

THE

TRIBUNE

York: Opening the West, Breaking Bonds of Slavery

By Mary T. Miller

York, the first African American to cross what is now known as the United States of America, was in Charlottesville on Friday and Saturday for the 4th annual Lewis and Clark Festival.

A free man in his later life, York was the slave of William Clark, one of the two leaders of the Lewis and Clark expedition ordered by Thomas Jefferson to explore the great West. York's late morning performance on Saturday in Charlottesville's Robert E. Lee Park was a powerful and moving portrayal of the journey he and his fellow travelers began in 1803 and the journey that he, born a slave, made to freedom. Both journeys were fraught with pain and peril. While the expedition was made by a small group of men and one Indian woman, York's journey to freedom was painful and isolated.

Before shrugging on his jacket and picking up his staff, Hasan Davis, who becomes York, spoke about the great disquiet he felt performing in Robert E. Lee Park, in the shadow of that general on his horse. Hasan Davis says, "it may have been 150 years since the Civil War but it is not right to celebrate York in such a place." Davis believes that parks such as Lee Park are memorials to times past and to people who should not be celebrated. He believes that the continued existence of such memorials does not allow difficult times and raw feelings to rest.

Once in full performance attire, York spoke to a packed open-air tent crowd of area citizens interested in learning the accomplishments of the expedition and his account of the journey. In a resonant voice, quiet at times yet forceful throughout, York commanded the attention of all as he relayed his excitement about the completion of the expedition. He explained that he was a slave and that is why he had only one name, that name from his father, YORK. He told of his adventures with a bear, saying that perhaps we had already heard about this, or read about this in our schools. He made us feel his fear of the bear and we could hear the shots he made that didn't stop the bear from advancing. We could experience his relief when a couple of the Sergeants were sent to assist him and they took that bear down with their guns. He spoke in awe of the mountains that he "pushed hard against until they finally gave way to the other side." He told of his first sighting of the Pacific Ocean. An ocean he believed no black man had seen before.

In gentle asides he shared the humor of situations arising from his color and reluctantly described conditions of slavery that perhaps we did not know. Many Native Americans they encountered felt that, because he was black, he was God-like; and they treated him very respectfully. He told us he liked that idea very much. He spoke of the Indian woman, Sacagawea, who had been taken from her family but who found her brother on the journey. He spoke with joy in his eyes and from his heart when witnessing that family reunited. This, he said, was so unusual in his world where slave families were often torn apart, never to find each other again.

York made us feel the triumph of the journey and his sense of inclusion in all the successes along the trail. We also experienced his incredible pain when, upon completion of the expedition, he was expected to return to his status of a slave even while all the other survivors of the expedition were praised by Jefferson and honored. He told us his name was never uttered in glory, as were all the rest, upon return. York was not given honor, or coin, or freedom for his bravery on the journey or for his protection of his master. Clark took his family from him and beat him and imprisoned him for York's demands to be freed. York persevered and survived. He finally was freed.

His time after the expedition was painful to hear. His sorrow at the loss of his family was overwhelming. His isolation from the slaves he left behind once free and his isolation from the white businessmen he tried to compete with in his trade left him feeling not whole, despite his continued dreams of all he had seen and done with Lewis and Clark. He decided to travel back to the west. As he ended his story, York asked that each of us who shared in his retelling of the journey to remember him and tell the story to others so that no one will forget the pain of slavery or the accomplishments of a man called York. He looked us in the eye and asked us to understand and remember.

Darsetta Sapp, who attended the performance with her young friend Brionna White and Brionna's grandfather, Edward White, concluded: "It was a good performance, very emotional. It brought back lots of memories of stories told in my family. Hearing him talk about the dual messages York heard is reminiscent of mixed messages African American still hear."

At the conclusion of the performance, Davis was asked what happened to York in his later years. Speaking for York, Davis reported that, while it is not totally clear, he longs to believe in reports told years later in which Indians described a tribe whose chief was an old black man. He hopes that York ended his days as a God-like leader near the mountains and the ocean that he had tamed in his youth.



Hasan Davis as York, performing at Lee Park



In the front row were (from left) Brionna White, her grandfather Edward White, and Darsetta Sapp.