WPO:

Why are you retiring?

Holmberg:

I'm 66 now, and I think you reach a point where you're tired of going into work. Even though you love what you do, you reach a point where you want to do other things. I want to pursue some of my other projects, many of them Lewis and Clark related. I'm actually continuing at the Filson Historical Society part-time though. My boss wants me to continue part-time for the rest of the year. So I end full-time end of June, go to part-time for the rest of the year. Then he's actually suggested if it's agreeable to the Filson and me to continue for as long as three years.

WPO:

You said that one of your goals is other projects, including Lewis and Clark projects. What do you still want to do in the Lewis and Clark world, Jim?

Holmberg:

You know Clay, as all of us delve into Lewis and Clark do, there are always new things popping up and things that you bump into. It's like, gee, I didn't know that. Or you uncover a little bit of information that can lead to somewhere else. I am still looking to try to find out more about York and his final fate.

Things with Clark's relationships pop up that are buried in collections somewhere that many people aren't even aware of. So I have a few years to contribute and add to that body of historiography of the Expedition.

WPO:

Of course. You've done work on York, and you've helped others work on York. You've edited the journal of one member of the Expedition [Charles Floyd], which is a very fine piece of editorial work, and of course your masterpiece is what you did after the discovery of the Clark letters.

Holmberg:

Yes, *Dear Brother*.[1]

WPO:

Do you regard that as the most important contribution you've made to Lewis and Clark studies?

Holmberg:

Oh, I think undoubtedly yes. The discovery of those letters in an attic here in Louisville opened up so much that was unknown or just speculated about. I was familiar with Donald Jackson and his letters,[2] and I did a crash course over the weekend before I actually saw the letters to know what the gaps might be. So I immediately started checking, and here's Clark, the man; the fate of York post-Expedition; the death of Meriwether Lewis and what Clark was hearing, picking up that newspaper

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[1] James J. Holmberg, ed., *Dear Brother: Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

[2] Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents 1783-1854* 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978).

in Shelbyville, Kentucky, and reading the reports—that's three major topics right there that were filling in gaps.

Then you had Clark's mentions of Julia and her reaction, moving from the lap of luxury in Virginia to the edge of the frontier in St. Louis and what it was like for her. There was so much there. So I immediately decided these need to be edited and published. I was fortunate enough to be able to do that. The letters reveal William Clark the man, what he was like personally and not the iconic explorer figure.

WPO:

Of course.

Holmberg:

So what happened to York post-Expedition? What was known was just the slimmest of information that Clark and York had had a falling out. Then the death of Meriwether Lewis. And Clark from the day he picks up that newspaper in Shelbyville, Kentucky, and reads a report of Lewis' death down in Tennessee. Every time he gets more info, he's writing Jonathan about what he learns.

You are familiar with the letters. They're extremely important and insightful as to what Clark's hearing from his contacts in Tennessee. Historically, these letters are just priceless. So it was like, these guys need to be published; these letters need to be published. I was fortunate to be able to do that.

WPO:

When were they discovered?

Holmberg:

The family, the grandchildren of Temple Bodley, who was a Louisville attorney and historian and the direct descendant of Jonathan Clark, had packed them away in a trunk. He passed away in the forties, and his wife and their handicapped son, who was living at home, moved to a house in the Highlands, which is an old neighborhood on the east side of Louisville. The trunks, full of these family papers dating back to Jonathan's service in the Revolution, went up to the attic, and there they sat for essentially the next forty years, until the grandchildren had to decide what to do with the house.

They decided to sell it. They go up to the attic, discover these trunks of letters, which they were vaguely aware of. I still say today that it was the most productive lunch I've ever had. I was down in the Filson break room and Sam Thomas, who was a local historian, had been at a party with a couple of the grandchildren, who now were all in their fifties and sixties. They were older adults.

Sam asked me, "Have you heard about those Clark letters that the Stites have found? I was like, "No." Of course, right away the antennae are up. I'm like, "Ooh, what's this?" He said, "Well, they sound pretty good. They sound like there were a lot of William Clark letters." So I asked, "Well, whom do I contact about them?" He gave me the contact info. It was right before Christmas 1988. They had just found them that fall in October.

So I wrote, didn't hear anything. I followed up after the holidays, got a call in February of '89 from one of the guys who had possession of the main body of the Clark letters. He said, "I understand you're interested in them." It was a Friday afternoon and I'm sitting at my desk and I said, "Yes, can you tell me more about them?" He says, "Well, I think they're pretty good." He said, "A lot of them are written from St. Louis, Louisville, Mulberry Hill, Washington." Then he says, "At the mouth of the Missouri."

Of course, I'm starting to hyperventilate and thinking, "Oh my gosh!" I was familiar with Jackson, and I knew, these aren't in Jackson. This is new. Then he says, "Fort Mandan," and I'm about falling out of my chair, and I'm thinking, and I said, "Would it be possible to get together and see these letters?" He said, "Oh yes, sure." So we made an appointment for that next week, which happened to be on my birthday.[3] For me, somebody who was a curator, historian, at that time, who had a personal interest in Lewis and Clark from having traveled growing up out West and having seen parts of the Trail, and then some professional interest because the Filson had a good Lewis and Clark collection, it was incredible.

I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this sounds like just fantastic stuff." So what better birthday present can a historian with a Lewis and Clark interest have than to be seeing something like this that is almost like a holy grail of Lewis and Clark and to be able to see it on his birthday? I went to his office; he pulled them; he had them in a bank box, pulled them out. They were folded up in a stack just like Jonathan had filed them away almost 200 years earlier.

I started looking at them, and I'd done the crash course, just cramming to make sure I knew what gaps to look for. It was Clark as a man, the fate of York, and the death of Lewis, the three biggies. I'm like just looking through letter after letter. Among them were five Expedition-dated letters, including the Fort Mandan letter, his first report home after they leave the falls of the Ohio for their winter camp, Camp Dubois, there in December of 1803.

It was just mind-blowing. So at that point, I began negotiating with the family about what are you going to do with these letters? They obviously were very valuable financially as well as historically. It helped us that they were owned by the six grandchildren, so anything they got was going to get split up. They were all in a position where they didn't really need the money. They were successful; they were well set. In working with them and recruiting friends of theirs who I knew who could put in a good word, they eventually decided to donate them to the Filson.

Now, that was just the *initial* group of letters. There were still those trunks that they'd gotten from the attic, and I just kept nudging them. It wasn't until 1998, and they had donated them in '91. And in 1998, Jim Stites, who had possession of the trunks, was a retired attorney. He wanted to maybe do something with them, but he finally said, "You know, I'm not going to." He said, "Can you come over and just look at them and tell me what I should do?"

So I said, "I'll be right there."

I dropped everything, went to his house and looked at him. Right on top is Revolutionary War stuff from Jonathan. It's just mind-blowing. I'm sure you've experienced this in your research and looking at things, Clay. You get the shakes. This is just mind-blowing stuff. You know that the Clark letters that you are holding in your hands contain answers to questions that have bedeviled historians for decades. You are like, "Oh my gosh, here's the answer right here."

Right away I suggested to Mr. Stites that really the best thing would be to give them to the Filson. He said, "Well, I think we can do that." So he talked to the others, his siblings and his two cousins, and they decided to do that. They donated the letters; they brought them to the Filson; and immediately I went through them because I was wrapping up the *Dear Brother* letters by then for editing. I was convinced there were more letters, including William's famous October 28th, 1809, letter written the night he'd gotten news about Lewis' possible death in which he has a famous quote, "I fear the weight of his mind has overcome him."[4]

That letter had not been in that initial group of some 46 letters, 45 letters to Jonathan. So I go through the trunk right away looking and find three more letters, including in the lower right-hand corner, the October 28th letter. You can imagine the reaction to finding the original of that. There had been a

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[3] February 15.

[4] "I fear O! I fear the waight of his mind has over come him, what will be the Consequence?"

typescript done many, many years earlier cited in the Bodley Family Papers [1773-1939] at the Filson. So I had a hunch that that letter might be in this bigger group. Thankfully it was. So that completed the other letters that I felt must be there and then I proceeded on. In 2002 Yale ended up publishing the letters.

WPO:

So you first get these letters in 1989, and they're supplemented later. The publication then comes out in 2002.

Holmberg:

Look at the time stretch. So I started working. They gave us that initial group of some, and there were some more letters mixed in. They weren't all Clark, but there were like 45 of them to Jonathan, and then a couple to his brother Edmund and then to his nephew. So in all, there were like 48, 49 William Clark letters. Those were the ones I'd been working on immediately and transcribing and prepping to edit if they gave us the letters. Then they gave us the letters in '91.

Once we had possession of the letters, I submitted a proposal to the Filson that we officially publish them with myself as editor. But I'm working full time and my wife and I have got little kids, so a lot of times I wasn't able to devote full time to it. So the years would stretch on, but the Filson started giving me more help with a research assistant who could help with some of the footnotes and things like that. So it took a while, but finally, yes, I'd say really over ten years from the early nineties to publication in 2002, it was about a ten-year project.

WPO:

So first you get the rumbling at the office, then you make contact, then you're able to see some of it. Here's what I would have felt, Jim. First, I'd be just almost having a nervous breakdown over the possibility of a major, major discovery in the Lewis and Clark world. But secondly, I would have been terrified that somehow in some way this was going to slip through our fingers, that they were going to sell it at auction, or somebody else would roll in and shove you out of the way. You must have felt all of that.

Holmberg:

Oh, yes. Over those forty-two years, especially as I became more and more from a manuscript assistant to the curator of manuscripts, to the curator of special collections, and I was handling so much of the acquisitions across the collections, but especially for manuscripts for the Filson, believe me, Clay, there have been some sad, sad stories of exactly those things' slipping through your fingers, of somebody doing something. That all they saw were dollar signs and they sold it, or they semi-ruined a collection because they split it up.

That possibility, with respect to the Clark letters, was initially on the table. They had had them appraised, and they had been in touch with a collector dealer in East Tennessee who had somehow heard about this, and he was actively working on them to acquire them. So it happened with the Filson's counseling them, encouraging them to look at the big picture and the importance of keeping everything together and getting it to an institution. And again, thankfully, they did not need the money so that was not a motivating factor for them. They very historically, conscientiously decided to go ahead and donate the letters to the Filson. And thank goodness.

But indeed that can happen. I've seen it happen, too, where somebody swoops in and takes the legs out from under someone who had been working on something or planning something. In a small way it's happened to me a few times where I was going to do something, had it on my radar, but then somebody else came along and discovered it, and ran with it. And that was just a matter of timing

and not being able to get it off the back burner instead of jumping right on it. So in a way, it's well, my own fault, but at the same time, those kinds of things happen. But when something is taken away from you when you really were working on it and wanting to do it—that's pretty depressing.

WPO:

Jim, this shows the honor of Gary Moulton and Jim Ronda, because they were the superstars of this Lewis and Clark world, and Stephen Ambrose was a national celebrity. It shows the decency and honor of these men that they made no attempt to take that away from you.

Holmberg:

Yes, and they're all three of them, we know all three, and they were all good guys, and really they were mentors to me, Gary especially. And Jim wrote the foreword for the book, and he was always so helpful. And so Jim and Gary were very much the mentors.

I'll tell you my Stephen Ambrose story. I was at the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation's 1995 Annual Meeting in Charlottesville, and he gave the banquet address on Meriwether Lewis and *Undaunted Courage* shortly before it was going to be published. I was there with my dad, who often came to these meetings with me, and then later on, well, sometimes my son would, too. But my dad and I were there, and we were having a picnic lunch there at Monticello, and there's Stephen Ambrose sitting on a hay bale eating by himself. Nobody's paying attention to him.

I thought, "Well, I'm not going to miss this opportunity." So I went over and introduced myself. He had already cited some of the Clark letters in *Undaunted Courage* from an article I had done about them for WPO back in '92.[5] And so we connected that way, and we ended up hanging out together the rest of the meeting. I just couldn't believe it: here's this guy who's already on the tails of his D-Day book and all that. Here's this guy, this well-known historian, and nobody was paying attention to him. So I took full advantage.

After that, Steve was always very good about encouraging me to work on the letters and do more on York. He really encouraged me to work on a biography of York. I looked at it, and I've done so much in the way of articles and things like that. I just never felt I could really have enough material to do a true biography. Maybe I'm selling that short. It could have been a smaller monograph or something. But anyway, so I really kept spinning articles more about York's situation and what have you. I don't know that I would ever try to take on a bio of York, but there's still more to be done on him.

But you get guys like that, Ambrose, Moulton, and Ronda. As you said, they're honorable; they want to help and mentor younger folks coming up. We're so fortunate to meet people like that and have people help us in our careers.

WPO:

Back to the acquisition. You must have been on absolute pins and needles as you were negotiating for the letters.

Holmberg:

Oh my gosh. Yes. Again, this is in many ways is like the star case, something like that. It's great when you succeed, and we've gotten some wonderful collections through the years because you are in there pitching. I call it the three P's of collecting: Patience, Persistence, and Persuasion. I have worked

[5] James J. Holmberg, "'I Wish You to See & Know All.' The Recently Discovered Letters of William Clark to Jonathan Clark," WPO 18:4 (November 1992): 4.

on collections with eventual donors for as long as thirty years, just being there, nudging them, visiting them.

I'll give you an example. It's Lewis and Clark specific. When I was on the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Commission, we used to meet out in the Kansas City area at Fort Leavenworth. So whenever I went out there for a Board meeting, I would visit a descendant of Simon Bolivar Buckner, who was an officer in the US Army, then a general in the Confederate army, and then he became governor of Kentucky and post-war Kentucky. I would go and visit him because he still had family papers.

It's that kind of thing. It was a twenty-year relationship in which I'd call him on the phone, drop him an email, visit him when I was in the area, which was about once a year for a while, and finally he donated his grandfather's papers. This was the grandson of the general and the governor, and he gave the family papers to us. A lot of times what it takes is for you build that personal relationship, but it doesn't always work out. There have been some sad cases where people did something else or gave the papers to another institution. At least they did that. But with the Clark letters, though, it worked out wonderfully. Not only did we get that initial group, but then we got the trunk of the old family letters, which are themselves tremendously important historically, beyond the William Clark and Lewis and Clark connection.

WPO:

I would've have had sleepless nights. I'm sure you did.

Holmberg:

Oh yes. For sure.

WPO:

And the thrill, the sense that, first of all, what's in those letters? You had an inkling, but you didn't know much about what was in those letters. And it could have been when you finally got them that they were about drayage services or about nothing in particular. They could have been interesting but of no great significance, right?

Holmberg:

Yes, it could have been. And that's one reason why it was like cramming for a final that weekend before I saw them. I knew exactly what to look for. But when I started unfolding them and reading, I see a letter saying, "opposite the mouth of the Missouri," then Fort Mandan. Already I'm like, "Holy smokes. This is unbelievable." Because I know from looking at Donald Jackson's work and surveying other literature, these things I am seeing are completely unknown. They are brand new and going to be important additions to Lewis and Clark historiography and the story now and going forward.

And then starting to read where Clark says that he might sell York down the river to New Orleans because he's misbehaving. And then when he is saying, "I just got word from my contacts in Tennessee about Lewis," and what he's hearing. It was mind-blowing.

And I was going to say that truly, as you do, you get the shakes. It's just unbelievably exciting to know that, number one, you just read something that is brand new and that nobody knew, and then also that you may have the opportunity to preserve these letters for posterity, hopefully get them to your institution, and then maybe even edit them.

WPO:

Even if the letters had not really changed the equation much, if they had just confirmed some things and given us a better window into Clark, or were just documents in some way related to the Expedition, they would have been interesting in and of themselves, even if there hadn't been that much there. But if I were holding a letter that said "from Fort Mandan on the upper Missouri," I'd be trembling.

Holmberg:

Oh yes. And that was exactly it.

It is hard to even describe the feeling. And you're thinking, again, number one, thank goodness they've survived and not been tossed. And number two, I'm reading...and I'm sure you know this feeling, too, any historian does, of holding original material in your hands written by Clark or Lewis or Jefferson, knowing that they themselves wrote that letter. That in itself is very exciting. And I tell people, the younger curators, and they get that feeling. Of course, I've been doing editorial work for so long, you get, I don't want to say jaded necessarily, but you get used to it. You are a little bit anesthetized in that it doesn't always hit you the way that it did when you were just starting out.

But, boy, I'll tell you what, those letters hit me. And I'll give you just a quick little side story. I had a volunteer years ago now, and she would come in and help pre-process manuscript collections, getting them in chronological order, things like that. A very nice lady. She was a native of Iceland, and she was working at a table one day, and I looked over and I saw that she was crying. She had tears coming down her face. And I went in and said, "What's wrong? Are you okay?" And she said, "Look. Look at this."

I looked at it and it was a receipt for the sale of a slave. I said, "Oh, it's a slave receipt." I've seen hundreds of them. I was used to that. I've seen so much from that enslavement period. It's a terrible thing (York, and everything else), but you're used to it. She was not, though. Her visceral reaction to holding a document in which a human being was being sold to somebody just absolutely devastated her.

So you keep things like that in your mind. You get used to things, but for other people, when they're first experiencing them, it can be a very impactful moment for them. And the Clark letters did that, too, literally, on the day that I talked with Jim Stites on the phone. He had the letters in his possession, and he's telling me where these letters are coming from, and then when I sat in his office that day actually going through them—what an experience. That's something I'll never forget.

WPO:

Absolutely.

You mentioned that you're holding these letters in your hands, but in addition to that, because you did your homework, you know that you are holding in your hands previously unpublished and unknown documents.

Holmberg:

Yes, exactly.

And again, it's not really stretching the point. It's possible to say that I was the only person on the face of the earth who had just read the answers to some of the questions that had bedeviled historians for decades. Details about Clark and York's falling out, about the death of Meriwether Lewis, Julia's reaction to being taken to the edge of the frontier and what that was like, and Clark's reaction to the birth of his son, Meriwether Lewis Clark. For a historian, a curator, it's a priceless experience. That's one reason why I always tell people how fortunate I've been to have the career, the job, I've had at the

Filson in working with things like that, because not a lot of people get to go to a job that they, for the most part, love and enjoy every day.

It's not all peaches and cream, believe me, but when you can work with this original material, when you can work with the historians I've had the honor of meeting, it's all worth it. Gary Moulton came into town one day to visit a friend at the University of Louisville, and he called me up. He'd known about the letters because I'd checked with him and also Jim Rhonda, just to verify that I wasn't missing something. They both said, "Oh my gosh, these are unbelievable." I'd already been in contact with Jim about another Lewis and Clark project and something in our collection that I had mentioned to him. And then Gary said, "I'm going to be in town. Can I come by and see the letters?" I said, "Sure."

At that point, I didn't even know that they were ours yet. It would've been in the early nineties, right around 1990 or so, '91. He comes into town and he says, "Now, Jim, I don't doubt that you know what you're doing. I don't doubt that these are the real deal. But," he said, "There's a little test we can do to just verify things." And I said, "Okay, that's fine." So we pulled out the letters and he took the Expedition letters, and he held them up to the light to see the watermark. They're on Whatman paper, the beautiful English-made paper. He said, "There you go." He said, "Almost everything that Lewis and Clark wrote during the Expedition in the way of letters," he said, "They used Whatman paper." That was just like the cherry on top: verifying that, yet again, these were indeed the real deal.

WPO:

Jim, at any point during this agonizing process between hearing about the letters, seeing them for the first time, and so on, was there any time when it looked as if this was going to slip through your and the Filson's fingers?

Holmberg:

No. I think once the family realized the importance, they, again, were very conscientious, and wanted to do the right thing by the letters. And they had told me and were very upfront, and talked about this dealer collector in Tennessee who had been in touch with them trying to get the letters from them. But I think, again, the fact that they did not need the money helped, although there were six of them involved in this, which often can be a real problem when you get multiple owners. But in this case, it actually, I think, worked in our favor. And so it was just more that they wanted to take their time, make sure it's what they wanted to do. Everybody was comfortable with it.

By the time everything got worked out, it ended up being a couple of years, but it worked out just fine. I'm sure I had that nagging doubt in the back of my mind like, "Oh boy, I hope things don't go off the rails here."

One of Jim Stites' good friends was on the Filson Board, and I recruited him to work on Mr. Stites about how important it was to donate. So it was a campaign, but I don't want to sell it short and think, "Oh boy, guys, give it to the Filson" was all it required. It's a campaign where you just sometimes very overtly, but other times subtly, try to move the owners towards the decision you're hoping they'll make.

WPO:

The three Ps: Patience, Persistence, and Persuasion.

Holmberg:

Persuasion.

WPO:

And you had to show grace in this. If I were sitting there and I read the October 28th letter, I would have wanted to say, “Oh my God, this is of monumental importance!” But you don't want to oversell it at that minute because then they might think, “Ah, this is a gold mine.”

Holmberg:

That's true, and not only with this, but with other collections where you have to control yourself. But at the same time, and I tell this to the younger curators and groups when this comes up when I'm giving talks, you need to be honest, and you need to remember that you're representing the Filson, your institution, and its reputation. So you're honest, but at the same time, you sometimes have to be careful about how you do react, because people can get carried away. If I said, “Oh my goodness! Do you realize how valuable this letter is?” then people might start seeing dollar signs or something.

That sometimes happens. We have people come to us and they're really just wanting to know what something's worth. We don't do appraisals for people, but I'll be as honest with them as I can be, and either counsel them that this would be something that would be good to place with an institution or I'll send them on to a dealer, or an auction house, or something like that, if that's clearly what they want to do.

WPO:

So you've got the letters now, and the Filson is committed to publishing them. I want to come back to the substance in a minute, but as we know from the great Donald Jackson, Clark is very difficult to transcribe. Talk a little bit about that process.

Holmberg:

I always say that William Clark never met a word he couldn't misspell, even if it's just two letters. Gary has tracked his different spellings of Sioux and potato and things like that. But his handwriting actually is very good. Clark was an educated guy. And I'll tell you; this is, again, one of those funny little things you bump into. I was researching something one time, and a guy named Taylor, who was a Kentuckian, was in Virginia. In 1792, he is coming from Virginia back to Kentucky, and he's written this memoir later in life. He said, “Oh, and one of the party coming with us is William Clark, who has been in Virginia to go to school.”

Now, by then William Clark is twenty-two years old, and he says that he's recently joined the Army. So all of a sudden, here's this unknown little fact about Clark, that he had actually gone back to Virginia for apparently some more education, had decided to go ahead and join the Army, and was commissioned a Second Lieutenant. Of course, that leads to his whole military career. He'd already been in the militia. So you bump into these little things like this that are very helpful.

But his handwriting is good. Spelling at that time was still pretty fluid. People, even Jefferson, could be a little creative in the way things got spelled. But there were only, I think, about maybe three or four words that I could never figure out in all those letters, that I could never quite figure out what he meant to say.

Sometimes Clark would throw in French if he knew the place name by the French name, or something that colloquially was a word then. I would go to the OED[6] and look some of these words up because they were obsolete for us now. Back then they were perfectly fine to use, or it was some material that Julia wanted and I didn't know what that word was, so I'd look it up. But there were

[6] John Simpson and Edward Weiner, eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 13 vols., 2nd ed. (London: Clarendon Press, 1989).

only two, maybe three words that simply defeated me as far as being able to really understand what he had written.[7] It's really that his spelling is creative.

Sometimes, too, and this was very interesting, in his letters to Jonathan, not only did he state that he's basically spilling his guts, but he says, “I write you without reserve. I'm writing you everything I can think to tell you.” And sometimes he'd say, “Well, I'm coming to do a visit back to Louisville.” Or he'd say, “Well, I'm going to see you soon, so I'll save the rest of this story for when I see you.” I'm thinking, “Dog gone it. I wish he had really spilled the beans about this incident.”

You get these insights into how open he was with Jonathan, who was twenty years his senior, and very much the archetypal big brother, and really a surrogate father for him once their own father passed. Jonathan had this reputation, apparently, from Virginia, from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, about being a pretty wise guy and somebody to go to for advice.

Clark makes a reference to this one associate of theirs who has gotten involved in a duel and trouble, and he's gotten tossed in jail, and Clark goes to visit him. Then he tells Jonathan in a letter, “Oh, and by the way, Lieutenant Gamble … wishes you were here so he could get your advice.” Jonathan was a well-known advisor for people. He had a lot of wisdom. And so Clark knows this. And so he is like, “I want to learn. Here's everything.” One reason the letters are so revealing about him personally is because he's often revealing his true feelings.

When he states to Jonathan his opinion of African-American personalities, it's not flattering. He says “They lie a little, steal a little, and try to smile and make it all okay.” And he says, “That will not do.” Because he's just being driven to distraction, because the enslaved people he took with him to St. Louis have not had a happy transition. They've been uprooted from their home, their family, things like that, and Clark just doesn't get it because of being the product of his times. This is where present-day wokeness can become an issue today: he was a product of his society, a slave-holding culture, slave-holding family, and he was conditioned to act in a certain way, not only towards his enslaved people, and African-Americans in general, but to other whites. Look how stern and brutal discipline could be to members on the Expedition when they broke the rules. Whether they were getting whipped or whatever, that was the way military discipline was. And so the fact that he's telling Jonathan these things where he really reveals himself and his opinions and beliefs is, again, one of the things that make these letters just, historically, so priceless.

The Death of Meriwether Lewis

WPO:

Let's talk about the two big issues here. You said earlier in the interview that these letters are not only interesting and historically important, but they answer some long-held perplexities and questions we have had.

And I would have thought, Jim, that the October 28th, 1809, letter basically would have put to rest the great debate on murder or suicide. Clark is clearly Lewis' best friend. He probably knows him better than anyone, including Jefferson. He knows that Lewis is a high-strung, difficult, self-punishing person, that he's been through all sorts of trouble, that his governorship has been problematic, let's put it that way, that he's made enemies, that he has issues of communication with Washington, DC, and his great mentor Jefferson, and so on, and maybe is in danger of being recalled by the US government. He's certainly being rebuked by the War Department with the endorsement of

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[7] Holmberg, ed., *Dear Brother*, 61: “contrait” may mean “country” (December 16, 1803).

President James Madison. So when he writes in that letter, "I fear the weight of his mind," you would think that the October 28 letter would essentially settle it, wouldn't you?

Holmberg:

You would think that that would be obviously a very good piece of evidence that William Clark believed that Lewis took his own life. That right away, his initial reaction is, “I was afraid he was going to do something like that.” That he's not shocked. But there is only the typescript version of the letter, and it does appear in Donald Jackson. I think that was the belief up until the 1840s when the whole murder theory pops up, thanks to Meriwether Lewis Clark, by the way, who writes the Monument Committee a letter saying, “You're creating a county named in Lewis' honor, and there’s the monument you're doing and all that. And I share his name. And it's embarrassing to have the name of a self-murderer. Don't you think it was actually murder instead of suicide?” And with that, the whole theory is off and running and it just gains legs.

But from our own involvement together with Jay Buckley and John Guice, and doing the book *By His Own Hand*[8] for which I wrote the suicide portion, every time, and over and over, I would be told the Grinders were suspicious. Robert Grinder might've killed him or thieves. And there was even the whole conspiracy thing that James Wilkinson and others were behind this to keep them from spilling their mysterious secrets from out in the West and things like that. But every time we followed this up we hit a dead end or it was disproved. Then you get guys from beginning in the 1890s and right up through Vardis Fischer[9] and those guys in the mid-twentieth century who all say, “Oh yes, it was murder.” Sometimes out of clear blue, it's like everything seems to be leading to suicide and all of a sudden it's like, “No, it was murder because he was a hero, and a hero isn't a self-murderer. They don't take the cowards way out.” Things like that. But actually, “anybody's capable of suicide, sadly, given certain circumstances" and, as you just said, given everything that Lewis was facing in his life at that time. Gilbert Russell[10] documents his behavior and we have his letters to Clark. He says, exactly: he'd already tried to kill himself twice coming down the Mississippi. He was basically put under house arrest at Fort Pickering until he seemed to get his mind back. Things like that. But then people discount that and say, “Well, that letter,” and we all know of whom I'm thinking who claims letters like that are forgeries. “Oh, well, no, somebody else wrote that. That was a setup.” And they just don't want to believe it.

And I think we know from experience that if people believe that Lewis was murdered, I don't think there's anything in the world you could do to change their mind. We could have Lewis' suicide note in our hand and they would say, “Oh, well, they forced him to write that before they killed him.” Or something like that. So we're not going to change any minds. But I think the fact that Clark believed it and never was known to have actually put in writing his thoughts after that counts for a lot. But he mentions how he and Jefferson discussed it when he visited Jefferson when he came east in 1809 and in early 1810. He's in touch with William Meriwether, who is executor along with Clark for Lewis' estate and things like that. It seems perfectly clear.

And there's John Pernier, Lewis’ free black servant. I think one of the saddest things, and of course given your close association with Lewis and his story, is when Clark reports that Pernier is saying that, coming up the trail towards Grinder’s Stand, Lewis is hallucinating and believing that Clark is

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[8] John D.W. Guice, ed., with contributions by James J. Holmberg, John D.W. Guice, and Jay H. Buckley. Foreward by Elliott West and Introduction by Clay S. Jenkinson, *By His Own Hand: The Mysterious Death of Meriwether Lewis* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press: 2006).

[9] Vardis Fisher, Suicide or Murder?: the Strange Death of Gpvernor Meriwether Lewis (Denver: Allan Swallow, 1962; reprinted Atherns, OH: Swallow Press, 1991).

[10] Gilbert Russell was in command of Fort Pickering near today’s Memphis, Tennessee, when Lewis arrived there in 1809.

on the trail behind him and is going to catch up and make everything okay. That almost brings tears to your eyes to think how sad that is. That here, really an American hero who had so much potential still, is in this sad, sad state, and that he's thinking his best friend and partner in discovery is coming to his rescue. Clark was about a hundred miles away in Russellville, Kentucky, at the time, heading east himself on a visit. And it is just so sad that that is what had happened.

WPO:

So on a scale of 1 to 100, how certain are you that Lewis committed suicide?

Holmberg:

Well, you never want to say 100, but you might remember back in 2009 when we had the Bicentennial gathering down in Olive Grove outside Memphis, and we did that daylong seminar, that panel. That same question was asked, and I think I said ninety-six percent, and I was the highest one. Everybody else kind of hemmed and hawed a bit. Of course some believed it was murder. But in my mind, and again, you can't say 100 percent, but I just think there's no doubt that Lewis killed himself. And it's so sad that's the way it happened because he did have so much potential. If things had gone differently, he might've had a great career. Steve Ambrose, as we've all heard him say, put some of the blame on Jefferson for this. Instead of making him governor of Upper Louisiana and inserting him into that political mess out there and making him deal with everything, Jefferson should have given him a couple of clerks, kept him in Washington or Philadelphia working on that book until it was done, and then sent him off on another expedition. I think Steve pegged it perfectly, and that probably would've been the best thing for him. But the reality of the situation was that's not how it was going to happen. Jefferson wanted somebody whom he knew he could trust out there on the frontier in that situation. Lewis needed a reward. And what better reward was there than to make him governor of the territory he had helped explore?

WPO:

And keep in mind that heroic prospectus that Lewis published in 1807, announcing a three-volume publication process. It didn't sound like a man who was going to have any problems putting together this book.

Holmberg:

Right. He'd gotten a good start on it with Pursh[11] and some of these other people and people he was working with. And in your work, Clay, you make the great comparison of Buzz Aldrin and the whole moon thing. Once you've been to the moon, what do you do? Once you've gone across the American West to the Pacific and come back, what's left? In a way, everything else seems kind of minor. And given Lewis' personality... We can't say for sure that he was bipolar. He probably was. He certainly was having issues with alcohol, depression, and things like that. When you read everything that's going on, he was a mess. And whether he had malaria that was impacting the situation, what have you, it was his personality that was, in a way, his undoing given the situation. Whereas Clark, what's he doing after the Expedition? Good old solid Clark comes back, gets married, takes on his jobs.

Then the whole book project is dumped in Clark's lap, and when you're reading the letters you see that Lewis was keeping from Clark exactly what he had and hadn't done with the book. Clark doesn't realize it until later that essentially Lewis has done nothing. But what's Clark do? He finds Nicholas

[11] Frederick Pursh (1774-1820), a German botanist, worked with Benjamin Smith Barton on the floral specimens Lewis and Clark sent back from Fort Mandan in 1805. He took some of the specimens with him when he moved to England which are now housed at Kew Gardens. He was also involved in drawing some of the botanicals.

Biddle to get the book done. So that's just good old solid Clark getting the job done, whereas Lewis, given everything he was facing, just couldn't do that.

WPO:

So back to the October 28th letter for just a moment. How much weight should that have? For me, that is the capstone of the argument. In other words, I always believed that it was suicide. I had no reason to believe that it was otherwise. But when you published *Dear Brother* and that letter is there, that seemed to me as if that's the end of the debate. How much weight should that letter be given?

Holmberg:

Oh, I think a tremendous amount of weight. Whether we can say that it's the missing bullet, so to speak, of saying, "Look, Clark believed it, and so it's true," I don't know. Because some people are going to say, "Well, what did he know? He wasn't there. He just doesn't want to believe that his friend was murdered." And this usually means that they're sweeping it all under the rug. According to this theory, Jefferson and Clark didn't want to create a big scandal, so they just sweep Lewis' murder under the rug. And that's usually what the murderists, as I call them, will say. And again, they sometimes go to, I think, pretty extreme lengths to try to state that as being the truth. And it's not.

But yes, I think that letter or Clark's immediate reaction should be given great weight, because you have to remember that Clark was in close association with Lewis there in St. Louis. And he writes in that late August 26th, I think, letter to Jonathan in which he talks about Lewis, "I'm really worried about him. He is in a bad way." And he says, "The sympathy isn't off me yet." John Guice uses this as one of the proofs that it was murder, because Clark says, "I believe that Governor Lewis will return to this country with flying colors." He's projecting confidence and hopes that everything's going to work out okay. Guice turns this around and says, "Well, look, see, he was coming back. He wasn't going to die by suicide." Well, things change and can change on an hourly basis when you're having mental issues, but Clark knew the state Lewis was in and on October 28th he immediately goes to, "I was afraid he was going to do that."

We know he talked about it to Jefferson and others, but there's no other written evidence beyond that letter. He wouldn't really talk about it later on. But that doesn't mean you can discount it and say, "Oh, well, he didn't know what he was talking about."

WPO:

So those are the October 28, 1809, letter, and the one that you're talking about from late August, the Cempothy letter. That seems to me the second most important document because, as you say, he was very worried about Lewis. He says, "A week like this, I can't remember the last time there's been a week like this." So Lewis was a basket case when he left St. Louis and Clark was aware of that. Was that one of the discovered letters?

Holmberg:

Yes, that was one of the discovered letters.

WPO:

What happened to the, I'm going to call it the suicide note, but you remember Clark says to Jonathan, "No, that letter, keep that letter, that's an important letter." What's in it, do you think?[12]

[12] See Holmberg, ed., *Dear Brother*, 224: "I wish much to get the letter I receved of Govr. Lewis from N. madrid, which you Saw. it will be of great Service to me. prey Send it to Fincastle as Soon as possible."

Holmberg:

I don't know. That's a good question. Clark knows, because he's hearing from Gilbert Russell and William Anderson and these other guys, but there is this other letter, and it's never turned up. I'm afraid that it ended up in the backyard fire in St. Louis in the 1930s in which so many Clark papers were destroyed. Again, through ignorance and stupidity. Clark knows, as at that point he's been told Lewis made a second will, that he tried to kill himself coming down to Mississippi. And that he thinks, again, the missing letter will give him further insight into Lewis' last days and his state of mind and maybe even what his intentions were as far as maybe let's say the book or his estate or something like that. Yes, that's one of those things that I fear. So many things have happened through history; it's no surprise that that letter is no longer with us. And so we may never know.

WPO:

Here's my theory, Jim. I think the letter is actually not about Lewis' state of mind. I think it's about the fact that he changed the itinerary. He was planning to go to New Orleans and he didn't. So I think Clark is basically saying, "What the heck was Lewis doing on the Natchez Trace?" And then I think he says, "Oh." Because I bet Lewis said in that letter, "I'm planning to go down to New Orleans, but if the malaria is too bad or if I think that there are going to be British problems down there, I might divert and go overland." My sense is that it's an itinerary letter rather than a psychological one. But that's just a hunch.

Holmberg:

That could well be. We know from another other source that Lewis was afraid that, given the rise in trouble with the British, he and the journals might get captured, seized by the British. And that was one of his reasons for deciding to go overland instead. Then there's the whole thing about how the murderists try to make James Neely out as one of the villains in this. They come up with certain evidence which I don't agree with to try to prove that Neely was some bad actor in all this and did wrong by Lewis.

Again, you have to remember what the dynamics are. Neely is an Indian agent and is of the community in that region, but here's Lewis who is a national hero, the governor of Upper Louisiana and Neely isn't going to be bossing him around. He is not going to necessarily be controlling him. And if he did have liquor and he let Lewis get at it again, well, we know that liquor was abused on the frontier and in society in general at that time.

WPO:

Why didn't Clark go to the grave site? Alexander Wilson goes there and he shames Mr. Grinder into taking better care of the grave site. Why didn't Clark go there? Why didn't Clark investigate? This is his closest friend. It's not like going to Peru or to Canada.

Holmberg:

I don't know, but dealing with death... When Clark gets word of Lewis' definite death, he is in Lexington, Kentucky, heading east with Julia, their little baby Meriwether Lewis Clark, and some servants. So he probably, number one, feels, "Well, I can't abandon them and rush off down into Tennessee." Number two, Lewis is dead. So what good is that going to do? He continues on until he gets to Fincastle over in Botetourt County, Virginia. So there Julia and their son Lewis are with his grandparents, with Julia's family. But what Clark does do? He didn't think it was practical to try to go down to Tennessee to investigate. Lewis is dead and buried. Everything he's hearing is that he killed himself. And so it's not like, "Hey, this might be murder. I need to investigate."

Clark takes it as a given that Lewis killed himself. What he does do though right away is he's writing his contacts, Anderson, Overton; he's getting letters from Gilbert Russell. So he's doing as much investigative work as I think he believed was possible and practical. Clark was a practical guy. And so, he's getting all this info now where the question again is where are these letters that Clark cites in the letters to Jonathan? None of them is known to exist. And we go back to the backyard fire in St. Louis where the lady who owned the old Clark country place hired the young couple next door to clean out all that old junk upstairs which they threw out the back window and burned.

WPO:

What year was that, Jim?

Holmberg:

That was in the thirties. It was during the Depression. I got a lead and I actually talked to the couple who did it. I'm trying to remember. It was at the 1996 annual meeting that somebody told me about the fire. And so I followed up with their son and then his parents who were still alive. They were a young couple living next door in the neighborhood of Minoma. It was actually Jefferson K. Clark's home. It wasn't the original house. It was the Clark country house that was newer than when William was living there. When he left and moved to New York, the stuff that's at Missouri Historical is the stuff he gathered up and took with him.

Apparently he left a lot of things behind. The lady who ended up owning the house wanted to turn it into a boarding house. This was in the thirties during the Depression. She hired the young couple next door or in the neighborhood to go upstairs and clean out all that junk. They spent a day, and this is how they tell it: they spent a day throwing trunks of letters, books, Indian relics, uniforms, all kinds of stuff out the back window into the yard. They came back the next day and burned it.

WPO:

Horrible.

Holmberg:

And for that, they were paid. You want to guess how much they were paid?

WPO:

No idea.

Holmberg:

Ten dollars. Oh, it makes you want to cry.

WPO:

Has this been written about? Where's this written about?

Holmberg:

It's in one of my notes. It's in one of the notes to *Dear Brother*.[13]

WPO:

[13] Holmberg, ed., *Dear Brother*, 26-27 n.

It'd be worth an article in WPO about that sometime, about the fire, assembling everything you know about that.

Holmberg:

Well, I can see the title now *When Bad Things Happen to History or to Historical Material*. I truly believe we've lost so much because very few, only a few of Jonathan's letters to William have survived. And yet we know he was writing him regularly during this period. Where are all of Jonathan's letters? Where are the Gilbert Russell letters, the John Overton letters, and the William P. Anderson letters? Where are they? They're nowhere to be found. They're not in Missouri, they're not at the Filson, and they're not in Wisconsin with the Draper manuscripts. Where are they? I keep going back to idea that they were burned up in that backyard. This probably includes field books, field journals, field notes, and other things like that. I'm sure Expedition-dated material was part of all that went up in smoke.

WPO:

Plus the maps, the 1804 lower Missouri maps that Maximilian copied; the originals are gone. We'd give anything for those original maps.

Holmberg:

Right. Well, here's another thing. I did an article on this and surprisingly I never really got much reaction to it.[14] The letter that Lewis writes James Finley in Cincinnati in September of 1804, going up the Missouri, in which he reports on the countryside and what they're doing and all of that. It's a partial letter. It's incomplete and it's missing at least the last page or two or more. But the first four pages are there. And in some parts, it is word for word almost the same as the letter that Lewis writes his mother from Fort Mandan before they set off up the Missouri in April of 1805. Now Clark clearly is referring to notes he has taken, things like that that have never turned up, that are missing.

We know that with Lewis' whole lack of journal keeping and things like that, he is like, "Clark can do that." But we know that he was keeping field notes of his own that have never turned up. And again, did they end up in that backyard fire? Were they ruined in a cache there at the Great Falls? But I think that's a particularly important letter that, again, gives a hint suggesting there was more that Lewis was actually doing in the way of recording and documenting what was going on. Read that and see what you think and then look at the letter he writes his mother from Fort Mandan.

WPO:

A great letter.

Holmberg:

It's a great letter, but parts of it are word for word the same as Clark's letter. He is clearly referring to notes, field notes, he's taken, observations he's made, and I wish the rest of the letter would turn up some day. It's at the Cincinnati Historical Society Museum Center. It's one of two of his Expedition-dated letters that I edited, first it was for *Ohio Valley History*, and then that one from September of 1804, I did again for WPO[14] when we did something back about 15 years ago.

WPO:

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[14]James J. Holmberg, "'Fairly Launched on my Voyage of Discovery:' Meriwether Lewis's expedition letter to James Findlay," 35:3 (August 2009): 20.

Let me ask one last question about the Lewis aspects. Obviously, we're both fascinated by this. The one really intriguing thing that Kira Gale and John Guice and others bring up is the whole Wilkinson conspiracy, the Aaron Burr world, that kind of miasma of whatever it was that was going on in the Mississippi-Missouri frontier. Nobody is quite sure, but we know that James Wilkinson is not reliable, and Lewis writes the letter to Secretary of War William Eustis saying, "my Country can never make 'A Burr' of me"[15] and so on. Does any part of you think there may be more to this that relates somehow to Lewis' demise than we know?

Holmberg:

I don't think so. When you look where Wilkinson's at, you look at what all is going on out there. I think there's no way that Wilkinson was trying to orchestrate the assassination of Lewis. He's down the Mississippi in the New Orleans area in a mess dealing with stuff. We know what a nefarious character he was. But I just don't see it, I just don't see it. When Gilbert Russell makes those statements during Wilkinson's court martial later on, or gives his testimony and his recollection, Kira Gale, James Star, all those guys, try to pick it all apart and ultimately claim that the whole thing is a forgery, that Russell didn't even actually write these letters, that somebody made it up to cover up for Wilkinson. That's just not true.

I've looked at the documents and things like that, and it is just, again, that it feeds into their scenario of their conspiracy theory. I just don't see that is at all a possibility. Just as I don't see that some random, whether it was Grinder or some thieves, criminals that happened along the Natchez Trace, stopped and killed Lewis that night. When you look at all the facts, for me anyway and most folks, we just keep coming back to the conclusion that he sadly took his own life.

WPO:

You say most folks, but remember at Olive Branch that we took a vote at the end and it was like 350 to 20 who were still in favor of murder.

Holmberg:

John Guice and I did a session at the Southern Historical Association annual meeting back in Houston years ago. And in fact, that's what actually helped lead to our book *By His Own Hand?* Chuck Rankin from Oklahoma University Press was there, and he took John and me to lunch afterwards, and he said, "You guys need to do a book on this." And so, that's actually how it all came about. But I gave mine with all my solid Clark evidence, and "I fear, I fear," and all this evidence as to why it was almost certainly suicide. John gets up there and holds up two, was it 55-caliber musket balls? And he said, "Now somebody shooting himself twice with balls of this size, that's a pretty steep learning curve, don't you think?" and with that, he won over the whole room.

WPO:

Exactly. He and I debated in Natchez once, and we had agreed to Queensbury rules that we would be respectful of each other and that we would listen and we would see how much we could agree on, and we would start by saying where we agreed. He agreed to these rules. And so we start, and the audience is made up mostly of his followers. I start by saying, "Professor Guice, can we agree that Meriwether Lewis died of gunshots on October 11th, 1809?" I thought, "This is a good start." I had about a dozen propositions I thought we would agree upon before we would get to the controversial stuff, but he just took over and he talked for 45 minutes. He was like a professional wrestler. He was

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[15]Meriwether Lewis to William Eustis, August 18, 1809, in Jackson, ed., *Letters* 2:459-61.

eye gouging, he was doing illegal holds, and he just cheated. He broke the agreement and just held forth. I was laughing at the sheer audacity of it. And of course the audience loved it, and they voted again that it was clearly murder. It was one of my happiest days in the Lewis and Clark world. I loved and admired John.

York

WPO:

Jim, you talked about how the *Dear Brother* letters humanize Clark and reveal more about his personality. I think it's really important that he also gives us a glimpse into his new wife Julia's response to going from real genteel Virginia luxury out to the howling frontier. But the other big question, of course, is York. It has been my view since the Bicentennial, Jim, and partly thanks to you, that we liked Clark better before we knew as much as we now know. So Jay Buckley has shown that Clark's handling of Indian relationships and treaties sometimes makes us cringe, even though we understand that he was a man of his times and an agent of the US government, but still we hate to see it, because we prize Clark so much for his decency, his generosity, and his humanity. Then your view and others, but yours particularly, that the picture of the post-Expedition relationship with his enslaved body servant York really damages our sense of Clark, however much we understand that that was then, and this is now.

Holmberg:

Right. I agree. It does not reflect well, and I say this again when I talk about that relationship between the two men; it doesn't reflect well on Clark. But again, you have to remember that he was a product of his society, the culture he was raised in to believe a certain way. Very truthfully, he did not think African-Americans were on the same level of Euro-Americans. He believed that Whites were superior and that Blacks were less intelligent. At the same time, Clark believes, and he stresses this a couple of different times in letters to Jonathan, that he's a good master. That's something. You did not want to be known as a bad master because that reflected poorly on you and your family. He tells Jonathan, "Believe me, I have not become a severe master, but I must have work done and my people …" He often refers to them as, and you'll see this in letters, your White family and your Black family. Well, there's a true divide between the two.

I tell people who think, "Oh, these guys were buddies. They grew up together," and all that, well, they were never friends. It was master and slave, owner and property. There was a divide there and, when push comes to shove, Clark's going to do what he believes he needs to, going so far as threatening (now he didn't actually ever do it), but threatening to sell York down the river to New Orleans. That's the worst fate that a slave from the Upper South could face, pretty much. He separates York from his wife, and he tells York, "Well, find another wife here in St. Louis. Get over her." That becomes the whole core of what Clark sees as the problem: "that wife of York" back in Louisville. He says, "You just need to get over her," but York won't do it.

That's why I think, too, in many ways, York, beyond what he does during the Expedition, is a heroic figure in that he risked everything and essentially sacrificed the position he had at pretty much the top of the pecking order for enslaved people, being the body servant of a national hero, a prominent person and all that, and pushing for what he believed he deserved and had earned for his years of service. He starts off with saying, "Well, I'm going to stay in Louisville, so why don't you hire me to somebody?" Clark says, "No, you're useful to me and I want you with me in St. Louis." Then, he goes to, "Well, why don't you sell me to somebody?" Clark says, "No, I want you in St. Louis." It becomes this battle of wills. Then, finally, by November-December of 1808, when they moved permanently to St. Louis, York is like, "Hey, I think I deserve my freedom," and Clark is like, "I

don't think so. You need to make me more money and be of more service to me before I can afford to free you."

The chasm has opened up, and York clearly lets Clark know his unhappiness, his resentment about this situation because in the past, during the Expedition and other travels, these two guys are in the same boat, so to speak. They're both away from home, they're separated from family but now, Clark gets married and takes his wife to St. Louis. York's probably saying, "Hey, what about me? Why don't I get to take my wife?" York's wife is owned by somebody else. I have not been able to determine and may never be able to determine who owned her, but York feels he's been wronged and you can't blame him. He has really gotten a raw deal here, but Clark just doesn't see it.

Clark does eventually free him, even though there's, again, whole speculation of York's going out to the Rocky Mountains and being a chief among the Crow or whatever. Clark has no reason to lie about this. He tells Washington Irving in 1832 that he freed York. Doesn't say when, but he freed York, set him up in a drayage business, and York ran it between Nashville and Richmond, Nashville, Tennessee, obviously, and I think probably Richmond, Kentucky, because there was a road that he could have traveled there, and that York lost the business; a horse died. This is your slave owner rationalization coming in. He didn't take care of the horses, Clark claims. He lost the business, didn't get up early enough, then hires himself out, then tried to return to him in St. Louis, and he died of cholera in Tennessee. That's Clark's story.

Here's York at an unknown year. I speculate circa 1820, 1821 would be about the right timeline. You did not free slaves after they were fifty because they didn't think they'd be able to take care of themselves. If York is born about 1770 like Clark, in 1820 he is going to be 50. If you look at Julia who died in 1820 and slaves whom Clark inherits for either himself or their children and everything that's going on, I think York perhaps was freed around 1818-ish, maybe something like that, and gets set up in a business. We know from other documents that we have in the Filson's collection that York was indeed a wagon driver around Louisville. We have the contract from 1815 in which he is doing exactly that for Clark and his nephew, John Hite Clark, in Louisville. Whatever Clark is saying is backed up by documentary evidence from that day. He had no reason to lie, make this up. He says, "I have heard that there are remnants or members of York's tribe," he says, "living up in Missouri," meaning that he left descendants among the Indians of the Upper Missouri, the Mandan, what have you.

Clark tells what he knows, but he never gets specific, at least Irving didn't record it, as to when he might've freed York. I think there's that sense of fog of time a bit. I think it's probably twelve to fifteen years earlier that he's talking about that. We know there was cholera in the area around 1820, so it makes sense that I think right around 1820, '21, something like that, York died. Again, going back to Lewis' death, Clark has all these contacts everywhere. Somebody down in Tennessee is reporting it. I'd love to do another deep dive into the Missouri Historical Society Clark papers and some others, too, to see if there might be this random letter that's been overlooked and never really studied. It might just be this one line of some contact of Clark's from Tennessee saying, "Oh my gosh, your former slave or your body servant, York, died." That's why we keep looking and we keep hoping.

WPO:

Jim, I can understand why Clark was reluctant to free York, to hire him out, or to sell him. There was a codependency in their relationship, they'd been childhood companions, and they'd been through a lot together.

Holmberg:

Exactly.

WPO:

What I can't understand, though, is why can't Clark understand that York has a reasonable desire to be with his wife?

Holmberg:

I think, again, it goes back to a codependency. They'd always been together since childhood. The analogy I mentioned is the best buddies. One of the buddies gets a girlfriend or is going to get married and the other guy feels like, "Oh man, this isn't fair. I'm getting cut out." I think for Clark he had trouble thinking that York was choosing his wife over him. He should've been more loyal to him and wanted to stay with him rather than with his wife there in Louisville. He was his property. He owned him. They'd been lifelong companions. They'd been through all these things together. I think for Clark, it was a reaction to a personal rejection like, "Man, I can't believe you want to leave me to stay with her." It was just a blind spot. Whether you want to say it was that slaveholder mentality or just a personality feature of Clark, it was very human.

I think we've all been there, where we felt like we got the short end of the stick in a relationship. I think that was part of Clark's anger and frustration with York, especially once York started acting out and letting Clark know he wasn't happy. That's why in the letters, as he painfully records to Jonathan, he beats York on one occasion and York is in jail. Now, whether Clark put him there or he landed there for another reason is unclear, and then Clark gets him out and says, "Oh, he's been the finest Negro I ever had," but then, shortly thereafter, he's back to saying, "He's a problem, I can't do anything with him." That's when Clark says, "Okay, I'm sending him off to Wheeling with a boat in September of '09. When he gets to Louisville, do whatever you want with him. Hire him out, sell him, I don't care," but he doesn't ever actually do that. I think that still shows the humanity of Clark and that he can't really truly part with him, even though he doesn't finally know what happened to him.

WPO:

Does York have only that name? There's no other name associated with him?

Holmberg:

No other name. You've seen it turn up sometimes as Ben York. That's not right. Ben was a different individual. Ben Gee or McGee, whom Clark frees in December of 1802 when he was getting ready to move across the river from Louisville to Clarksville, when he is, again, looking to start over because he goes bankrupt, essentially, from helping George out, so he's starting over. It was a legal dodge because Indiana was free territory. So you could still take slaves over into the Ohio country. It was very fluid, it happened, but you would usually free one or two or so just to meet the legal qualifications. Ben York is a freed slave who turns around the very next day and indentures himself to William for thirty years. It was a dodge. I think that's different, but the only name that the Lewis and Clark York is known by is just that single name.

WPO:

What about York's wife? What was her name?

Holmberg:

Don't know. Don't know her name, don't know who her owner was, but we know she had one because Clark said so, going back to the Fort Mandan letter, where he says that York is sending his

wife a buffalo robe. He's also sending Ben a buffalo robe, formerly his fellow slave who of course is free now, but he's indentured so, for all intents and purposes, he's still a slave.

WPO:

What about York's children?

Holmberg:

Don't know. Clark refers to family, York's family, but now we know that he did have relatives and fellow slaves who were still back in Louisville whom Clark did not take to Missouri. Rose, I believe, was his stepmother. I don't believe Rose was his birth mother. I think Old York was maybe dead by then. He doesn't seem to be getting mentioned. He had half-siblings. Nancy was apparently a sister or at least a half-sister, and then there were others. There was a family there in Louisville, but we don't know as far as York's children with his wife which back then, of course, would've been jumping the broom.[16] Slaves didn't legally get married. I've talked to people over the years. As recently as last year, a lady called and thought she was a descendant of York. Those leads go nowhere. There's no way of proving it. Often, they get so far off the beam of any possibility that we know that they're almost certainly not.

WPO:

There's more. Clark says he trounced York. He beat him severely. I try to imagine this scene. We know York was a big man. When you hear that story, what do you see? What do you think happened?

Holmberg:

He mentions in some of the letters how he's whipped some of his other slaves, including a woman who I think was pregnant, as I recall, but he says he gave her a genteel whipping, I think probably with a cane or a switch, something like that, and that he probably beat York on the back, around the shoulders. I don't think it was like a cat o' nine tails or anything like that. It might've been a strap of some kind, but Clark must have been very angry with him because he says that he gave him a severe trouncing, but that he's better today. I think Clark means that York was better in that his attitude was better after the beating, not that he was so badly hurt.

WPO:

When Frederick Douglass was being beaten, he fought back. Can York fight back or does he just have to take it? Are there people holding him down? Is he tied up? It's hard to imagine York as just saying, "Okay, boss, go ahead and beat me."

Holmberg:

That's a question we may never be able to know the answer to. In my mind, I think it was almost like a child getting a whipping which, back then, was a spare the rod, spoil the child kind of thing. I picture York basically just leaning over and taking it, and Clark was beating him on the back with a strap, a cane, a rod, something like that. I don't see that he was tied to a post or held down. He might've been. We don't know and I don't guess we ever will but I think, given their relationship and everything, that York just simply took it, then proceeded to shape up for a little while but then go back to being stubborn and disobedient, just driving Clark to distraction.

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[16] Jumping the broom was a rite that enabled enslaved people to consider themselves married as marriages between enslaved Black people were not legally recognized in the antebellum United States.

WPO:

This makes it worse to my mind, Jim, because York could have turned and killed Clark, probably. Certainly, he could have fought back severely.

Holmberg:

Oh, he could've fought, yeah, he could've fought.

WPO:

But he takes it. That's how slavery worked.

Holmberg:

Right.

WPO:

He knew he had to take it. There's something psychologically so chilling about that.

Holmberg:

Yes, it is, and it's sad. Again, I talk about this: I said, "It's just such a sad commentary on the relationship and the unequal positions that these two men were in that one would beat the other, given their lifelong relationship, and that the other would just have to take it." Again, you can default back to the whole parent-child situation where, if you did wrong, and maybe even if you thought you didn't, and you got a whipping, well, you took it and that was it. York probably knew, as angry as he might've been, as much as he maybe wanted to strike back, he knew that would make it even worse for him, so he simply took it.

WPO:

Enter Meriwether Lewis. Clark says, "You know me, I may just sell them down the river." Lewis says, "No, we're not doing that."

Holmberg:

Right. Look at Lewis stepping in and telling Clark to calm down and not get carried away. I think that's a very interesting comment on Lewis, that he's on York's side, in a way. He sees this relationship between the two men, is clearly bothered, and counsels Clark to calm down and not do anything rash that he's going to regret.

WPO:

Is that a personal thing or is that because York is now a veteran of the Lewis and Clark Expedition? Is Lewis protecting Clark against possible charges of brutality or is he just doing the humane thing?

Holmberg:

I think he's doing the humane thing. I think, again, they were not only on the Expedition together; they're in St. Louis together. I think that Lewis has a certain level of sympathy for York and hates to see that the relationship between these two men had reached the point that it had. Even though he doesn't interfere, he counsels Clark to just cool down, not do anything rash, and he's hoping maybe things will get better. I think that speaks, again, to his humanity and a certain level of, I'll say, sympathy, perhaps, for York and the situation he's in. When you look at the fair copy journals, field

note journals, when Floyd is dying in August of 1804, Clark says that York is the one who's really taking care of them.

That's, again, one of those little insights into humanity of these folks here and there. York and Lewis might've had a good relationship. You can see where the two of them obviously were together at various times on the Expedition. Lewis lives with the Clarks for a while in St. Louis, and York is there in the household. These two men have a relationship of a number of years standing already, and I think he hates to see the falling out and the trouble that the two of them are having over this separation of York from his wife, so he's hoping that the relationship will sometime, somehow get better and heal as best it can. He doesn't want Clark to do anything he's going to regret.

WPO:

That's great.

Holmberg:

Or to mistreat York, either. I think he was probably truly bothered to see that York was getting beaten and things like that.

WPO:

That's a great analysis, thank you. It makes us feel better about Meriwether Lewis, among other things. Just one more thing about York here. He's on the Expedition. At times, he's allowed to carry a rifle and to hunt alone. He nurses Floyd through his death in a way that Clark really points to. He saves Clark, maybe, at the flash flood at the Great Falls. He certainly helps in that situation. He's a hit amongst Native Americans, exotic, for some unprecedented, and he's sought after sexually—in that complicated world of sexual exchange between Euro-Americans and Indigenous people. Some Native people think maybe he's the leader. There's something special about this man.

Holmberg:

Spiritually, yes. He was apparently considered spiritually more powerful than the White guys.

WPO:

My point is that he's had a very unusual experience for an enslaved human being, right?

Holmberg:

Right.

WPO:

You know what my question is. It should not surprise us much that afterwards York would think and say, "Hey, look, the most dignity I ever had, the most freedom I ever had, the most autonomy I ever had was on this Expedition where I played a serious and material role in its success, at times a critical role, and frankly, I helped you guys out with Native Americans because they liked me a lot." It seems to me, Jim, that he has a real argument to make here.

Holmberg:

Oh, I agree. The early thinking often was that, when they got back from the Expedition, Clark freed him. Back then we didn't know any of the post-Expedition facts except that, according to Washington Irving's account, Clark had freed him. People just tended to think it was right after the Expedition. Then, in Robert Betts' book, when he sees the John O'Fallon letter from 1811, May 1811, in

which he's reporting York's being miserable and that York's wife's owner is planning to move to Natchez, which I think actually is Nashville, not Natchez, that he's just beside himself, and he thinks he can never make up with Clark.

I think, again, the whole slavery thing and the dynamics between the owner and the enslaved can be very complicated. We would think that, after all that, Clark would've been happy to give York his freedom, but what Clark's doing, and he says this a number of times in letters to Jonathan, is that he's worried about his finances and making a living. Also, he has that almost lifelong connection with York that he doesn't want to lose. I think all those things come together—that he wants to hold onto York, he wants to have York there in St. Louis with him. It's a comfort factor. He knows York can do everything.

There's a document in the O'Fallon papers at the Filson in which Clark is writing John O'Fallon, one of his nephews. He is going on a trip up to Ohio. York is in Louisville at the time and York is going with him. He tells his nephew, whom he thinks of as a son, whom he's helped raise, educate, and all that, basically, "Trust York and what he tells you to do, because he knows how to handle horses, boats, and all this." That shows a complete level of trust in York.

When you look at the situation of going to St. Louis, Clark didn't want to be without him. Clark wanted York there and, if that meant York's wife had to stay back in Louisville and be separated, well then, that just was the way it was. He'd just have to live with it. Clark does relent, obviously, as we know. He does relent and let York go back for a visit, but York apparently tells people he's supposed to be staying months instead of weeks. When Clark hears that, he gets ticked off that York is lying about this, and the whole relationship continues to erode and go downhill.

WPO:

Jim, it wouldn't have surprised me and I wonder if it would've surprised you if one of the following things had happened. Number one: after the Expedition, Clark says, "Good and faithful servant, I'm just going to free you now." Number two: after the Expedition, Clark would have said, "You're a very special human being to me. What's it going to take for you to want to come to St. Louis?" and tried to buy his wife or tried to figure out how to keep the family intact. Aren't those things that are not beyond the realm of rational possibility, even for the slave system?

Holmberg:

I agree. I've seen it in other ownership situations where exactly that kind of thing happens. For their years of service, they might free them; they might try to make sure they're taken care of, things like that. If he had come back, freed York, and tried to set him up in a business or something like that, it would've been perfectly understandable. If he had made every effort… We don't know if he tried to acquire York's wife. He never says, "I tried to acquire her, but I couldn't." He just always says that York needs to forget about her and move on once they go to St. Louis. It could be that he inquired and York's wife's owner said, "No, I'm not parting with her. I don't want to sell her to you," or something like that.

Clark also has more enslaved people than he can handle, and he says at one point, too, that he's trying to sell some of them off and hire them out because he has more than he'd really need or can afford to really support. He leaves some in Louisville, and he takes others to St. Louis. It turns up several different times in the letters where he probably is thinking, "Why would I be buying another slave? I don't need more." He's thinking financially of what that cost is going to be and that he can't afford it. I think a number of things are all getting factored in here. And then, too, it becomes a battle of wills of York's doing as Clark wants him to and not giving in to him. And again, it's going back to the hurt feelings from York's choosing his wife over Clark.

WPO:

I just want to just finish this little piece of it, Jim, but it reinforces so many of the worst aspects of slavery. First of all, York has only a single name, and that name was almost certainly imposed upon him. It's not York Smith.

Holmberg:

Right. But that was the slave system. I mean, almost all slaves only had a single name.

WPO:

Yes. Jefferson's Jupiter, for example. Fair enough. Second point, the White slaveholders felt so entitled in separating families that Clark is offended that York would insist upon staying with his wife. For Clark, it's, "Are you kidding? I mean, look, I own you. That's not part of the bargain here." The idea that separating families was routine. The use of violence as a measure of control and, of course, the threat to sell down the river are typical stereotypical things that slaveholders did in that era. We all get it, but it bothers me to see Clark's succumbing to it.

Holmberg:

Clark was a product of his times, his family, his culture. Clark wanted to be a good master and to be known as a good master. Again, he tells Jonathan in one of his letters, "I don't want you thinking I'd become a severe master. That's not the case." If they could keep families together, they would, but the bottom line was often finances, the economics of it. And if they needed to separate families, they would. Even with the emotions and long-term relationships involved, that sometimes happens. And I've seen it over and over again in slavery-related material in the Filson collections where mothers and children are getting separated. And it's just like, "Well, that's the way it is, and if that's what I need to do, we do it." And so it goes back and forth. The important thing is that York's wife was owned by somebody else, so she was not part of the Clark family. Now, I think, and I'm pretty certain in this belief, that if York's wife had been a fellow Clark slave, she would've been taken to St. Louis with them. Clark would've had no reason to separate them, but the fact that she was owned by somebody else put her out of the Clark orbit of family. So that put things in a different light.

WPO:

Two quick last questions about this, Jim. Number one, there's one more element that I think relates to Washington Irving or some of the rumors that swirled around later about York's fate. This is the trope of the slave who's sorry he was freed, who wants to go back to the previous arrangement.

Holmberg:

Right. Yes. The quote that Irving records is like that: York damned the day he ever got his freedom.

WPO:

White people love to say that, of course. And maybe it's true.

Holmberg:

Well, I think that's where Clark's kind of slaveholder rationalization kicks in. It's at least possible that York might've, given the sad situation that his life had become, lamented his situation. Whether he regretted being free, though, I think is something different. I always say that that's where Clark's

slaveholder rationalization kicks in like, “I told you so. You thought freedom was going to be so great. Yeah, look at what happened.”

WPO:

Exactly.

Holmberg:

This account comes years after York has passed. So this could be upwards of ten years later that Clark's recalling all this to Washington Irving. And in his own mind, maybe it was a way of not feeling guilty about the whole situation and what happened with York. He's rationalizing the whole thing with, “Yeah, see, I told him he'd be sorry. I told him freedom wasn't so great.”

WPO:

Last question about this. You've done all this important work on York. You've also been a really good friend to others who work on this, Hassan and Betz and others. I take it from what you said earlier that there's more to be done on this subject.

Holmberg:

I think so. I mean, if we can find more documents, and more might be out there. I base my analysis on everything that I'm aware of. That doesn't mean that somebody hasn't come up with something else that I'm not aware of. I've talked to people, and they'll contact me and maybe I'll review something for them or they'll point to something they found. And sometimes I'm very honest and tell them I think they're going down the wrong track. One guy in a slavery-related document came across the name York from the 1830s, and he said, “Oh, that's York from the Expedition.” And I said, “No, but why do you say that?” He said, “Well, his name's York, and he's living in Louisville.” I said, “Well, there were other slaves named York. You can't jump to the conclusion of his being the York of the Expedition.”

But I don't think I convinced the guy even though he was almost certainly, in fact, I would say one hundred percent wrong on that. It's kind of like historical fiction, and I'm a fan of historical fiction. I think it's great. I think it's a great way to learn history and make it exciting and interesting. But you’ve also got to read it with a grain of salt as we know, because boy, you can go down the wrong path. When you just buy into something because that seems like the best story or something like that, you can end up way out in the weeds.

WPO:

The discussion we've had now for two hours comes out of the letters that were discovered in the attic and in the trunk that were made available to you at the Filson Historical Society which you then transcribed, edited, annotated, and published. I can't imagine another discovery in the Lewis and Clark world of the past fifty years that is anything as important as this one. The only thing I can think of is a little earlier than that, and that's finding Clark's field notes in the attic in St. Paul, Minnesota. But I think you'll agree this is the great Lewis and Clark discovery of our time.

Holmberg:

Yes, I would say that's pretty accurate. I can't think, in looking at what's turned up in the last fifty or so years since Clark’s field notes, of anything that major. The only other thing that I could think would be on a level with this would be Pryor's journal or Frazer's journal or something like, perhaps an unknown Expedition journal. Or Lewis' field notes. I mean, you get little bits and pieces. But a

group of documents like this, not only of Expedition-dated letters, but then of course everything that follows, filling in gaps about Lewis' death, York's life, things like that. I would agree, this was a major, major discovery.

WPO:

Is that the highlight of your career?

Holmberg:

Oh yes! I think without a doubt. I mean, this led me onto a path of being interested personally and professionally in Lewis and Clark. Editing the letters sent me on the whole path with becoming deeply involved with the Lewis and Clark Trail Heritage Foundation [now doing business as the Lewis & Clark Trail Alliance] and Lewis and Clark Bicentennial efforts and all the articles I've done. I mean, because of this discovery, my primary academic focus was working on Lewis and Clark.

WPO:

Amazing achievement, Jim Holmberg.

WPO:

All right. So here's my next question. In my opinion, the second most important thing that you've done in this area was your edition of the Floyd Journal, the fragmentary Charles Floyd Journal.[17] He dies on August 20, 1804. We have his journal. It's usually been ignored because it's so fragmentary and preliminary, but you not only transcribed it and annotated it and introduced it, but provided a beautiful facsimile edition. We get to actually see what the journal looked like. And although it's possible to look at some of the Lewis and Clark journals thanks to the American Philosophical Society and the internet, this is really the one that shows you what an Expedition journal looked like. Talk about that story.

Holmberg:

All this goes back to the letters and editing them for publication. I took a special interest in the nine young men from Kentucky, which I am still interested in and have things I want to do regarding them. But I was approached by the Wisconsin Historical Society as the original Floyd Journal is there at Wisconsin. And they wanted to have a new edition done as part of the Bicentennial. And so based on my editing of the letters, they asked if I would do it, and I said, yes, I would. And so I was working on it and in talking to them and starting to think, boy, a facsimile would be nice, with annotation and all that. Of course, I had Gary's volume of the Floyd Journal to rely on and others that had been done going back to that early period when Reuben Gold Thwaites had done the first great multivolume edition of the Expedition journals.

We kept trying to figure out how we would do it. Then Chuck Rankin at Oklahoma University Press got involved as the possible publisher. This was before we actually did the *By His Own Hand?* book. He said they would be the publisher. Our discussions eventually led to the format you see. And there was a designer out of Seattle whom Chuck brought into it to try to imagine, "How can we do this so you can actually see it all?" I think they came up with a really attractive and easy to follow format of showing original transcription notes and all that. It turned out really, really well. Some people may say the level of annotation is overboard. Although most people love all the notes in *Dear Brother*, a few folks said it was overdone, but I said, "Hey, I see a name, I see a mention. I'm curious. I figure if

[17] James J. Holmberg, ed., *Exploring with Lewis and Clark: The 1804 Journal of Charles Floyd* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005).

I'm curious and would like to know who that is or what they're talking about, I'm going to do a note on it. And if you don't want to read it, you don't have to." And so I did the same pretty much then with the Floyd journal and so went through and anything that I could explain or maybe identify where Gary didn't in the University of Nebraska edition or where maybe we had a slight difference of opinion or something, I would bring that out in a note. That worked really well.

But I tell you, I'm a little surprised you even mentioned that because I think that book really pretty much stayed under the radar of most folks and never really seems to get mentioned or anything like that. It's a beautiful book, and I think it turned out really well. I'm encouraged, I guess, and a little surprised that you've identified that as really one of the other important things that have been done.

WPO:

I think it's very important. It's beautiful. For one thing, it was beautifully designed and the transcription and your notes and your introduction are really masterful. It's a beautiful contribution to Lewis and Clark studies. The annotations are important. And I don't know where you disagree with Gary, but given his amazing work, I don't think it's very often.

Holmberg:

Oh no, very rarely.

WPO:

I think what's important is for people to see it because even though we're all lovers of Lewis and Clark, we tend to think of Lewis and Clark in terms of the linear text that appears in most editions. We need to be reminded from time to time that at the end of a long day of really backbreaking labor, these men sat down with fine paper and a pen and wrote out their observations. To see that, to gaze at the high-resolution facsimile, it makes the hair on my arm stand up. Because when I go on my own little adventures, I'm sure you feel the same way, the last thing you want to do at the end of the day is sit down and write it all up. You want your grog. You want to eat. You want to sleep.

Holmberg:

Right, exactly, yes. You can see it in his own handwriting, in his own description and expression. It shows again that dedication, and Floyd was a dedicated guy. Until he got sick, he made an entry every day, because he was so dedicated to following their instruction that the sergeants keep a journal. When you read Lewis, Clark, Gass, Ordway, Whitehouse, and you read Floyd side by side, you start seeing how there are little differences. I find this very interesting. Even though they often copied from each other or made just the basic notes, it is the little things that show up that only that one person recorded. One of them for Floyd is the outrage he felt when Moses Reed took off and deserted, and how he felt that was so terrible that he had kind of betrayed the trust and the fellowship of the Corps of Discovery.

There are a few instances where only Floyd mentioned some of these things that nobody else does. So I think there is a constant learning opportunity by reading not just the captains' journals and thinking you've read it all, but by reading the other journals, but also letters and things like that. I was working on something recently and it wasn't even a Lewis and Clark- related thing, but I thought, "I'm going to check for a listing for Lewis and Clark." And there were letters relating to William C.C. Claiborne who was the first elected governor of the State of Louisiana. He's talking about Lewis and Clark and what he's hearing about them. I thought, "Wow, this is really something." And I said, "I don't know that this has turned up anywhere," so what did I do? I went right to Jackson, the "Bible" of the letters, and sure enough, he already had them in there [Jackson, ed., *Letters*, from 1:250, 253; to 1:248-49,

252]. I thought my initial excitement pretty much had cold water poured on it, because I had been thinking this might be another article to pursue with more info on the Expedition and public reaction to it. I think that's one of the intriguing things. We are always hoping for new things to turn up. And even when they're older, like Floyd's Journal which had already been published, if you can put a new twist on it, bring a new kind of light to how it's presented with the addition of a facsimile, there's something that people can learn from and enjoy and appreciate.

WPO:

Absolutely. Is there a Pryor journal out there that's burned, disappeared, or once existed? What's your sense of that?

Holmberg:

We know that Robert Frazer kept a journal and that he was planning on publishing it. Of course Lewis about had a meltdown over that because he felt he was getting pre-empted. I think the publication of the Patrick Gass Journal really kind of took the wind out of Lewis' sails to a degree. He felt that his efforts were getting co-opted, and it really upset him. And then there was Frazer's talk about publishing, and Ordway was encouraged to get his journal published. That's I think when Lewis and Clark bought it from Ordway to make sure it didn't get published before their journal did, their history did. The last we know of Frazer's journal is somebody who was going out west, heading out to go, I guess, onto the Oregon Trail I think in Franklin, Missouri. Was it where Frazer's son was living? They visit him and say they saw the journal from the Expedition. Part of Whitehouse's Journal is missing. Whether that survived, who knows? Nathaniel Hale Pryor is one of the sergeants, so he should have kept a journal.

WPO:

The sergeants were required to keep journals unlike the privates.

Holmberg:

Pryor ends up becoming an officer after the Expedition. I'm quite sure he was literate, and there's evidence of his having a letter or getting a letter or something as part of their communications during the Expedition as to who's going where. Where is his journal? And who knows what else might be out there? When a new collection turns up somewhere, when something is uncovered in an attic, a barn, what have you, there's always hope that, whether it's Lewis and Clark-related or something else, it might be a tremendous contribution to the historical record of whatever that subject might be.

WPO:

If you had world enough and time and all the energy in the world, is there another book in you? Are there more books in you?

Holmberg:

I'm contemplating a book, and I've had this in my mind for a long time, and it's really just been a matter of time and energy. When I was doing the Clark letters and stuff, not only did the Filson give me a day a week for a few years so that I could just work on it here at home. I'd work on nothing but Clark. And then I had a research assistant part of the time who would help with the notes and stuff. That really got it moving forward instead of my just trying to do it on my own at night and on weekends. Once the kids are in bed and my staying up till midnight and one in the morning and getting up again at six to do research and things like that, those days were over. So I really felt the need for more blocks of regular daytime, be it during the week or weekends, to work on things.

There's a collection of really good early letters at the Filson of a Kentuckian who goes down to Louisiana in the Jefferson administration. He's writing home to his wife, and they're really good letters about early Louisiana and what's going on and the people. I've done some on those. I've done an article, I've done a talk on them, and I really am looking at them as maybe another edited collection in a book. I haven't committed to it yet. I haven't presented a proposal to Yale or LSU Press or anything like that yet. But I think they would be a very nice addition to that period of history in that part of the country. The funny thing is this guy almost has shades of Lewis in that he apparently goes off the deep end and ends up killing himself and leaves a note behind that's full of paranoia and things like that.

It's shades almost of Lewis in that respect. I'm looking at that as a possibility. And there are literally two and three other collections of the Filson that would be really nice to edit and publish. I like doing the edited letters with the annotations and a lengthy introduction and the like. When I go to part-time or even full retirement, I'm looking to mentor the younger curators at the Filson, help out with projects that I can be useful for. And then really to pursue not only articles for WPO on the nine guys from Kentucky, but then to launch into maybe a full-scale book edition of edited letters.

WPO:

In a certain way, Lewis and Clark just happened to you. Right? I mean, you had a whole portfolio of work at the Filson and suddenly this thing came to your attention. It's kind of a perfect storm. These letters are discovered, they fall into your hands, and you help to persuade the owners that they should go to the Filson. The three Ps. You get the assignment to edit them, but also the Bicentennial of the Expedition is coming. So this confluence of circumstances gave a certain energy to the whole thing.

Holmberg:

It was kind of like the perfect storm. As I've mentioned, growing up, we started going on family camping vacations when I was four years old. I tell my parents to this day, they're both still with us, they're in their mid-nineties, and I've told them this for years, “How in the world did you guys think hauling four little kids around the country, camping almost every night, in different places, driving, going to the national parks, sometimes staying with the relatives around the country, my mom cooking full-scale meals over the fire or Coleman stove would be fun?” How in the world they ever thought that was a vacation is beyond me. I said, “You ought to be canonized as saints for doing that.” And of course then they respond, “Oh, it was wonderful. You guys were so good and all this and that.” But I tell you, and I tell it truthfully, that experience growing up I'm sure is what set me on the course I followed as far as loving history.

I have a vivid recollection of roaming around the Little Bighorn battlefield when I was six years old when you could still do that and freezing our butts off and staring down bears at Yellowstone on that same vacation. By the time I was fourteen, I'd been in forty-seven states.

WPO:

Wow.

Holmberg:

That's pretty darn unusual for kids. That's all a tribute to my parents. My dad is an accountant by profession. I think he would've probably loved to have been a historian, but that wasn't what happened. But they took us around; they made that effort. And I've benefited. My siblings don't follow history. They've all done other things with their careers, but it sure bit me. I can remember reading biographies as a kid growing up and history and of course the vacations and always going to these historical sites. When it came time to go to college I decided to major in history, which

concerned my parents because they thought, "What in the world were you going to do with that?" It worked out really well that coming out of grad school, the Filson was hiring a manuscript assistant. I was fortunate to get the job, and then from there, a personal interest really did become a professional interest. And when the Clark letters turned up, I seized the opportunity. I saw the potential and the importance really, but at that point I wasn't really thinking of what it was going to do for me personally. I just knew these letters needed to get published and get out there. But it worked out great for me professionally because that did indeed, as you said, became my route into all of the Lewis and Clark world, the groups, the history, and all that. So a matter of opportunity presented itself, and I had enough sense, or at least the passion, the incentive to pursue it. Any fame I do have, my claim to fame has been the Clark letters and my work with Lewis and Clark subjects.

WPO:

It's a very, very, very legitimate claim to fame, Jim. So I hear you promising to write a whole series of articles for *We Proceeded On* over the next five or ten years.

Holmberg:

Yes, yes. Hopefully sooner than ten years, but certainly as long as you're editor and you want them. I have a group of about five articles that are on the back burner from things that I've bumped into over the years and that I found interesting that nobody's really addressed. Intriguing questions like Joseph Field, was he killed on the Arikara expedition led by Nathaniel Pryor? Maybe there's evidence that will actually say that. I speculate in a note in *Dear Brother* that I think that might be what happened, that he got killed on that expedition, but we've never found any evidence of his being named as one of the casualties. We know that George Shannon got wounded and had his leg amputated and that Gibson they think was also wounded on that expedition. They're all part of that group out there in early 1807 and into 1808, rolling around out in there and going back and forth.

You had mentioned something more on Floyd, which would basically be a reworking of my intro to the Floyd Journal book as an article incorporating anything new that might've popped up, which shouldn't be much I don't think. Also Clark's daughter, Mary Margaret Clark, and her death. She died here in Louisville in 1821, and I have things on her that I found. George Gibson and his post-Expedition years and death. More on the Field brothers, mostly Joseph Field, if I can ever run that down. That's the kind of thing you know from doing your research that leads you to bump into this stuff and you stick it in a file to deal with later on. And before you know it, three and five and ten years have gone by and you've never gotten back to it.

WPO:

Oh, I know very well. But I also encourage you to think about writing an article about what was lost in the great St. Louis backyard fire in the 1930s. I think that's a really great (although sad) story, and I think it would be a great article.

WPO:

Just a couple more questions. Do you think that there's a good deal more of Lewis writing that once existed by way of journal or field notes that for whatever reason, in a cache pit, or when a boat overturned, or after the craziness of his death, that has disappeared and could possibly still be out there?

Holmberg:

I believe there is more that he wrote. And whether it was in the form of a regular journal or I'll say field notes, I believe there were more of his observations on the flora, the fauna, things like that, at

one time. I fear that it probably has not survived, whether it was in a cache, an overturned pirogue, a portmanteau in the Potomac, or that backyard fire in St. Louis. I think that material has met its fate. Maybe it got lost on those pack horses that got away on the Natchez Trace that James Neelly, agent to the Chickasaw nation, was trying to track down while Lewis traveled on. Some of those things in the transition between Nashville and Washington maybe go astray. I think there was more at one time. Go back and look at that letter that Lewis writes to Finley and then compare it to the one that he writes to his mother from Fort Mandan. I think that is a big clue that indicates that he was doing more, keeping more in the way of recording the Expedition than is generally believed or known.

WPO:

Yes, just remember also that when Lewis writes in his journal in mid-September 1804 about the pronghorn antelope and the prairie dog and the astonishing treelessness of the plains, he actually ends a journal entry in mid-sentence[18] and it just gives you the feel that he probably finished that sentence. That in other words, he probably didn't just go silent at that point.

Holmberg:

Right. There are clues like that that make you think there must be more. It is one of those tragedies of losing our historical material that, because of accident, ignorance, or whatever, things haven't survived.

WPO:

In the Expedition’s departure from Fort Mandan in April 1805 Lewis says it’s been a "darling project of mine" for the last ten years. This is the most happy time of my life. We know that he had applied to Jefferson years before to be a part of the Andre Michaux Expedition that collapsed, et cetera. That’s Lewis. But Clark could have no idea of the letter that's about to appear in his mailbox from Meriwether Lewis saying, “This thing is on. I'm doing it. I need a partner in discovery. Is there anything that could convince you to do it?” We have no evidence, do we, that Clark had been dreaming of a trip into the deep interior of the country?

Holmberg:

No, we don't. We do know, however (this is in Jackson, 1:7-8) that George Rogers Clark writes Jefferson and says basically, “Hey, if you have anything that needs doing out here in the West, keep my brother William in mind.” We'd like to know the whole thought process and the decision between Lewis and Jefferson to invite William Clark. We know that Clark was in Washington just a year or two before, and that they'd been in touch and seen each other. So Clark and Lewis clearly have a continuing friendship that would have put him in mind. Clark has actually been doing some work for the Secretary of War on things that are going on in the West like the Mississippi area which he's reported on. So Clark is in that mix of somebody out here in the West, but I think he was never thinking, I've never seen it anyway, "Hey, boy, an expedition all the way to the Pacific would be nice."

Clark is so practical and looking to get ahead in life, and I think to live up to the expectations of his family and to have them be proud of him. When this opportunity comes up he's just moved across the river to Clarksville after he's impoverished himself helping his brother George out, and he's looking to start over. He's looking for the next big opportunity, and here comes the opportunity of his life. He grabs it.

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[18] Lewis, September 17, 1804: “this morning I saw" - Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Journals of the Lewis & Clark Expedition*, 13 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979-2001), 3:82, 85 n 5.

Now he qualifies it, saying "I will be equal with you in every respect," as Lewis says he will be, and engage in all its dangers and honors. He realizes right away that this is the opportunity of a lifetime. And it hits him at the perfect time. If he had been a successful, comfortable plantation owner here in Jefferson County, outside Louisville, would he have necessarily wanted to have done something like that? He might've said, "Well, now I don't know that that's in my best interest." But he was looking for an opportunity, he's starting over, and here comes Lewis' letter.[19] However you want to think of it, William Clark grabbed that opportunity and ran with it, and of course it set him up for the rest of his life. He continues in government service, as we know, the rest of his life.

WPO:

And as the patron of a private western expansion museum. He becomes the conduit for Maximilian and for Washington Irving and for all sorts of other people.

Holmberg:

Yes. I saw this in the Clark papers at Missouri Historical Society. John J. Audubon is a contact. He's an associate and kind of helping out John J. Audubon, the artist. He is this conduit not only for the government, but for all these other explorers coming through. So he becomes this major figure on the frontier, and it all goes back, as we said earlier, to grasping opportunities when they come along. It's all because he grasped that opportunity when Lewis invited him to head West with him.

WPO:

If Lewis isn't just being rhetorical when he says the adventure had been "a darling project of mine" for the last ten years, you can be sure that at some point he and William Clark talked about the West, the far West. George Rogers Clark had been invited by Jefferson to explore the interior, had turned it down. So it would not have been absolutely lightning out of the blue for Clark to hear that Lewis was going to do this.

Holmberg:

No. He would've been well aware of other opportunities or other possibilities and attempts that had never panned out. Going back to George in the 1780s when Jefferson had invited George to do it, he would've been aware of the idea of a western tour. It wouldn't have been a shock, especially given the competition going on as to who's going to be controlling the West. Of course, the big final nudge for Jefferson was Alexander Mackenzie's flat out saying that Britain needed to seize control of the Pacific Northwest and keep America out.[20] That finally scared them enough that they got an official expedition under way. They were no friends of the English. Now Clark wasn't the Anglophobe that Lewis was, but he realized that expansion and protecting America from these European powers were very important priorities.

WPO:

Jim, this is an impossible question, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Would the Expedition have succeeded in full measure without William Clark? In other words, let's say that Lewis does it alone or that he picks Moses Hook or some relative nonentity to be the second in command. How important is Clark to the success of the Expedition? There are times when I would say in some sense it should be called the Clark and Lewis Expedition.

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[19] Lewis to Clark, June 19, 1803, Jackson, ed., *Letters* 1:57-60.

[20] Alexander Mackenzie, *Voyages from Montreal, on the river St. Laurence, through the continent of North America, to the frozen and Pacific Ocean; in the years1789 and 1793…* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, Strand; Cobbett and Morgan, Pall-Mall; and W. Creech, at Edinburgh. By R. Noble, Old-Bailey, 1801).

Holmberg:

Yes, I think Clark was very important. We can't say, and we can never say, that it wouldn't have succeeded without Clark. But of course we know that the Expedition was very successful because of Clark. He was a leveling factor for Lewis. And I've said this before: not only were they good friends, but I think Lewis looked up to Clark as kind of a big brother figure and somebody he clearly relied on in many ways. I think Clark gloried in that position because he'd always been the little brother. He looked up to his older brothers, and now this was his chance to be a mentor and kind of a big brother figure to somebody else.

He takes this on with his nephews whom he essentially thinks of as his sons. He's very dedicated to family. I think he was very dedicated to Lewis and that friendship and how he could be a mentor and a good friend and of course partner in discovery as is often said for Lewis. We can never say that the Expedition wouldn't have succeeded without him. You're no doubt familiar with *The Far Side* cartoon. Clark's mom is telling him, "You'd better get busy. It's going to be Lewis and Clark, always Lewis and Clark, instead of Clark and Lewis." I definitely think it was more successful because of Clark. He was the day-to-day commander really, the hands-on guy. Lewis would go roaming off and doing his scientific observation and what have you. And there's Clark with the boats, with the men, handling practical things. He's better at Indian negotiations. Even with the medical thing, he kind of becomes more the medicine guy than Lewis. So I think he clearly is integral to the success of the Expedition, at least in terms of making it more successful than it might've been with somebody else. And who knows, the whole thing could have fallen apart without him. But we'll never know that.

WPO:

Do you think Clark understood that there was fragility in the character and personality of Meriwether Lewis and that Lewis needed a steadying older-brother influence like Clark in order to succeed?

Holmberg:

I think so. I think Clark was a smart and observant guy, given their relationship that went back to the 1790s in the Army where Lewis ends up in Clark's rifle company because he's gotten in trouble from his run in with the other officer.

WPO:

Lieutenant Eliot.

Holmberg:

Lewis challenged Lieutenant Eliot to a duel which Anthony Wayne put a stop to, liberated Lewis from the arrest as per the court martial that ensued, and transferred him to Clark's command so Clark knew all of that. Meeting thusly, they clearly hit it off and were good friends, but I think it was partly that Lewis looked up to Clark, and Clark really kind of gloried in that mentor-big brother role. I think both aspects were very important.

WPO:

Alas, you are retiring. James Ronda has retired. John Logan Allen will have to stop his amazing work at some point. Gary Moulton is growing older. The great Gerard Baker has retired to eastern Montana. Steve is dead. Fortunately, Jay Buckley is still in his prime. I don't see another group of people like all of you who really carried the ball forward in a big and scholarly way and broke new ground for this story.

Holmberg:

I don't disagree with that. Yes, when you look at who has gone before us and who is in the sunset of their careers and who are the up-and-comers, I think it's clear that Jay is very important to continuing on the story.

WPO:

Yes. That tells us how important it is to encourage others, be they professional historians or not, who have the passion and the ability to take on some of these stories, these little bits of info that they get and run with them, and to use *We Proceeded On* as the outlet so that that story can keep being told. It doesn't always have to be books. It can be the articles in a journal. But it is important that there's always something more. It's incredible that in WPO, even with having three and four articles four times a year on Lewis and Clark for the last fifty years, new work can keep getting produced. It is amazing.

Holmberg:

It is amazing and it takes a lot of work and a lot of encouragement. It needs constant nurturing. That's true with anything. I see that with *Ohio Valley History*, which is the academic journal that the Filson publishes in partnership with the University of Cincinnati History Department and the Cincinnati Museum Center.

Jay is the youngest of our group, but who's coming up behind him to keep carrying the ball forward?

WPO:

I give Jay a lot of credit because he's bringing in some of his students and co-writing articles with them. I think that's incredibly important, nurturing work.

Holmberg:

Well, that's great. We need things like that. Jay's going to continue to be very, very important. And you're going to have your enthusiasts who keep cranking. You can have your, I'll say, amateurs, which is perfectly fine and legit, and you have your more professionals. It's a good mix because you've got to remember your target audience too, and who's reading these journals. We all know how deadly dull academic articles can be sometimes. You have to make them so that they're engaging and relatable in some way to your readership. Let's hope, another ten years down the line, the work continues, whether it's from some of Jay's students or a whole new generation that decides to focus on Lewis and Clark for whatever reasons.

WPO:

So we have talked now for three hours, and guess what word we have never uttered?

Holmberg:

What?

WPO:

Sacagawea. Neither one of us has ever uttered the word Sacagawea.

Holmberg:

No, we have not. Clark would say, Janey.

WPO:

Another conversation at another time! Many heartfelt thanks, Jim.