

Sacagawea

c. 1786–1812



WHY SHE MADE HISTORY From the Shoshone tribe, Sacagawea traveled thousands of miles with the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the Pacific Northwest.



As you read the biography below, think about Sacagawea's journey. What did she contribute to the Corps of Discovery?

The Louisiana Purchase nearly doubled the size of the United States territory. However, Americans knew little about this land to the west or the people who lived there. President Thomas Jefferson asked Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore and map the new land. Along the way they discovered plant life and animals previously known only to Native Americans. They also met the Native Americans who lived on the land. Sacagawea, from the Shoshone tribe, joined the Corps of Discovery on their journey, serving as a guide and interpreter.

Sacagawea was born around 1786 in present-day Idaho. When she was about 12 years old, she was captured by an enemy tribe. The tribe sold Sacagawea and another Shoshone girl to a French trapper, Toussaint Charbonneau, who had been living among the Indians. Charbonneau made both girls his wives.

In 1804 the Corps of Discovery arrived at Sacagawea's village and built a fort nearby for the winter. Lewis and Clark asked Charbonneau to join the expedition as an interpreter. The captains felt that Sacagawea would also be an asset, and it was agreed that she would join the party. That winter, Sacagawea gave birth to a baby boy. She carried the baby on her back as the expedition left the fort in April to head west. In the course of the journey, the party became very fond of the child. William Clark later paid for his education.

Lewis and Clark decided that having a woman as part of the expedition would serve as a sign to natives they met. Clark wrote in his journal that "a woman with a party of men is a token of peace." They also felt that she could serve a valuable role as an interpreter when they met the Shoshones. However, Sacagawea's contributions were far greater. In familiar territory she acted as a guide. She located berries, plants, and roots that could be used for food or medicine. And she acted calmly to save important journals and equipment when a high wind nearly knocked over one of the boats.

By August the expedition had traveled as far as they could on the Missouri River. Lewis set out to make contact with the Shoshones to trade

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for horses. When Sacagawea arrived as interpreter she was reunited with her older brother, the leader of the tribe. After a joyful reunion with her people, Sacagawea helped the Corps secure the needed horses and continue on with the expedition.

Sacagawea and her husband traveled to the Pacific with the Corps and wintered with them in present-day Oregon. On the return journey, Sacagawea proved to be a valuable guide as they again passed through Shoshone country. Clark praised her as his "pilot." When the Corps arrived back at Charbonneau's village in August of 1806, Sacagawea's journey ended.

Most historians believe that Sacagawea died of an illness in 1812, at a fort in present-day South Dakota where Charbonneau traded furs. Others argue that she lived to be nearly 100.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. **Explain** How did Sacagawea contribute to the Corps of Discovery?

2. **Infer** How do you think Sacagawea felt about the men she traveled with?

ACTIVITY

What would this long and dangerous journey have been like for Sacagawea? Read excerpts from the journals of Lewis and Clark. Then write a journal entry from the perspective of Sacagawea.