

SACAGAWEA

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Charbonneau married her and took her with his two other wives to live in one of the villages of the Mandan, near the present site of Bismarck, North Dakota. She was still in her teens and pregnant with Charbonneau's child when a history-making event took place, one that would effect the entire course of her life, not to mention the lives of many others. The event was the arrival of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on October 26, 1804. The two explorers and their party had left their starting point just above St. Louis on May 14, charged by President Thomas Jefferson to explore the vast Louisiana Territory and report back to him.

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Thanks in no small measure to Jefferson, the journey of Lewis and Clark and the contributions of Sacagawea are well documented. Jefferson insisted that Lewis and Clark keep detailed diaries. As a result, their observations, along with those of others in the party, form one of the most complete records of any exploration in history. And the pivotal role played by a young Indian woman, instead of being buried by time, has come down to us in rich detail. The explorers took note even of the smallest acts, as for example in this entry in Lewis's diary, dated April 9, only two days after the party left the Mandan:

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Not long after this, however, Sacagawea proved that she was capable of rendering much more vital service. A strong gust of wind caught one of the boats and capsized it, throwing valuable cargo into the river. Clark records the incident in his diary entry of May 14:

"The articles which floated out were nearly all caught by the squaw who was in the rear. This accident had like to have cost us dearly: for in this perogee were embarked our papers, instruments, books, medicine, a great proportion of our merchandise and, in short, almost every article indispensibly necessary to further the views and insure the success of the enterprise in which we are now launched to the distance of 2,200 miles."

Sacagawea fell ill in mid-June, but recovered after about a week under the solicitous care of Lewis. One of his diary entries during that period reveals that he realized her continued ill health or death could jeopardize that success of the mission:

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A few days later, Sacagawea, Charbonneau, Clark, and the rest of the party arrived in the Shoshone camp, and Sacagawea was joyfully reunited with her people. One of the most touching incidents was her reunion with the young woman who had been kidnapped with her but had escaped later. The event is recorded in the Biddle edition of the diaries:

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