

Anticipatory Slides

Black Explorers in Oregon





Marcus Lopeus

Marcus Lopeus was a free Black teenager from Cabo Verde, a Portuguese island chain off the coast of West Africa.

In 1787 he joined the crew of Lady Washington, a sloop from Boston captained by Robert Gray, when it docked in Cabo Verde before its long journey to the Pacific Northwest. Lopeus became the cabin boy.

In 1788, Lady Washington made landfall in what is today Garibaldi, OR. This made it the first American ship on the west coast. The crew traded with the local tribe, but misunderstandings about trade led to a fight, during which Lopeus was killed.



York

York was William Clark's enslaved personal servant. In 1804, Meriwether Lewis recruited Clark to co-lead an expedition to the Columbia River from Missouri, and Clark brought York with him. York was one of just 33 people to travel from the Missouri River to the Pacific Ocean and back.

York was the only Black member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. He provided general labor (carrying supplies, cutting wood, hunting and cooking, etc.) but he also traded with the tribes and cared for the dying Sergeant Floyd. The journey offered York the rare chance to use a gun and to vote on where the group made their winter quarters in 1805.

After the expedition York was brought back to the US where he remained enslaved. Clark is said to have freed York at some point, but writing confirm York was enslaved until at least 1815, and Clark was physically abusive. York's place and date of death are unknown.



Moses "Black" Harris

Moses Harris was from Kentucky or South Carolina. In the 1820s, he was living in Missouri where he began working in the fur trade. His long trips in search of beaver allowed him to travel extensively through the sparsely-populated west.

When the Beaver market collapsed, Harris and many other fur traders became guides for the first wagon trains headed to Oregon. The routes Harris and early fur traders had once used to reach the Columbia River and Fort Vancouver became the Oregon Trail.

Harris made the trip across North America at least three times. In 1845, Harris was sent to rescue Stephen Meek's party which had gotten lost. That same year, he joined Jesse Applegate to find a new route to Oregon via California, which is known as the Applegate trail.



Jacob Dodson

Jacob Dodson was born free in Washington, DC in 1825. His family worked in the home of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton. In 1843, Dodson joined his employer's son in law, John C. Fremont, and Fremont's friend Kit Carson, on a journey to explore the west.

The group traveled from Missouri to Fort Vancouver on a path that would later become the Oregon Trail. They then moved South across all of Oregon and into California before returning to the United States across the southwest. In doing so, Dodson became the first Black person to reach California by land, and the first Black person to set foot in what is today Nevada.

Dodson joined Fremont again in 1845-1846 on a trip to California. After returning to DC in 1848, Dodson worked as a message courier for the US Congress.



James Beckwourth

James, or “Jim” Beckwourth was born in Virginia around 1800. His mother was enslaved and his father was her white owner. In 1809 his father/enslaver moved to Missouri and brought James along. James was freed around 1825.

Missouri was the center of the American fur trade. James joined the Rocky Mountain Fur Company and explored the west in search of beaver. He became well known to the western tribes and lived with the Crow peoples for most of the 1825 and 1830s.

Beckwourth spent the 1840s and 1850s all across the west, working as a trader in the southwest and a gold seeker in California. He reported a mountain pass in California which is today known as the Beckwourth Pass.

It is unknown if he ever went to Oregon, but many of Oregon’s pioneers and wagon drivers knew Beckwourth.