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Dunbar Expedition passed through Arkadelphia in 1804

By Wendy Richter
For the Siftings

Two hundred and eleven years ago, a cadre of explorers left Natchez, Mississippi, seeking to learn more about the Ouachita River and the celebrated hot springs of the Ouachitas at the request of President Thomas Jefferson. This meant that Lewis and Clark were not the only explorers of the United States' huge, newly-acquired parcel of land called the Louisiana Purchase. William Dunbar of Natchez and George Hunter of Philadelphia led the excursion up the Ouachita, constituting the first American investigation of its new territory. Their reports pertaining to the river's environs provide some of the earliest descriptions of the Ouachita River region, including the area that would become Clark County.

After weeks of preparation and planning, a group of 19 men left Catherine's Landing on the Mississippi River on Oct. 16, 1804, and began their journey toward what is now Arkansas. The Ouachita River region had long been inhabited by Indians in addition to European hunters, trappers, traders, and explorers. The French and Spanish had established small outposts in the area such as *Ecore a Fabri* (present-day Camden) and *Fort Miro* (now, Monroe, Louisiana).

As directed, Dunbar and Hunter recorded descriptions of their surroundings as they traveled up the river. They were in the vicinity of present-day Arkadelphia on Nov. 28 and 29. Here, they met an Indian wearing "vermillion" paint around his eyes who called himself "Captain Jacobs." Also in that area, the men met a man named "Paltz" and his hunting party. Paltz told Dunbar that he had lived in the area for 40 years.



William Dunbar
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He mentioned a salt spring nearby, so Hunter, Paltz, and others investigated the large spring, or "saline." Dunbar and Hunter called the area around Arkadelphia "Grand Glaise," describing it as beautiful and unspoiled.

On Dec. 1, the party passed by "Des roches" shortly after 7 a.m. After noon, Hunter recorded that the men traveled by "Isle de Millon" (later known as Morrison or Watermelon Island), and that all indications were that the explorers were "approaching a more elevated country." Both Hunter and Dunbar noted distinct changes in the landscape in this area: "The country appears now to wear a new aspect; high lands and rocks frequently approach the river; the rocks are extremely hard." There were greater numbers and larger turkey, deer, and raccoons, as well as signs of buffalo. Oak and beech trees dominated the forests.

On Dec. 3, 1804, the explorers faced a major obstacle in their travel up the river. Near what is now Rockport/Malvern, a series of rocky rapids, called "the Chutes" by Hunter and Dunbar, lay ahead of them. Only by rocking their boat from side to side and dragging it between and over rocks, did the team finally make it through the rocky hurdles.

A few days later the men made it to the hot

springs and began their four-week study of the waters there. They found an open log cabin as well as some board shacks not too far from the springs, where they stayed for most of their visit.

Dunbar and Hunter began the return trip home on Jan. 8, 1805. The ascent of the Ouachita had taken 50 days, but the descent took less than half that. When the men made it back to near present-day Clark County, they met a group of Indians who may have been Quapaw. Hunter described them "Indians from the river Arkansa." By the end of the month, all had returned to Natchez.

In the following weeks, William Dunbar and George Hunter prepared the reports of their journey for President Jefferson. Dunbar's journal made it to the president more than a year before Lewis and Clark returned from their trip into the Northwest. Dunbar and Hunter gave Jefferson his first glimpse into the vast Louisiana Territory from a commissioned exploration team. While the men were certainly not the first to travel the waters of the Ouachita, they were the first Americans to complete a scientific and mapping of the river and its tributaries.

Today, the journal carried by William Dunbar up the Ouachita River in 1804 is preserved by the Ouachita Baptist University Archives. A book published in 2006, *The Forgotten Expedition*, by Dr. Trey Berry, Pam Beasley and Jeanne Clements, also chronicles the expedition.

For additional information about Clark County history, visit or contact the Clark County Historical Museum at the train depot (www.clarkcounty-history.org or 230.1360) or the Clark County Historical Association's Archives at the Ouachita Baptist University Library (www.obu.edu/archives or 245.5332).