


BIOGRAPHY
York

The success of the Corps of Discovery depended on the skillful leadership of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark and on the courage, wilderness skills, and hard work of their expedition team. One person who proved to be a significant asset on the long and dangerous journey was York—an African American whom William Clark referred to as “my servant,” but who was actually his slave.

As you read the passage below, think about the ways in which York contributed to the success of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Little is known about York’s early years. He was born about 1770 to Old York and Rosa—house slaves on the Clark family plantation in Virginia. He probably grew up with William Clark, and when Clark’s father died in 1799, he left York to his son as part of the estate. Described as “amiable and trained by long experience in the ways of wilderness housekeeping,” York was a natural choice to accompany William Clark on his greatest adventure. York had the added advantage of being a good hunter, even though at that time enslaved Africans were legally prohibited from having guns.

York began the expedition in a menial role—as manservant to Clark—gathering roots and greens for meals and tending to Clark’s clothing and other gear. But as the expedition moved farther west, York began proving valuable in other, more important, ways. One of the Corps’s assignments was to try to make friends with the Native American groups they met along the way, in order to gain information about the land. Often in the evening they would invite the local Native Americans to dinner, and provide entertainment afterwards. Fiddle playing and dancing were both popular attractions for the guests. It soon became apparent, however, that the major attraction for the Native

Americans was York. Clark recorded in his journal that Native Americans were “Much astonished at my black Servant, who did not lose the opportunity of [displaying] his powers Strength &c. &c.”

An actor at heart, York sometimes pretended that he was a wild man. When curious Native American children followed him about, he would turn toward them and “they would run from him & holler as if they were terrified, & afraid of him,” Clark reported. He “made himself more turribal than we wished him to do,” Clark added. Even so, York continued to attract Native Americans to the expedition’s camps, and soon their curiosity turned to admiration. Good relations with Native Americans were vital to the expedition’s success because the explorers traded with them for essential items such as horses. York himself became a master at tracking with the Native Americans, often accompanying Clark on trading forays to get the goods that the Corps needed to survive.

At the end of the journey, after the Corps had returned to Missouri, a grateful William Clark granted York his freedom and reportedly set him up in the freight-hauling business with a wagon and a team of six horses. Unfortunately, York died not long after that, apparently the victim of cholera.

Questions to Think About

1. Why was York included in Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery?
2. What vital skills did he contribute to the expedition?
3. **Identifying Assumptions** Why do you think Clark granted York his freedom after the expedition was completed?