

Hair Dress in the 1804 U.S. Military



As we all know, President Jefferson initiated a full U.S. military expedition in 1802 when he sent Lewis and Clark the Missouri to explore and chart the unknown lands of Louisiana. There were a full military contingent of Captains, Sergeants, a Corporal, and Privates who were subject to all the rules and regulations of the United States Army. The newborn Army, from the time of its inception in the 1770's, had not allowed facial hair. This was part of the "uniformity initiative" that was intended to set the military men apart from the common civilians. Beards were not in fashion with the aristocrats of the colonies from 1750-1800 anyway. Think about the founding fathers. You'll be hard pressed to find one that wore a beard or a moustache. Long hair tied back was allowed earlier in the military, but that all lost favor in 1801. Proper hair was considered part of a soldier's uniform.

Gen. James Wilkinson, who commanded the U.S. Army, required all officers and troops to cut their hair short. Order on April 30, 1801: "For the accommodation, comfort, and health of the troops, the hair is to be cropped without exception..." In Oct 1801, Wilkinson repeated... "The order of cropping the hair was intended to introduce uniformity as well as neatness and cleanliness." Wilkinson, who was met with some resistance, enforced this order with great zeal. He ordered every enlisted soldier or Officer subject to court martial for improper dress if they did not comply. Officers would have to lead by example.

The book of Regulations that Baron von Steuben prepared for the American army at the beginning of the War for Independence contained the direction that officers were to see that their men's hands and faces were daily "washed clean" and their hair combed. It was an element of personal pride and self-respect: "field officers must pay attention to this object," the baron continued, "taking proper notice of those companies where a visible neglect appears, and publicly applauding those who are remarkable for their good appearance."

As the troops of the Corps were assembled at Camp Dubois in 1803, the men's hair were cut and their beards shaved. As Wilkinson had stated: "An Officer shall never leave their quarters without being dressed in full uniform, not forgetting his side arms... and everyone was expected to shave at least every 3rd day by Army regulations". Orders to the Camp were also sent by Col. John Hamtramak, commanding officer of the 1st US Infantry. He reiterated: "The hair of both non-commissioned Officers and men to be cut short, once every month." Facial hair was not allowed below the lower part of the ear. So it was a clear message on military men's hair... haircuts monthly and a shave every 3rd day or a court martial can ensue! There is no indication in the journals that the Corps ever ran out of water, soap or razors. There was plenty of bar soap, liquid soap, (over 200 lbs. in the cargo) and scissors (over 350 of them... some used as Indian trade goods) purchased in advance of the trip. My guess is the men provided their own

personal straight razors. There is no mention of procurement for razors in the original purchase orders by Captain Lewis.

The men of the Corps may have looked a little scruffy from time to time as the rules was certainly relaxed due to time and travel constraints. One of those times could have been when the Corps entered into the mountains and abandoned the Missouri waters. They met the Shoshone, trekked through the Bitterroot Valley, into the mountains to the waters of the Columbia. In August of 1805, Lewis mentions in the journals when he met with the Shoshone for horse trade: "my hair dishivled and skin well browned." It seems that Lewis' hair must have been shaggy, if not downright long. The summer sun had bronzed his skin. It is my guess he wouldn't make this point in his journal unless it was an unusual circumstance. He had desperately been looking for horses and a way over the mountains. He marched ahead of the main body and had little time to stop, rest, and groom. But he was "hair aware". He mentions that the Shoshone had recently cut their own hair as a sign that they were in mourning and they all fit in well together with his white travelers. The Captain stated his observation: "Cameawait's hair being cut close all over his head." Captain Clark also hints in his own journal that his hair was longer than military regulations allow with the Shoshone. "the main chief imedeatly tied to my hair six small pieces of shell resembling perl which is highly valued by those people... residing near the Sea Coast." Clark must have had longer hair than usual to tie sea shells to it. It might have been time for a haircut dear Captains! They had to lead by example. But rarely was there time in the mountains. Salish oral history mentions only a few weeks later in early Sept 1805 near the bottom of Lost Trail Pass: "these men must be in mourning because their hair was cut shorter". We can deduct from this that the Corps might have done some quick grooming while camped with the Shoshone along Lewis's River, (now the Lemhi and Salmon) in today's Idaho, being departing for the road to the North into the Bitterroot.

My guess is that the Corps had some time again to attend to their hair and faces at Travelers Rest where they spent 2 days coming in 1805 and 3 days going in 1806. We haven't found any razors there yet, but its likely time would allow the men some hair care. They would likely let their appearance slide again on the difficult Lolo Trail trek; and again at the Dismal Nitch near the mouth of the Columbia River on the Washington coastline. Conformity was probably met in Nez Perce Camp at the bottom of the Lolo Trail and Fort Clatsop near the ocean. Certainly the trip back with supplies and razors dwindling, the regulations had to be relaxed.

It appears that at least some of their straight razors had become useless before they reached the Pacific, so not all the men could shave beards and mustaches, but only trim them with scissors, like head hair, when they grew long enough. They may have had an alternative. Lewis brought along 15 "scalping knives" and had provided them to the men. Just sharpen and add soap.

On the trip, there were only 3 men exempted from these military orders on hair. Droulliard, York, and Charbono, who were not enlisted in the Army. The journals suggest that York had worn his hair short anyway. We can only guess at the other two. We can also verify that both the Captains wore short hair immediately after the expedition. The best known portraits of both Lewis and Clark by Charles Willson Peale (1807) shows them with relatively short hair. Other portraits before and after the trip show them with longer hair.

Uniformity and discipline was a big part of why the Expedition succeeded. The practice of military hair certainly was practiced and survived the entire journey. It was adhered to from start to finish with a few necessary exceptions. To the military, this was just every bit as important as proper clothing and dress.

We know this practice certainly out lasted the Euro-American military dress uniforms that the Corps left Camp Dubois with in 1804. In 1806, they all returned to St. Louis in leather animal skins. Some suggest the men were half naked and had adopted the dress ways of the natives. But Meriwether commented a day after his return to St. Louis that they were ready again for civilization: “dined with Mr. Chotoux to day; and after dinner went to the store and purchased some clothes, which we gave to a Taylor and derected to be made.” It was also time for the barber and a clean shave. They were back in civilized America again!

Sources: Tailor Made, Trail Worn; Moore & Haynes, The Salish People; Salish Elders; Discovering Lewis and Clark, Musselman; Letters of the Expedition, Jackson

