

The Dying Stranger and the Bloody Cloth.

Early one morning, just before the first light of dawn on October 10, 1809, Priscilla Griner, the wife of Robert Griner awoke to the sound of gunshots. This alone was not that unusual, since her and her husband were the owners of an inn that was located in Natchez Trace just south of Nashville, and butted up just a few feet from a large Native American reservation. Over the years, the Griners had become accustomed to the sound of gunshots as the tribes that lived on the land hunted with rifles as well as with bow and arrow. However, this time it was different. The gunshots were very near - and were followed by groaning from the room of their secretive guest, who was later identified as Meriwether Lewis.

Captain Meriwether Lewis, 35, was by this point famous throughout the country as being one half of the Lewis and Clark Expedition - the first American expedition to cross what is now the western portion of the United States. Captain Lewis was entrusted to lead the expedition by his good friend (and third President of the United States) Thomas Jefferson, who was eager to map a direct passage to the Pacific Ocean. Later, Captain Lewis was appointed governor of the Louisiana Territory, and had become quite a celebrity as well as a contender for high political office in Washington D.C.

Early in September of 1809, Lewis set out for Washington D.C. to resolve a financial dispute. It is at this point that things get very hazy; some say he was travelling alone, but others claim that he was with a mysterious "unknown companion." He claimed that he was taking some of his travel journals to Washington with him to be published, but others later testified that he had said that he was going to Washington to ask the daughter of Vice-President Aaron Burr for her hand in marriage (which put Burr into a state of extreme anger). Whatever his reason, he made a very unusual and costly decision. He started out traveling to Washington by ship from New Orleans, but changed his plans while floating down the Mississippi River from St. Louis. Why he changed his mind will never be known. Adding to the strangeness is the fact that he refused to give his name when he checked into the Griner's Inn for the night; instead just calling himself a "tired traveler." He had no luggage and only carried a rifle, two pistols, and a tomahawk. He checked in alone, but, as the Griners would later testify, they could hear him arguing with another person in his room (which was just a door away from the communal kitchen / dining room).

As the Griner's rushed into the stranger's / Captain Lewis' room they saw him crawling on his hands and his knees in the corner of his room leaving a trail of blood from gunshot wounds to the head and abdomen. They claimed that they heard him groan "I am no coward... but it is hard to die...so young...so young..." as he was lapsing in and out of consciousness. He was clutching what Priscilla Griner later described as a "bloody cloth"; in his right hand. And soon fell into unconsciousness and died the next day.

The cause of death was officially ruled a suicide. It was claimed that Lewis had tried to shoot himself in the head and flinched at the last moment. Then, took the second shot to the abdomen to try and finish the job. However, after his death was pronounced a suicide, the Griners changed their story. They claimed that three men challenged 'the stranger' to a duel around midnight and that he had been shot and crawled back to his room (with a piece of his skull missing), and later died. Conveniently, days later, a 'suicide note' was found that stated that Lewis had suffered from bouts of suicidal thoughts.

Oh... and about that “bloody cloth” that Meriwether Lewis was clutching as he lay in the throes of life and death? It was his Masonic Apron that he had stuffed in his pocket earlier in the evening. In 1796, Brother Lewis was admitted to the Scribe of the Door to Virtue Lodge No. 44 of the Ancient Free and Accepted Masons in Albemarle County, Virginia, and raised in January of 1797. This begs the question, why did he put his apron in his pocket earlier that evening? Was he going to / coming from a lodge meeting?

The mystery got more interesting in 2011.

In 2011, “forensic geologist Scott Wolter examined famous explorer Meriwether Lewis's Masonic Apron and discovered that the blood stains on the apron were not Lewis's and in fact belonged to two or more other individuals.” Whose blood was it? Why would it be their blood on his apron and not his?

The fact surrounding Brother Meriwether Lewis' last days and death are strange and incomplete, and far too lengthy to include in this article, but make for very interesting reading. In the end, as with much of Masonry, the truth may never be known.



Meriwether Lewis' bloodstained Masonic apron, which he clutched in his hand as he lay dying.