

## Sacagawea



*Figure 1: Sacagawea was depicted on a United States postage stamp in 1994.*

(1788?–1812?). A teenager named Sacagawea served as an interpreter for the Lewis and Clark Expedition to the western United States. She was a Lemhi Shoshone Indian. She traveled thousands of miles through the wilderness with the explorers, from the Dakotas to the Pacific Ocean and back again. Many memorials have been raised in her honor, in part for the fortitude with which she faced hardship on the difficult journey.

Separating fact from legend in Sacagawea’s life is difficult. Historians disagree on the dates of her birth and death and even on her name. One version of her name, Sacagawea, means “Bird Woman” in the Hidatsa language.

Alternatively, her name is sometimes spelled Sacajawea or Sakakawea. She is thought to have been born in about 1788, near the Continental Divide at what is now the Idaho–Montana border. In about 1800, when she was about 12 years old, a raiding party of Hidatsa Indians captured her near the headwaters of the Missouri River. The Hidatsa made her a slave and took her to the Mandan–Hidatsa villages near what is now Bismarck, N.D. In about 1804 she became one of the wives of the French Canadian fur trader Toussaint Charbonneau. (Sacagawea may have been sold to him.)

The explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived at the Mandan–Hidatsa villages and built a fort there in which to spend the winter. They hired Charbonneau as an interpreter to help them speak with the various Indian peoples they would encounter on their expedition. However, he did not speak Shoshone. The expedition would need to communicate with the Shoshone to acquire horses to use to cross the mountains. For this reason, the explorers agreed that the pregnant Sacagawea should also accompany them. On Feb. 11, 1805, she gave birth to a son, Jean Baptiste.

Sacagawea took her infant along on the expedition, which set off on April 7 on the Missouri River. On May 14 Charbonneau nearly capsized the dugout boat in which Sacagawea was riding. Remaining calm, she retrieved important papers, instruments, medicine, and other valuables that otherwise would have been lost. Sacagawea also proved to be a significant asset in other ways, such as in searching for edible plants and in making moccasins and clothing. She also helped allay the suspicions of approaching Indian tribes through her presence—a woman and child accompanying a party of men indicated peaceful intentions.

By mid-August the expedition encountered a band of Shoshone. Their leader was Sacagawea's brother Cameahwait. The reunion of Sacagawea and her brother helped Lewis and Clark obtain the horses and guide that enabled them to cross the Rocky Mountains.

Sacagawea was not the guide for the expedition, as some have wrongly portrayed her. She did, however, recognize landmarks in southwestern Montana. She also informed Clark that Bozeman Pass was the best route between the Missouri and Yellowstone rivers on their return journey. Sacagawea and her family left the expedition when they arrived back at the Mandan-Hidatsa villages.

It is believed that Sacagawea died shortly after giving birth to a daughter, Lisette, on Dec. 20, 1812, at Fort Manuel, near what is now Mobridge, S.D. Clark became the legal guardian of her two children.



In the years since her death, Sacagawea has become a legend, the subject of many books and movies. She has also been honored with monuments, statues, U.S. postage stamps, and a U.S. dollar coin. In 2001 she was given the title of honorary sergeant in the regular U.S. army.

**Citation (APA)**

Sacagawea. (2021). In *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Retrieved from <https://school.eb.com/levels/middle/article/Sacagawea/276830>