

SHAPERS OF AMERICA

**S**ACAGAWEA  
SHOSHONE EXPLORER

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MICHAEL T. CROSBY



*Frontispiece: Although no images of Sacagawea were made in her lifetime, she has been depicted in more statues than any other woman in American history. This 1980 painted bronze statue by Harry Jackson can be found at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyoming.*

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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Introduction by Dr. Roger G. Kennedy	7
1 Who Was Sacagawea?	10
2 A Shoshone Girl	18
3 The Lewis and Clark Expedition	29
Map: Louisiana Purchase Territory	34
Map: From St. Louis to the Knife River Villages	38
4 The Shoshone "Interpretress"	41
5 Seeking the Headwaters of the Missouri	51
6 Finding Sacagawea's People	61
Map: From the Knife River Villages to Camp Fortunate	68
7 On to the Pacific	70
Map: From Camp Fortunate to Canoe Camp	76
8 Waiting Out the Winter	82
Map: From Canoe Camp to the Pacific	88
9 "A Pilot Through This Country"	94
Map: The Expedition Returns	100–101
10 Remembering Sacagawea	110
Map: The Lewis and Clark Expedition	115
Chronology	118
Chapter Notes	121
Glossary	128
Further Reading	130
Internet Resources	132
Index	134

## SHAPERS OF AMERICA

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SACAGAWEA: SHOSHONE EXPLORER

IDA TARBELL: CRUSADING JOURNALIST

## INTRODUCTION

BY DR. ROGER G. KENNEDY

The SHAPERS OF AMERICA series profiles men and women who have had a powerful effect on the way our country has evolved. The subjects of these biographies were selected because their lives are interesting and important, and because they show what people like us can do when we summon the courage and persistence to make history. We may admire the subjects of these biographies, but their achievements, while great, are not so great as to seem irrelevant or inaccessible to our own lives.

The books in this series are not about celebrity, but about citizenship. One criterion for selection into the series is that the subjects of these biographies are not as well known as they should be. We all know something about George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt. But over more than two centuries many other Americans have also made indelible contributions to the future of their nation and our world. The people profiled in the SHAPERS OF AMERICA series are not likely to be sculpted onto another Mount Rushmore. However, their lives affirm an inquiring and active citizenship—a citizenship that wants to know, and is willing to venture into the unknown for good purpose.

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*Dr. Roger G. Kennedy is the former director of the National Park Service and is director emeritus of the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.*

I want to comment on something that has become important to me over more than sixty years in public life: although the men and women profiled in this series changed history, they were not set apart from the rest of us by knowing in advance the exact outcome of their actions. Sometimes things turned out as they intended, sometimes not. But as the old Southern expression goes, they put down their buckets where they were, drew up the water of life, and drank deep. They acted on the best information they could get—in many cases, amid much confusion and dispute—as we all must.

Striving amid doubt, each of them could take as a text a statement made in the midst of the Civil War by Abraham Lincoln: “I do the very best I know how—the very best I can; and I mean to keep on doing that until the end. If the end brings me out all right, then what is said against me won’t amount to anything. If the end brings me out wrong, 10,000 angels swearing I was right would make no difference.”

The biographies of the SHAPERS OF AMERICA series reveal people who used their talents and adapted to their circumstances in order to accomplish the extraordinary. None of the people in these volumes were perfect. Each got things wrong from time to time. But they put down their buckets where they were, and kept on trying their best despite derision and defeat. That is why they can be exemplars. They were capable of acting together with others to make matters better.

Acting together! That’s the key to it! Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard said: “He that drinks his cider alone, let him catch his horse alone.” There never was a lone cowboy capable of much—or very happy for very long. “He who can be happy alone,” said Aristotle, “is either a brute or a God.” We are citizens. The same Founding

Fathers who wrote of the pursuit of happiness—without making any promise of finding it—wrote of seeking “a *more perfect union*.” They did not proclaim that their new American nation was perfect; they left plenty of room for the work of the rest of us—including the work of the people in these books.

A more perfect union comes about in increments, as each generation engages in the pursuit of happiness. The lives profiled in the SHAPERS OF AMERICA series can inspire us to renew our own energies and to assert an active pursuit of happiness through public service. The true reward of citizenship comes from doing the best you can with what you’ve got, working together with—and for—other people. Putting your talents to use for the common good is a grand kind of happiness.



# WHO WAS SACAGAWEA?

**T**he crowd bustled around the huge American flag-draped statue expectantly, waiting for its unveiling. It was July 6, 1905, and the United States was celebrating the 100-year anniversary of the Lewis and Clark Expedition—a journey of exploration led by Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark through the American West that took place in the early 1800s. Now, a century later, at a special exposition in Portland, Oregon, the audience listened to several speeches commemorating the actions of a special member of the expedition—a Shoshone woman known as Sacagawea.

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*This bronze statue of Sacagawea, by Alice Cooper, was the first sculpture in the United States to honor the only woman in the Lewis and Clark Expedition. Unveiled in 1905 at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland, Oregon, the statue was commissioned and paid for by donations from women's groups across the nation. It stands today in the city's Washington Park.*



Sacagawea had been the only woman in the Corps of Discovery, as the Lewis and Clark Expedition was also known. She was just 17 and already a wife and mother of an infant son when she joined her husband, Toussaint Charbonneau, on the long journey of exploration with the Corps. During that journey, she assumed many roles. She was a translator, helping Lewis and Clark communicate with various Native American tribes. She was a guide, showing the way as the Corps traveled through her homeland. And she was a teacher, explaining the culture of her land and its people.

## A POWERFUL SYMBOL

One hundred years after the William and Clark Expedition, Sacagawea had become something else—a powerful symbol of a woman’s right to equal treatment in society. Suffragettes pointed to Sacagawea as someone who had been granted a right that women a century later were still struggling to achieve—the right to vote. That is why, in 1905, many women activists came to the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland to pay tribute to a historical moment and person.

### *The Lewis and Clark Expedition*

**W**illiam Clark and Meriwether Lewis were tasked in the early 1800s by President Thomas Jefferson with exploring the wilderness of the American Northwest. During the Lewis and Clark Expedition, its leaders made detailed records of hundreds of birds, plants, fish, and animals previously unknown to people living east of the Mississippi River.

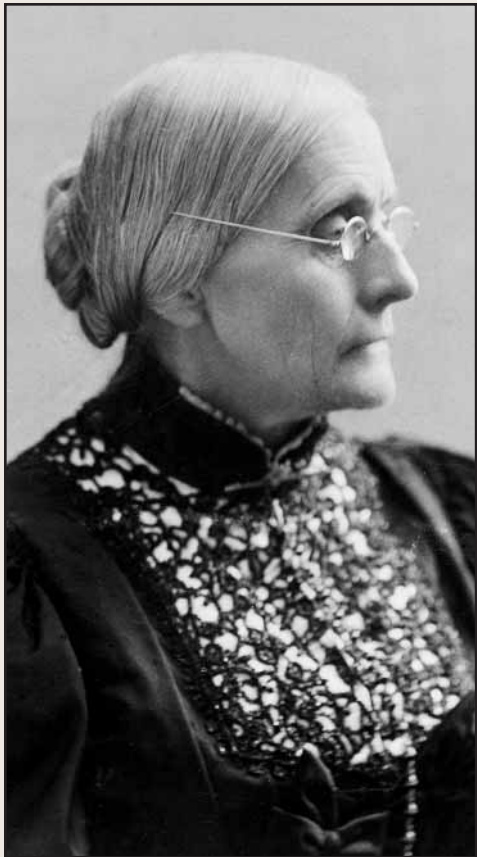


The Portland exposition took place on land about 90 miles away from the site of a winter fort built by the Corps of Discovery. In December 1805, after spending several cold, miserable weeks camped on various spots along the north side of the Columbia River, the expedition had moved to the south side of the river as the result of a historic vote. Lewis and Clark had included each member of their group in making the decision on where to base their winter quarters. Among those participating in the vote were Clark’s African-American slave York and Sacagawea, a Native American.

The decision to include York and Sacagawea in a vote was unusual for the time, to say the least. In the early 19th century, most African Americans were slaves with few rights; blacks were not permitted to vote in national elections. Women in American society were typically discouraged from giving their opinions and also could not vote in political elections. But on November 24, 1805, Lewis and Clark counted both Sacagawea’s and York’s votes equally with those of the other members of the expedition.

In the early 20th century, the story of Sacagawea’s vote served as a great inspiration to leaders of the women’s rights movement. As they actively campaigned for a woman’s right to vote, they asked how their country could deny this essential right of equality a century after Sacagawea had exercised the franchise.

Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906), a social reformer who devoted her life to such causes as the abolition of slavery and equal rights for women, spoke before the unveiling of Sacagawea’s statue at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland. In her speech, she focused on Sacagawea’s actions during her time with the Corps as an example of the patriotic role that women have played in American history:



*Suffragist Susan B. Anthony (1820–1906) was a longtime activist for the woman's right to vote. In her 1905 speech at the dedication of the statue of Sacagawea, she described the Shoshone woman as a "patriot," whose efforts helped build the United States.*

"This is the first time in history that a statue has been erected in the memory of a woman who has accomplished patriotic deeds," Anthony stated. "[If] it were not for that brave little Indian mother, there would be no Oregon or Portland."

Sacagawea was indeed brave, but it is unlikely that she viewed her contributions to the Lewis and Clark Expedition as "patriotic deeds." It is difficult to characterize her as a patriot when according to the laws at the time she was not even recognized as a U.S. citizen. Anthony's remarks were an example of how the historical Sacagawea had become lost, replaced in 1905 by the stereotype of a



patient and wise Native American woman who guided the way for American westward expansion.

At the end of the speeches, the huge flag was pulled off the bronze statue, and the crowd broke into cheers. The sculpture was of a young Shoshone woman with her infant son strapped to her back. Wearing a brave, determined expression, the figure representing Sacagawea pointed dramatically to the West.

## THE REAL SACAGAWEA

So who was the real Sacagawea? Despite her importance to American history, there is remarkably little reliable information available about the woman who served as the guide and interpreter for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. No portraits were ever painted of her, so her actual appearance remains unknown. No written records exist to verify her date of birth or death. People cannot even agree about the proper spelling of her name.

Most of what is definitively known about Sacagawea comes from journals written by members of the Corps of Discovery during their journey from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Ocean and back. However, the authors of

**I**n addition to Captains Lewis and Clark, several members of the expedition kept journals documenting the experiences of the Corps of Discovery. They included soldier John Ordway, from New Hampshire; Patrick Gass, a carpenter from Pennsylvania; and Joseph Whitehouse, a tailor from Virginia. In the journals, Sacagawea is referred to by name, as "the interpreter's wife," and as the "Squar" or "Squaw"—a term that whites at the time thought was the Indian word for "wife" or "woman."



## What's in a Name?

Is it *Sacagawea*, *Sacajawea*, or *Sakakawea*? The spelling, pronunciation, and meaning of Sacagawea's name is quite controversial. Lewis and Clark used variations of *Sah-ca-gah-we-a* and *Sah-kah-gar-we-a* in the journals they kept. In all cases, the third syllable of the name always started with a *g*. However, in the first edition of Lewis and Clark's journal, published in 1814, the name appears as *Sacajawea*, with a *j*. To add to the confusion, in a list of the Corps made by Clark in the 1820s, he wrote *Se car ja we au*.

Sacagawea lived with two different Native American tribes—the Shoshone and the Hidatsa. She had been living with the Hidatsa people when she joined the expedition, and William and Clark thought her name was Hidatsa for “Bird Woman,” or *tsakaka wia*. Some historians say her name should be spelled like bird woman sounds in Hidatsa—*Sakakawea*.

The Shoshone spell the name *Sacajawea* with a *j*, but they disagree on its meaning. One of the early claims was that *Sacajawea* was a Shoshone word for “boat launcher” or “boat puller.” Because the Shoshones often named someone for a characteristic event or quality, it is possible that the tribe could have given her that name when she returned to them accompanied by men who were pulling canoes up a shallow river. More recently, some Shoshone speakers have said that *Sacajawea* means “burden” or “one who bears a burden.” Still other Shoshone language authorities say that it is not a recognizable Shoshone name.

Most historians prefer *Sacagawea*, primarily because that spelling is closest to the way the name appears in the original journals. But the questions of how to spell the name and its true meaning remain a sensitive issue among historians and the people of the Shoshone and Hidatsa tribes.



these journals were men from a very different culture and none of them spoke Sacagawea's language.

Beginning in the late 1800s, writers and novelists who told the story of Sacagawea often added their own fictional details to journal accounts or invented new tales about her. One of these authors was Eva Emery Dye, who in 1902 published a novel in which she inaccurately portrayed the Shoshone woman as a princess. However, she also characterized Sacagawea as a strong, self-reliant, and capable woman who had made great contributions to the historic expedition in which she traveled. The journal writings made during the Lewis and Clark Expedition support this portrait as that of the real Sacagawea—a woman who contributed in many ways to an expedition that helped shape American history.



# INDEX

Agaidika, 19  
*See also* Shoshone (Native American tribe)

Allen, Paul, 117

Anthony, Susan B., 13–15  
*See also* women's suffrage

Arikara (Native American tribe), 37

Awatixa (Hidatsa village), 116

Barton, Benjamin Smith, **32**

Beaverhead Rock, 62

Biddle, Nicholas, 117

bier, infant, 58

Big Hole Valley, 94–95, 96

Bitterroot Mountains, 69, 74–77, 92

Blackfeet (Native American tribe), 23, 24, **97**

Bodmer, Karl, 106

Bozeman Pass, 97

buffalo, 21–23, 61–62, **63**, 73

camas (quamash), 77, 92, 96

Cameahwait (Shoshone chief), 66, 69, 70, 72–73

Camp Fortunate, 67, 69–71, 92, 96

Camp River Dubois, 34

canoes, 48, 57, 62–63, 70, 78, 80–81, 96, 97

Catlin, George, **25**, **42**

Cavelier, René-Robert (Sieur de La Salle), 26

Champlain, Samuel de, 26

Charbonneau, Jean Baptiste (“Pompy”), 50, 58, 71, 81, 87, 93, 98  
 birth of, 45–47  
 death of, 107, 108  
 education of, 99, 102, 103, 105–106

Charbonneau, Lisette, 104–105, 109

Charbonneau, Toussaint, 12, **47**, 65, 67, 71, 73, 74, 87, 93, 104–105, 110, 113  
 causes near accident, with pirogue, 53–55  
 compensation of, 102–103  
 death of, 106  
 is hired by the expedition, 41–44, 45, 48–49  
 leaves the expedition, 98  
 marries Sacagawea, 27–28  
*See also* Sacagawea

Numbers in *bold italics* refer to captions.

Chinook (Native American tribe), **80**, **81**

Clark, William, 11, 12, 16, **47**, 102  
 death of, 109  
 and expedition preparation, 33–35  
 friendship of, with Sacagawea's family, 47, 53, 93, 99, 102–103, 105, 109, 110  
 as guardian of Sacagawea's children, 105–106  
 journals of, 15, 35, 43, 49, 64, 77, 81, **83**, 84, 86, 93, 95, 97, 98–99  
 medical treatment of Sacagawea, 59  
 names river after Sacagawea, 56  
 offers to raise Pompy, 99, 102  
 scouts the Salmon River, 70–71, 73–74  
 selected by Meriwether Lewis, 33  
*See also* Lewis, Meriwether; Lewis and Clark Expedition

Clatsop (Native American tribe), 84, 85, **86**

Clearwater River, 74, 78, 91

Clinton, Bill, 117

Colter, John, **47**

Columbia River, 13, 30, 32, 70, 74, 75, 78–79, 82–83, 89–90

Comanche (Native American tribe), 21

Continental Divide, 43, 62–63, 66, 69, **72**, 94

Cooper, Alice, **11**

Corps of Discovery. *See* Lewis and Clark Expedition

Coues, Elliot, 117

Crow Indians (Native American tribe), 93

Crunelle, Leonard, **58**

Cruzatte, Pierre, 36, 55

diaries. *See* journals, expedition

Discovery (keelboat), **35**

Drouillard, George, 36, 49, 55, 62, 65, 66

Dunbar, William, **103**

Dye, Eva Emery, 17

earth lodges, **25**, 37

firearms, 21–22, 23, 66

Flathead (Native American tribe), 23

Fort Clatsop, 85, **86**, 89

Fort Mandan, 44, **45**, 50

Fort Manuel, 104, **108**

France, 26–27, 32–33

French Canadians, 26, 27, 36

Fries, Anastasia Katerina, 107



- Fries, Anton, 107  
fur trade, 26–27, 32, 49
- Gass, Patrick, 15  
journals of, 37, 40, 51, 54, 59, 65, 84, 85, 97, 117
- Gibbon's Pass, 94
- Great Falls, 57, 58, 60, 92, 96
- Haystack Rock, 87
- Hebard, Grace Raymond, 107–108
- Hidatsa (Native American tribe), 16, 23–26, 27–28, 37, 39–45, 98, 116
- horses, 20–21, 43, 63, 64, 66, 69, 71, 73, 74  
*See also* Shoshone (Native American tribe)
- Jackson, Donald, 109
- Jefferson, Thomas, 12, 28–32, 37, 46, 48, 49, 81, 84, 98, 114, 117  
and Jefferson's Message, 103  
and the Louisiana Purchase, 32–33, 34
- Jefferson River, 60, 61–62, 92, 96
- Jefferson's Message, 103  
*See also* Jefferson, Thomas
- Jessaume, René, 43, 44, 46
- journals, expedition, 15–17  
William Clark, 35, 43, 49, 64, 77, 81, 83, 84, 86, 93, 95, 97, 98–99  
Patrick Gass, 37, 40, 51, 54, 59, 65, 84, 85, 97, 117  
Meriwether Lewis, 23–24, 45–46, 52, 54–55, 61, 66, 67, 71, 73, 91, 96  
John Ordway, 44, 57, 60, 65, 75, 117  
*See also* Lewis and Clark Expedition
- keelboat, 47–48, 49
- Knife River, 24–26, 27, 39–40, 98
- Knife River Indian Villages National Historic Site, 116
- Knife River people. *See* Hidatsa and Mandan (Native American tribes)
- kouse, 96
- La Louisiane, 26  
*See also* Louisiana Territory
- La Salle, Sieur de (René-Robert Cavelier), 26
- Labiche, François, 36, 45
- Lemhi Pass, 66, 69, 71–73
- Lemhi River, 70, 74
- Lemhi River Valley, 18–19, 23



- Lemhi Shoshone. *See* Shoshone (Native American tribe)
- Lewis, Meriwether, 11, 12, 16, 47, 62, 64, 102  
death of, 109  
and expedition preparation, 34–35  
first contact of, with the Shoshone, 66  
journals of, 15, 23–24, 45–46, 52, 54–55, 61, 66, 67, 71, 73, 91, 96  
medical treatment of Sacagawea, 59  
names river after Sacagawea, 56  
selected by Thomas Jefferson, 29, 32  
*See also* Clark, William; Lewis and Clark Expedition
- Lewis and Clark Expedition, 11–12  
through the Bitterroot Mountains, 75–78  
at Camp Fortunate, 67, 69–72  
and canoes, 48, 57, 62–63, 70, 78, 80–81, 96, 97  
on the Columbia River, 78–85  
conclusion of the, 102–103  
and decision-making votes, 13
- Exposition (Portland, Oregon), 11, 12–15  
at Fort Clatsop, 85, 86, 89  
interactions of, with Native American tribes, 36–37, 39–40, 81, 90–92, 97, 114–116  
and keelboat, 47–48, 49  
leave the Knife River villages, 47–50  
through the Lemhi Valley, 70–74  
maps, 38, 68, 76, 88, 100–101, 115  
members of the, 49, 109  
mission of the, 12, 29–32, 33, 46, 70  
reaches the Pacific, 82–87  
and pirogues, 34–35, 53–55  
preparation for the, 33–35  
published journals, 79, 80, 89, 117  
return journey, 89–99  
Sacagawea's contributions to, 110–114  
searches for the Shoshone, 61–67  
seeks Missouri River head waters, 51–60  
specimens gathered by the, 48, 49, 112



- at Traveler's Rest, 75, 92–93
- winters with the Mandan and Hidatsa, 40–45
- See also* Clark, William; journals, expedition; Lewis, Meriwether; Sacagawea
- Lewis and Clark Exposition (Portland, Oregon), 11, 12–15
- See also* Lewis and Clark Expedition
- Lewis's River. *See* Snake River
- Louis XIV (King), 26
- See also* France
- Louisiana Territory, 30, 32–33, 34, 103, 109
- Luttig, John, 104–105, 107, 109
- Mandan (Native American tribe), 25–26, 27, 37, 39–45, 98
- maps, 115
- from Camp Fortunate to Canoe Camp, 76
- from Canoe Camp to the Pacific, 88
- from Knife River Villages to Camp Fortunate, 68
- return journey, 100–101
- from St. Louis to Knife River Villages, 38
- Marias River, 57, 92, 97
- Mathisen, Pat, 58
- McNeal, Hugh, 62
- Metaharta (Hidatsa village), 28
- Mississippi River, 26–27, 29, 32, 34
- Missouri Fur Company, 103–104
- Missouri (Native American tribe), 36
- Missouri River, 25–26, 30, 32–33, 34–35, 41, 56, 75, 91, 92–93, 98
  - dangers of the, 54
  - exploration of the, by Lewis and Clark, 51–60
  - and the fur trade, 27
- Montana Salish. *See* Salish (Native American tribe)
- Mossett, Amy, 117
- Musselshell River, 56
- Napoleon, 33
- See also* France
- Native American tribes
  - Arikara, 37
  - Blackfeet, 23, 24, 97
  - Chinook, 80, 81
  - Clatsop, 84, 85, 86
  - Comanche, 21
  - Crow Indians, 93
  - Flathead, 23
  - Hidatsa, 16, 23–26, 27–28, 37, 39–45, 98, 116
  - Mandan, 25–26, 27, 37,



- 39–45, 98
- Missouri, 36
- Nez Perce, 23, 75, 77–78, 91–92, 115
- Otos, 36
- Salish, 22, 74, 94, 115
- Shoshone, 16, 18–23, 25, 41, 43, 46, 63, 65–67, 69, 71–73, 93, 98, 113–114
- Sioux, 24, 36–37, 39, 98
- Tillamook, 89
- Walla Walla, 90–91, 115
- New Orleans, 27
- Nez Perce (Native American tribe), 23, 75, 77–78, 91–92, 115
- Northwest Passage, 30, 32
- See also* Lewis and Clark Expedition
- “Old Toby” (guide), 71, 74–75, 77
- Ordway, John, 15, 92, 95, 96
- journals of, 44, 57, 60, 65, 75, 117
- Otos (Native American tribe), 36
- Pacific Ocean, 86–87, 89
- Paxson, Edgar S., 47
- peace medals, 37
- “peace pipe,” 71
- Peale, Charles Willson, 57
- pirogues, 34–35, 53–55
- Pompeys Piller (Pompy's Tower), 97–98, 99
- “Pompy.” *See* Charbonneau, Jean Baptiste (“Pompy”)
- Pompy's Tower (Pompeys Piller), 97–98, 99
- Remington, Frederic, 90
- Rocky Mountains, 69, 91
- Rush, Benjamin, 57
- Russell, Charles M., 52, 67, 80
- Sacagawea, 47, 49, 81, 82–83, 85
  - capture of, by the Hidatsa, 23–25
  - contributions of, 110–114
  - controversy surrounding death of, 107–109
  - courage of, 55
  - daughter, Lisette, 104–105, 109
  - death of, 104, 105
  - dollar coin, 116, 117
  - family of, 69
  - as guide, 59, 61–62, 65, 71–73, 95–97
  - historical legacy of, 11–12, 114–117
  - illness of, 57, 59
  - as interpreter, 45, 46, 51, 74, 91, 93
  - leaves the expedition, 98
  - marriage of, to Toussaint Charbonneau, 27–28



and medicinal and food knowledge, 51–53  
 meets the expedition members, 43–44  
 physical description of, 44  
 reunion of, with the Shoshone tribe, 65, 67, 69  
 river named after, 56  
 sees the Pacific, 86–87, 89  
 son, Jean Baptiste (Pompy), 45–47, 50, 58, 71, 81, 87, 93, 98, 99, 102, 103, 105–107, 108  
 spelling variations of name, 15–16  
 stereotyping of, 14–15, 17  
 and women's suffrage, 12–15  
*See also* Charbonneau, Toussaint; Lewis and Clark Expedition  
 Sacagawea River, 56  
 Sacajawea. *See* Sacagawea  
*Sacajawea: Guide and Interpreter of Lewis and Clark* (Hebard), 107  
 Sacajawea Interpretive, Cultural, and Educational Center, 116  
 Sakakawea. *See* Sacagawea  
 Sakakawea Site, 116  
 Salish (Native American tribe), 22, 74, 94, 115  
 salmon, 18–19, 61, 74  
 Salmon River, 70–71, 73–74  
 Sheheke (Mandan chief), 98, 102  
 Shields, John, 62, 94  
 Shoshone (Native American tribe), 16, 41, 46, 93, 98, 113–114  
 as buffalo hunters, 21–23, 61–62, 63, 73  
 conflicts with other tribes, 21–24  
 and horses, 20–21, 43, 63, 64, 66, 69, 71, 73, 74  
 meeting of, with the expedition, 65–67, 69, 71–73  
 and oral tradition, 18  
 region of the, 18–19  
 way of life, 19–23, 25  
 Sibley, John, 103  
 Sioux (Native American tribe), 24, 36–37, 39, 98  
 slavery, 13  
 Snake Indians. *See* Shoshone (Native American tribe)  
 Snake River, 78–79, 90  
 Spanish mustangs. *See* horses  
 St. Louis, 27, 38, 39, 47, 49, 99, 102–103, 104  
 Teton Sioux. *See* Sioux



(Native American tribe)  
 Three Forks of the Missouri, 23, 60, 96–97  
*See also* Missouri River  
 Tillamook Head, 87  
 Tillamook (Native American tribe), 89  
 “Toby” (guide), 71, 74–75, 77  
 trade, 26–27, 32, 49, 84  
 Traveler's Rest, 75, 92–93  
 Twisted Hair (Nez Perce chief), 78  
 Ute (Native American tribe), 21  
 voting rights. *See* women's suffrage  
 Walla Walla (Native American tribe), 90–91, 115  
 wapato, 83  
 Watkuweis, 78  
 Whitehouse, Joseph, 15, 112  
 Wied-Neuwied, Max von, 106  
 wild hyacinth (camas), 77, 92, 96  
 Wilhelm, Paul, 106  
 Willamette River, 13  
 women's suffrage, 12–15  
 Wyeth, N.C., 95  
 Yellepit (Walla Walla chief), 90  
 Yellowstone River, 92–93, 95, 96  
 York (African American slave), 13, 47, 49