N o one has ever accused Thomas Jefferson of being uncomplicated or easy to cipher. Whether history has grappled with his political legacy, his contradictory stance on social justice, or his vision for the great western country that his Louisiana Purchase folded into America's destiny, Jefferson has remained the great American enigma. Part of the mystery is explained by the pragmatism that colored most of his decisions, but Jefferson also had a certain risk-taking impulse. The man willing to speak in favor of occasional revolution was the same man who pushed the envelope of possibility, like exploring the West. Sometimes, as with the Lewis and Clark Expedition, his gambles paid off. Sometimes they did not, and when they didn't, Jefferson was fully capable of turning his back.

Just what Jefferson's objective was vis-à-vis the other—and, relative to Lewis and Clark's, today virtually invisible—exploration into Louisiana Territory remains obscure. That expedition, led by Thomas Freeman and Peter Custis, should not be confused with either of the Zebulon Pike probes. Like Pike's earlier search for the source of the Mississippi, his 1806-1807 overland expedition to the southern Rockies was an exploration launched by the American military—by General James Wilkinson—not Thomas Jefferson. Other than being pointed in the same general direction as Lewis and Clark, Pike's expedition shared little in common with Lewis and Clark's probe in intent or preparation. Nor should Freeman and Custis be confused with the brief William Dunbar-George Hunter Expedition to the Ouachita Mountains of present Arkansas in 1804-1805, although the Dunbar-Hunter trek preceded even Lewis and Clark as the first to report back from Louisiana Territory, and in their time it made its two leaders famous enough that no less than John James Audubon would later speak reverently of Dr. George Hunter as that "renowned Man of Jefferson." That expedition originated with Jefferson and was intended to include the southern parts of the Louisiana Purchase as part of his master plan for exploring the West. The Dunbar-Hunter probe, however, was merely a trial balloon for the "Grand Excursion"—the southwestern counterpart to Lewis and Clark—that Jefferson had in mind all along.

At the turn of the century, the Red River was not only essential as a boundary but an alluring path into the unknown, a river of mysterious origins and potentially dangerous imperial rivalries. Few understood that better than Thomas Jefferson who, in 1806, sent what he intended to be the southern counterpart to Lewis and Clark into its waters. Under the leadership of Thomas Freeman, a civil engineer and surveyor, and Peter Custis, the first academically trained American naturalist, Jefferson's expedition was to explore the southern boundary of the Louisiana Purchase. Author Dan Flores photographed the river and Grand Enchore Bluffs near Natchitoches in present-day Louisiana (above, 1895), where the Freeman and Custis Expedition assembled their final equipment.
Story
Monticello with the Freeman and Custis Expedition of 1806
It is the historical fate of the latter expedition, directed in the field by civilian engineer and surveyor Thomas Freeman, assisted by Meriwether Lewis’s personal friend, Captain Richard Sparks of Virginia, along with young Peter Custis, the first American and academically trained naturalist to examine the West, that is most intriguing. Although hard digging and luck have enabled us to adorn the event in every manner of factual dress that history had not known before, aspects of the event remain puzzling, even troubling. Its invisibility in the popular American imagination, however, is not surprising. Unless multicultural history in the twenty-first century shapes the writing of the American past far more than at present, or until the fate of Jefferson’s southwestern exploration comes to be celebrated by southwestern Hispanics as one of their great early successes in resisting American imperialism, there should be no doubt why Lewis and Clark history is worthy of a Ken Burns film while not a single roadside historical marker exists to remind the American public of Freeman and Custis.

The answer is simple and supports the truism that the winners write the version of events later generations celebrate. In contrast to the nationalistic pride that adheres to the remarkable success of Lewis and Clark’s traverse of the continent, failure is the legacy of Jefferson’s southwestern exploration. Intended originally to chart the entire lengths of both the Red and Arkansas rivers, the Freeman and Custis Expedition failed even to achieve its last-minute, more limited objective of exploring the Red River only. What brought it to a halt after four months and an ascent of only half the river’s length had nothing to do with daunting courage on the part of its leaders or a disinclination to “proceed on” in the face of nature’s obstacles (and there were some big ones). Rather, Jefferson’s other Lewis and Clark Expedition was caught, blocked, and turned around on the Red River by a Spanish army four times its size. Simply put, Jefferson took a risk that backfired. Spanish resolve was greater than he thought, perhaps greater than he was encouraged to think.

That a failed exploration, confronted and forced to “retrace” by a foreign power, should fade in the American memory is no surprise. But the intent of Jeffersonian exploration was always scientific discovery, at least nominally. (The letter of exploring instructions Jefferson gave Thomas Freeman at their private White House dinner in November 1806 called for precisely the kind of broad-ranging examination Meriwether Lewis was instructed to conduct.) Considering that both expeditions had very similar objectives, it is puzzling that the southwestern effort, which covered more than six hundred miles of unfamiliar landscape, somehow ended up erased from history at every level. How to explain it? What does it mean to the process of selective historical memory that the southwestern probe was the only Jefferson-era western expedition never summarized in the scientific literature of the day? Or that when Alexander Wilson’s biographer charged Jefferson in the 1820s with rudely failing to respond to Wilson’s entreaty to join the Red River expedition, Jefferson claimed not to recall either Wilson’s letter or the expedition he applied for? Or that a monument to science in the trans-Mississippi West like Susan McKeel’s 1,400-page opus on western botany could somehow miss a foundation figure like Peter Custis?

That the Freeman and Custis Expedition is missing is odd, but since the past is a foreign country, much history strikes us as odd, ironic, or even unexpected. In any case, given the growing fascination with Lewis and Clark as the two hundredth anniversary of their grand expedition nears, perhaps it is worthwhile to take another look at Lewis and Clark’s southwestern counterparts, whose story is attached to Lewis and Clark much like a tail flapping after a kite.

The genesis of American exploration of the Southwest undoubtedly lays with Jefferson’s goals for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. While a probe along the

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2. See Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Explaining Ourselves: Jefferson, History, and the Changing West,” in Thomas Jefferson and the Chang-
Among the reasons Jefferson sought to explore the Southwest was the need to clarify boundaries the Louisiana Purchase treaty left vague. The plan conceived for Freeman and Custis to ascend the Red River and descend the Arkansas River was impractical. The Red flowed from a great desert plateau, the Llano Estacado, and not from the Rocky Mountains, as men in Washington believed. Moreover, the source of the Arkansas lay hundreds of miles north and west. All this turned out to be immaterial when, in the face of Spanish opposition, the expedition retreated just short of the present-day Arkansas and Oklahoma border, an area highlighted on the map above.

line of the Missouri and Columbia river systems would resolve the question of a commercial Northwest Passage and clarify the extent of United States' holdings as specified by the Louisiana Purchase, more than anything else, American exploring parties in the West would establish an American presence on the land that Jefferson hoped both competing imperial powers and indigenous peoples would acknowledge. Additionally—and the issue was important to Jefferson—western exploration represented an official government support of Enlightenment science aimed directly at part of the earth where European plant collectors and naturalists had only nibbled. There was a whole, fascinating world out there beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains of home about which Jefferson's mind wondered restlessly.

But the Lewis and Clark Expedition would leave these missions unfulfilled for an enormous stretch of the Louisiana Territory, and that was hardly Jefferson's intent. Indeed, he seems from the first to have regarded an American expedition across the southern reaches of Louisiana as nearly equal in importance to his Missouri-Columbia exploration. As the president put it to Meriwether Lewis in November 1803:

The object of your mission is single, the direct water communication from sea to sea formed by the bed of the Missouri & perhaps the Oregon [sic, the Columbia]. . . . I have proposed in conversation, & it seems generally to be ascertained, that Congress shall appropriate 10, 000 $ for exploring the principal waters of the Mississippi & Missouri. In that case I should send a party up the Red River to its head, then cross over to the head of the Arcansa, & come down that . . . This will be attempted distinctly from your mission. 4

Once Lewis and Clark were underway in spring 1804, Jefferson devoted the time and energy he had for exploration to assembling and launching what he and all the principals came to regard as the southwestern counterpart to Lewis and Clark. Nearly two years of detailed planning and preparation, much of it devoted to a search for expedition personnel, and a congressional budget of $5,000 (twice the original appropriation for Lewis and Clark), finally poised the president's Grand Excursion for a scientific strike into the heart of the Southwest in April 1806. With Lewis and Clark


then crossing the Bitterroot Mountains bound for Saint Louis and home, one triumph seemed ready to proceed on the heels of another.

But why the Red and Arkansas rivers? Aside from the geographic symmetry of aiming his second western expedition at the most southerly tributaries of the Mississippi, the reasons, as Jefferson saw them, for extending the American reach into the sunlit spaces of the Southwest were diverse and compelling. For one, there was the matter of the Louisiana Purchase boundaries. The agreement that had transferred Louisiana to the United States had left the boundaries vague, stating only that the lines of demarcation were to be the same as when France had controlled Louisiana. While France had legally owned Louisiana since the Treaty of San Ildefonso with Spain of 1800, French officials had not assumed direction of the province. And because Spain had enjoyed undisputed claim to the whole Southwest since France’s exit from North America in 1763, delineating the boundaries between Spanish and French possessions in the Southwest required research into seventeenth- and eighteenth-century documents to determine where the two imperial powers had drawn their borders.

Researching the matter in his own library, Jefferson had come to a startling conclusion. In 1687 the French explorer René Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, while seeking to found a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi, had missed that river and made landfall along what is now the Texas Gulf Coast, not far west of present-day Houston. La Salle’s “colony” was an accident and it had collapsed almost immediately. In the long run it had little effect other than to inspire Spanish interest in Texas. The French had gone on to establish permanent settlements among the Caddo Indians at Natchitoches, on the Red River, in 1714, and at New Orleans on the Mississippi in 1718. With century-old settlements already in New Mexico, Spain had responded with the presidio/mision of Los Adaes (present-day Robeline, Louisiana) in 1716, and San Antonio in 1718. Over the ensuing decades, French traders following the likes of Luis de Saint Denis and especially Bénard de La Harpe—who founded a post several hundred miles up the Red in 1719—used the Red and Arkansas rivers to penetrate far into the southwestern interior. Indeed, it was widely known that in 1739 Pierre and Paul Mallet had reached Santa Fe, and then descended a river that everyone assumed was the Red back to French Louisiana.

When Jefferson asserted then, in a treatise he called “The Limits and Bounds of Louisiana,” that the brief French settlement on the Texas coast meant that the Rio Grande should be the western boundary of the Louisiana Territory, Spanish diplomat Pedro Cevallos had responded that the American claim was “absurd reasoning! which does not merit to be refuted.” But the president’s ill-considered claim, which would not be resolved until the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819, did have the important consequence of turning the Red River—where French activity was far better documented—into a reasonable boundary compromise.

In the actual world of southwestern geography, however, an exploration that ascended the Red and descended the Arkansas rivers was not all that feasible,
for the Red River would lead explorers deep into the Llano Estacado, which, for purposes of exploration, was nowhere. Despite the longstanding existence of Euro-American settlements in New Mexico and Louisiana, only the Indians and a handful of traders knew that. Unable to imagine the actual nature of southwestern topography, Jefferson and everyone else in the American government assumed that major rivers head in mountain ranges, and that given its lower course and size, the Red River must have its origins somewhere in the southern ranges of the Rocky Mountains, what were then known as the “Stony Mountains,” at the foot of which lay Santa Fe. Indeed, these assumptions seemed corroborated by the most recent maps available, particularly Alexander von Humboldt’s not-yet-published Carte générale du royaume de la nouvelle espagne, which von Humboldt presented to Jefferson during a trip to Washington in 1804. Based on manuscripts in Mexico City, this map merged the Pecos River—which heads in the Sangre de Cristo Range east of Santa Fe—with the river the French called Rivière Rouge (Red River) in Louisiana.

What the Jefferson administration lacked was the kind of information about southwestern geography that existed in the heads of late-eighteenth-century travelers Pierre ("Pedro") Vial, José Mares, and Francisco Fragoso, who, with Indian guides, had made a series of journeys in the 1780s and 1790s that attempted to link the Spanish settlements of Saint Louis, Natchitoches, and San Antonio with distant Santa Fe. The geographic details in their reports seem to have escaped even Spanish officials. What had caught their attention was Vial’s claim in 1793 that it was possible to make the journey between Saint Louis and Santa Fe in twenty-five days, a discovery that put the expansive Americans far too close for comfort.  

In actuality, revisionist knowledge about the Red River gleaned from such travelers did make it back to Washington via General James Wilkinson, who would emerge as one of the principal proponents (for reasons all his own) of southwestern exploration. In July of 1804, with Lewis and Clark underway and Jefferson’s exploration focus redirected towards southern Louisiana, Wilkinson submitted to Secretary of War Henry Dearborn a twenty-two-page letter calculated to excite “the Presidential Eye” about the Southwest that mentioned volcanoes and other marvels of the “natural History of this Wonderful Country.” Among Wilkinson’s information was a description of the upper Red River country that combined reality with confusion:

About 20 leagues above [the Wichita Indian villages] the Red River forks, the right descending from the Northward and the left from the westward. . . . it appears that the right branch . . . takes its source west of a Ridge of mountains, in the East side of which the Arkansas and Ouichita or Black River head. The left branch which is reputed to be the longest is said to have its source in the East side of a height, the top of which presents an open plain, so extensive as to require the Indians four days in crossing it. . . . west of this high plain my informants report certain waters which run to the Southward/ probably those of the Rio Bravo, and beyond these they report a ridge or high mountains extending North and South.

What this document conveyed was someone’s first-hand knowledge about the upper Red, but embroidered with secondhand syllogisms. It accurately portrayed to the Jefferson administration—and for the first time—the existence of the Llano Estacado, the great southwestern escarpment and plateau on which the Red River headed, well beyond which lay the southward-running
Pecos River and the Sangre de Cristo front of New Mexico. While this ought to have raised doubts that the main stem of the Red would lead American explorers to the Rockies, Wilkinson’s muddled account of the North Fork probably alleviated those doubts. It is true, as the document asserted, that the North Fork of the Red flows through a “Ridge of mountains.” But this range is the Wichita Mountains of western Oklahoma, not the Rockies. And the Arkansas does not head in the Wichitas but rises 350 miles northwest of there, in the heart of present Colorado.

With historical hindsight, then, Jefferson’s fascination with the river he called “next to the Missouri, the most interesting water of the Mississippi” seems to have been ill-starred from the first. However diplomatically correct a choice it appeared to be, the Red River was not going to lead his explorers where he thought it would or fulfill the geographic objectives he had for southwestern exploration. And unlike the Missouri, the Red would bring Americans threateningly close to Spanish settlements, and dangerous to Spanish presidios. Yet, given Jefferson’s interest in natural history, the economic potential of opening a trade route between Louisiana and New Mexico, and the fact that information about the Red continued to come in between 1804 and 1806, the president’s risk-taking inclinations caused him to persist in planning his next expedition around the Red River.

To be sure, the evidence for discovery in the Southwest was tantalizing. New York naturalist Samuel Mitchell reported to Jefferson that the Red was said to be navigable for one thousand miles above the town of Natchitches, penetrating westward into a country of immense and rich prairies. Alligators, buffalo, “tigers,” wolves, and “innumerable herds” of wild mustangs were said to abound, along with a luxuriant growth of indigenous fruits and many unknown species of both plants and animals.

Another effusive source of information was the renowned Scottish expatriate scientist, Sir William Dunbar of Natchez, who spoke of the Red’s long course, its medicinal plants, its sources in mountains of pure or partial salt. Dunbar also dangled “wonderful stories of wonderful productions,” among them trader accounts of unicorns (!) and giant water serpents (probably garbled stories of the Horned Water Serpent of Pueblo mythology). And there were vague tales of huge masses of metal—in reality a pair of fallen meteorites—venerated by the Indians, and assumed to be silver ore. Critically, from Dr. John Sibley, his Indian agent at Natchitoches, Jefferson learned that as gateway to New Mexico, the upper Red was owned by the horticultural “Panis” (Wichitas) under their forceful leader Awahakei, and the buffalo-hunting “Hieten” (Comanche) bands. These Indians, who had fond memories of the days when Spanish and French traders had competed for their friendship, openly expressed interest in the Americans.

In April 1804, with Lewis and Clark still making preparations to head up the Missouri, Jefferson took steps to make his southwestern expedition a reality. On April 14, at home in Monticello, the president sat down to compose a seven-page letter of instructions for southwestern exploration, which he left unaddressed because he had not yet selected an expedition leader. Unpublished until 1984, Jefferson’s letter was based closely on his June 20, 1803, letter of instructions to Meriwether Lewis, a letter often praised as a classic expression of Enlightenment scientific instruction. As would be expected, the southwestern version differed from Lewis’s letter on routes, and it gave southwestern explorers a greater diplomatic burden in winning the Indian tribes of the Spanish border over to the Americans. It also included a line as the Texas Panhandle. Meteories that fueled the “silver ore” tales are the actual source of two generations of silver mine expeditions into Texas. Traders flocked in a 1,000-pound meteorite from the Texas plains in 1810. See Dan Flores, ed., Journal of an Indian Trader: Anthony Glass and the Texas Trading Frontier, 1790–1810 (College Station, Tex., 1985), 85-99.


12. John Sibley, “Historical Sketches of the Several Tribes in Louisiana South of the Arkansas River and Between the Mississippi and the River Grand,” in Thomas Jefferson, Message from the President of the United States, Communicating Discoveries Made in Exploring the Missoury, Red River, and Washita, by Captains Lewis and
that had its origins with the Lewis and Clark letter but that would prove far more significant in the Southwest: "if at any time a superior force authorized or not authorized by a nation should be arrayed against your further passage and inflexibly determined to arrest it, you must decline its further pursuit and return."  

That done, the president commenced the next logical step: the search for an addressee. First, however, he wrote William Dunbar in Natchez, successfully enlisting the Mississippi scientist in helping to organize the expedition and mentioning that Dr. George Hunter, a Philadelphia chemist, had agreed to become naturalist for the southwestern tour. Although he did not realize it then, Jefferson had set in motion what would become a trial run for his major expedition. Hunter did not arrive at Dunbar’s plantation outside Natchez until late July 1804, and during the interim, ominous warnings from a disaffected band of Osages and from Spain (which had refused a passport request for the explorers) had convinced Jefferson to delay the Grand Excursion. Instead, he sent Dunbar and Hunter on a quick reconnaissance of the Ouachita River, a lower tributary of the Red.

That autumn and winter, Dunbar and Hunter led fifteen men in a rapid ascent of the Ouachita into the pine-clad mountains of today’s Arkansas. The short, careful journey was without mishap except for an accidental gunshot wound to Hunter and total failure of the boat he had designed and brought down from Pittsburgh. Their official report was published in the congressional documents and in several reprints, and serialized in 1806 in the administration’s favorite newspaper, the National Intelligencer.

The Dunbar and Hunter probe had important consequences for Jefferson’s major expedition. For one thing, it decided Dunbar and Hunter (both in their fifties) to decline the more arduous expedition. And it prompted Dunbar to argue, on the basis of the difficulty of mountain portages and continued hostile Osage displays, that the planned descent of the Arkansas River ought to be dropped, that the southwestern expedition ought to focus all its energies instead on the more interesting river, the Red. President Jefferson agreed to this alteration of objectives in May 1805.

May 1805, and still no Jeffersonian party on the Red! The reason, Lewis and Clark aficionados ought to note, had everything to do with the difficulty of finding young men who possessed leadership skills, a woodsman’s physique, and sufficient scientific education to lead such a party. Indeed, the frustrations of evaluating and rejecting at least five candidates to find another Meriwether Lewis would lead Dunbar to write the administration in exasperation: “I am surprised that young men of talents unencumbered by family affairs are not found in numbers with you who are solicitous to go upon so inviting an expedition.”

The sixth candidate, and the one to win Jefferson’s personal blessing as leader of his southwestern probe, was Thomas Freeman. Today, Freeman has the distinction of being early American history’s least known explorer. Indeed, until recently, most major works on American exploration still confused him with a New Orleans military officer with the same last name. But Thomas Freeman was not a military officer, and he was not a Louisiana. He was, in fact, an Irishman who had come to America in 1784, and who had employed his considerable skills as a civil engineer and surveyor on various government projects, including laying out Washington, D.C. Freeman had important connections across the political spectrum in Jeffersonian America, from James Wilkinson to Alexander Hamilton. But it seems to have been his friend Robert Patterson, mathematician at the University of Pennsylvania who had tutored Meriwether Lewis, who brought Freeman to Jefferson’s attention.

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