



# Wintering on the Northern Plains: Lewis and Clark at the Knife River, 1804–1805

By Gregory S. Camp

Upon reaching the Mandan and Hidatsa villages in October 1804, the **Lewis and Clark Expedition** entered a world of Native American culture they scarcely could have imagined back at Wood River, Illinois, that spring. The five villages that made up the Knife River settlement bustled with people and trade activity, showcasing a way of life that was perhaps at its peak when the Americans arrived. Long aware of the importance of these villages to both European and Native American trade, Jefferson had hoped to persuade the villagers to shift their loyalties to the United States. What the expedition encountered, however, was a people of rich cultural and economic achievement concerned with obtaining the best deal for themselves. For both groups, the winter stay was one of introduction and teaming; for the Americans in particular, it was an up-close study that impressed everyone who kept a journal.

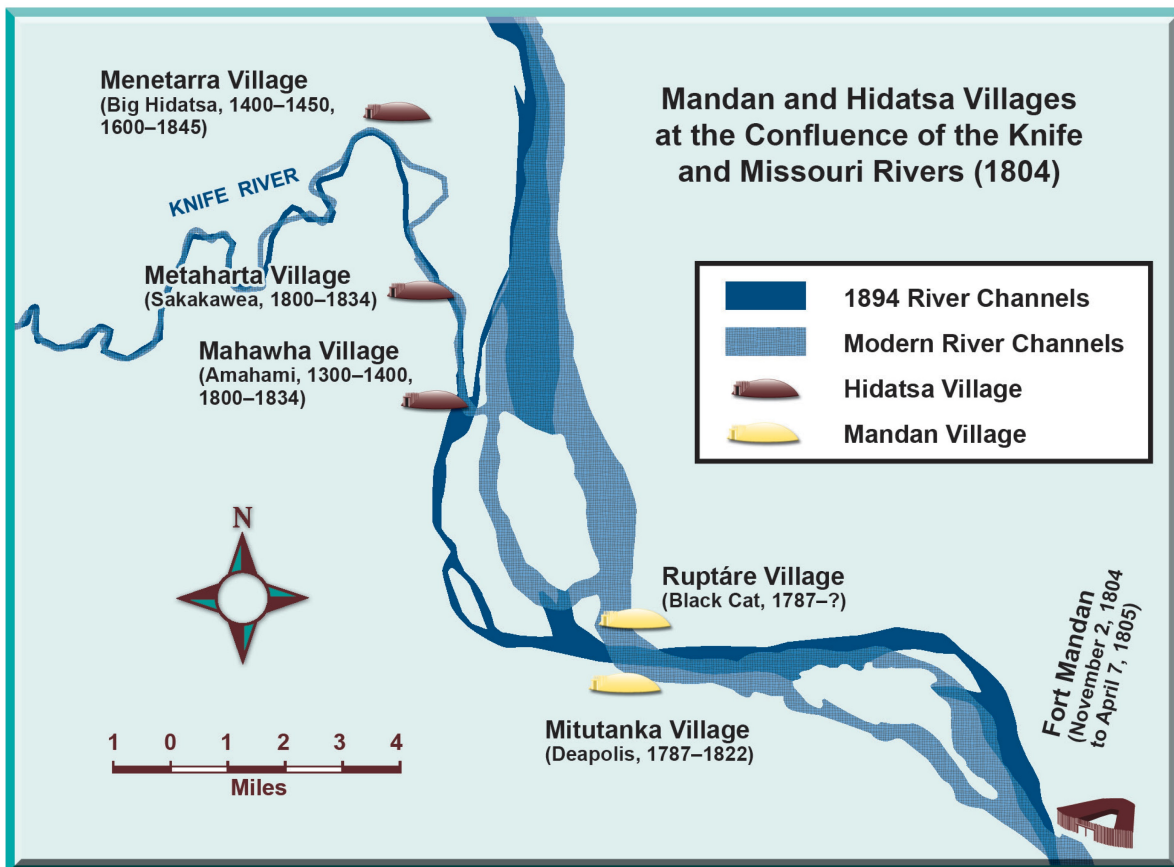


Figure 1. Mandan and Hidatsa Villages at the confluence of the Knife and Missouri Rivers, 1804. (Graphic by Cassie Theurer)

The **Corps of Discovery** met their first Mandans, an autumnal hunting party of some two dozen people under the leadership of **Sheheke**, or “Big White,” on October 24.<sup>1</sup> After this initial encounter they pushed on to the Knife River villages, the first of which was the Mandan town **Mitutanka**, or, as Lewis called it, “Matootonha.”<sup>2</sup> The captains described this village as the lower of the two Mandan communities and stated that it was located on a prairie bluff overlooking the Missouri River. Built in the late 1780s, Mitutanka consisted of perhaps forty earth lodges and was home to chief Sheheke. Because of its close proximity to the expedition’s winter camp, it would be the scene of numerous American visits. Due north of Mitutanka was **Ruptáre** (Rooptahee), another Mandan village of around forty lodges. Ruptáre—referred to by Lewis and Clark as the upper, or second, village—was the home of **Black Cat**, a leader the captains designated as the “Grand Chief” of the Mandan peoples.<sup>3</sup>

Three Hidatsa villages were also nearby. Across the Missouri River from Ruptáre was **Mahawha**, smallest of the group. There is some confusion in the journals about this village and its inhabitants, but it was apparently distinct enough for both Lewis and Clark to consider it linguistically independent from the two larger communities immediately to the north. These larger communities, situated along the Knife River proper, were **Metaharta**, or Black Moccasin village, and **Menetarra**, or Le Borgne village.<sup>4</sup>

By any description, it was a colorful atmosphere that met the members of the expedition. As the center of an immense trade network, the **Knife River villages** contained not only an impressive array of local culture, but also evidence of other Native peoples who regularly visited the trade fairs held at the **Knife-Missouri confluence**. The Mandans welcomed their American guests warmly, arranging activities such as gaming, story-telling, and dancing. The Corps of Discovery, meanwhile, had much to do and much to learn about their native hosts. Tribal leadership needed to be quickly identified, and social customs, so far as they could be ascertained on short notice, needed to be followed.



**Figure 2.** Games the Mandans and Hidatsas played during Lewis and Clark’s visit would have used, among other things, balls, stone rings, and feathered horn darts. This Mandan game ball, circa 1870, is made of elk or bison hide and decorated with dyed porcupine quills. Prince Maximilian of Wied, who visited Fort Clark in 1834, observed Mandan women using such a ball to play a game similar to modern-day hacky sack. (SHSND 156)

To address these pressing concerns, Lewis and Clark spoke with the leaders of the lower Mandan village, notably Big White and Little Raven. On October 26 the captains reintroduced the Arikara chief who had come with the expedition from his village on what would later be the North Dakota-South Dakota border. This unnamed leader had already met Big White two days earlier, when the Mandan chief’s hunting party encountered the keelboat on its way north. The speedy introduction of the two tribal leaders was part of Lewis and Clark’s effort to reconcile local native groups along the Missouri River so as to facilitate trade with the Americans and draw them away from their ties to the Hudson’s Bay and North West Companies. As part of this effort, the leaders of the Corps of Discovery sought to bring about a long-term alliance between the Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras against their most formidable foe on the northern plains, the Lakotas.<sup>5</sup> In order to keep the Missouri open to trade, they also tried to quiet short-term conflicts such as the fighting that had broken out between the Arikaras and the Tetons.



## Politics on the Upper Missouri

Relationships among the tribes of the Upper Missouri were as complicated and contingent as those of the United States and the nations of Europe (then in the midst of a twenty-year period of alternating wars and temporary truces). Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the northern plains, the Hidatsa earthlodge villages at the Knife River and the Mandan villages farther south at the Heart River served as centers of a vast trade network that allowed the Mandans and Hidatsas not only to trade their surplus agricultural products for goods introduced by Indian groups engaged primarily in hunting cultures, but also to act as middlemen in annual trade fairs. These fairs, often held in late summer or early autumn, brought together Crees, Ojibwas, Assiniboines, Crows, Arikaras, Arapahos, Kiowa-Apaches, various Dakota bands, and even the distant Cheyennes.



**Figure 3. Mandan-Hidatsa quilled shirt, circa 1890.** The Knife River villages were the hub of an extensive Native American trade network in Lewis and Clark's day. The Mandans and Hidatsas, who were semisedentary, exchanged their own crafts and agricultural produce for goods made by more nomadic, hunting-based tribes like the Dakotas. Mandan and Hidatsa quilled shirts were so prized that they were traded south to the Dakota people in present-day Nebraska and west to the Blackfeet, Cheyennes, and Gros Ventres in the Rocky Mountains. This shirt, decorated with some five thousand porcupine quills, was collected from a Dakota owner but is recognized as having a Mandan-Hidatsa design. (SHSND 14370)

These village complexes also served as increasingly important centers for the trade in European goods—and for the European diseases that accompanied that trade. In the last decades of the eighteenth century the Mandans, weakened by smallpox and other diseases and faced with increasing pressure from expanding Dakota bands and the Arikaras farther south on the Missouri, left their Heart River villages, moving north to the Knife River and into an uneasy alliance with the Hidatsas. The newly arrived and less numerous Mandans functioned in some ways as junior partners in this alliance of commercial and security interests (which may help explain their warmer reception of the Lewis and Clark Expedition).

As the Mandans moved north to the Knife River confluence, the Arikaras also moved north up the Missouri. When the Lewis and Clark Expedition encountered the Arikaras, they were living near what would become the North Dakota-South Dakota border. The relationship between the Arikaras and the Hidatsas and Mandans was frequently hostile. They were, after all, competitors in the production of agricultural goods and dependent allies of powerful nomadic tribes—the Hidatsas and Mandans with the Assiniboines and Crees, and the Arikaras with the Dakotas—who were themselves seeking to demonstrate their dominance.

The Arikaras traded their surplus agricultural goods with the Dakotas, originally for products from the hunt and later also for European goods the Dakotas obtained from their own contacts with British traders farther east in what is now Minnesota. In the same manner, the Assiniboines and Crees, who lived closer to the French and British traders in Canada, served as the source of European goods for the Hidatsas and Mandan. None of these relationships were seamless. At times, open conflict would arise between the village peoples and their nomadic allies. At other times the Mandans and Hidatsas would trade amicably with Dakota bands. As the needs and relative strengths of these groups varied, so did the nature of their relationships.





**Figure 4. Arrival of Lewis and Clark at the Mandan Villages**, by Ralph W. Smith, 1950. The locals were as curious about the newcomers as the newcomers were about them. (SHSND 11549)

Such talk of alliances among Native peoples of whom the Americans were largely ignorant was at best an uncertain proposition, but it was deemed necessary if the trade relations Jefferson had hoped for were to be successfully implemented.<sup>6</sup>

That same day (October 26) the expedition made camp just below the first, or lower, Mandan village. The locals immediately flooded the Corps of Discovery's temporary home and proved just as curious about the newcomers as the newcomers were about them. The large keelboat was of particular interest; few of the attending Indians had seen a vessel of such size, and they considered it to be woven about with spiritual significance, or "medicine."<sup>7</sup> Lewis met with Big White and accompanied him back to his village, where further invitations were extended to leaders of all the villages to meet with the captain in council. Clark, meanwhile, remained with the keelboat and saw to the establishment of a camp and general security. With probably some four thousand people in the

combined five villages, the Mandans and Hidatsas could easily have overwhelmed the expedition had they so intended. Any fears of attack, however, proved to be unfounded.

While Lewis was being received by the Mandans, Clark met a local French-Canadian fur trader named **René Jessaume**. Jessaume was an independent trader who had been living among the Mandans for more than fifteen years. Though generally held in low esteem by the British and Americans who knew him, he nonetheless played an important, albeit brief, role in the success of the expedition. Clark himself did not entirely trust the fur trader, but he recognized an asset when he saw one. Hearing that Jessaume had been a longtime resident of the area, he hired him as an interpreter, as he would again during the Corps of Discovery's brief stay on their return trip to St. Louis.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Jessaume's greatest contribution would come from his understanding of Mandan social and religious ceremonies; he would explain



local spiritual concepts for the Americans and act as guide through the unfamiliar rites.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the friendly Mandans, the Hidatsas had serious doubts—perhaps fueled by unflattering things they had heard from British and French traders in the area—about the intentions of the Americans. Although the initial meetings were cordial, there was an underlying sense of apprehension. The Knife River trade network, after all, had been created and sustained through the adroit (skillful) diplomacy and skepticism of its Mandan and Hidatsa leaders. In addition to their trade concerns, the Hidatsas would resent any suggestion from the Americans that they were in fact “owners” of the land and resist pressures to cease making war on traditional enemies, notably the Shoshones of Montana. Given the underlying arrogance of the American claims, it is nothing short of remarkable that the Mandans and Hidatsas were receptive at all.

On October 28 the first formal council with the five villages took place.<sup>10</sup> The meeting was originally scheduled to assemble on the east bank of the Missouri River, but by noon the winds had begun to pick up, forcing a change in plans. The two

captains spent the rest of the day entertaining the Hidatsa chiefs who had managed to cross the now-foaming Missouri River on the keelboat, and later accompanied Black Cat in search of possible winter quarters.<sup>11</sup> During this time with Black Cat, Lewis gained valuable information about the political structure of the five villages and a rudimentary understanding of their cultural norms and mores. Indeed, so helpful was Black Cat in explaining the complexities of Mandan and Hidatsa life that he henceforth became a close confidant of Lewis. Much of what Lewis wrote about Mandan life in his journal over the next six months was directly informed by his conversations with Black Cat.<sup>12</sup>

The following day the captains and chiefs reassembled under fairer weather. Lewis made what historian Stephen Ambrose had called his “Indian speech,” a general introduction the captain had been using each time the expedition met a new group of native peoples. In this speech, two important claims were repeatedly stated: that the Louisiana Territory upon which the five villages sat were now American lands and that the Mandans and Hidatsas were therefore expected to trade with the United States. If these pronouncements were not enough to raise eyebrows, particularly among



**Figure 5. Detail from pictograph of Mandan Corn Priests, by Sitting Rabbit (Little Crow) at Fort Berthold in 1906.** The corn priest was an important religious figure to the Mandans. He led ceremonies for good weather and crops and officiated whenever corn was sold to other tribes. Little Owl's genealogy (read right to left) covers thirty-three priests, beginning with Rattler and ending with Moves Slowly (far left), a survivor of the 1837 smallpox epidemic who was in his eighties when he died in 1905. Either Garden Tree or Rattler Head was probably the priest when Lewis and Clark visited the Knife River villages. (SHSND 792)



the Hidatsas, Lewis's call for peace with the Arikaras certainly caused a stir. Peace between the Knife River villages and their southern neighbors might be desirable in itself, but it would surely incur the wrath of the Lakotas, who would look upon any such agreement as a threat to the balance of power. For the Hidatsas, moreover, accepting these terms would mean alienating the English, with whom they had traded for years. All of this was undoubtedly a hard sell, and Lewis was not ignorant of the fact the United States' goals for the northern plains depended on willing Mandan and Hidatsa participation. Nonetheless, when the meeting adjourned he had reason to believe that Jefferson's objectives might be met.<sup>13</sup>

Lewis's optimism seemed warranted when, on October 31, William Clark was summoned to Black Cat's village.<sup>14</sup> To the delight of the Americans, the Mandan leader welcomed the possibility of peace between his people and the Arikaras.<sup>15</sup> However, Black Cat also expressed disappointment that the newcomers had not brought more in the way of gifts (the Mandans had received only a few thus far). Lewis and Clark, however, had other concerns. The captains sought to further ascertain the social and political power structure of the villages so as to better negotiate with their hosts and prod them into compliance with American objectives. They also had to address the Knife River villages' longstanding relationship with British traders, notably the Hudson's Bay and North West Companies.<sup>16</sup> These two companies, while engaged in competition with each other, presented a formidable challenge to the United States. Both had years of experience on the plains, and both were well-known to the locals; the North West Company in particular had built friendships

with the Mandans and Hidatsas that would prove difficult to counter.

On October 31, Lewis met with one of the North West traders, a man named Hugh McCracken, who had for years provided a steady stream of European manufactured good to the Mandans. Lewis needed to be diplomatic with McCracken, and to his credit he did not announce plans to throw out the British and assert American power in the region. Indeed, the Corps of Discovery was hardly in a position to do much about rival trade; the British were on good terms with the Mandans and Hidatsas, and the American visitors were powerless to force the issue. The meeting was therefore cordial, if not altogether candid.<sup>17</sup> For the expedition, keeping things friendly was of paramount importance, as was the need to construct quarters before winter descended upon them in earnest.

The building of what would be called **Fort Mandan** proceeded quickly, beginning November 2. Named for the native hosts, the post was situated on the east bank of the Missouri River across from the lower Mandan village. It was a triangular affair, with two rows of officers' and men's quarters forming the outside walls and a third, palisaded side facing the river. The fort allowed the expedition quick access to nearby tribes while also providing a place where discipline could be maintained and planning for the ensuing journey to the West Coast could proceed. In all, the Corps of Discovery would spend more than 140 days at Fort Mandan—the longest period at any one place on the entire trip.

During the fort's construction Lewis and Clark met a fur trader who would make a great, albeit



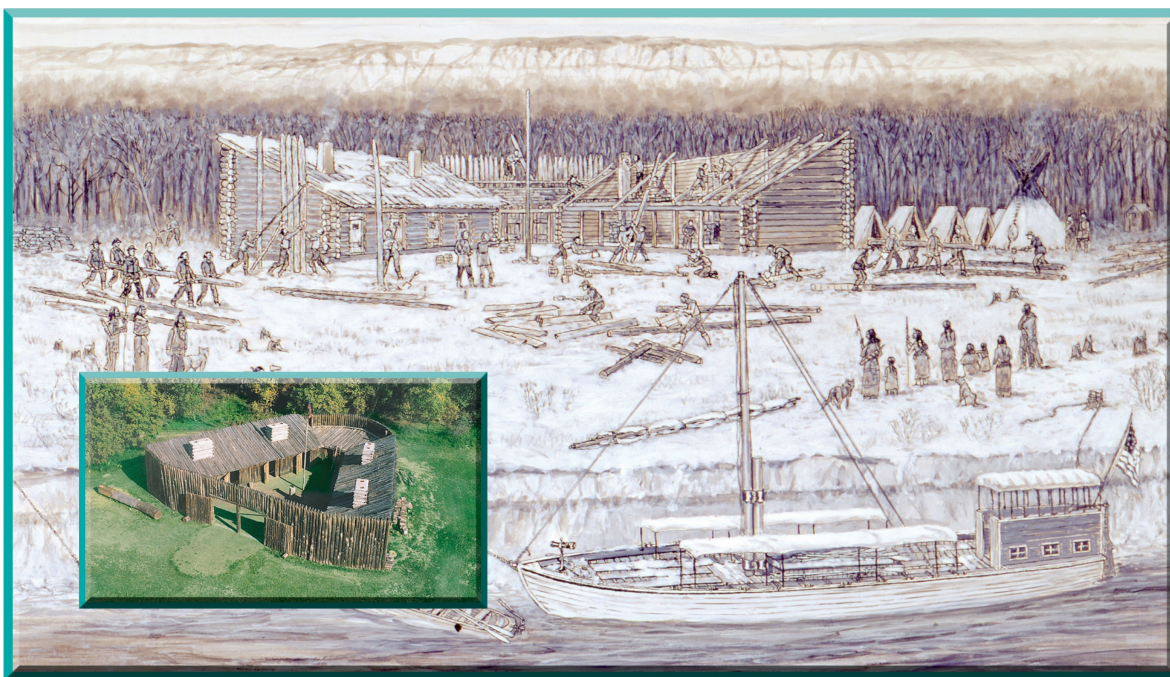


indirect, contribution to the expedition's efforts. **Toussaint Charbonneau**, a French-Canadian, had been a trader for the North West Company for several years, but apparently by the time the Americans met him he was working independently and living year-round with the Hidatsas. Charbonneau would himself be valuable to the captains as an interpreter, but far more important was the fact that at least one of his wives was Shoshone and could fluently speak the language.<sup>18</sup> **Sakakawea**, or "**Bird Woman**," had been captured during a Hidatsa raid to the west and brought back to the Knife River villages. The tribe had then adopted her and raised her as one of their own. When Lewis and Clark met her she was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old and six months pregnant with Charbonneau's child. This remarkable young woman would contribute far more to the success of the expedition than would her husband. The English traders had a low opinion of the former North West trader, and by all accounts Charbonneau did little to change that perception among

the Americans. As for Sakakawea, her value as a translator became immediately apparent.

The Corps of Discovery's success depended on reliable translation—their difficulties with the Tetons in present-day South Dakota had taught them that. At the Knife River villages, however, translation was a frustrating, serpentine (winding course) process. An English trader noted that when Lewis and Clark tried to record a Hidatsa vocabulary, the chain would pass from a native speaker through Sakakawea to Charbonneau, who would then translate it into French for Droulliard or Jessaume, who would in turn translate it into English for the captains.<sup>19</sup> Naturally, these early meetings proved difficult due to the language barrier.

Even before Fort Mandan was completed, Lewis and Clark heard some troubling news. Their attempt to make peace between the Arikaras and the Mandans and Hidatsas had run into serious



**Figures 6 & 7. *The Corps of Discovery Constructing Fort Mandan, 1804***, by Vern Erickson, 2002. The Lewis and Clark Expedition constructed their 1804–1805 winter quarters from river-bottom cottonwoods. By the time they returned to the Knife River area in August 1806, the fort had burned down. (SHSND 2006.373.3) **INSET A reconstructed Fort Mandan** near present-day Washburn. (Courtesy of Lewis and Clark Fort Mandan Foundation, photo by David Borlaug)





**Figure 8. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark entering Black Cat's Village, a Mandan village. Detail of painting by Andrew Knutson. (SHSND 2003.9)**

obstacles. Despite the presence of the Arikara leader whom the expedition had brought along expressly to promote peaceful relations between the three tribes, periodic Arikara-Sioux raids on the Mandans persisted. Old animosities died hard, and efforts to stop the raids would take time. Arikara peace overtures to the Tetons had also been rebuffed, in spite of Lewis's efforts. What is clear is that Lewis and Clark had been meddling in intertribal affairs about which they had little or no information, and that the intrusions were neither welcomed nor appreciated. The captains' heavy-handed approach angered the Hidatsas in particular, who already were suspicious of the newcomers. Having engaged in the trade network longer than the Mandans, the Hidatsas jealously guarded their operation and considered any changes with great care. When Lewis informed the locals that it was America who now called the shots in the region, and that the land upon which their ancestors had lived and died now belonged to the "Great Father," it reinforced warnings the Hidatsas had heard about the Americans. Since

the time of the Evans expedition a decade earlier, European traders had told them that the Americans were not to be trusted and would not be able to live up to their trade promises. Neither did it help matters that the Americans proclaimed their arrival with both a carrot and a stick: the Mandans and Hidatsas were told that to disagree with the United States was to possibly invite their wrath. To date, however, the Hidatsas had seen little to indicate that the Corps of Discovery was the harbinger (coming of) of a vast and powerful people.

Trying to get the Hidatsas to agree to American plans for peace and trade was a difficult task. Astute diplomats and businessmen in their own right, the Hidatsas rightly saw the American requests primarily as means to support their claims in the region. Lewis himself must have recognized, or at least suspected, the Hidatsas' reservations, as efforts throughout the winter to halt Hidatsa raids against the Shoshones and Blackfeet of Montana repeatedly broke down.



For Lewis and Clark, the winter would prove a long one in this regard.<sup>20</sup>

Whatever else can be said about the 1804–1805 winter at Fort Mandan—and much can be—the Lewis and Clark Expedition got off on the wrong foot in one particularly important area: honestly stating their objectives to their hosts. There is no question that the expedition's leaders sought to establish peace and encourage a thriving trade relationship with the Knife River tribes. But it is also true that Lewis, at least, understood some of the long-term implications of their visit. What was being attempted, though not openly proposed to the people at Knife River, was the establishment of an outpost on the Great Plains by a nation fully intending to search westward as quickly as possible. Lewis was understandably nervous about announcing such plans; and even though both he and Jefferson hoped that the incorporation of the vast Louisiana Territory would be peaceful and

the assimilation of Indian peoples smooth, they knew from history that this was seldom the case. Indeed, the construction of Fort Mandan marked the beginning of the end of Native American independence on the northern plains. It ushered in a period which, for the Indians concerned, would be masked by broken promises, economic domination, and finally, the loss of their very lands.

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## About the Author

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1. James Ronda, *Lewis and Clark among the Indians*, Bicentennial Ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 67–70. Chapter four, which deals with the Corps' time among the Mandans and Hidatsas, is a first-rate account and of the highest value for those seeking information about this period; see also John Allen, *Passage Through the Garden: Lewis and Clark and the Image of the American Northwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 207.
2. Today also known as the Deapolis site.
3. See also Clay Jenkinson, ed., *A Vast and Open Plain: The Writings of the Lewis and Clark Expedition in North Dakota, 1804–1806* (Bismarck: State Historical Society of North Dakota, 2003), 68–75 for the Corps' early encounters with the Mandans and Hidatsas.
4. Today also known as the Sakakawea and Big Hidatsa villages, respectively.
5. The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras would unite decades later as the Three Affiliated Tribes, but at this juncture in their history there were periodic hostilities between the Arikaras and the other two.
6. Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 182–183; see also Ronda, 81.
7. The keelboat was of interest to virtually every tribe that saw it. Clark's black slave, York, was also a source of intellectual and spiritual intrigue to the Mandans.
8. Jessaume moved his family down to Fort Mandan to be closer to his new employers. Whatever his shortcomings, he was of service to the United States and was even sent to accompany the Sheheke delegation to Washington, D.C., in 1807. Apparently universally known as a braggart, he lived into the 1830s.
9. Ronda, 80.
10. Jenkinson, 83–90; Ambrose, 84–185; Ronda, 80–81.
11. Ronda, 80–81.
12. *Ibid.*; Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, vol. 1 (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1905), 208–209; Jenkinson, 81–82.
13. Ronda, 83–85.
14. *Ibid.*, 79; Jenkinson, 93.
15. Jenkinson, 95–97.
16. The Hudson's Bay Company had been established in the late seventeenth century and had a long history on the North American continent. The North West Company, which had come into existence in the 1770s, offered the Hudson's Bay Company competition in several areas of the Canadian West, including present-day North Dakota. Less than ten years after the Lewis and Clark Expedition's visit, there would be open warfare between the two fur trade firms, collectively known as the Pemmican Wars. By the early 1820s, however, the Hudson's Bay Company had bought out and absorbed its rival.
17. Ambrose, 185–186; for a much more detailed account of this meeting between Captain Lewis and the British fur traders, see L.R. Masson, *Le Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest*, (1889–90, reprint, New York: Antiquarian 1960), 304–311.
18. The Shoshones were a tribe the expedition was sure to run into on its way west, and the possibility of having a native speaker travel with them was considered a great advantage.
19. Ronda, 116–117; apparently Jessaume and Charbonneau argued about the proper French words to use in the process.
20. Ambrose, 188–189.

