



James Mackay's Journey in Nebraska in 1796

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Article Summary: Few persons known by name and date explored Nebraska beyond the banks of the Missouri before Lewis and Clark. The 1796 route of James Mackay, preserved on a Lewis and Clark map, provides our earliest details about northeastern Nebraska in its virgin state. Diller's description of the route names each of Mackay's stops and includes his French notes and English translations.

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Photographs / Images: document dated May 12, 1796, presented to the Omaha Chief Blackbird by the Spanish Governor General of Louisiana, El Baron de Carondelet

JAMES MACKAY'S JOURNEY IN NEBRASKA IN 1796

BY AUBREY DILLER

NEBRASKANS who are curious about the history of their state and use Coues' edition of Lewis and Clark¹ may well be intrigued by a dotted line marked *Mr J. Mackays Route*, to be seen on the first large folded map in the pocket in the fourth volume. For the route shown lies entirely within the present state of Nebraska, and it is earlier than Lewis and Clark. Few persons known by name and date trod the soil of Nebraska beyond the banks of the Missouri River before Lewis and Clark. Bourgmond in 1714, Villasur in 1720, and the Mallets in 1739 are almost the only ones,² and their routes are very uncertain. Traders from St. Louis and Prairie du Chien followed the Kansas and Platte Rivers during the last quarter of the century, but nothing personal is known of them. So *Mr J. Mackays Route* stands out as a first in the historical record of Nebraska and deserves to be remembered.

The map in question is a facsimile of a manuscript map of the western half of the United States said in the cartouche to have been compiled by M. Lewis and copied by Nicholas King in 1806 for the War Department. Since Coues' publication it has become well known and has recently

¹Elliott Coues, *History of the Expedition under the Command of Lewis and Clark* (New York, 1893).

²A. P. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark, Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri 1785-1804* (St. Louis, 1952), pp. 17 and 28 with references.

Aubrey Diller is professor of Greek at Indiana University.

been studied carefully and published in photograph.³ The original map was actually drawn by William Clark at Fort Mandan (in North Dakota) in the winter of 1804-1805, before the expedition proceeded across the mountains to the west coast. The map was sent to Washington by Meriwether Lewis along with his reports, and copies of it were presented to both houses of Congress by Jefferson with his message of 19 February 1806. The War Department copy is now in the National Archives, and a photograph of a State Department copy is in the Map Division of the Library of Congress.⁴

Who was *Mr J. Mackay*, and where did Clark learn of his *Route*? In his journals Clark refers to this same person several times for topographical information on the Missouri River.⁵ In one passage the words "Mr Mackay lais down a old french fort" suggest that he is citing a map by Mackay. On 13 August 1804 Lewis and Clark passed "the place where Mr Ja: McKey had a tradeing house in 95. & 96. & named it Fort Charles," which suggests that Clark knew more about Mackay than the map told him. The map Clark cites is thought to be one found many years ago in the Indian Office in a package of manuscript maps that seems to have belonged to William Clark.⁶ This map agrees satisfactorily with all of Clark's citations except one, but that is the very one that concerns us. It does not show *Mr J. Mackays Route*. Clark must have had another map that did show it, but no such map is found today among Clark's papers.

James Mackay was almost forgotten in 1893, when Coues published his edition of Lewis and Clark, but he is now

³Jesse S. Douglas, "Lewis' Map of 1806," *Military Affairs*, V (1941), 68-72; Sara Jones Tucker, *Indian Villages of the Illinois Country* (Springfield, Illinois, 1942) Plate XXXI.

⁴National Archives, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Ama 21 (Roll). The photograph is dated 21 November 1934. The writer has inquired repeatedly at the State Department and the National Archives without locating the original of this photograph. The State Department copy, overlooked by Douglas and Tucker, is sometimes more correct in small details than the War Department copy.

⁵R. G. Thwaites, *The Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (1904), I, 50, 109, 147; VI, 125.

⁶A. H. Abel, "A New Lewis and Clark Map," *The Geographical Review*, I (1916), 329-345.

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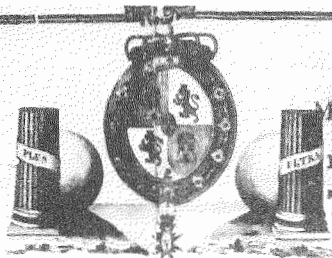
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Document presented to the Omaha Chieftain, Blackbird, by the Spanish Governor General of Louisiana, El Baron de Carondelet. It bears the date May 12, 1796.

well known in the annals of the Missouri River as the leader of the second expedition sent out by the Upper Missouri Company of St. Louis in 1795.⁷ The expedition left St. Louis in August, and on November 11 it halted at the village of the Maha Indians and began to build the house called Fort Charles which Clark mentions in his journals. In the spring of 1796 Mackay sent his subordinate John Evans to lead a party on up to the Mandans. Nothing is known of his own movements in the meantime except what we learn from the *Route* in Nebraska which is our present theme. Mackay and Evans returned to St. Louis in 1797, and Mackay stated repeatedly in later years that he had written a full account of his expedition and produced a map of the Missouri River showing the results of it. The account has not been preserved, and no map exists that bears the name of James Mackay as author. However, there do exist a number of similar maps in manuscript and print that are now very plausibly attributed to Mackay, one of them being the Indian Office map we have just mentioned.

The *Route* of James Mackay in Nebraska, omitted on the Indian Office map, is shown with a vengeance on two other maps of the group attributed to Mackay.⁸ One of them is the map that accompanies Perrin du Lac's *Voyage dans les deux Louisianes*, published in Paris in 1805.⁹ The other is a manuscript map discovered among the papers of J. N. Nicollet [d. 1843] in the War Department in 1917 and preserved now in the Library of Congress.¹⁰ Both have the dotted line marked *Route de Jacques Mackay en 1796* or *Traces de Jacques Machey 1796*, but it is accompanied here by rather copious notes in French (the language of all Mackay's maps) which tell us something of what Mackay saw on his tour and compensate to this extent for the loss

⁷Nasatir, *op. cit.*, 93-108.

⁸A. Diller, "Maps of the Missouri River before Lewis and Clark," *Studies in Honor of George Sarton* (New York, 1946), 505-519.

⁹Reproduced in *Missouri Historical Society Collections*, IV (1912), 18; *South Dakota Historical Collections*, VII (1914), inside of back cover; W. R. Wedel, *An Introduction to Pawnee Archeology*, (Washington, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 112, 1936), map 7.

¹⁰Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Papers of J. N. Nicollet, Vol. II, Part 2, Nos. 342-345. See *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, VIII (1921-22), 149-152.

of his journals and reports. The manuscript copy of the route and notes is often more complete and correct than the printed copy, but it has never been published. With the help of these notes in a better text Mackay's journey in Nebraska in 1796 acquires clarity and significance and becomes an important event in the early history of the state. So far as this writer has been able to ascertain, its interest in this respect has never been exploited. Let us see, then, where James Mackay went and what he saw, according to the Nicollet manuscript map.

Mackay started from his winter quarters in "Fort Charles." This house, the first building by white men in Nebraska, was very near the site of the present village of Homer in Dakota County.¹¹ From here Mackay made directly for *L'eau qui court* (Niobrara River). Crossing near its mouth, he zigzagged westward between the Niobrara and the *R. des Poncas*. Crossing the Keyapaha (unnamed) about on the state line, he moved indirectly southwestward until he struck the Niobrara again a little below Valentine (on the map this stretch is too long). Crossing again, he passed the lakes of Cherry County on his right and struck those of Brown County at the head of the Calamus (unnamed), which he followed downstream to its confluence with the *R. des Loups* near Burwell. From here he struck off northeast to the *R. Corne du cerf* (Elkhorn), which he crossed and followed eastward until it turns south in Cuming County. From here he struck off northeast again to reach his starting-point at Fort Charles. He had travelled some five hundred miles and had explored for the first time part of the courses of three important rivers of Nebraska, the Niobrara, the Loup, and the Elkhorn, the last not known previously by name or mark. The route lay through uninhabited territory, and apparently the journey was without incident. Mackay must have traveled on horses obtained from the Mahas or simply accompanied the Mahas on a hunting expedition.

¹¹Fort Charles was "between the very village of the Mahas and the Missouri River" (Nasatir, *op. cit.*, 362). The village of the Omahas is at Homer, Nebraska (Federal Writers Project, *Nebraska, A Guide to the Cornhusker State* [1939], 259). Coues, *op. cit.*, I, 74, followed by Thwaites, *op. cit.*, I, 109 and Nasatir, *op. cit.*, 98, 352, locates Ft. Charles near Omadi, Nebraska, a ghost town in Dakota County.

The notes illustrating this journey on the map are as follows: *R. qui monte.* (Climbing River.) Bazile Creek in Knox County.—*Source froide.* (Cold spring.) On the south side of the Keyapaha River.—*Trouve ici le Millieu de l'os de la Cuisse d'un animal dont le gros bout avoit 7 pouces de diametre, & l'autre bout pres de 6¾ pouces.* (Found here the middle part of the thigh-bone of an animal, the large end of which was 7 inches in diameter and the other 6¾ inches.) In Keyapaha County. There are large deposits of fossils across the Niobrara at Devil's Gulch and Fossil Park in Brown County, but of course the greatest deposits are further west, at Agate in Sioux County. This note makes Mackay the discoverer of the Nebraska fossils.—*Dans ce Pays il y a beaucoup d'ours blancs.* (In this country there are many white bears.) In Todd County, South Dakota. The range of grizzly bears would be the Black Hills rather than the Great Plains.—*Ancien Village de la Nation Padoucas.* (Old village of the Padouca tribe.) South of the lakes in Cherry County.—*Montagne de sable minee par un courant d'eau souterrain, dont le Millieu s'est affaisse et a forme une cavite de 100 pas de diametre et environ 150 pieds de profondeur.* (Hill of sand undermined by an underground stream of water, the middle of which has settled and formed a pit 100 paces wide and 150 feet deep.) North of the lakes in Brown County. I do not know whether this feature still exists.—*Dans ces Marais il y a du Riz sauvage ou de la folle avoine.* (In these marshes there is some wild rice or wild oats.) The lakes in Brown County.—*Grande Desert de sable Mouvant ou l'on ne trouve ni bois, ni terre, ni Roches, ni eau, ni animaux d'aucune espece, si ce n'est de petites Tortues bariolees, dont il y a une quantite infinie.* (Great desert of drifting sand without trees, soil, rocks, water, or animals of any kind, excepting some little varicolored turtles, of which there are vast numbers.) Southwest part of Cherry County. The ornate box turtle is still said to be so prolific at times in Kansas and Nebraska as to "encumber the ground."—*Ici il y a beaucoup de boeufs Sauvages pendant l'Ete & l'Automne.* (Here there are many wild oxen [buffalo] in summer and autumn.) In Loup County.—*Pays Sablonneux et inegal.* (Sandy rolling country.) Custer County.—*Pays Sablonneux & Montagneux.* (Sandy hilly country.) Rock County. —*Il y a beaucoup de Castors dans cette Riv-*

iere. (There are many beaver in this river.) The Elkhorn in Stanton and Cuming Counties.

Mackay did not reach the Upper Platte. His drawing of it is similar to that on Soulard's map of 1795¹² except for the Grand Island, which Soulard omits. He places this island right at the forks (merging the present Grand Island and North Platte into one locality!) with the following note: *Dans Cette Ile & toute autour, il y a bonne chasse. La Nation Panis frequente ces parages dans l'hyver. (On this island and round about there is good hunting. The Pawnee tribe frequents these parts in winter.)* On the south fork he gives another interesting note: *Cette Riviere prend ses eaux dans les Montagnes de Santa Fe (qui ne sont qu') a 8 Jours de Marche de la ou est l'Exploitation des Mines. (This river arises in the mountains of Santa Fe, which are only 8 days march from where the mines are operated.)* Soulard also connects the South Platte with Santa Fe, whose supposed mines drew the interest of the merchants of St. Louis. In 1795 Pedro Vial reached the Pawnee Republic (near Red Cloud) from Santa Fe in eight days.¹³

This is all that has survived of James Mackay's observations on his journey in Nebraska in 1796. It would perhaps be more valuable if we knew whether it is a random selection from the more ample account Mackay surely wrote or a deliberate selection of what seemed most interesting or important; possibly it is both in part. At any rate it contains some curious points and is of peculiar interest as portraying, however meagerly, the scene of northeastern Nebraska in its virgin state.

¹²Nasatir, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹³*Ibid.*, 329 f.