

The Lewis & Clark expedition



We were taught the Lewis & Clark expedition in school. We were not taught there was a Black man who played a major role in the success of that expedition! His name was York. He was born to enslaved parents, and served as William Clark's valet from boyhood. As a young teen he served as a trusted member of the expedition. His skills as a tracker/hunter credited with making it possible for the group to reach the Pacific Ocean, despite extreme weather and dangerous overland conditions. York was in fact lauded for his skills: scouting, hunting, field medicine, finding food/water and performing much of the heavy lifting.

Lewis noted in his journal that York saved him from certain death in the grip of a grizzly bear during the expedition. Native Nations treated York with great respect, and he played a key role in diplomatic talks between Tribal leaders and whites in his group...due to his dark skin and open attitude. When the expedition returned, every member received money and land for their services... except York.

York asked William Clark for his freedom based upon his leadership during the expedition. Clark refused. York pleaded to be reunited with his wife, who was enslaved in Louisville. He even offered to work in Louisville and send Clark all of his earnings. Clark still refused, and in 1811 sold York to a brutal white man, who kept him enslaved under harsh conditions until 1816. There is nothing written about York after 1816. Today we must honor York, a Black man who made a difference in US history, but has been ignored in US history books. York statue - Louisville, KY