John Colter (ca. 1775-1813)

John Colter was a member of the Corps of Discovery, commanded by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. He was among the majority of the party that, while huddled at stormy Station Camp on the north bank of the Columbia in late 1805, voted for crossing the Columbia to winter on the Oregon side rather than return to drier country upstream.

Born and raised in the Shenandoah Valley, apparently near Staunton, Colter was among several Virginians whom Lewis selected as the Corps' boatmen in late 1803. He filled several roles for the expedition. During the ascent of the Missouri, he was one of the expedition's main hunters. By August–September 1805, due to his self-reliance and dependability, Lewis and Clark regularly dispatched Colter as a courier between their separate parties as they struggled over the rugged Lolo Trail in the Northern Rockies. They also entrusted to him such independent tasks as finding lost horses and recovering mislaid critical supplies. During this period, Lewis and Clark named Colter Creek in his honor (now Potlatch River in Nez Perce County, Idaho).

While the rest of the expedition camped in relative dryness at Fort Clatsop, Colter and several other men spent much of the rainy Oregon winter of 1805-1806 about twenty miles distant (at present-day Seaside, in Clatsop County), boiling gallons of seawater to produce sufficient salt for curing elk meat. Later that winter, Colter was one of the hunters who kept Fort Clatsop well supplied with elk. He was also among the small group that on January 8, 1806, accompanied Captain Clark south from the salt camp to see "that monstrous fish," a whale, that had washed up near present-day Cannon Beach. It was the farthest southern point in Oregon that the expedition would travel.

During the 1806 return trip down the Missouri, Colter obtained Captain Lewis's permission to leave the expedition and join two free (independent) trappers on what would be the farthest-west foray that American trappers had yet ventured, into the Yellowstone River country. Between 1806 and 1810, while he helped Manuel Lisa initiate the St. Louis-based fur trade of the Northern Rocky Mountains, Colter earned enduring fame as one of the first American mountain men. He explored much of present-day northwestern Wyoming and central Montana, sometimes literally dodging the arrows of Blackfeet Indians.

In 1810, after narrowly escaping death once again, Colter declared he would "leave this country day after tomorrow—and damned if I ever come to it again." Finally returning to St. Louis over six years after departing from its waterfront with Lewis and Clark, Colter spent his remaining years (as a neighbor of Daniel Boone) farming on the Missouri River frontier.

Written by Jeff LaLande

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