

**William Clark, Master Graffitiist
by Tom Laidlaw**

One of the best and most precisely known Lewis & Clark landmarks is the signature of William Clark on Pompey's Pillar near Billings Montana. Historians have said this is the only concrete evidence left of the trip. But this is only one of thirteen different places Clark left his signature on the land. There may be more, but so far I have found only thirteen, and I have been looking for some pattern or reasoning to the placement and frequency of the signatures. Several are in response to existing markings. In some cases they seem to signify the end of a particular side trip. Many are copied in nature from Alexander MacKenzie, whose cross-continent trek through Canada in 1793 in part motivated the expedition. Since 9 of the 13 are west of the Mandans, it seems obvious he is claiming the land.

This article originally only had eleven instances, but I recently found the **August 1987 WPO** article *They Left Their Mark* by Bob Saindon, which is more extensive and showed me two more absolutely documented locations and two additional signatures at one location I already had. There were also several suppositions. But the author of that article also missed the first two, which I do have. I will talk more about Saindon's article and suppositions below, but for now I want to list only the absolutely documented markings noted within the journals. I think, between Saindon and myself, that this is now a complete list. References are to Moulton, unless noted.

1.) Wednesday May 23rd, 1804 near the Femme Osage River. "Stopped one hour where there was many people assembled to see us. Halted at an indented part of a rock which jutted over the water, called by the French *The Tavern*, which is a cave 40 yds. Long with the river 4 feet deep & about 20 feet high. This is a place the Indians & French pay homage to. Many names are wrote up on the rock, mine among others." (2, 246). The way he phrases this statement it almost seems as if he had put his name on the rock previous to this visit. Does anyone know if he was here before?

2.) Thursday July 12th, 1804 near the mouth of the Nemaha River. Clark went up the Nemaha River, found some Indian burial mounds and a beautiful view of the river. On his way back he wrote: "On a sandstone bluff about ¼ mile from its mouth on the lower side I observed some Indian marks, went to the rock which jutted over the water and marked my name & the day of the month & year" (2, 370). I wonder if it would be possible to find this one, since it was on a rock with other markings. He says he marked his name, but not that he carved or engraved it. Has anybody looked for this one?

3.) June 5, 1805 near Fort Benton, MT (Using today's names). Clark was investigating the Missouri River upstream of the Marias to determine which was the proper river to take. His first course took him up on a ridge dividing the Missouri from the Teton River, which joins the Marias close to the disputed confluence. He says the Missouri and Teton were separated by only 100 yards. He continued on another 13 miles, plus 11 the following day. When he had satisfied himself that this was the true Missouri he hiked 20 miles over to the small river, came down it and camped for the night. He writes: "Some beaver, antelope, mule deer & wolves & one bear on this little river. Marked my name in a tree N. side near the ridge where the little river breaks through" (4, 259). This break in the ridge can easily be seen just a little west of Fort Benton, MT on Hwy. 87. Has anyone looked for the tree? Clark does not talk about any other markings so I assume it was his name alone on that tree. It seems like at least a semi-significant place where today's Teton River breaks through a long ridge. I read it sort of as an exclamation point to his exploration.

4.) June 17, 1805 at the Great Falls – "In ascending the cliff to take the height of the fall was near slipping into the water, at which place I must have been sucked under in an instant, and with difficulty and great risk I ascended again, and descended the cliff lower down (but few places can be descended to the river) and took the height with as much accuracy as possible with a spirit level, etc. dined at a fine spring 200 yards below the pitch near which place 4 cotton willows grew. On one of them I marked my name and the date, and the height of the falls" (4, 304). Reading through his extensive survey of the river and the heights of all the falls, I think he was signing his work as an artist would. There were no other markings to prompt him, but then again I don't think he really needed any prompting. He wanted to let people know he was there, and also to let any readers of the tree know that he also had the been able to take an accurate measurement of the falls.

5.) Saturday Aug. 24, 1805 Salmon River After being shown the difficulties of the Salmon River by his Shoshone guide, Clark turned back and wrote: “Set out very early this morning on my return. Passed down the [E.C. Berry] creek. At the mouth marked my name on a pine tree, proceeded on to the bottom above the creek & Breakfast on berries & delayed 1 hour, then proceed on up the river by the same rout we descended to the place I left my party” (5, 162). Clark seems to be marking a place where he had turned back from his exploration, and his is the only marking present. Here he also wrote a letter to Lewis recommending that the party obtain at least one horse for each man and to attempt the mountains with Old Toby as a guide. In his journal for the day he also looks at two other possibilities:

1. Split the party with some of them attempting the Salmon while the others crossed the mountains on horses, the two parties coming together occasionally.
2. Split the party and let one group go back down the Jefferson, gather provisions and attempt the route along the Medicine (Sun) River.

Neither of these is being seriously considered, but merely represent Clark's reasoning process. Moulton's note on this states: “They had not known of the Sun River route, which Lewis would follow on his return trip in 1806, until they discussed the geography of the region with the Shoshones. Having set this last plan down on paper, Clark obviously found it unacceptable, probably because of the cost in time and wide separation of the parties, and crossed it out” (5, 164).

6.) Nov. 18, 1805 Haley's Bay Anchorage. Here begins the greatest concentration of signatures within a small area and short time, 4 signings in a radius of ten miles and 18 days. On his land trek to Cape Disappointment (with Ordway, Pryor, J. & R. Fields, Shannon, Bratton, Colter, Wisner, LaBieche, Charbonneau, & York) Clark found a tree Lewis had branded on his earlier trek to the Cape. “This appears to be a very good harbor for large ships. Here I found Capt. Lewis name on a tree. I also engraved my name & by land, the day of the month and year, as also several of the men” (6, 66). He doesn't say which of the men, but apparently he encouraged them to sign also. Adding the “by land” was perhaps to differentiate from possible signatures of sailors. It is also the form used by Alexander MacKenzie in 1793. We don't know how many of the men signed or if there was more than one tree used, but the point seems to be to leave evidence of the whole group reaching this point by land. After reaching the “main ocean” across a low neck of land, Clark climbed a high separate hill, took observations and then descended and camped on the north side of what is today called Mackenzie Head.

7.) Nov. 19, 1805 Long Beach, WA. “After...breakfast I proceeded on through rugged country of high hills and steep hollers on a ... direct line to the commencement of a sandy coast which extended ... from the top of the hill above the sand shore to a point of high land distant near 20 miles. This point I have taken the liberty of calling after my particular friend Lewis I proceeded on the sandy coast 4 miles and marked my name on a small pine, the day of the month & year, etc. and returned to the foot of the hill, from which place I intended to strike across to the bay” (6, 70). This signature is at the farthest north any member of the party reached on the Pacific Ocean.

8.) Nov. 22, 1805 Station Camp. “A calm cloudy morning, a moderate rain the greater part of the last night. Capt. Lewis branded a tree with his name, date, etc. I marked my name, the day & year on an alder tree. The party all cut the first letters of their names on different trees in the bottom” (6, 81). The decision to cross the river had not yet been made but they knew they would not be staying here for the winter, and they wanted to claim the land in a big way. One wonders if Charbonneau & Sacagawea carved their names also, or if someone did it for them. This eighth signing was not in response to any other markings like the first couple were, but it marked an end of exploration in a way, because it was as far as they got with canoes. Yet there remains a curious sidelight about this — on Nov. 20, after crossing today's Chinook River while returning from his trek up to Long Beach, Clark wrote: “I proceeded on up the beach and was overtaken by three Indians. One of them gave me some wapato and some dried sturgeon. I employed those Indians to take up one of our canoes which had been left by the first party that came down” (6, 72). That would have been Colter, Willard, and Shannon on Nov. 13. So it looks like at least one canoe got around Chinook Point and down near today's Chinook River, 5 or 6 miles further downstream from Station Camp.

9.) Dec. 3, 1805 Point William (Tongue Point) After being trapped at Station Camp for nine days, the party finally went back upstream and camped at Pillar Rock on Nov. 25. On the 26th they crossed the river at a narrower and calmer point, camped at an Indian Village near today's John Day River, and made it around Tongue Point on the 27th. Here the wind and waves delayed them another 10 days. On the 29th Lewis takes 5 men in the Indian canoe and goes looking for an "eligible location" for their winter camp. Clark stays behind and pretty soon he is getting anxious for Lewis. They are all wet and disagreeable and morale is low. Clark writes: "**The men sent after an elk yesterday returned with an elk which revived the spirits of my men very much. I am unwell and cannot eat the flesh. O! how disagreeable my situation, a plenty of meat and incapable of eating any**" (6, 106). It is easy to picture him as whining with this statement, and maybe he is, just a little, but I think he was just fighting depression with humor. And the signing is meant to encourage himself and remind himself of his accomplishment and that of the Corps of Discovery. It is also the most complete description of his signature – "**I marked my name & the day of the month and year on a large pine tree on this peninsula and 'Capt. William Clark, December 3rd, 1805. By land from the U. States in 1804 & 1805**" (6, 107). A classic example of territory claiming postings.

10.) July 14, 1806 Bozeman, Montana (West side of Bozeman Pass) "On July 14 Clark noted in his "Course and Distance" record: "**Marked my [name] W.C. July 14th 1806. with powder on a cotton tree at the river [present East Gallatin].**" (Thwaites 5, 263) The initials also appear on Clark's field map. The exact location of this marking has not been determined for sure, but a tentative study places it somewhere near the East Gallatin River a mile or so north of the Bozeman, MT Fair Grounds" (WPO, Aug. 1987, 19)

11.) July 15, 1806 Livingston, MT (East side of Bozeman Pass) Clark wrote: "**2 miles [north] on a direct course from the gap of the mountain to a few cotton trees under the bank and on the West or Larboard Side of the river & on a small channel, I marked my name with red paint and the day of the month & year [July 15, 1806] also the distance and course of the portage on one of the cotton trees**" (Thwaites 5, 267) (WPO, Aug. 1987, 19) This marking is reinforced on map 106 by the note: "W.C. on tree July 15, 1806"

12.) July 25, 1806 Pompey's Pillar. This time, as in several other places, he is reacting to graffiti already in place. He has been on the Yellowstone River in a dugout catamaran for two days and, well I'll let him tell it — "**I...arrived at a remarkable rock situated in an extensive bottom on the starboard side of the river and 250 paces from it. This rock I ascended and from its top had a most extensive view in every direction. This rock, which I shall call Pompey's Tower is 200 feet high and 400 paces in circumference.... The Indians have made 2 piles of stones on the top of this tower. The natives have ingraved on the face of this rock the figures of animals, etc. near which I marked my name and the day of the month and year**" (8, 225).

13.) July 27, 1806 Yellowstone – Big Horn confluence. Just a day later Clark camped at the junction of the Big Horn River, and on the morning of July 27 he begins his journal with: "**I marked my name with red paint on a cotton tree near my camp, and set out at an early hour and proceeded on very well**" (8, 237) This is actually a **triple** because, as Saindon points out, on **map 110** Clark wrote: "**Marked my name on 3 trees with paint**" This signature is at a very important river junction, which later became the site of the fur trading post Fort Manuel of Manuel Lisa's Missouri Fur Company. Clark, himself became a partner in that company and John Colter was trapping out of here when he had his famous escape from the Blackfeet Indians.

In addition to these absolutely documented instances of signing the land, Bob Saindon also pointed to several times Clark's initials appear on his maps, without being supported by journal entries. This often indicates a marking, but it is not absolute or consistent. The first of these occurs just a little short of Great Falls on **June 15, 1805** where there appears on the **map 54** the lone initials: **W.C.** and **R.F.** There is no journal entry to support this as a definite signing, but I believe along with Saindon, that it does indicate that Clark and Reuben Field signed their names on the rock tower Clark noted at this point. I believe this one because there is no other reason to put initials alone on the map.

The next possibility is up on Lemhi Pass, a very logical place to mark. On **map 67** there are two locations marked "**W.C. camp**". Saindon thinks these might indicate signatures because of the initials, but I don't think so. This is an area where there were several camps and I think Clark was simply differentiating between his camp and the main camp. Still, the possibility exists. Another possibility is on **map 91**, at today's Wallacut river: **W.C. camped 19th November**. I think that one, again, is differentiating his camp from others, and yet on the same map he notes the campsite of Nov. 18th simply: Camped 18th Nov. 1805, without his initials. So now we have:

- **15** absolutely documented Clark signatures in **13 different places**, supported by definite journal entries.
- **1** probable supported by initials only, along with R.F. for Reuben Field.
- **3** possible supported by initials and other words suggesting he was differentiating his camp from others.

As far as Lewis is concerned he appears to have signed only two trees, just for the sake of signing them – at the Haley's Bay anchorage (**6, 66 and Map 91**) and at Station Camp (**6, 81**). At the anchorage we don't know if it was a brand or carving for Clark just says he found Lewis's name on a tree. The branding iron could be supposed, I guess, but this was a walking journey so he may have been traveling light. At Station Camp it was definitely a brand. There was of course, the branding of trees at Maria's River. This, however, was not a claim on the land or a personal marking, but meant to keep the Indians away from the boat. As Ordway writes on June 10, 1805: "**We halled out our largest pirogue in the middle of an Island in the North fork opposite the point, and made her fast between some trees, & branded several trees to prevent the Savages from disturbing hir**" (**9, 165**).

Another class of markings mentioned by Saindon is from outside observers. One was discovered by a Henry Osterman in the 1930s. It was in the white cliffs area across from the camp of May 31, 1805. (**WPO, 8 / 87, 12**)

Another was purportedly by Lewis at the canoe camp above Great Falls. Saindon apparently saw this one for himself. (**WPO, 8 / 87, 15**)

The third was on Beaverhead Rock, attested to by a man name August Mailey, whose father blasted the marking off of the rock to create an irrigation ditch. (**WPO, 8 / 87, 15**)

Another thing that Saindon brings out in his article is the instruction given to John Evans when he attempted the same exploration in 1796, on behalf of the Spanish. Evans was told by his boss, James Mackay, to mark the land at significant places. He even dictated the style. Evans mission only reached the Mandans, so there were no markings, but it is known that Mackay actually visited Clark at Camp Dubois on Jan. 10, 1804 (**2, 154**), and may have furnished him with Evan's maps. He might have suggested to Clark that he mark his trail (**WPO, 8 / 87, 11**)

So what does this all mean? I believe Clark was much more attuned to the need to claim the land by leaving signatures than was Lewis. I have already noted that several of the signatures were in what I am calling the classic format. "**Capt. William Clark, December 3rd, 1805. By land from the U. States in 1804 & 1805**". But I also believe some of the other signings, especially when he was responding to existing markings, reveal a deep personal need for William Clark to let the world know he was there. This very human quality really endears me to William Clark. It moves him from the ideal superhero to an ordinary guy in extraordinary circumstances. And his mastery of those circumstances, in turn, does make him a superhero, along with the other 32 members of the Corps of Volunteers for NorthWestern Discovery.

Note: During the recent field trip over "The Forgotten Trail", our own Steve Plucker related that two different family members independently and at different times told him about a tree in the area that had been marked by Clark. The search continues. If you find any more let me know.