

York, Just York:

The tale of an enslaved man who understood everyone, but was understood by no one

Big Horse walked in smooth, steady strides to close the gap between him and the crowd of newcomers. He strode past them, one by one, in silence, until only the tall, motionless man was in front of him. Big Horse's hospitality came easily. But for a moment, the tall man only watched him. Then, as if giving himself permission, he smiled too.

Clark's voice lifted faster than his feet did.

"That man's just York," Clark interrupted. "I own him."

Growing up in Virginia, York was given to a young William Clark. Clark used York as a companion, but York was simply a boy who would never be free. When Clark needed to go somewhere, York went, without objection. When Clark needed to do something, York did it, without objection. So when Lewis and Clark were selected to set out for the Pacific, York, who was married by then, was forced to join them.

The rustling breeze York encountered while hunting in the mornings reminded him of the night before. Almost the whole Corps of Discovery was gathered around a low fire, each debating where to camp and spend the winter. Captain Clark would listen to each man's opinion, one by one, about where and why they should camp in specific locations. When it came time for York's turn to speak, no one skipped him. No one ignored him. His voice counted just as much as every free, white man who sat around the fire with him.

York had spent his whole life believing that he was somehow less than others. That night spent voting by the low fire and the quiet morning bristle of leaves in faraway woods taught him something he would have struggled to grasp at the beginning of his journey: his own self-worth.

And as they say, you can't put a genie back in the bottle. York was now determined to live with his self-worth in mind. So when the team joyfully returned to St. Louis after the expedition, York asked Clark for one thing: to be free, to live near his wife in Kentucky.

Clark refused.

York then offered a compromise. York offered to hire himself out in Louisville and send his wages back to Clark.

Clark refused again.

York kept asking. Clark kept refusing, until one day, Clark became tired of refusing. Clark decided to make York pay a hard price for his disobedience: he sent York to a harder master in Louisville, a man known for his severity when dealing with enslaved people.

Many years later, Clark told writer Washington Irving a different version. He said that he had freed York, and set him up with a drayage business of his own. The business failed, Clark said, because York turned out to be lazy, a rather unusual claim to make about a man who trekked miles and kept an entire expedition fed through harsh winters to help map an entire continent.

York's idea of himself had changed immensely in those three years. Clark's hadn't. He had seen York work as much (and often more) than the other members on the Corps of Discovery. He had seen York vote, negotiate, decide, and endure. But when Clark came back from the mission, he saw York through the same prejudices. Nothing that York did, however extraordinary, was ever going to change Clark's mind, because Clark's mind was never actually open to the belief that York was an equal.

And that is how York's tale ends. There is no information on whether he was ever freed. No information on how he died. The only records we have say he died sometime around 1834, somewhere in Tennessee.

And in the end, the man who helped map a continent was treated as if he deserved no place in it.