MASTODON MANIA!

Discover the forgotten quest of the founding fathers to find a fearsome and gigantic beast that once roamed America from shore to shore. This true story follows the desperate search for the fossils of a mysterious animal that gripped America's attention even as the country fought for freedom during the Revolutionary War. Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and artist Charles Wilson Peale were all key players in this quest to find the bones of the "American Incognitum."
Our story begins in 1725, when a farmer in South Carolina stumbled onto some huge fossilized teeth. Gasp!

A respected scientist was asked to determine the nature of the teeth.

It's a giant, I tell ya!

Ahem.

This was actually the accepted theory of the time! Many people thought that fossilized teeth like these were from giants that died in a biblical flood.

1705 - The large tooth of a mysterious animal was found near Claverack, New York. It was used as a drinking vessel in a local tavern.

1755 - "The Theory of American Degeneracy" is published by Buffon.

1776 - The Declaration of Independence was written and the Revolutionary War began.

1783 - The Revolutionary War ended with the signing of the Treaty of Paris.

1784 - Jefferson sailed to Paris with an "uncommonly large partner skin to show Buffon.

1786 - Peale opened the first major American museum in his house, containing art, taxidermied animals, and fossils.

1789 - Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson's book, helped to make the mastodon a national symbol.

1799 - George Washington is inaugurated as the first president of the United States.

1799 - A mastodon skeleton was discovered by a farmer in Orange County, New York.

1801 - Peale and his sons Rembrandt and Raphael fitted skeletons together with input from enslaved servant Moses Williams and artist William Rush.

1804 - Lewis and Clark explored the Louisiana Purchase, with instructions from Jefferson to find living mastodons or giant ground sloths.
The founding fathers’ counterclaim to the theory of American degeneracy was finally on display.

To drive the point home, a mouse skeleton was also displayed for comparison.

The public was suitably impressed.

“A human being shrinks into significance beside the bony fragment of this enormous Antediluvian.”

Ante-what now?

Good heavens!

The mastodon was so popular, it sparked a “mammoth mania” and doubled the museum’s revenue.

But the true achievement of the exhibit was that after a moose disaster, decades of work and a lot of digging, Jefferson’s argument was finally proven!

He believed that America had only recently risen from the sea, which made it too swampy and humid for any large animals to grow.

The famous French scientist, George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (what a name!) outlined his influential “Theory of American degeneracy” in 1755.

(Buffon never actually saw North America himself.)

This theory applied to people too. Buffon stated that anyone who lived in America would become weaker and smaller.

This is ridiculous! No one with half a brain would believe that!

The theory was accepted knowledge all over Europe and the colonies.

What?

Thomas Jefferson

I’ll go to France personally and tell this Buffon fellow what’s what!

Hold your horses, T.J. There’s something more important coming up.

What could be more important than the reputation of my home?

Oh, that.
AFTER DECADES OF SEARCHING, IT WOULD ONLY TAKE THREE MONTHS TO ASSEMBLE THE SKELETON.

WHAT A SHORT PERIOD OF TIME IN COMPARISON TO HOW LONG IT TOOK FOR THESE FOSSILS TO FORM.

SHORT? MAYBE TO YOU!

AS THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR WAS WAGED, THE THEORY OF AMERICAN DEGENERACY WAS ALWAYS IN THEIR MINDS. SKELETONS OF MAMMOTHS, MASTODONS, AND GIANT GROUND SLOTHS WERE CONSTANTLY BEING MAILED OVERSEAS.

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN SPENT A LOT OF TIME DURING THE WAR TRYING TO SECURE AN ALLIANCE IN FRANCE. UNSURPRISINGLY, BUFFON'S THEORY CAUSED SOME DRAMA.

GOOD EVENING, MONSEUR.

UGH, COME TO TRY AND PROVE BUFFON WRONG AGAIN?

I'M HERE FOR THE REVOLUTION, BUT I'LL GLADLY GET YOU STRAIGHT WHILE I'M AT IT.

THE SCIENCE IS CLEAR, AMERICAN SOIL WILL NEVER GROW ANYTHING OR ANYONE WITH STRENGTH OR STATURE.

I HAVE A PROPOSAL...

MISSING BONES WERE REPLACED WITH WOODEN CARVINGS BY RUBENS AND REMBRANDT PEALE, AS WELL AS ARTIST WILLIAM RUSH.

ANOTHER CONTRIBUTOR WAS MOSES WILLIAMS, ENSLAVED BY THE PEALES.

OW! SPLINTER.

WHY DON'T WE JUST STAND UP AND SEE WHO'S TALLER?

I, WELL, UM...

IT WOULD BE UNVEILED ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

EVEN GEORGE WASHINGTON HIMSELF PUT THE WAR ON HOLD TO CHECK OUT SOME MASTODON BONES AT A FARM IN NEW YORK.

AND THOMAS JEFFERSON WAS SO MAD ABOUT IT, HE WROTE A WHOLE BOOK! NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA WAS FULL OF SCIENTIFIC DATA AND WRITINGS ABOUT MASTODONS. IT WAS THE ONLY BOOK HE EVER AROSE.

THEY NEVER DID TAKE FRANKLIN UP ON HIS OFFER.
So you see, these bones are truly - now hold on there, city boy, this isn't a donation.

Would $200 change your mind? It's all I brought.

This time, Thomas Jefferson had a new trick up his sleeve: a moose!

There was only one problem: Jefferson didn't have one.

It might not be an elephant, but it's still 7 feet tall.

Darn. And so...

I wouldn't say that's all you brought...

That's an awfully nice shotgun you've got there.

Sigh.

As it turns out, mailing a dead moose across the Atlantic Ocean is trickier than it sounds. The trouble started out when it was shot...

- 20 miles from the nearest road.

Well, shoot.

After being dragged through the forest for two weeks, the moose was a mess.

Were there antlers on this thing earlier?

Is that all?

WELLLLL... now that you mention it, my daughters could use some new dresses, too.

By the time it finally arrived in France a year later, it looked even worse.

What did Buffon think of it? We'll never know! He died before he could comment on this putrid moose mess.

Oh, for the love of...
LITTLE DID THEY KNOW THAT THE PROOF WAS RIGHT THERE. JUST
AND MANY OF THE OTHER FATHERS WERE ASKED TO
SURE THAT THE ROPE WAS
needed. where.

THOMAS WAS ANIMAL WE
RENT IN THERE. IF
IT IS TRUE THAT
BEING A BAND OF
BEINGS,
IT SEEMED LIKE
SKELETONS WOULD
CHANGE EUROPEAN AUDIENCES.

WHEN GEORGE WASHINGTON WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT A YEAR LATER,
FINDING A GIANT SKELETON BECAME A
MATTER OF-X.

TEN YEARS LATER, TURNING UP
NEW YORK, 1795
ONCE AGAIN, IT WAS A FARMER THAT STUMBLED ACROSS THE
THAT DISCOVERED:

JEFFERSON WILL BE
EXCITED TO HEAR
ABOUT THIS.

YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE TO
BE BUSY BEING THE
VICE PRESIDENT SO...

YEAH, I'M A LITTLE
BUSTED BEING THE VICE
PRESIDENT SO...

THE EVENT EVEN MADE NEWSPAPER
CRACK

WHOA!

CHARLES WADSON
HAD EVEN OPENED UP
DRAWING BONES, AND
HIS OWN MUSEUM OF
ART AND FOSSILS.