

A Prairie Dog For Mr. Jefferson

In late 1803, after the completion of the Louisiana Purchase transfer ceremonies at the Cabildo in New Orleans, President Thomas Jefferson wasted no time in tasking Meriwether Lewis with putting together an expedition to map and explore the United States' newly acquired lands west of the Mississippi River. Lewis chose William Clark as his co-leader for the mission, and the Lewis and Clark Expedition was underway. The two captains of this historic excursion, which lasted over two years (May 1804 to September 1806), were also charged with finding a practical route across the western half of the continent and to take steps to establish an American presence and sovereignty in the new territory before Britain or other European powers could, in any way, lay claim to it.

In the course of their quest, these two undaunted explorers experienced unforgiving terrain and weather, treacherous streams, starvation, extreme physical peril, disease and both hostile and friendly Native Americans. Still, the approximately 8,000-mile journey was considered a great success and provided new geographic, ecological, social, botanical and zoological information about previously uncharted regions of North America.



Left to right: Meriwether Lewis, prairie dog and William Clark

By early 1805, the expedition team had built an encampment on the Missouri River in present-day North Dakota known as Fort Mandan, and they had already prepared a shipment of zoological specimens.

According to Paul Russell Cutright in his book, *Lewis & Clark, Pioneering Naturalists* (1969), this shipment included: "1 tin box containing insects, mice &c and a unique collection of skins, horns, and bones of such animals as pronghorn, mule deer, prairie dog, white-tailed jack rabbit, coyote, long-tailed weasel, badger, elk, and bighorn sheep"

There is nothing unusual in this except for the fact that the captains made the decision to consign to Mr. Jefferson six live animals from the Dakota plains. How were they ever to make the journey and safely reach the Presidential Mansion miles and miles across the continent?

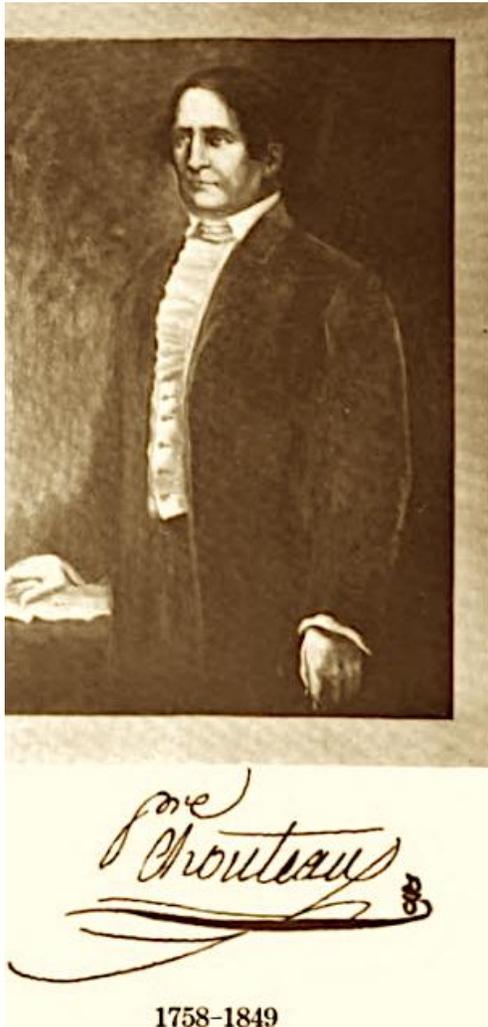
These were men who were determined to make it happen, whatever challenges were involved. The six living creatures collected were four magpies (*Pica pica hudsonia*), one sharp-tailed grouse (*Pedioecetes phasianellus campestris*) and one sole mammal, a black-tailed prairie dog (*Cynomys ludovicianus*).

The prairie dog's genus name, *Cynomys*, is from the Greek words, *kynos*, meaning dog, and *mys* for mouse. The species name *ludovicianus* is a Latin form for the surname Lewis, in honor of Meriwether Lewis for his contribution in collecting the animal for scientific study. The next step was to send what Lewis later described as a "barking squirrel", along with his five avian co-travelers, on the first leg of their journey aboard a keel-boat down the Missouri River to St. Louis, a distance of approximately 1,600 miles over forty-five days.

Black-tailed prairie dogs are generally tan in color, with long black claws for digging. Their tails have black tips, from which their name is derived. The one Captain Lewis sent on to President Jefferson had already been kept three months without his being able to make it swallow a single drop of water. But it "accepted very readily biscuit, corn, nuts, etc."

Upon the arrival of the keel-boat in St. Louis, Missouri, the precious cargo was entrusted to New Orleans-born fur trader Pierre Chouteau, who President Jefferson had named U.S. Agent for Indian affairs west of the Mississippi River. On June 12, 1805, Chouteau wrote the

President that he had received the trunks and cages from Lewis and Clark and had shipped them down the Mississippi to New Orleans.



Jean-Pierre Chouteau



Governor William C. C. Claiborne

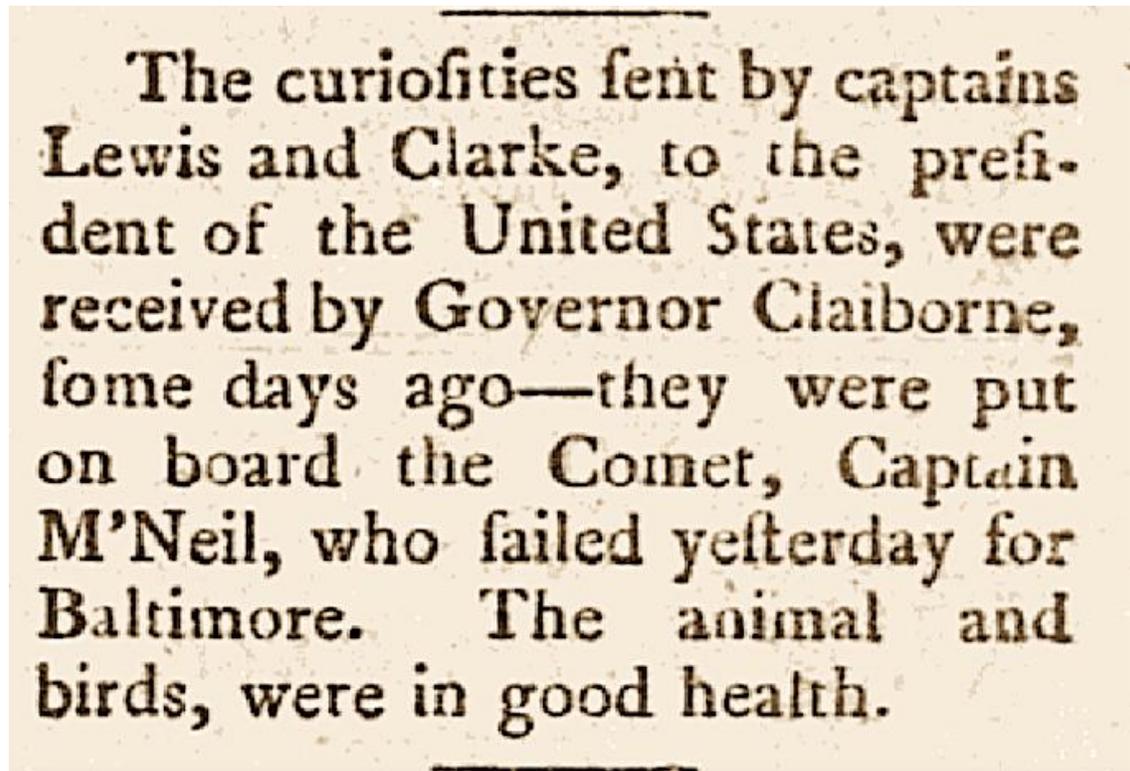
"I thought that this would be the surest way to have these animals arrive safe and sound in federal city," Chouteau said.

At about this same time, Chouteau wrote the Governor of the Orleans Territory, William Charles Cole Claiborne: "Cap'n Lewis having sent by his barge from the Missouri [*sic*] river two trunks, two cages or boxes with some birds and one ditto with a prairy [*sic*] Dog, which are to be sent according to his instructions to the President of the United States, I send them to you by Mr. Mallock according to his receipt here annexed, as the only proper authority to take them with safety to

Washington city. I beg you will give me notice of theyre [sic] safe arrival at New Orleans."

The unusual menagerie reached Governor Claiborne in New Orleans, who immediately reported to Jefferson that he had received four of the birds plus "a small living animal somewhat resembling our common Gray Squirrel," which Claiborne went on to say, "seems to be sick & I fear will not live. The Birds are well and have excellent appetites." The whole cargo was to be shipped to Baltimore aboard the Ship *Comet*, which was to depart New Orleans in fifteen days.

Two days later Claiborne wrote the President with an update. The prairie dog was on the mend and he had high hopes that it would survive. He also wrote the Collector of Baltimore asking him to take care of the "one Hogshead [sic] three boxes and two cases directed to the President of the United States". Along with those "curiosities" Claiborne also asked that he look after the "living animal called the wild dog of the Prairie".



The curiosities sent by captains Lewis and Clarke, to the president of the United States, were received by Governor Claiborne, some days ago—they were put on board the Comet, Captain M'Neil, who sailed yesterday for Baltimore. The animal and birds, were in good health.

A notice appearing in the local *Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser* on July 24, 1805 (shown above), mentioned the "curiosities" and the departure of the *Comet* for Baltimore, with Captain McNeil at the helm. To reach Baltimore with her prairie dog

passenger, the *Comet* had to sail into the Gulf, round the Florida peninsula and travel along the Eastern seaboard to the Chesapeake Bay.

The *Comet* made numerous voyages between Baltimore and the Crescent City. An 1807 advertisement in the *Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser* placed by Charles Marr, shopkeeper at Number 15 Royal Street, announced many fine goods "imported in the ship *Comet* from Baltimore", such as "well chosen cutlery", special netting for "musqueto [*sic*] curtains", "checked gingham", "gun and rifle locks", "ship scrapers", "superfine ... cloths", black and scarlet "bombazetts" and "bombazeens"(types of worsted fabric).

Upon the arrival of the *Comet*, the Collector of the Port of Baltimore promptly placed the consignment on a vehicle bound for Washington, as requested by Governor Claiborne. On its safe delivery to the Executive Mansion (Jefferson was still away at Monticello), the President's major-domo, Étienne Lemaire, wrote the President on August 12th that the prairie dog had landed, along with one magpie, after an arduous journey of over 4,000 miles. He informed Mr. Jefferson that he had put the two critters "in the room where Monsieur receives his callers."

It was not until October 4th that Jefferson had the opportunity to examine his treasures from the West. He decided to keep some horns, skins and American Indian utensils for Monticello. Some skeletons and skins, as well as the living magpie and prairie dog, were sent on to Charles Willson Peale, eminent American painter and naturalist, for his natural history museum in Philadelphia. Housed in Independence Hall, the "burrowing squirrel of the prairies" and the last remaining magpie had reached the end of their travels almost seven months after leaving the distant grasslands they once called home.

Peale thanked the President and wrote him that the prairie dog "is a handsome little Animal, smaller and much more gentle than our Monax [woodchuck]". "I am very thankful for these additions," he replied.

Distinguished and learned men visited the museum to see this gregarious creature, and it became evident that the prairie dog was indeed new to science and native to the treeless plains of North America. The last report on the prairie dog still being alive was in a letter from Peale to Jefferson dated April 5, 1806, when he informed the President that he would attempt a drawing in the latter part of spring when the prairie dog would be hopefully more animated. We

don't know if that moment ever happened, since no known sketch or description by Peale has ever been located.



In the above self-portrait by Charles Willson Peale (1741 – 1827), the painter lifts the curtain to reveal the natural history curiosities in his museum on the second floor of Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

Prairie dogs are truly fascinating mammals. They live in tight-knit family groups called coteries, yet their entire mating season is merely an hour long.

There once were hundreds of millions of these herbivorous burrowing rodents in North America, and their intricate underground colonies, known as prairie dog towns, often extended for miles. But over time

and with the encroachment of humans, their historical range has today shrunk by more than 95%.^[1]^[SEP]

It has also been said that these animals support at least 136 other species, as their burrowing helps create shelter for jackrabbits, toads, and even rattlesnakes. And they themselves are a vital food source for a number of predators, such as coyotes, hawks and ferrets.



Looking as if they were awaiting a Carnival parade

What can be said of the prairie dog and magpie that traveled from North Dakota to our nation's capital via New Orleans and ended their days in Philadelphia? Not many animals can claim that they've resided both in the President's Mansion and at Independence Hall. Nor have there been other live animals that have been encountered by the likes of so many famous persons: Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Pierre Chouteau, Governor William C. C. Claiborne, Thomas Jefferson and Charles Willson Peale, to name just a few.

And although prairie dogs do not inhabit the swampy terrain in and around New Orleans, the city can proudly claim its important role as a transit point in the delivery of Lewis and Clark's special consignment to President Thomas Jefferson and the world.

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New Orleans Nostalgia
"A Prairie Dog For Mr. Jefferson"
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