



# THE MARSHALL Expedition

A modern tale of historical adventure

WRITTEN BY **ERIC J. WALLACE**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **WESLEY ANDREWS**

Imagine yourself poised at the stern of a 47-foot-long wooden boat, arms braced about the rudder's wooden handle, shouting commands to your crew as you crash through the 10-foot waves of the New River Gorge, seeking to steer your vessel through the treacherous Class IV rapids. If successful, you'll become the first bateau crew to have done so in more than 125 years. Such was the experience of National Geographic Young Explorer Grant recipient Andrew Shaw in 2012.

But how did Shaw get there? The tale begins more than 200 years ago, at the dawn of the founding of the United States of America. In the late 18th century, the midwestern territories were highly contested. If Virginia was to secure its status as the New World's dominant economic hub, the colony would need to expand its shipping capabilities westward. Future-President George Washington hatched a plan, envisioning a vast canal system connecting the colonies' major shipping corridor, the James River, with that of the distant and disputed frontier, the mighty Mississippi.

"It was a toss-up as to whether the French, British, Spaniards, and even Russians would end up controlling the region," says Bill Trout, founder of the Virginia Canal Society. "It was Washington's viewpoint that, to control those territories, the colonies would have to establish strong economic ties with its settlers." That would mean providing them with easy transport for goods to and from the eastern seaboard. "Prior to the advent of the railroad, rivers were the dominant shipping corridors," Trout says. And canals allowed the use of larger boats pulling heavier cargo loads for increased exports and greater profits.

But a revolution and nation-founding sidetracked Washington's ambitions. It wasn't until 1812 that John Marshall—Virginia native and fourth chief justice of the Supreme Court—was commissioned by the Virginia General Assembly to lead an exploration investigating the feasibility of Washington's intercontinental canal. On September 1 of that year, when rivers were at their lowest, Marshall and his crew poled the nose of their 60-foot wooden vessel into the swift James River current at Lynchburg, Virginia, and proceeded upstream with dreams of linking the Chesapeake Bay with the Ohio River Valley.

Over two months the company traveled westward, ascending the Alleghany Highlands deep into modern West Virginia by means of the James, Jackson, Greenbrier, New, and Kanawha rivers. The difficulties were considerable. "This expedition was carried out by men who had never seen these rivers," Trout says. Due to limited supply outposts, the crew carried 3,000 pounds of provisions. Due to low waters they'd have to carry the boat at times. It took three days to make it two miles at one point on the Greenbrier. "No one had ever run a vessel like this through the New River Gorge, and, if Marshall and company made a mistake, there weren't any park rangers to save them," Trout says. "For the most part, these men were alone in the wilderness."



WILLIAM HOLT MESSERLY



Despite the dangers, the expedition made it through. By journey's end, the adventurers had portaged, towed, and, eventually, after descending the treacherous New River Gorge, floated well over 300 miles. Upon Marshall's return, the venture was heralded as a tremendous success.

But again plans for the construction of the James River and Kanawha Canal were stalled for decades. Precarious and labor-intensive construction across the Eastern Divide was complicated by the remote and rocky

**ABOVE** Andrew Shaw and his crew spent months researching the historic Marshall Expedition, building a replica craft, and planning a course to take an 18th century boat on a 300-mile river journey.



terrain, stymied by the War of 1812 and the American Civil War, and finally made obsolete by the advent of a cross-country railroad system. The Washington/Marshall brainchild was never finished. Once a titanic example of American drive and ingenuity, the James River and Kanawha Canal was either repurposed with railroad track, destroyed, or left to ruin. Marshall's expedition was all but relegated to the historical dustbin—until 2012.

### **A Young Explorer Takes Up the Pole**

Bolstered by a National Geographic Young Explorer's grant and to commemorate the bicentennial of that brazen voyage, Virginia native Andrew Shaw decides to attempt the route. Enlisting the help of five strong friends, he constructs a 43-by-7-foot, built-to-period-specs wooden craft. For months he researches the 1812 expedition, compiles atlases of the various waterways, plots his course, and, on April 5, 2012, sets out from Powhatan, Virginia, poling in Marshall's wake.

As a three-time veteran of the Virginia Canal Society's annual weeklong Batteau Festival—an event celebrating early 19th century trade routes—Shaw had played crewman on a number of trips downriver from Lynchburg to Richmond. It was after one such venture that he heard Trout tell of Marshall's 1812 expedition. An avid white water kayaker and outdoorsman, Shaw was dumbfounded. "To run the New River Gorge in a modern kayak is one thing, but a

60-foot wooden boat with no idea of what lies ahead of you is quite another," he says.

The feat got him thinking about the American spirit and the can-do attitude at the core of the country's founding. "The fact that John Marshall, at 57 years old, got on a bateau, went upstream, crossed the Alleghenies, and then went down the Greenbrier and the New River Gorge sight unseen—that's unbelievable," Shaw says. "I started considering retracing the route as a kind of tribute to the vision of the bold men dedicated to forging a lasting and successful political entity from a group of rebellious colonies."

Over the course of five weeks, Shaw and company poled their newly crafted boat—christened the Mary Marshall in honor of the late chief justice's wife—for 12 hours a stretch against headwinds, swift currents, and even Class III rapids to Covington, Virginia, a distance of 225 miles. After taking out near Dunlap Creek as Marshall once did, they trailered their boat and towed it, via horse and cart, over the Alleghany Mountains to put in on the Greenbrier River in Caldwell, West Virginia.

There, despite having to tow through numerous shallows, the floating was smooth. "The Greenbrier is a picturesque river, carving gently through the mountains," Shaw says. "Even with the portages, after battling for all those miles upriver, we delighted in the

After traveling hundreds of miles from Virginia to the New River in West Virginia, the crew's most difficult

stretch still loomed ahead. Under the supervision of park rangers, Andrew Shaw and his crew practiced their New

River run in kayaks before attempting the course in the period boat.





fact we were moving closer to our goal while having to do minimal work.”

This ease lasted until they reached the New River. A notorious destination for adventurous kayakers, navigating the New River Gorge marked a perilous apex: From a 400-yard-wide bed, the river is compressed into a slim channel of 20- to 60-yards, strewn with hazardously jutting rocks, resulting in white water characterized by big waves, strong current, and massive holes. Toward the end of safely navigating the rapids, Shaw and company camped above the gorge for more than a week, using the time to investigate possible routes and plot their course by making numerous runs through the section in kayaks. “We wanted to be sure we planned it just right,” Shaw says. “One false move could easily have resulted in losing the boat.”

Despite days of preparation, on the night before the run, Shaw could only think of the possible danger. “Listening to the roar of white water, I think of little else but guiding our vessel down the high-volume Class IV white water—it’s going to be a wild ride,” he wrote in his *National Geographic Explorer* journal. Then, on the following morning, he wrote, “Daylight comes with a strange combination of calm and excitement as we prepare to take on the greatest challenge of our journey.”

By 9:30, a large group of kayakers, rafters, onlookers, and members of the National Park Service had gathered to see the *Mary Marshall* through the New River Gorge.

Decked out in safety helmets and life vests, with park rangers waiting on standby, the *Mary Marshall* attempted the run, making it through with only a slight leak. “Crashing through the gorge’s massive 8- to 10-foot waves in the bateau was one of the greatest rushes of my life,” Shaw recalls. “I kept thinking, ‘We’re going to drop this boat in here and we have no idea how it’s going to react.’ But we made it through, and in doing so became the first bateau crew in 125 years to successfully descend the New River Gorge.”

Upon reaching Hawk’s Nest Dam in Fayette County, Shaw and company had traveled more than 360 miles, accomplishing something that, so far as historical record shows, only two other groups had ever done. “Most people would say, ‘Poling a huge wooden boat upriver hundreds of miles and running it through a Class IV rapid? Now that’s a stupid thing to do,’” Shaw says. “And yet, years later, I still feel incredibly blessed to have had the opportunity to shed light on Marshall’s story, to live on the rivers he saw as so critical to our nation’s development.” 🍀