

How Clark County Got Its Name

Clark County was named for William Clark, best remembered for his exploration of the Louisiana Purchase lands west of the Mississippi River acquired by the United States in 1803. The Corps of Discovery, as the expedition came to be called, provided new information about the culture and geography of the West. Significantly, Clark also served as the governor of Missouri Territory from 1813 to 1820.

William Clark was born in Virginia in 1770. His older brother George Rogers Clark was a Revolutionary War hero. William followed in his brother's footsteps and joined the military at age nineteen, and became friends with Meriwether Lewis while the two served together. Clark left the service, but in 1803, received a letter from his friend Lewis that included an invitation to share command of an exploratory party headed into the new Louisiana Territory.

The legendary Lewis and Clark Expedition left St. Louis in May of 1804. The group traveled for more than two years and traversed more than 8,000 miles. The expedition's reports provided much new information about the lands in the West and the native peoples who inhabited it. After the men returned in 1806, the United States Congress awarded Clark double pay and 1,600 acres of land for his service. In 1807 President Thomas Jefferson appointed him brigadier general for the Louisiana Territory (later Missouri) and federal agent for western Indian tribes. President James Monroe later appointed William Clark to be Territorial Governor of Missouri, a post he held for seven years. While governor, he oversaw government affairs, which included building relationships with Indian tribes. He attempted to maintain good relations between new settlers and the Indians, but he often drew criticism from many Missourians who believed him to be too sympathetic to the tribes.

With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, lands which included the huge Mississippi River basin drained by rivers flowing east to the river, had become American property. The area that is now Arkansas was part of that new "Louisiana Territory." Officials established new political boundaries within the area, and the Louisiana Territory included all of the new land north of the present Arkansas-Louisiana border; the Orleans Territory lay to the south. When the Orleans Territory became the state of Louisiana in 1812, the area to its north became Missouri Territory, including what is now Arkansas. Clark County was first established within that Missouri Territory in 1818, and was named for Missouri Territory Governor William Clark. It was one of the five counties in existence at the time Arkansas Territory was established in 1819.

William Clark died in 1838 in St. Louis, Missouri. His tombstone reads, "Soldier, Explorer, Statesman, and Patriot." Today, he is not only remembered as one of our nation's most significant explorers, but also for being the person for which Clark County is named. Clark's maps expanded knowledge about the geography of the West, and his journals offered greater understanding of life and culture in the region as well.

