

York, African American explorer.(with Lewis and Clark expedition)

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Trekking to the Pacific in the first exploration of the American West was an African American named York. York crossed the continent, from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean and back, as a member of the Corps of Discovery. York was a member with a difference, however. Although he was called William Clark's "man servant," he actually was a slave and had been with Clark all his life.

In a time when slaves were not allowed to carry firearms, and when their comfort was not often considered, York carried a gun and rode "a horse. And, as a member of the expedition, he was allowed to vote on decisions affecting the group. This would never have happened "back home."

Hunting, fishing, cooking, scouting, and caring for those who fell ill--York did all this on the expedition. Once, during a flash flood on the Missouri River, York's bravery saved Clark's life. York helped in another way, too. The American Indians along the way had never seen anyone of African descent. More than once, the color of York's skin made him fascinating to the Indians. Some historians believe that getting to know York sometimes made the Indians more willing to allow the expedition safe passage through their lands.

Sadly, the freedom and importance given to York on the expedition did not last once the journey ended. York again found himself to be Clark's slave in a world where he was denied the rights he had enjoyed during the trip. Unfairly, he was the only member of the expedition to receive no pay or land.

It took 10 years before Clark granted York his wish for freedom. Some say that York died of cholera in Tennessee, and other records suggest that he went back to live with one of the Indian tribes he met on his great journey.

Several geographic sites--including a river canyon--were named in York's honor. On January 17, 2001, President Bill Clinton recognized York for his work on the Lewis and Clark expedition by naming him an honorary sergeant.