

## **Election at Station Camp in 1805 – Our First Inclusive Vote**

*By Philippa Newfield and Jay H. Buckley*

In this time of hard-fought election campaigns, many Americans are unaware that our first inclusive election occurred in the wilderness 215 years ago – and among the voters were a Black Slave and a teenaged Shoshone woman.

Cold, wet, hungry, miserable, and poorly clad, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and the men, woman, and baby of the Corps of Discovery could barely find a secure place to camp while at “Station Camp” during the rainy, wind-blown November of 1805. High waves crashed upon them near the mouth of the Columbia River, making their lives miserable despite that fact that Clark had recently written in his journal on November 7 “Ocian in view! O! the joy.”

Although they had not fulfilled President Thomas Jefferson’s charge to find an all-water route to the Pacific Ocean for purposes of commerce, the captains had reached the Pacific. On November 24 they decided to spend the winter at the coast before retracing their route up the Columbia, Snake, and Clearwater rivers, back across the Rocky Mountains, and then on down the Missouri River to St. Charles, Missouri, from where they had started out in May 1804. This posed a dilemma as to where to set up their winter camp. Should they winter over on the present-day Washington side, where they were currently situated, or cross the treacherous waters before them to reach the present-day Oregon side? Uppermost in the captains’ minds was the availability of food sources such as elk and deer. Trading for food was not a possibility because their trade goods were limited and the local Clatsops and Chinooks were astute negotiators.

As the Native visitors to their camp had indicated in response to the captains’ careful questioning, there were more elk on the southern (Oregon) side of the Columbia River. In addition, a coastal location offered the opportunity to make salt from the seawater and spot passing ships. Although the captains favored the Oregon side of the Columbia, they decided to poll the entire membership of their group. With the exception of Jean Baptiste Charbonneau, the nine-month old son of the French-Canadian interpreter Toussaint Charbonneau and Shoshone teenager Sacagawea, all the members of the Corps of Discovery voted for their winter encampment choice, including Clark’s slave York and Sacagawea. They opted to

cross the river to the Oregon side, although Sacagawea favored a spot where she could find the wapato root that was a staple of the local Indian diet.

Conscientious and courageous leaders, Captains Lewis and Clark were also men of vision whose judgments were ahead of their time. They not only enfranchised everyone on their expedition but also embraced a remarkable inclusivity.

Numbered among the members of what was a military expedition were soldiers, Kentucky woodsmen, Metis boatmen of French and Indian parentage, a Metis interpreter, an enslaved African, and a young Shoshone woman. Although of different backgrounds and experience, the captains respected and valued the perspectives of all the expedition members. The captains also noted time and again in their journals the admiration they had for the skills, generosity, guidance, and friendship of the Indians whom they encountered.

Out in the wilderness and far from the nascent United States, Election Day 1805 foretold the universal suffrage it would take our country more than 100 years to achieve.

*Ms. Newfield of San Francisco is past president of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation ([lewisandclark.org](http://lewisandclark.org)), the citizen support group for the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail. Dr. Buckley of Orem, Utah, is a historian at Brigham Young University, director of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, and past president of the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation.*