff in period costume demonstrate some of the frontier skills used at Fort Clatsop in the winter of 1805-6. Photos courtesy Andrew E. Cier

The Salt Makers

To augment their low supply of salt upon arriving at the Pacific coast, Lewis and Clark assigned a high priority to the task of producing this commodity. During the winter of 1805-06 a salt-making camp was set up "near the houses of some Clatsop & Kilamox (Indian) families" about 24 kilometers (15 miles) southwest at present Seaside, Ore. The camp operated until February 21, 1806. Usually at least three men were assigned here though the number varied and personnel were rotated. Salt was obtained by laboriously boiling sea water in five large kettles. Very shortly the men were producing "excellent, fine, strong & white" salt. They were able to make about 3 quarts a day and accumulated enough for the trip home. About 3 of the approximately 4 bushels produced at the camp were packed in kegs and carried eastward from Fort Clatsop with the expedition on March 23. Today a small site in Seaside known as the Salt Works is a reminder of the sacrifices that were overcome to accomplish a truly incredible journey. The works, originally constructed of boulders, has been reconstructed and kettles placed on it.

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