First-Year Seminar: Myths and Controversies of the Lewis and Clark Expedition

The Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-06), conceived by President Thomas Jefferson to find a Northwest Passage for trade but also to control Native Americans and expand the US to the Pacific, has been a source of multiple myths, controversies, and debates. For example, some historians have asserted that the all the expedition’s participants—the two captains and their soldiers, Clark’s slave York, and the Native American Sacagawea—all constituted a microcosm of the larger US democratic, egalitarian society--mainly because Captains Lewis and Clark allowed everyone on the expedition to vote on where they would make their camp in the Pacific Northwest.

After examining excerpts from the primary source—Lewis and Clark’s journals--and secondary sources by historians, cultural critics, and filmmakers, students will identify and articulate their choice of myths and controversies to investigate further. The last two weeks they will present their research findings to the class. The presentations will later evolve into the final course papers.

August 24: Background on the Expedition: Jefferson’s mandate
August 31: Lewis and Clark’s Journals: IL, IA, NE
September 7: Lewis and Clark’s Journals: the Dakotas, the Mandans’ Fort
September 14: Lewis and Clark’s Journals: The Great Falls
September 21: Lewis and Clark’s Journals: The Bitteroot Mountains
September 28: Lewis and Clark’s Journals: The Pacific Coast
October 5: The Return Trip and the Political Aftermath; Preliminary Selection of Myths and Controversies and Formation of Research Teams
October 12: Ken Burns’ Documentary
October 19: Ken Burns’ Documentary
October 26: Stephen Ambrose’s Commentary
November 2: Dayton Duncan’s Commentary
November 9: James Ronda’s, Alvin Josephy’s, and Marc Jaffe’s Commentaries
November 17: Progress Reports and Team Meetings to Organize Research
November 30: Presentations
December 7: Presentations