

York: Too Long Ignored

Law student's black history discovery

BY CARI HACHMANN
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It was the summer of 2004, third-year Lewis & Clark College law student Charles Neal was reading an American history book when he stumbled across a passage that enlightened him to the existence of a black slave named York.

A slave to William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition, Corps of Discovery, York was the first documented black man to explore the Willamette River and visit the future site of Portland, Ore.

Neal was surprised to learn that one, as a grad student he was just now learning about this man who was so instrumental to the success of the expedition, and two, that on a campus bearing the names of the famed pioneers, he could find no recognition of York.

Neal set about changing that. After sharing his sentiments with a friend and fellow law student Matthew Abosedra, and paying a visit to the campus archivist, the two appealed their idea—to install a memorial of York on campus—to then college president



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEFF JAHN

York: Terra Incognita, a statute on the Lewis & Clark College campus representing the person named York, a slave to William Clark of the Lewis and Clark Corps of Discovery expedition. York was the first documented black man to explore the Willamette River and visit the future site of Portland.

Dr. Thomas Hochstettler.

“Speaking to the degree of our persistence, it became pretty clear that saying no was not going to be a viable option for them,” said Neal. Hochstettler, along with other administration, embraced the idea and promised to give the project proper attention.

A committee was formed, funds were raised, an artist commissioned and three years later, York: Terra Incognita was installed on the Lewis & Clark campus as a permanent memorial of York, too long ignored by history.

Dedicated in the spring of 2010, the six-foot tall statue mounted in bronze stands between the college’s Watzek Library and the Manor House.

“I am very happy and thankful to Lewis and Clark College for supporting this and putting in their resources to get it done,” said Neal, reflecting on the project. Today, Neal works as an Energy and Environmental Sustainability Manager for a community college district in the Bay area, California.

Because no photographs or paintings of York exist (back then, it was rare for a whites to have their black slaves rendered) the sculptor who installed the statue, Los Angeles artist Alison Saar, decided to construct a less realistic and more symbolic portrait of York.

With neither the physique nor facial features of the sculpture claiming to represent how he looked, Saar made York’s back and

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