



# Video Story Transcript

## THROUGH THE EYES OF YORK

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**Link to YouTube Video:**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kGTTZJZyvYM>

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Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

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Hello, my name is Bobby Norfolk and I'd like to do a piece from a one-person show called "Through the Eyes of York" based on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Hello, my name is York. That's right. Just York. Y-O-R-K. Born in Virginia around the year 1771, they tell me.

Now somebody asked me, "Why did they name you York anyway?"

Huh, huh! Good question. I was born New York town, New York County, near the York River. Now y'all do the math. Now my mama, her name was Mama Rose. My daddy. Huh, his name was Old York.

And I had no idea when I was a kid back in Virginia, I was the property of William Clark. You know, I was his body servant, fancy name for the slaves that worked in the house instead of out in the field.

While I was racing with William Clark one day, I was a fast runner, y'all, boogity, boogity, boogity. Ha, ha, I beat him. He got mad. "Mmm, I'mon beat you!" Hit me! Bam! Whoa! I hit him back. Boom! The overseer saw it.

"Boy, you hit Mister Clark's son!" Hit me with a whip! Pi-yah! Oww! I ran to my mama. "Mama Rose, Mama Rose! That man hit me with a whip."

"What man?"

"That man ova der."

What did you do?"

"Nuthin."

"York, we are owned by the Clark family. We are their property. You can't knock that white boy down. You gon get us all killed; are you a fool? Now, if you hit him, you better not come back to this house. You don't hit him back!"

"Yes, ma'am." I had to sit down and think about that. Property? Owners? I knowed you can own cows, pigs, horses and chickens. How can you own another human being?

But I grew up. William Clark grew up. Then we became young men in our early thirties and a friend of William Clark named Thomas Jefferson. Oh, yeah! He lived up there in Virginia with another man named Meriwether Lewis. Well, Meriwether Lewis got this letter from Thomas Jefferson said he wanted us to explore this new territory altogether. And so, Master Clark took me.

So, we started off. May 14<sup>th</sup>, 1804 exploring the Louisiana Purchase territory. Science lesson.

We put our keelboats and pirogues in the water. Splash-ah! Going noff against the mighty current of the mighty Missouri River and so we put our poles into the river and we pushed the pole south. The boat, we goin' noff! Oh, it was back breaking labor! Kkk-kuh! And that mud was so thick, it kept getting my stick stuck. They call the Missouri River "Big Muddy" just because of that river.

Then, y'all, we got up into Noff Dakota. It was wintertime, ooh! Seven or below zero. We stayed with the Mandan Indians. The Mandan Indians did not live in tepees; they lived in earth lodges made out of earth and wood. So, they started to interpret back and forth to spend, ah, winter of 1804-1805 and, all of a sudden, the Mandan chiefs saw me. Unggg! They started pulling at me. I said, "What? What's that? What's their problem?"

They had never seen an African-American person before. All the thousands of years that the plains people have lived on this continent, York was the first African-American person they had seen and they thought my skin color was paint. They thought I painted myself brown. The bravest warriors, the most powerful warriors, the most courageous warriors in all the Indian villages would paint themselves with brown paint so they thought I were real brave. They thought I had been dipped in chocolate (pp – set to dry) 'til the chiefs tried to rub off my paint. At the interpreter, "What are they doin' rubbin' off paint. Heh, heh, heh, heh! Tell them this is skin."

They rub harder. Paint! I say "Oww! You gon start a fire in a minute. This is not paint!"

And they thought, at that point, I was a supernatural creature. They thought I was a shapeshifter sent down by the Great Spirit of a great mystery to visit and they called me Big Medicine, Big Medicine. They started following me around like I was supernatural. Big Medicine, he's the one. Lewis and Clark said, "This is gettin' otta hand! They think he's the leada. York, York! York, York!"

"Yessir, what's up?"

"Tone it down, tone it down, boy! You gittin' too big for your britches!"

I couldn't tone it down too much because the Indians knew if I would ever attack them, it would be the end of the Indian nations! Big Medicine would retaliate.

Well, one time, y'all, we wa goin' over the Rocky Mountains and headed down into the colder regions and down into Montana and, all of a sudden, a big huge storm broke out and that storm was capsizin' canoes. And

we started swimmin' back and forth and I saved all them supplies and I got some respect from them white boys after that. I was not just a body servant.

It's about da time we finally got to Astoria, Oregon, we had to vote to say where we would spend our campsite in. I got to vote. Sa-cag-a-wea, which some of y'all call Sac-a-jaw-ea, she got to vote. First time that an Indian and an African-American person had voted in a government sanctioned election.

But we returned back to St. Louis, September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1806. Only lost one man in that whole expedition, from appendicitis. The men, they got 320 acres of land, double pay - thousand dollars. I went to Mr. Clark. "Sir, mission accomplished. I may not get land or money. What about my freedom from slavery?"

He said, "York, I can't give you your freedom. You still my slave!"

I said, "Sir. I beg to differ. I've worked with you for two years to get over the Rocky Mountains, go through the Indian Territory, get back to St. Louis. Give me my freedom, sir!"

"York, back up off me, boy! Can't give you your freedom!"

I didn't back off. I got insolent and sulky, according to him. He had overseers tie me up and whip me with 50 lashes across my back. I say, "Well, let me see my wife, sir. I haven't seen her in two years. I'm the only man that was married in the Corps of Discovery."

"How 'bout y'all go see your wife down in Louisville, Kentucky. Mo... By the way, she gonna be sold off to another master in Natchez, Mississippi so you will never see her again anyway. Find yourself another white boy. And if you don't come back to St. Louis in two weeks, I will send the slave catchers after ya and send you down to a severe master in New Orleans, Louisiana.

York returned back to St. Louis and it took five years for William Clark to give York his freedom. Somebody said his wife was in Nashville and he went looking for her in Tennessee instead of Natchez in Mississippi. Other historians claim that he died of cholera in the big cholera epidemic in St. Louis.

But I tell you what, long after York passed away, the former governor of Missouri Bob Holden made York Honorary Sergeant in the Missouri National Guard. Before William Clinton left the White House, he made York Honorary Sergeant in the United States Army. We have the U.S. Constitution and in it, we have amendments to correct our flaws. Better late than never for York to enter United States history. Through the Eyes of York.