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**OBJECT: SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE,
THE FREEMAN-CUSTIS EXPEDITION**

by Beverly Watkins

Thomas Jefferson had a life-long interest in Western exploration. Even before he knew of the purchase of Louisiana he had made the arrangements for the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the Missouri River system to find routes for communication and trade with the Pacific coast.

As soon as the news of the purchase of Louisiana reached Jefferson, he began collecting information on the new territory. In preparing a report to Congress, Jefferson sent a list of seventeen questions about Louisiana to Daniel Clark, the consul at New Orleans, William Dunbar, a scientist and plantation owner of Natchez, Mississippi, and William C.C. Claiborne, governor of the Orleans Territory. Four of the questions dealt with maps and boundaries; others were about militia strength and Indian tribes. The answers that Jefferson received served as the basis for his report to Congress on 14 November 1803.¹

Congress was also interested in learning more about Louisiana. On 8 March 1804 the House Committee of Commerce and Manufactures produced a report on the need for exploring the new territory. After taking note of the Lewis and Clark expedition and of the availability of information on the land along the Mississippi River, the report pointed out that large parts of Louisiana were still unknown, particularly along the Arkansas and Red Rivers. Special attention was given to the Red River because it was assumed that the source of the river was in the southwest corner of the new territory, where the boundary was undefined. The committee felt that the government should determine the latitude and longitude of the river's source. The report went on to recommend "that it will be honorable and useful to make some public provision for further exploring the extent, and ascertaining the boundaries of Louisiana."²

Jefferson and Henry Dearborn, Secretary of War, acted promptly on the committee's recommendation. Both of them wrote to William Dunbar on March 31, 1804 suggesting that he lead the expedition to explore the Arkansas and Red Rivers.³ Dunbar was born in Scotland and educated at Glasgow and London. He came to America in 1771 where he engaged in the Indian trade; later he established a plantation near Baton Rouge, then moved to a new plantation near Natchez in 1783. He was widely known for his scientific abilities and was employed as an astronomer in running the northern boundary of Florida.⁴

The original plan of exploration for the Arkansas and Red Rivers was for the expedition to ascend the Red River to its source, then go overland to the Arkansas and descend that river. Dearborn wrote to James Wilkinson informing him of the expedition and directing him to supply Dunbar with an escort and supplies. The escort was to be a sergeant and ten men, volunteers if possible, who were faithful, discrete, and sober. In addition to a boat, they were to be furnished with six months rations of ham and flour, one wall tent, three common tents, and guns or rifles.⁵

From the beginning, Dunbar was worried about the reaction of the Spanish government to an expedition up the Red River, since the question of the boundary was unsettled. He communicated his fears to Jefferson, emphasizing orders which had been issued to the governor of Texas and the Commander at Nacogdoches to allow no Americans to approach the Texas frontier or to attempt to mark the Louisiana boundary. In view of the unsettled conditions, Jefferson ordered Dunbar to delay the expedition.⁶

Dunbar, however, was anxious to do some exploring, so he decided to use the supplies and personnel to travel the Ouachita River, a tributary of the Red, and investigate some hot springs.⁷ This limited expedition left Natchez on October 16, 1804 with Dunbar, Dr. George Hunter of Philadelphia (a chemist), a sergeant and twelve men. They reached the hot springs in December, and returned to Natchez in late January, 1805.⁸

The success of the expedition up the Ouachita River, and the wealth of scientific information which it produced, created renewed interest in the exploration of the Arkansas and Red Rivers. Early in March, 1805, Jefferson wrote Dunbar asking him to reorganize an expedition, using \$5,000 appropriated by Congress. Dearborn echoed the request but limited Dunbar to a budget of \$2,000.

Dunbar accepted the new assignment promptly and made several recommendations to make the trip easier, including using two small boats instead of one large one. He also mentioned again his fears of Spanish opposition, in particular from the militia at the Spanish settlement on Bayou Pierre about fifty miles above Natchitoches.⁹

In May Jefferson decided, because of the problems encountered by the Ouachita expedition in transporting itself from the river to the hot springs (about nine miles), that the new expedition should confine itself to the Red River rather than try to reach the Arkansas River by land.¹⁰

The President also attempted to solve the problem of Spanish opposition. He directed William C.C. Claiborne, governor of the Orleans Territory, to obtain a passport for the expedition from the Marquis de Casa Calvo, the Spanish boundary commissioner then in New Orleans. Claiborne was to stress the scientific nature of the expedition, and to offer Casa Calvo the opportunity of sending along his own representative in order to assure himself that obtaining geographical knowledge was the expedition's only activity.¹¹ Claiborne applied for the passport and got a favorable reply from Casa Calvo, who said that he would issue the passport on demand and that he was notifying other authorities because the expedition might cross their provinces.¹²

In the meantime, Dunbar was faced with finding leaders for the expedition. Although he would supervise the trip, he had decided not to be the actual leader. Dr. Hunter had also decided that the rigors of exploration did not appeal to him. Dearborn and Jefferson both suggested a number of possible candidates. Dunbar finally settled on Thomas Freeman, a surveyor he knew personally from running the Florida border, and not to be confused with Constant Freeman, the commander of the post at New Orleans. Dr. Peter Custis was chosen as the naturalist for the group.¹³

In February Claiborne wrote to Casa Calvo again on the subject of a passport. He informed the Spanish commissioner that the expedition led by Thomas Freeman would soon be ready to leave. Claiborne also renewed the assurances that the expedition was solely scientific. Casa Calvo, however, now declined to issue a passport and Freeman was forced to proceed without even that small measure of protection.¹⁴

By March Freeman had reached New Orleans to make the final preparations for the voyage. By this time Claiborne was afraid that the lack of a passport would cause Freeman some difficulties, saying, "I very much fear he will be interrupted in his excursion by our jealous and illdisposed Spanish neighbors."¹⁵

Claiborne had reason to be concerned. From the time the United States had purchased Louisiana, Nemesio Salcedo, the Commandant-General of the Interior Provinces, had feared the encroachment of foreigners on Spanish territory. He had sent a detachment of troops to the Bayou Pierre settlement, and it was he who had issued the order to stop Americans from entering Texas or trying to survey the boundary. He therefore saw the scientific expedition as a survey party in disguise. In order to meet the threat from the east, Salcedo redistributed his troops until he had 700 men in the province of Texas, with 141 at Nacogdoches by the end of 1805.

Antonia Cordero y Bustamente, the governor of Texas, was also concerned about the security of his province. In February 1806 the troops from Bayou Pierre were forced to withdraw beyond the Sabine River (the boundary claimed by the Americans). Following this humiliation, Cordero replaced the commander at Nacogdoches with Captain Francisco Viana, and ordered Lieutenant Colonel Simon de Herrera to command the border forces. He also called militia from neighboring provinces until the number of soldiers in Texas reached 1,368 in June 1806, with 883 of these in Nacogdoches.¹⁶

The long delayed expedition up the Red River finally got under way in the spring of 1806, leaving Natchez on April 28. The party consisted of Freeman, Custis, Lieutenant Humphrey, Captain Sparks, two non-commissioned officers, seventeen soldiers, and a black servant; a total of twenty-four. They arrived at Natchitoches on May 19 and were joined by twenty more soldiers assigned to them because of the danger of Spanish opposition.¹⁷

The expedition left Natchitoches on June 2. Five days later they were overtaken by an Indian guide sent by Dr. John Sibley, the United States Indian agent at Natchitoches. The guide brought the news that a detachment of Spanish troops had left Nacogdoches with the object of intercepting the exploring party. This information made them more cautious but did not deter them.

At about one hundred miles above Natchitoches the party encountered its greatest geographical obstacle, the Great Raft. At this point the Red River was filled with logs and trees in an obstruction to navigation many miles long. The expedition had forced its way through three small rafts, but the enormity of the Great Raft forced them to leave the river and fight their way up the line of lakes and swamps which ran along the edge of the valley. It took them fourteen days of hard labor to regain the main channel above the Great Raft.¹⁸

On June 27 they reached the village of the Coshatta Indians about twenty miles above the raft. There they were met by a messenger from the chief of the Caddo village about thirty miles away. He brought news "that about three hundred Spanish dragoons . . . were encamped near that village with the design to prevent further advance of the Americans." The party set up camp to wait for further news from the Caddo village.¹⁹

Freeman's expedition remained at the Coshatta village for several days and was honored with a visit from the Caddo chief himself. By July 11 however, having heard no more news of the Spanish force, the expedition started up the river once more. Because the water was low, the boats often ran aground, and progress was slow.

On July 26 they were hailed by three Caddoes. The Indians told Freeman that the Spanish troops had gone to Nacogdoches for reinforcements but had returned to the Caddo village six days earlier. The Spanish force was greatly enlarged and had cut down a United States flag presented to the Caddo chief by Freeman before it had moved to a camp on a bluff a few miles away to wait for the arrival of the expedition.²⁰

After burying a cache of important papers, provisions, and ammunition, the expedition reached the Spanish position on July 29. Ironically news of the Spanish detachment reached Claiborne in New Orleans on the same day, but he wrote the Secretary of War that he had no fears for their safety.²¹

Freeman had a different view of the situation. After surprising an advance guard which fled, the party readied their guns for action and continued up the river. When they rounded the next bend they had a good view of a long stretch of the river. The expedition stopped to fix its noonday meal and a short time later saw a large Spanish detachment riding toward them.

The soldiers from the expedition concealed themselves where they could attack the Spanish flank and rear if the opportunity arose. There proved to be no need for this, however. The Spanish troops stopped on the beach and the officers came forward to talk with Captain Sparks. The Spanish were determined to carry out their orders to stop the expedition. The Americans, recognizing the overwhelming superiority of the Spanish force, acquiesced and agreed to return down the river. They had traveled 230 miles by water above the Coushatta village; 635 miles above the mouth of the Red River; or roughly to the present western boundary of the state of Arkansas.²²

The expedition reached New Orleans late in August and Claiborne immediately wrote a protest to Herrera. Claiborne pointed out that he had given Casa Calvo prior notice about the scientific nature of the trip. He also complained about the actions of the Spanish troops in cutting down the American flag at the Caddo village. Herrera replied only that Freeman and the Caddoes were both on Spanish territory. Claiborne rejoined that Herrera's lack of effort to justify the Spanish actions must come from the knowledge that the Americans were in the right.²³

The Freeman-Custis Expedition added little to the fund of scientific knowledge. In his annual message to Congress in 1806 Jefferson noted that the voyage had not been successful but complimented the men on their zeal and prudence.²⁴ The Freeman expedition, along with those of Lewis and Clark, and Dunbar, did, however, help to make the country aware of the possibilities of the new territory, and encouraged a wave of settlers which soon made the Orleans Territory the new state of Louisiana.

NOTES

¹Isaac J. Cox, "The Exploration of the Louisiana Frontier, 1803-1806," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1904* (Washington, 1905), 152.

²*Annals of the Congress of the United States*. 8 Cong. 1 Sess., 1125-26.

³Dunbar to Dearborn 13 May 1804, Dunbar to Jefferson 13 May 1804 in Mrs. Dunbar Rowland (Eron Rowland), ed., *Life, Letters and Papers of William Dunbar of Elgin, Morayshire, Scotland, and Natchez, Mississippi: Pioneer Scientist of the Southern United States* (Jackson, Miss., 1930), 128-33.

⁴Eron Rowland, *Life of William Dunbar*, 9-11.

⁵Dunbar to Jefferson 9 June 1804, Dunbar to Constant/Freeman 14 June 1804 in *ibid.*, 133. Secretary of War to James Wilkinson 31 March 1804, Secretary of War to Constant Freeman 23 April 1804 in Clarence E. Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States*. Vol. 9 *The Territory of Orleans, 1803-1812* (Washington, 1940), 217-18, 231.

⁶Dunbar to Jefferson 13 May 1804 in Eron Rowland, *Life of William Dunbar*, 131; Cox, "Exploration of Louisiana," 155-56.

⁷Dunbar to Jefferson 18 August and 14 October 1804 in Eron Rowland, *Life of William Dunbar*, 139-41.

⁸For accounts of the journey see "Journal of a Voyage," in Eron Rowland, *Life of William Dunbar*, 216-320; and Milford F. Allen, "Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana-Arkansas Frontier," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 20 (Spring 1961), 47-52.

⁹Jefferson to Dunbar 14 March 1805, Dearborn to Dunbar 25 March 1805, Dunbar to Dearborn 4 May 1805 in Eron Rowland, *Life of William Dunbar*, 148-52.

¹⁰Dearborn to Dunbar 24 May 1805, Jefferson to Dunbar 25 May 1805 in *ibid.*, 152-53, 174.

¹¹President to Gov. Claiborne 26 May 1805 in Carter, *Territorial Papers*, 9:451.

¹²Claiborne to Casa Calvo 11 July 1805, Casa Calvo to Claiborne 15 July 1805 in Dunbar Rowland, ed., *Official Letter Books of W. C. C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*. (Jackson, Miss., 1917; reprint ed. New York, 1972). 3:199, 128-29.

¹³Jefferson to Dunbar 14 March, 25 May 1805, and 12 January 1806. Dearborn to Dunbar 24 May 1805, Dunbar to Jefferson 6 July, 8 October, 17 December 1805, and 18 March 1806, Dearborn to Custis 14 January 1806 in Eron Rowland, *Life of William Dunbar*, 152-55, 174-75, 182-83, 186-91; Allen, "Jefferson and the Frontier," 58.

¹⁴Claiborne to Casa Calvo 8 February 1806, Claiborne to Dunbar 12 February 1806 in Dunbar Rowland, *Letters of W. C. C. Claiborne*, 3:262-63, 265.

¹⁵Claiborne to Jefferson 26 March 1806 in Carter, *Territorial Papers*, 9:616.

¹⁶Odie B. Falk, *The Last Years of Spanish Texas, 1778-1821*. (The Hague, 1964), 121-24.

¹⁷Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains*. Vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1823; reprint ed. *March of America Facsimile Series*, No. 65 Vol. 2, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1966), 306-7.

¹⁸James, *Expedition*, 307-9.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 309-11.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 311-312.

²¹Claiborne to Dearborn 29 July 1806 in Dunbar Rowland, *Letters of W. C. C. Claiborne*, 3:375.

²²James, *Expedition*, 313-14.

²³Claiborne to Herrera 26 August 1806, Herrera to Claiborne 28 August 1806, Claiborne to Herrera 31 August 1806 in Dunbar Rowland, *Letters of W. C. C. Claiborne*, 3:383-84, 392, 394.

²⁴*Annals of Congress*, 9 Cong. 2 Sess., 14.