The Death of Meriwether Lewis
A Historic Crime Scene Investigation

James E. Starrs & Kira Gale

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Part One

The Coroner’s Inquest

Note:
The reader is advised that this testimony was taken in less than perfect acoustical circumstances. The witnesses have reviewed their testimony and made a few corrections for clarity, but the testimony remains as it was first presented, as the “spoken word” and as the court reporter recorded it.
An Introduction to an Inquest
on the death of Meriwether Lewis

by
James E. Starrs,
Professor Emeritus
The George Washington University

“Behind the corpse in the reservoir, behind the ghost on the links,
Behind the lady who dances and the man who madly drinks,
Under the look of fatigue, the attack of migraine and the sigh
There is always another story, there is more than meets the eye.”

W.H. Auden, “At Last the Secret is Out”

“Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.”

Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Dirge without Music”

The dead can have no voice, I have sometimes learned to my re-
gret, unless they are fairly given the chance to speak. I tremble
at the thought and the knowledge that the dead can be denied this
“last right” by the cold, calculated or curious attitudes of those who
control the decision to grant such a last rite.

Some deaths are so electrified as legend that the truth may be
known, if at all, only with the modern methods of science, and
where the legend outruns the truth, then, as in Jesse James, an ex-
humation may well be in order so that the truth will surpass and
even dispel the legend. Meriwether Lewis’ death is a prime example
of the necessity to right the imbalance between far-fetched legend
and inestimable truth.

My involvement in the issues surrounding the death of Meri-
wether Lewis occurred quite serendipitously in the early 1990s
when my wife, Barbara, and I were returning home from a Florida
family wedding. We had been traveling by car on the Natchez Trace
Parkway from Tupelo, Mississippi northward toward Nashville. As
my wife’s urgent insistence we stopped many, many times at the sites of historical markers along the roadway, she being a dedicated and quite learned amateur historian.

One of our intermittent stops was at the “Pioneer Cemetery” where a rustic cabin stood uncontrolled and open to all passers-by and there were surely few of those in this somber, lonely woodland location. A short walk away but in sight of the cabin was the monument. As we stood looking up at this graffiti-desecrated monument my wife remarked quite non-committally that this was a death I should investigate with the instruments of science. As we sat leaning our backs against the base of the monument with Jefferson’s words to Meriwether Lewis inscribed above us

“His courage was undaunted: His firmness and perseverance yielded to nothing but impossibilities …”

Barbara gave me a lesson in basic facts underlying the controversial death of Meriwether Lewis. Her informed description added to my sum total of the man as I knew him from the abbreviated Journals of Lewis and Clark by Bernard de Voto (1953). I still have that much paged paper edition which Barbara read to our children in the late 1960s as we journeyed via a VW bus across the country following as best we could on roads near the land and water route of the Lewis and Clark expedition, known as the Corps of Discovery. At that time like so many Americans I knew of the expedition but not what happened afterwards, certainly not of the deaths of its leaders, Lewis and Clark. My wife’s detailing the facts of Meriwether Lewis’ death set me on my own journey of exploration seeking the answers to the tragedy and the dilemma of Meriwether Lewis’ death. That journey has continued to this day and which I am resigned to continue unflaggingly in the future.

An examination of the circumstances and documents associated with Lewis’ death provide clear evidence that no one has proof beyond a reasonable doubt as to the actual manner of his death, whether it resulted from suicide or homicide. The only evidence that remains to clarify this issue are the bones of Meriwether Lewis, buried some 70 miles south of Nashville, Tennessee, a strong outfielder’s throw from the Natchez Trace. A broken shaft monument (symbolizing a life cut off in its prime) marks the place where his remains rest.
It is correct to say that my research turned me into a Meriwether Lewis devotee. It was a warming experience to investigate the death of a great man. Here was no Jesse James, no Albert DeSalvo, and certainly no Alfred Packer. Now for the first time in my career as an exhumer I had a notable and historic person of immense stature whose death, come what may from my work, demanded my unfettered attention. He had become my investigative passion, little realizing the hurdles that would be planted even higher in my path towards the true facts of his death.

Apart from a visit to his Tennessee grave and my seeking to determine the soil constituents there to estimate the condition of his remains, the first order of my business was to obtain consents to an exhumation, for all sides and both far and wide. Locating living descendants of Meriwether Lewis was simply a matter of visiting the Hohenwald, Tennessee public library where the names of prominent descendants were recorded. Unlike the stone-faced attitude at the Fall River Historical Society, the librarian in Hohenwald, Pattie Choate, was delighted to provide me with names and addresses. The name that she singled out as the one I should contact first was William M. Anderson, M.D. of Williamsburg, Virginia.

Upon returning to my office from my Tennessee trip I immediately telephoned Dr. Anderson who immediately and enthusiastically agreed to join forces with me to accomplish the objectives of an exhumation. From Dr. Anderson I was led to Jane Sale Henley, also a descendant of Jane Lewis Anderson, Meriwether Lewis’s sister. Jane later became the President of the very influential Lewis & Clark Trail Heritage Foundation, which courtesy of its former president, Arlen Large, passed a resolution in support of an exhumation of Meriwether Lewis.

At this point the consents from the Lewis descendants were proceeding smoothly without any objections being received. Ultimately and to date I have received signed formal consents to an exhumation from 170 persons claiming to be descendants of Meriwether Lewis, all in various collateral lines of descent, there being no known direct descendants of Meriwether Lewis. More official consents were received from the Lewis County Board of Commissioners due to the gentle lobbying efforts of a Hohenwald attorney, Tony Turnbow. The Lewis County Historical Society also passed a resolution signed
by, of all names, its president, Philip Griner. And Terry Bunch, the Lewis County Executive weighed in with a strong letter in support for me and the exhumation I proposed. All of these consents were unequivocal and unconditional and as firm as firm could be.

Still not satisfied that my groundwork would convince the National Park Service to grant permission to exhume, I sought out the Lewis County District Attorney General Joseph Baugh who was readily available and very game to assist me. Our discussions led us to agree that Joe Baugh would, in his official capacity representing the law enforcement needs of Lewis County, direct the holding of a Coroner’s Inquest into the death of Meriwether Lewis in 1809, since there was no record of a previous inquest and the death could reasonably be deemed to be suspicious.

In 1809, in the state of Tennessee there was no appointed or elected medical examiner, either locally or with state-wide jurisdiction. As a result an inquest in 1996 for a death in 1809 would not appear to be out of order, even though exceptional in its delayed timing. Even though the office and functions of the coroner in the twenty states where an inquest is statutorily authorized are diverse, still the basic format follows that of the common law. In Tennessee an inquest is permitted only upon the filing of an affidavit by “two (2) or more reliable persons” alleging “good reason to believe that (a person) died by unlawful violence at the hands of some other person.” (T.C.A. 38-5-101). This prerequisite eliminates the opportunity to hold an inquest in the case of an out-and-out suicide. However, the affidavit submitted by me and three others, namely Professor Walter F. Rowe, Ph.D, Nancy K. Raber, and Patrick D. Zickler, filed March 25, 1996 deliberately left unstated the possibility of Lewis’ death having been a suicide (felo de se).

The inquest, in Hohenwald, the Lewis County seat, was held for two days, on June 3rd and 4th, 1996 with Richard Tate, the local Coroner and co-owner of McDonald’s Funeral Home in Hohenwald, presiding over the receipt of testimony and the deliberations of eight jurors from the community, including one who was a medical doctor. After the National Park Service declined my invitation to take part in the proceedings (although their Tupelo representative Gary Mason was in attendance as a spectator), I obtained the consent of twelve experts in a variety of disciplines to appear and testify.
Among them was Dr. William Bass, a forensic anthropologist of considerable national and international recognition, as well as three historians, Arlen Large, Dr. John Guice, and Ruth Frick, one geophysicist Dr. George Stephens, one psychologist Dr. Thomas Streed, two pathologists Drs. Jerry Francisco and Martin Fackler, a firearms expert Lucien Haag (who demonstrated for the jury the firing of a 1799 .69 caliber North & Cheney flintlock), an epidemiologist Dr. Reimert Ravenholt and two document examiners Dr. Duayne Dillon and Gerald Richards who spoke to the issue of what Meriwether Lewis’ handwriting could tell us of his state of mind when the documents were drafted; if they were drafted or signed by him as well as the authenticity of the Major Russell “statement” portraying Lewis’ death as a suicide by knives as well as by firearms.

The testimony of all of the experts was presented through the questioning of Joe Baugh and Paul Phillips, another of Tennessee’s elected District Attorney Generals, and through the queries of the experts from the members of the Coroner’s Jury. It was a most impressive array of talent and a most telling presentation by all and sundry. The result, as announced by Coroner Richard Tate was a unanimous verdict signifying that “there is very little tangible evidence for this jury to base a credible ruling as to the matter of suicide.” The sworn testimony of the experts appearing as witnesses is reproduced in this volume. As a result it was stated “because of the importance of the person in question to the history of Lewis County, we feel exhumation is necessary for closure.”
BEFORE THE CORONER AND JURY
OF LEWIS COUNTY AT HOHENWALD, TENNESSEE

CORONER’S INQUEST:
DEATH OF MERIWETHER LEWIS

TRANSCRIPT OF THE PROCEEDINGS
TAKEN ON JUNE 3-4, 1996

APPEARANCES

CORONER
OF LEWIS COUNTY: Mr. Richard Tate

CORONER’S JURY: Ms. Carolyn Hensley
Mr. David Brewer
Ms. Sandra Dearth
Ms. Kathy Carter
Mr. Robert Burklow
Dr. R. W. Bouldin
Mr. Vincent Flynn
Mr. Tony Turnbow

FOR THE STATE: Mr. Joseph Baugh
District Attorney General
Franklin, Tennessee

Mr. William Paul Phillips
District Attorney General
Huntsville, Tennessee
TESTIMONY OF JAMES E. STARRS
Direct Examination by General Baugh
Examination by Coroner Tate
Examination by Mr. Turnbow
Examination by Dr. Bouldin

TESTIMONY OF ARLEN J. LARGE
Direct Examination by General Baugh
Examination by Mr. Coroner
Examination by Dr. Bouldin
Examination by General Baugh
Examination by Mr. Turnbow
Examination by Mr. Bouldin
Examination by Mr. Flynn
Examination by Mr. Turnbow

TESTIMONY OF JOHN D. W. GUICE
Direct Examination by General Phillips
Examination by Mr. Turnbow
Examination by Dr. Bouldin
Examination by Mr. Coroner

TESTIMONY OF RUTH FRICK
Direct Examination by General Phillips
Examination by Mr. Turnbow

TESTIMONY OF GEORGE STEPHENS
Direct Examination by General Phillips
Examination by Mr. Coroner

TESTIMONY OF THOMAS STREED
Direct Examination by General Baugh

TESTIMONY OF JERRY THOMAS FRANCISCO, M. D.
Direct Examination by General Baugh
Examination by Mr. Coroner
Examination by Mr. Turnbow

TESTIMONY OF LUCIEN HAAG
Direct Examination by General Baugh
The Death of Meriwether Lewis

TESTIMONY OF GERALD B. (JERRY) RICHARDS
Direct Examination by General Baugh

TESTIMONY OF MARTIN FACKLER
Direct Examination by General Baugh

TESTIMONY OF LUCIEN HAAG
Examination by Mr. Turnbow

DAY TWO: JUNE 4, 1996

TESTIMONY OF DUAYNE DILLON, D. CRIM.
Examination by General Baugh
Examination by Mr. Coroner
Examination by Mr. Turnbow
Examination by Mr. Coroner

TESTIMONY OF REIMERT T. RAVENHOLT, M. D.
Examination by General Baugh
Examination by Mr. Burklow
Examination by Mr. Turnbow
Examination by Mr. Bouldin
Examination by Mr. Flynn
Testimony by Dr. Ravenholt
Examination by General Baugh

TESTIMONY OF WILLIAM M. BASS III, M. D.
Examination by General Phillips
Examination by Mr. Coroner
Examination by Mr. Turnbow

EXHIBITS

Exhibit No. 1 Letters
Exhibit No. 2 (LF) Handwritten letter: Neely to Jefferson
Exhibit No. 3 Curriculum Vitae, Dr. Ravenholt
Exhibit No. 4 Ravenholt Report
CORONER’S INQUEST:
THE DEATH OF MERIWETHER LEWIS

Day One: June 3, 1996

GENERAL BAUGH:
As far as questions, Mr. Tate, the coroner, has suggested and I agree that at the end of each witness’s testimony, he will receive written questions, so if you have a question that you want to give to the witness, then you will please write that question out, pass it to Sheriff Kilpatrick or one of the officers and they will pass it up to Mr. Tate and he’ll read those over and ask what questions he thinks are appropriate. He’ll also take questions from the members of the coroner’s jury on anything that they might have, questions of the witnesses.

We’ll probably take a break around 10:30 and then break for noon also. However long the breaks are, he can make it any length he wants, if you have left the room to do whatever you need to do, get a coca-cola or talk to somebody, please be back on time because this building as you can tell it has the acoustics of a National Guard Armory, strangely enough, and it can be disquieting or disturbing to have people coming in and out and to have noise going on during the time of the break.

As you can tell also these lights are going to light this fairly well. We would ask if you are going to make flash pictures or use other lights, other than these constant lights that are here, that you do that at the breaks, don’t do it during the testimony or questioning of any of the witnesses involved.

This gentleman is going to be introduced to you, Mr. Paul Phillips. He’s the District Attorney from the Eighth Judicial District. He’s going to carry on part of the questioning. If you are here and you wish to present something to the coroner’s jury, we would request that you make that known to one of us and we will talk to you and then discuss what you want to present with the coroner and he will make the ultimate decision about whether that is presented in the