

PRE SHOW ACTIVITY

A FOLK OPERA
YORK
THE EXPLORER



INTRODUCTION

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Explain the goals and outcomes of the Lewis and Clark expedition
- Describe York's contributions to the Corps of Discovery's success
- Analyze the impact of the expedition on Indigenous peoples
- Understand how slavery denied York a voice in telling his own story
- Create a fictional journal entry from York's perspective

Materials Needed

- Map of the Lewis and Clark expedition route
- Images of the expedition team and York
- Paper and pencils for journal activity
- Timeline of the expedition

Lesson Duration
60 minutes



INTRODUCTION

(10 minutes)

Show students a map of the United States in 1803. Ask: "What do you notice about this map compared to maps today?" Lead discussion about the Louisiana Purchase and the unknown western territories.

Setting the Scene In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson purchased a huge area of land from France called the Louisiana Territory. This doubled the size of the United States! But there was one big problem – no one knew what was out there. Jefferson chose Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to lead an expedition to explore this mysterious land.

PART 1 THE CORP OF DISCOVERY MISSION

(15 minutes)

The Goals of the Expedition

The Corps of Discovery had several important missions:

- Map the territory and find a water route to the Pacific Ocean
- Study plants, animals, and geography of the new lands
- Meet Indigenous tribes and establish peaceful relationships
- Claim the territory for the United States

The Team

The expedition included about 30-45 people, including:

- Meriwether Lewis (expedition leader)
- William Clark (co-leader and mapmaker)
- Soldiers and hunters
- A French-Canadian guide named Toussaint Charbonneau
- Sacagawea, Charbonneau's Shoshone wife who served as interpreter and guide
- York, an enslaved Black man owned by William Clark

Discussion Question

"Why do you think this expedition was so important to the young United States?"

PART 2: YORK- THE HIDDEN HERO

(20 minutes)

Who Was York?

York was born into slavery around 1770 and had been with the Clark family his entire life. He was about the same age as William Clark and may have been his childhood companion. When Clark joined the expedition, York came too – not by choice, but because he was Clark's property.

York's Contributions to Success of the expedition

Physical Strength and Skills:

- York was described as a large, powerful man who could handle the difficult physical demands of the journey
- He helped paddle canoes, carry heavy supplies, and set up camp
- His hunting and fishing skills helped feed the expedition

Cultural Bridge:

- Many Indigenous peoples had never seen a Black person before
- York's presence often amazed and impressed tribal leaders
- Some tribes viewed him with great respect and curiosity
- His interactions helped establish friendly relationships that were crucial to the expedition's survival

Medical Knowledge:

Medical Knowledge:

- York had knowledge of natural remedies and healing practices
- He helped treat sick and injured expedition members

Diplomatic Asset:

- Indigenous peoples were often more interested in meeting York than Lewis and Clark
- His presence helped open doors for trade and negotiations
- Some tribal members believed he had special powers

The Harsh Reality

Despite his vital contributions:

- York received no pay for his services
- He had no choice in joining the dangerous expedition
- He was not allowed to learn to read or write
- After the expedition, he remained enslaved for several more years
- His story was largely ignored in official expedition records

Discussion Questions

1. "How do you think York felt about not being able to choose whether to go on this dangerous journey?"
2. "Why do you think Indigenous peoples were so interested in meeting York?"
3. "How might the expedition have been different without York's contributions?"

PART 3: YORK- IMPACT ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

(10 minutes)

The Other Side of the Story

While the expedition was celebrated as a great American achievement, it had serious consequences for Indigenous peoples:

- Disease: The expedition brought diseases that made many Native Americans sick
- Loss of Land: The expedition's mapping helped the U.S. government later take Indigenous lands
- Cultural Disruption: Increased white settlement disrupted traditional ways of life
- Conflict: The expedition marked the beginning of more conflicts between settlers and Indigenous peoples

Important to Remember

Indigenous peoples had been living on and caring for these lands for thousands of years before the expedition. They had their own rich cultures, governments, and knowledge systems. The expedition treated these lands as "empty" and "unknown," but they were actually home to many thriving communities.

MAIN ACTIVITY- YORK'S MISSING VOICE

(15 minutes)

The Problem of Silenced Stories

York could not read or write because enslaved people were forbidden from learning these skills. This meant:

- He couldn't keep his own journal of this historic journey
- We don't have his thoughts and feelings about what he experienced
- His story was told only through the eyes of others
- His contributions were often minimized or ignored

Journal Writing Activity

Instructions for Students: "Imagine you are York during the Corps of Discovery expedition. You have just met a group of Indigenous people who have never seen a Black person before. They are treating you with great respect and curiosity, while Lewis and Clark are relying on you to help make this meeting successful. Write a journal entry describing:

- What you see, hear, and experience during this meeting
- How you feel about being the center of attention
- Your thoughts about your role in the expedition's success
- Your feelings about not being free, even though you're contributing so much"

Writing Prompts:

- "Today I met people who looked at me differently than anyone ever has..."
- "The tribal chief wanted to touch my skin because..."
- "Lewis and Clark depend on me, but I am still..."
- "I wonder what would happen if I could..."

Time: Give students 10 minutes to write their entries.



SHARING & REFLECTION

(10 minutes)

Journal Sharing

Invite volunteers to share parts of their journal entries (remind students this is sensitive content and to be respectful).

Closing Discussion Questions

1. "How do you think it felt for York to be so important to the mission but still not be free?"
2. "Why is it important that we learn about York's contributions today?"
3. "What does York's story teach us about whose voices get heard in history?"
4. "How can we make sure important stories like York's don't get forgotten?"

Key Takeaways

- York played a crucial role in the success of the Lewis and Clark expedition
- His story shows us how slavery denied people the chance to tell their own stories
- Learning about York helps us understand the full truth of American history
- We must actively seek out the stories of people whose voices were silenced

Potential Extension Activities

- Research what happened to York after the expedition
- Compare different historical accounts of York's role
- Create a timeline of York's life
- Draw a picture showing York's contributions to the expedition
- Write a letter from York to a family member (imagining he could write)
- Research other enslaved people who made important contributions to American history

ASSESSMENTS

Students can be assessed on:

- Participation in discussions about the expedition's goals and impacts
- Understanding of York's contributions demonstrated in journal writing
- Ability to explain why York's voice was silenced and why that matters
- Thoughtful reflection on the importance of hearing all voices in history

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Maps and images of the Lewis and Clark expedition
- Age-appropriate books about York and the Corps of Discovery
- Online resources about the expedition's impact on Indigenous peoples
- Primary source excerpts from Lewis and Clark's actual journals (to contrast with York's missing voice)