

# THE American Surveyor

A FOOT IN THE PAST... AN EYE TO THE FUTURE Vol. 10, Issue 2

## Ghosts of Alaska

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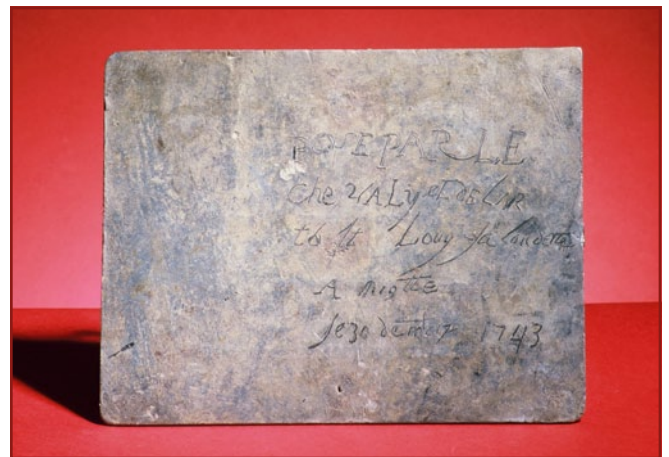
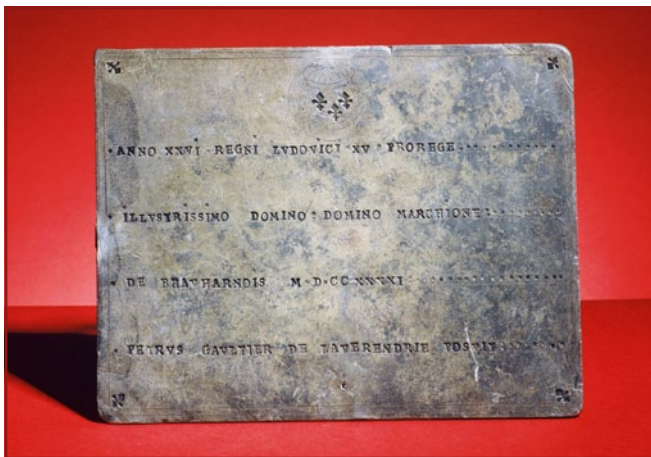
Future and past



# THE VÉRENDRYE PLATE

**T**he field stones that once formed a conspicuous pyramid upon a high hill overlooking the Missouri River were likely scattered on September 25, 1804, when Lewis & Clark made their way through what is now central South Dakota. That evening, the members of the Voyage of Discovery anchored their boats on an island near the location of today's city of Fort Pierre. The explorers were unaware of their proximity to an area claimed by white men from France more than 61 years earlier.

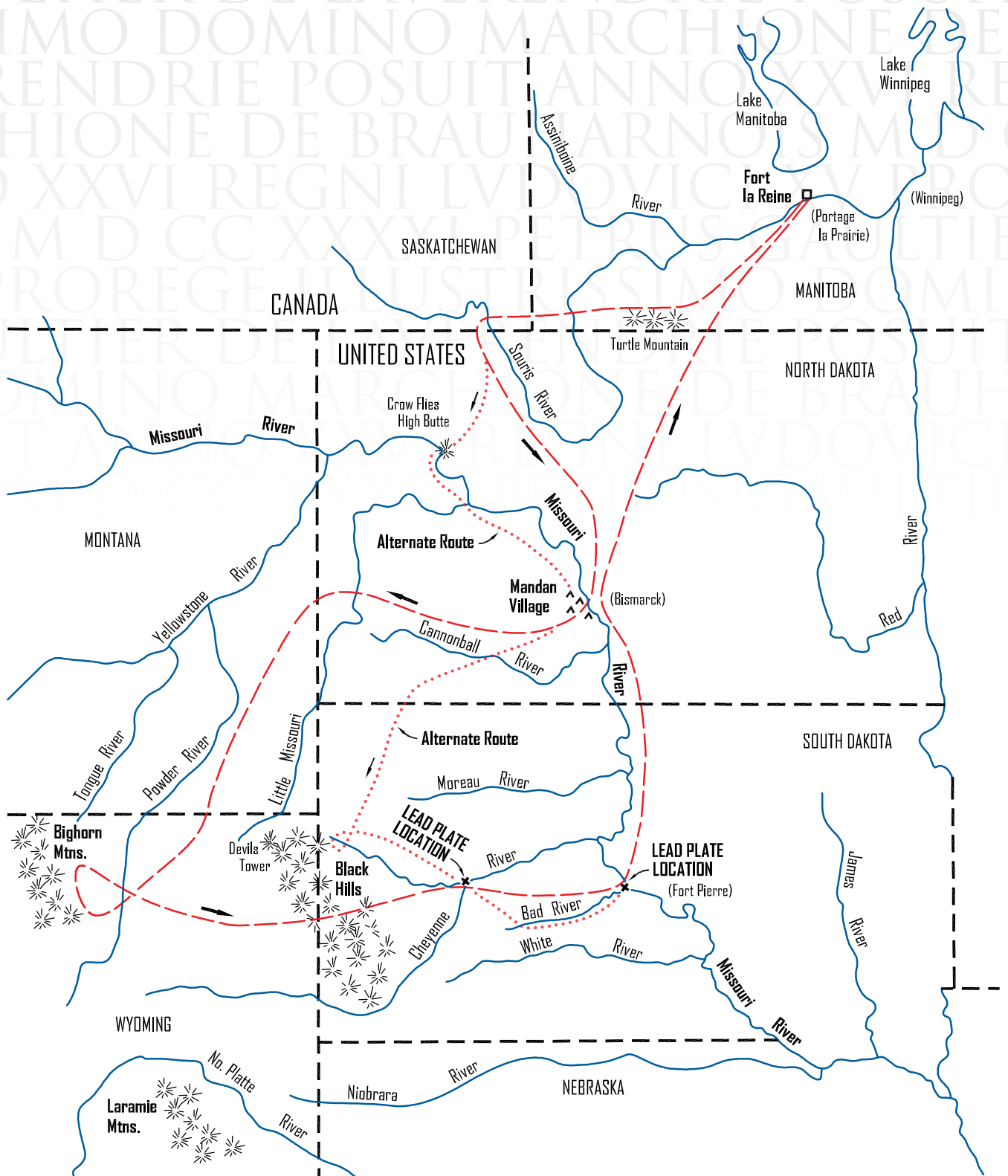
On a warm winter day, 109 years after Lewis & Clark's arrival, young children played on the same hill. Stones brought in by the glaciers were scarce on the west side of the river, so when found they were carried away by the early pioneers for useful purposes. Hattie Foster, Ethel Parish, and George O'Reilly were among those on the hill that day, February 16, 1913. Hattie noticed something resembling a piece of metal sticking out of the soil. With her friend's assistance, she dug out an unusual object measuring  $6\frac{1}{2}$ " x  $8\frac{1}{2}$ " and  $\frac{3}{16}$  of an inch thick. It was heavy for its size and appeared to be made of



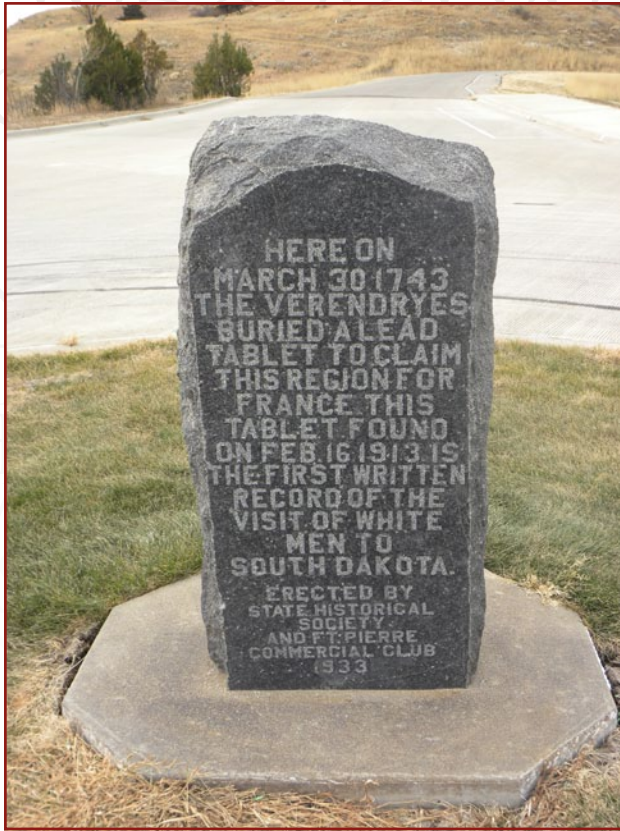
The Vérendrye plate, placed in 1743, is a two-sided lead marker found in South Dakota with wording on one side (left) claiming the area for France, and hand carved wording on the reserve side naming the explorers who placed it.

*Photos courtesy of the South Dakota State Historical Society.*

>> By Jerry Penry, PS



Historians have not agreed on the exact route of the Vérendrye expedition into the northern part of the United States. Some believe they ventured as far west as the Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming, while others suggest they never went past the Black Hills of South Dakota. This map (by the author) shows two possible routes that the explorers might have taken.



A granite marker was placed in 1933 on the hill near Fort Pierre where the lead plate was discovered twenty years earlier.

lead. More interestingly, strange words, which neither of them could understand, were imprinted upon it.

ANNO XXVI REGNI LVDOVICI XV PROREGE  
ILLUSTRISSIMO DOMINO MARCHIONE  
DE BRAUHARNOIS M D CC XXXXI  
PETRUS GAULTIER DE LAVERENDRIE POSUIT

Thinking the unusual item could be of some monetary value, the children proceeded down the hill toward a print shop in Fort Pierre where the plate might be melted down for its lead. Two legislators, in town that day, intercepted the young people to see their find. Upon examining the plate, the men summoned the state historian, Doane Robinson, with the hope that he might determine what had been found on the hill.

The wording roughly deciphered to: “*In the 26th year of the reign of Louis XV, the most illustrious Lord, the Lord Marquis of Beauharnois, 1741, Pierre Gaultier De La Vérendrye placed this*”. The reverse side of the plate contained hand carved words which translated: “*Placed by the Chevalier Vérendrye, his brother Louis, La Londette, and A. Miotte. March 30, 1743*”.

In 1727, Pierre Gaultier de Vérendrye was appointed commandant of the Posts of the North in New France, three forts constructed west of Lake Superior in what is now Canada. During this time, France, Spain, and England were all working hard to colonize North America. Vérendrye and two of his sons, Francois and Louis-Joseph, established a series of additional forts including Fort La Reine on the

Assiniboine River south of Lake Manitoba on October 3, 1738. Two weeks after the establishment of Fort La Reine, Vérendrye, his two sons, and approximately fifty other men began an expedition to the Mandan Indian Village near present-day Bismarck, North Dakota. Two men remained with the Mandans to learn their language while the others returned to the fort. In 1741, it is believed the two Vérendrye sons returned to the Mandans to secure additional information about the west for an expanded expedition.

The following year, on April 29, 1742, Francois and Louis-Joseph Vérendrye and two other men returned to the Mandan Village. After staying with the Mandans for two months, the party left the village and struck out to the southwest in the hope of finding the passage to the “Western Sea”, the Pacific Ocean.

These early French explorers are believed to be the first white men to view the upper reaches of the Missouri River in the Dakotas. Initially, it was also thought they were the first white men to see the Rocky Mountains. The Vérendrye journal, discovered in French archives in 1851, revealed their meetings with various Indian tribes. Despite many descriptions in the journal, historians have identified only one tribe’s exact location, the Mandans’.

The journal states they came in sight of the mountains on January 1, 1743. Were these mountains the Rockies, the Bighorns, the Laramies, or the Black Hills? Historians have long disputed the actual route of the Vérendrye party. Some believe they ventured into northeastern Wyoming, while others surmise they never went any further west than the Black Hills. Most likely, it will remain uncertain whether the Vérendrye party was the first group of white men to view the Rocky Mountains. This honor might go to Sir Alexander Mackenzie who completed an overland crossing of current day Canada to reach the Pacific Ocean in 1793.

The French endeavored to establish control of the entire Mississippi drainage system. The Vérendrye party carried several lead plates to place along their route as proof of their conquest by discovery. Similar lead plates have also been uncovered in Ohio. These were placed in 1749 when the French sought to take possession of all the land watered by the large tributaries of the Ohio River. The placement of one plate during the 1742-43 expedition was specifically noted in the Vérendrye journal:

*“I placed on an eminence near the fort a tablet of lead, with the arms and inscription of the King and a pyramid of stones for Monsieur Le General; I said to the savages, who did not know of the tablet of lead I had placed in the earth; that I was placing these stones as a memorial of those who had come to their country.”*

It seems incredible that despite this description, the most prominent hill, overlooking the Missouri River near Fort Pierre, was never thoroughly searched prior to the 1913 discovery





The lead plate found near Fort Pierre is on display at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center of the South Dakota State Historical Society in Pierre.

of the lead plate. The scattered pile of stones found by early settlers was another missed clue as to the location of the plate.


The 'fort' mentioned in the description is a mystery since Fort Pierre Chouteau was not established at this location until 1832 when John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company constructed it during their expansion into the upper region of the Missouri River. Prior to this fort, the Columbia Fur Company had a nearby establishment, Fort Tecumseh, from 1822-32. Although Lewis & Clark stopped at this location in 1804, there is no mention of a fort in their journals. The fort designation in the Vérendrye journal might have referred to their own camp.

One of the few defined locations along the 1742-43 expedition is thought to be Crow Flies High Butte in North Dakota where the party climbed to view the Missouri Valley. This location is nearly one hundred miles northwest of the Mandan Village. A 250-acre national monument was designated in this area in 1917, but later withdrawn in 1956 because many thought the location was inaccurate. Current research indicates the earlier assumption was probably correct.

The exact route of the Vérendrye party is unknown due to a lack of information. Historians have tried for years to determine the route, but few of the landmarks described could be accurately identified. The lack of identifiable landmarks in the journal can be attributed to the Vérendrye party being the first group of white men to explore this area. Much more could have been known about their route, but for the fact that they were carrying a broken astrolabe. This instrument would have provided the latitudes of various locations along their journey. The four explorers returned to Fort La Reine on July 2, 1743, after a return stop at the Mandan Village.

The story of the Vérendrye party took another turn on May 4, 1995, when a retired therapist from Florida along with his

dog uncovered another lead plate at the junction of the Belle Fourche and Cheyenne rivers while on a canoe trip. This plate was hand inscribed with the wording "*A. Miotte Le 7 de Marse 1743*". The date inscribed on this plate predated the one found at Fort Pierre by 23 days and was definitely connected to the same group since A. Miotte's name appears on both plates. Historians believe the lead plates carried by the French served a dual purpose. Because they were thin, a piece could be easily cut off and rolled into a musket ball if needed. The plate found in 1995 did not have the wording stamped on it like the one found at Pierre. It was most likely placed as an impromptu marker since they were on the return part of their journey and additional plates were saved for ammunition if necessary.

The discovery of the Vérendrye plate at Fort Pierre one hundred years ago remains one of the most significant historical finds in the American West. The discovery provided the initial link for historians to reexamine the Vérendrye journal. Combining the knowledge gathered from the dates on the plates and their discovery sites with information in the journal, historians have proceeded both forward and backward to retrace part the route taken by the first white men to view areas of the western United States. 

**Jerry Penry** is a historical writer, public speaker and published author. He is a licensed land surveyor in the states of Nebraska and South Dakota.



Another marker on the hill where the Vérendrye plate was discovered in 1913 provides the translation for the wording.