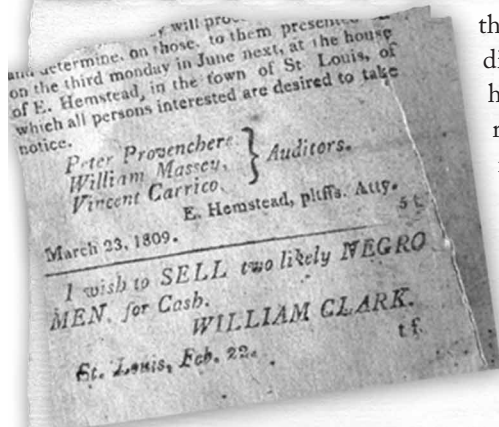


Lewis & Clark's Missouri YORK'S LIFE

PART 7 OF A SERIES OF EIGHT NEWSPAPER IN EDUCATION FEATURES

THE EXPEDITION'S RETURN TO ST. LOUIS in September 1806 was cause for celebration. No one had heard from the expedition since the keelboat had returned almost 16 months before. Looking ahead, the men of the Corps no doubt knew that their lives would be different — they had seen and experienced sights that no one else in America had seen. They had faced the challenges of travel through a difficult landscape and unknown Indian cultures and had survived.



Advertisement: Slaves for Sale, 1809
Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, photo by Cary Horton

One of them, Clark's slave York, may have had mixed emotions as he arrived in St. Louis. He was still Clark's legal property and was subject to the local slave laws. Following the expedition, York traveled with Clark to Kentucky where the men were reunited with their families. York had many adventures to share with his family — of the Hidatsa Indian chief rubbing his skin to see if the dark color would come off, of pretending to be a bear with the Arikara children, and of meeting a young Indian woman named Sacagawea.

President Jefferson appointed Clark superintendent of Indian Affairs for the Louisiana Territory, based in St. Louis. So, York's new home would be St. Louis, away from his family in Kentucky. A slave did not have a choice in such matters. In fact, York most likely did not even have a choice about whether or not to go on the expedition.

What was York's life in St. Louis like? As a slave he would have been subject to 35 slave codes passed as law for the Louisiana Territory in 1804. Under this law York could not leave home without a pass signed by Clark. He couldn't

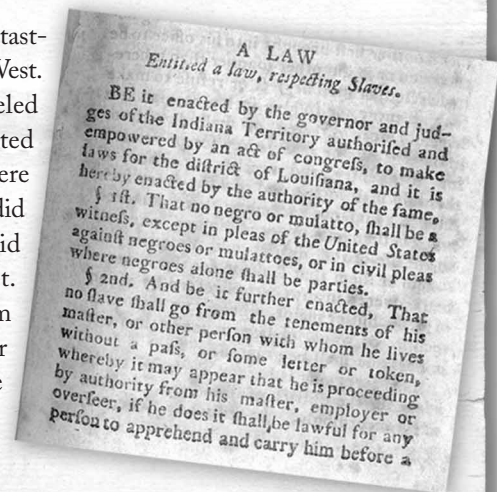
carry or use a gun either, something he had done on the expedition.

The expedition journals don't say much about York's contributions during the trip. He most likely experienced much more freedom during the expedition than at any other time in his life as a slave. And, as they did with many members of the expedition, Lewis and Clark named a natural feature for him, "York's dry river," present-day Custer Creek in Prairie County, Mont.

While the other members of the expedition received money and land as payment for their work, York did not. He had not been hired for the trip. The only other member of the Corps who didn't receive pay was Sacagawea. Again, because she had not been hired, but had accompanied her husband.

But York had tasted freedom in the West. He had even traveled outside the United States to land where the laws of slavery did not apply. How did he feel back in St. Louis? Letters from Clark to his brother Jonathan indicate that York was very unhappy, missed his family, and asked for his freedom. Did Clark ever free York? No one has found any legal documents to say for sure. Ads from St. Louis newspapers show that Clark continued to own slaves after the expedition.

When Missouri became a state in 1821, slavery was legal. The only written reference to Clark freeing York is in notes written by the author Washington Irving who visited Clark in 1832. Irving wrote that Clark mentioned that he had freed several of his slaves, including York.



Excerpt from Laws for the Government of the District of Louisiana, 1804
Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

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PART 8
MAKING MISSOURI HOME

Journey through our state's early history with the Corps of Discovery. For information about Lewis & Clark's Missouri, a touring exhibition organized by the Missouri Historical Society, visit www.lewisandclarkexhibit.org.