

Ako Mic Mi (Feathers) – Blackfoot Mapmaker 1801

Fast Facts

Curriculum Area: Social Studies
Grade Level: High School
Suggested Duration: Two 50-minute class periods

Stage 1 Desired Results

Montana Content Standards

SS.G.9-12.3 Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between the locations of places and regions and their political, cultural, and economic dynamics.

SS.G.9-12.5 Evaluate the impact of human settlement activities on the environmental, political, and cultural characteristics of specific places and regions.

SS.H.9-12.4 Analyze multiple, and complex causal factors that have shaped major events in US and world history, including American Indian history.

SS.H.9-12.10 Analyze perspectives of American Indians in US history.

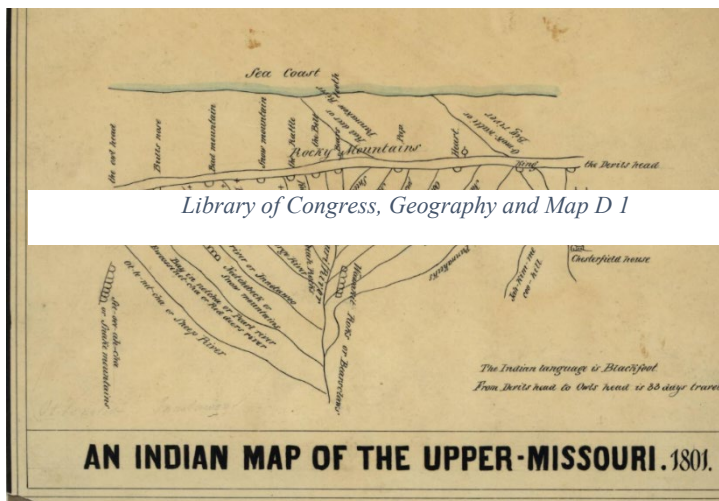
SS.H.9-12.11 Evaluate the limitations, biases, and credibility of various sources, especially regarding misinformation and stereotypes.

Understandings

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised.
- History told from American Indian perspectives frequently conflicts with the stories mainstream historians tell. (EU 6)

Essential Questions

- Why is it important to examine historical events from multiple perspectives?
- Who was Ako Mic Mi, and what is his connection to early Euro-American explorers and the Lewis and Clark Expedition?
- To what extent do our US history textbooks provide authentic Montana Native American perspectives regarding westward expansion?



Students will be able to...

- identify and analyze key concepts and ideas expressed in an article about the Blackfoot man named Feathers and his map from 1801.
- evaluate references for bias, specifically errors of omission, about Montana American Indians in history textbooks that pertain to the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Students will know...

- about the Blackfoot man Ako Mic Mi and the detailed map he created in 1801.
- that Montana American Indians played an important role in helping Euro-American explorers understand important geographical features such as rivers, valleys, and mountain ranges in addition to sharing knowledge of various tribal nations in the region.
- How to conduct a close analytical reading of primary and secondary resources regarding multiple viewpoints regarding events and issues associated with colonization and biased information put forth about American Indians.

Stage 2 Assessment Evidence

Performance Tasks

1. Participate in class discussion and read and analyze an article about the Blackfoot man Ako Mic Mi and the historic map he created in 1801.
2. Review Key Concepts from the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*.
3. Evaluate and analyze their own textbook for information about Montana American Indians and their interactions with the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

Stage 3 Learning Plan

Learning Activities

Briefly introduce students to the topic of westward expansion and the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Ask them what they already know about the expedition and facilitate a brief class discussion.

Did any students bring up American Indian perspectives besides the contributions of Sacagawea?

Brainstorm a list of potential American Indian topics/events that may be interpreted from multiple viewpoints. Examples include Columbus and "discovery," the roles of American Indians in the early colonial times, Pocahontas, influences American Indians had on early colonial thinking, westward movement, and Lewis and Clark.

Discuss the list with the class and then share the following guidelines and Key Concepts with them before handing out the article.

Things to keep in mind as you study about a particular event in history:

- With regard to events such as Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery, Montana tribal histories offer differing points of view from those expressed in your American history textbook.
- Your history textbook and a specific tribal history each represent "point of view;" the point of view changes depending on whose story is being told.

- Identifying and respecting another culture’s viewpoints of historical events is basic to our understanding of how histories can influence our ideas and points of view.
- The “discovery” of an area is not necessarily a discovery. Indigenous people had been in the area explored for hundreds, and more likely thousands of years.

KEY CONCEPTS from the *Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*

- History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller.
- Much of America’s history has been told from the Euro-American perspective. Only recently have American Indians begun to write about and retell history from an indigenous perspective.
- A huge amount of political capital is involved in the telling of history.
- History is a primary vehicle through which power is distributed and used; thus, the whole notion of political identity and ideology and who the United States is as a nation plays into how the story is told, and who has been privileged to tell the story.
- It is critical that history curricula include the stories and experiences of individual men and women of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious groups.
- Providing students with textbooks, primary source documents, and surviving oral traditions allows them to gain a more objective view of history and provides them with a historical context in which to situate and understand the experiences and perspectives of these groups in American society today.
- By giving students the opportunity to view our past through the eyes of many, they can begin to create their own view of our collective history, understand the present, and become better prepared to engage the problems of the future.

Facilitate a class discussion about the information shared from your lecture and ask students to complete a 3 - 2 - 1 prompt to summarize their understandings: Write down three things that caught your attention, two questions you have about information, and one thing you learned about American Indian perspectives.

Tell students they will be reading an article from the *Distinctly Montana* magazine written by Dr. Shane Doyle (Crow educator). The article is about a relatively unknown story of a Blackfoot man – Ako Mic Mi and the map he created in 1801 that eventually made its way into the hands of the Lewis and Clark expedition.

Next, distribute copies of the article to all students and have them read in class or as a homework assignment.

Ask students to write up a one-page reaction paper to the article. Did they learn anything new? Did this conflict with what they have been previously taught? Do these perspectives differ from what is in their history textbook?

Lead a class discussion on the major issues covered in the article.

List on the board new information gained as a result of reading this article.

After the whole class discusses the article, allow students time to add to or revise their one-page reaction papers.

Evaluation Activity

Have students work in small groups to look at all the references regarding Lewis and Clark and American Indians contained in their history textbook. Ask them to pay particular attention to issues of bias and errors of omission. Have them examine the terminology in the textbook. Groups could report their research results to the rest of the class. If examples of bias or misinformation are found, have them write the textbook publisher asking them to consider rewriting the section.

Provide them with time to conduct their research. Suggested assignments for checking understanding include short research paper, poster presentation, participation in an on-line discussion forum, and multimedia presentation formats such as a video or podcast.

Resources Needed

The lesson plan from the North Dakota Department of Education has an [interactive map of Louisiana](#) where you can zoom in for a clearer picture. The lesson also includes a summary of Native American Indians and their extensive understanding of their geography.

For a deeper dive into this topic check out this detailed lesson plan created for the [Honoring Tribal Legacies Project](#) by Dr. Shane Doyle.

[*Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians*](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2024.

[*Essential Understandings Key Concepts*](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2019.

[*Evaluating American Indian Materials and Resources for the Classroom*](#). Helena, MT: Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015.

[An Indian map of the Upper-Missouri, 1801](#). Maintained by the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Louisiana, accessed March 1, 2024.

Brilliance and Beauty – Celebrating the Gift of a Blackfoot Map

By Dr. Shane Doyle

Article used with permission – Distinctly Montana (Fall 2023)

In February of 1801, a Blackfoot Chief named Ako Mic Mi, translated as Feathers, traveled on horseback to the confluence of the Red Deer and Saskatchewan Rivers in present-day Canada to visit the first trading post ever established on the Northern Plains. Having heard that a new arrival sought detailed information about the local area, Ako Mic Mi (sometimes spelled Ac ko mok ki) came to the Chesterfield House that day to share with Hudson Bay surveyor Peter Fidler what Indigenous people had been trading there since time immemorial—relevant and topical knowledge of the world. Because his knowledge came from an oral tradition and he had no handheld map to give to Peter, Feathers instead drew a balanced and centered diagram of lines on the ground and then communicated the details to Fidler using the spoken Blackfoot language and Plains Sign. Fidler copied the lines of the diagram into his journal and then added demographic and geographic footnotes related to him through Feathers’s oral communication.

The final copy of Feathers’s map describes a landscape of over 200,000 square miles and stands out as being the most expansive oral account of a geographic region ever recorded on the continent. Stretching from Oregon to North Dakota, and from Alberta to central Wyoming, the map identifies 14 major tributaries of the Missouri River, from the Milk River in the north to the Bighorn River in the south, and includes the location of prominent island mountain ranges interspersed between the rivers. Also listed in the notes is the estimated number of nights travel between each river, which provides the more specific information needed to make the map relevant for exploration. He estimated that traveling the distance on horse from the Milk River to the Bighorn would take approximately 30 nights, or one moon.

Just as impressive as its scale was the map’s utilitarian design. Its tidy and simple structure provided a reliable context for navigation, and the other descriptive details allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the actual terrain and culture of the region. Feathers’s map emphasized the concept of the Continental Divide by drawing two parallel lines that separate the map from top to bottom, showing the Missouri and its tributaries on one side and the Snake and Columbia Rivers on the other. Then, after marking the lay of the land, Ako Mic Mi filled in the ethnographic details by naming 32 different Tribal communities positioned along the rivers, the number of lodges in each village, and the name of the head chief in each tribe.

Ako Mic Mi’s knowledge and ability to recall it was built upon a sophisticated network of communication that was hundreds of generations in the making. Long before Montana became a state and its modern borders were drawn, Native people recognized the place as a central and pivotal zone unto itself, where the rivers of the earth started and flowed in opposite directions. The state’s broad and diverse landscapes contain vibrant ecosystems that made it a bastion for the Plains Indian way of life. Over the course of the past 13,000 years, the archaeological record shows an ebb and flow of people over time, but the last 2,000 years brought dozens of diverse Tribal nations here, and many stayed and continue to maintain their presence on their homelands.

Prior to when colonial forces began to dramatically shift the populations of people and wildlife in the 19th century, Montana’s Indigenous communities represented a hinterland for some of the largest language families in North America. To the north, the Blackfeet and Cree speak an Algonquin dialect

that comes from the Great Lakes. In the east, the Apsáalooke and Lakota have Siouan languages from the Mississippi Valley. Down south, the Shoshone speak a form of Uto-Aztecan, which is centered in Mesoamerica. Out west of the divide, the Bitterroot Salish trace their dialect to the Columbia River and Pacific Coast. Remarkably, the Kootenai language is the only tongue isolated to Montana, although Native people understand their relationships to their homelands as being one of continuity and reciprocity since time immemorial. Montana's ancient character as a blessed but at times hostile land has always kept civilization at bay, and that holds true into the 21st century, with the winter of 2022-23 setting records for cold and snow and even wild animals perishing in large numbers. Mesoamerican farming and agricultural traditions that swept across North America never took root in Montana because Native people recognized that Montana is not a place that can be tamed or cajoled; rather it must be embraced and accepted. Ancestors of today's Apsáalooke nation had successfully grown corn, beans and squash for a short time along the far eastern portion of the Yellowstone River near present-day Glendive. However, the site was abandoned about 500 years ago as the Apsáalooke people moved further east toward the headwaters of the Yellowstone River and became full-time hunter-gatherer-traders. Their collective experience and the wisdom they took from the land is reflected in an old Tribal placename near present-day Springdale—Where the Corn Died.

Along with the extreme climate, Montana's topography is also distinct from other zones on the Great Plains because its Continental Divide area is diffuse and accessible, making it a thoroughfare for Native peoples both east and west of the divide who ventured across culture zones to hunt, gather and trade. The snowcapped Rocky Mountains connect directly eastward onto a sweeping prairie that is interspersed with clear, cold rivers and bursting with island mountain ranges. These magical and mysterious mountains dot the open plains and harbor essential lodgepole pine trees as well as diverse edible and medicinal plants, fresh water, chert rock quarries, winter campgrounds, ceremonial areas, and rendezvous sites. All these blessed resources are not available on the eastern plains of Colorado, Kansas, or Nebraska. North and South Dakota, Canada and Wyoming all fall short of the dynamic place we know of as Montana. The Apsáalooke chief Sore Belly expressed a similar sentiment when he was quoted in the 1830s: "The Crow Country is in exactly the right place. Any direction you go from here is worse. In the north the winters are long and cold. In the south it is too hot and not much water. To the west there are no buffalo and all the people eat fish and pick bones from their teeth. Far to the east the water is warm and muddy, and our dogs won't drink it. Here in the Crow Country, we have the best of everything. High mountains with snowy peaks, cold clear water, good grasslands with many buffalo, elk and deer, and lots of good wintering sites. The Creator put the Crow Country in the exact right spot."

Since time immemorial, the tribes of Montana lived a sustainable way of life based on hunting, gathering and trading with each other throughout a seasonal cycle of movement. Feathers's map from February of 1801 showed the location of the tribes' wintering campsites, but all those Tribal communities would move from those locations along the rivers during the springtime when flooding, mosquitoes and grizzly bears gave people good reasons to move to higher ground and to nearby rendezvous sites to harvest plants and trade with their neighbors. This ancient lifestyle of Tribal communities walking seasonal rounds existed for millennia before horses, and created a culture of consistent and beneficial interaction that allowed Native people to share ceremonies, music and dance traditions, hunting and gathering strategies, ancient star stories, and a myriad of other cultural innovations. This age-old cosmopolitan interaction eventually spawned one of the world's great languages, Plains Sign Language. The world's only non-colonial lingua franca, Plains Sign Language connected the communication network that provided Feathers with the extensive knowledge he had in

1801, but this subtle and profound form of communication was virtually invisible to non-Indians who did not speak it.

Peter Fidler sent his drawing of Feathers's map to London in 1801 so that it could be incorporated into the most up-to-date map of the American continent at the time, but because cartographers of the day had no way to include the demographic information and were likely confused by the map's lack of cardinal directions, most of the major concepts were lost in translation. An updated map was completed in 1802 and sent back to America just in time to make it into the hands of Thomas Jefferson, who passed it along to Meriwether Lewis and Willam Clark in 1804.