



## YORK INVOLUNTARY AMBASSADOR

The diversity of the expedition party was one of its greatest assets. York, the enslaved servant of Captain Clark, was an important instrument of diplomacy as he was admired by many tribes for his large stature and strength, coupled with very dark skin. York also proved a skilled hunter, a rare opportunity for an enslaved man who otherwise would not have been allowed to use a rifle. York was even sent as an emissary to trade with the tribes.

Despite his contributions to the success of the Expedition, York did not share in the accolades given to the men of the Corps of Discovery upon their return to St. Louis. It is likely that he was enslaved to Captain Clark for the remainder of his life.

### ACCOUNTS OF YORK IN THE JOURNALS

Captains Lewis and Clark and several other men kept journals documenting the Expedition. York is mentioned many times, as in the entries below.

October 9, 1804, PLACE, Clark: *"the Indians much astonished at my Black Servent and Call him the big medison, this nation never Saw a black man before"*

October 15, 1804, PLACE, Ordway: *"the Greatest Curiosity to them was York Capt. Clarks Black Man. all the nation made a Great deal of him. the children would follow after him, & if he turned towards them they would run from him & hollow as if they were terreyfied, & afraid of him."*

January 1, 1805, PLACE, Clark: *"I ordered my black Servent to Dance which amused the Croud very much, and Some what astonished them, that So large a man Should be active &c."*

June 22, 1805, Ordway: *"large gangs of buffalow all around the lower Camp to day. one gang Swam the river near the camp Capt. Clarks Servant York killed one of them"*

August 16, 1805, on Beaverhead, Lewis: *"some of the party had also told the Indians that we had a man with us who was black and had short curling hair, this had excited their curiossity very much. and they seemed quite as anxious to see this monster as they wer the merchandize which we had to barter for their horses."*

June 2, 1806, Lewis: *"Our traders McNeal and York were furnished with the buttons which Capt. C. and myself cut off our coats, some eye water and Basilicon which we made for that purpose and some Phials and small tin boxes which I had brought out with Phosporus. in the evening they returned with about 3 bushels of roots and some bread having made a suffessfull voyage, not much less pleasing to us than the retur of a good cargo to an East India Merchant.—"*

### AFTER THE EXPEDITION

In 1988, a collection of 47 letters written by William Clark to his brother and nephew were discovered in the home of the great-grandson of Clark's brother Jonathan. These letters contain several passages discussing York's requests to be reunited with his wife and to be freed from enslavement. While Captain Clark allowed York to visit his wife in Kentucky for a brief period, Clark refused to free York. Other family letters indicate that York's wife was relocated to Natchez, Mississippi with her master's household, separated permanently from her husband.

Here is an edited transcription from a letter written by Captain Clark to his brother Jonathan on November 9, 1808 (pictured below)

*"I will send York and permit him to stay a few weeks with his wife. He wishes to stay there altogether and hire himself which I have refused. He prefers being sold to returning here. He is serviceable to me at this place and I am determined not to sell him to gratify him. I have directed him to return by being included in my nephew's shipment of goods. If any attempt is made by York to run off, or refuse his duty as a slave, I wish him sent to New Orleans and sold or hired out to some severe master until he thinks better of such conduct."*

One month later, Captain Clark wrote,

*"I did wish to do well by him, but as he has got such a notion about freedom and his immense services, that I do not expect that he will be of much service to me again. I do not think with him, that his services have been so great or my situation would permit me to liberate him."*



Author and historian Hasan Davis portrays York during a program at Travelers' Rest State Park in June 2019.

### YORK IN THE ORAL HISTORY OF THE SALISH

Account by Louie Adams, excerpted from *The Salish People and the Lewis and Clark Expedition*

"What I'll tell about is what I heard from Sophie Moiese. She was my grandma...I heard here tell about her folks, or her grandparents—whoever it was that encountered Lewis and Clark in the Bitterroot. She said these strangers came...these *syapis* (white people). She said they were really concerned when they saw them, she said, because they had a *qwasqsi?* with them.

A *qwasqsi?* to our people is a bluejay...these were the people who would blacken their faces with coals. They had an important role in the medicine dances, because they were smart people.

And when they saw this, this *qwasqsi?* with Lewis and Clark—these pale people—they wondered what kind of ceremony there was going to be, what there were up to...and Lewis or Clark, whichever one, finally told them that this was not a bluejay, that it was his natural color.

So, a lot of people, Sophie Moeise used to say, a lot of them went up to this black man and rubbed their finger on his face to see if any of it would come off...and that's why in our sign language, when you talk about a black person...you'd rub a finger on your face."