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PART I

GEOGRAPHICAL EXPLORATION

The Federal Government of the United States has participated in, sponsored, or actively undertaken a large number of geographical explorations during the past 175 years. Some of these, notably the Lewis and Clark, Frémont, and Byrd expeditions and more recently the Air Force, Navy, and Army polar expeditions, are well known to each of us. Hundreds of other similarly significant though little-publicized expeditions have contributed their share of the fruits of exploration not alone in the United States but of many, often isolated, parts of the world in order that we as a nation might better understand and appreciate the world in which we live.

The story of these explorations is found in the records of the sponsoring Government agencies. These records were cared for by the individual agencies before the National Archives was established in 1934. With the completion of the Archives Building a year later the process of moving the permanently valuable, noncurrent Federal records into this one repository began, until today the basic materials for the study of the historical geography of the United States are available in one place where they are administered by a professional staff.

The material in this part of the exhibit was selected from the records of a few expeditions, some famous, others little known, with the idea of illustrating both the scope of Government explorations and the wealth of information on climate, demography, vegetation, soil, physiography, natural resources, transport facilities, and land use to be found in the journals, reports, maps, drawings, and other mediums of expression by which the expeditions recorded their discoveries. The historical geographer interested in reconstructing the successive landscapes of a particular region will find these records to be a treasure-trove.

The chronological arrangement not only illustrates the growth of a nation but unmistakably indicates what the executive and legislative branches of the Government considered to be of paramount importance during the different periods of our history. Thus the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42 would never have left its rich legacy of scientific observations and geographical discoveries if the whaling industry had not been indispensable to the commercial and industrial life of the United States at that particular time. Similarly, sectional interests and the demands of an expanding commerce made possible such expeditions as those of Herndon and Gibbon down the Amazon and of Perry to Japan.