

An Assessment of the Valuable Contributions and Abilities of African Americans Associated with the North American Fur Trade in the Trans-Mississippi West and Great Lakes Region from 1720-1840.

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The goal of this paper will be to contend the reason African American fur traders were often included in fur trading parties was due to their linguistic abilities and cultural influence with Native American populations. This can especially be seen in the Trans-Mississippi West and Great Lakes region of North America from 1720-1840. Research methods include but are not limited to primary/secondary sources, letters, maps, journal, and diaries. The findings will show specific examples of African American contributions to fur trading parties via individual case studies.

Keywords:

African American, Black, Negro, Slave, Native American, Great Lake Region, Trans Mississippi West, Fur Trade, Bilingual, Language Fluency

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The history of African Americans in the North American fur trade has, at best, been unevenly reported by historians.¹ Often when African Americans are mentioned in the fur trade their last names are frequently absent, such as York from the Lewis and Clark expedition.² Also it is not uncommon for there to be a casual mention of a Negro, slave, or black person without knowing exactly whom the author is referring to, leaving other historians to make speculations about the true identity of the person in question.³ Furthermore there is an unequal presence of their specific contributions to the fur trade and how their individual skills helped enhance the goals of their respective fur trading parties. Even Hiram Chittenden, a fur trading expert, does not elaborate on the influence

¹ Quintard Taylor, "African American Men in the American West, 1528-1990." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569, The African American Male in American Life and Thought (2000), 105.

² Arwin D. Smallwood, "A History of Native American and African Relations from 1502 to 1900." *Negro History Bulletin*, 1999, 8.

³ "Black History in Wisconsin." Wisconsin Historical Society.
<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org>

that African Americans had on the industry.⁴ As early as 1934, a historian warned,

"Any picture of the racial aspects of the fur trade of that period which omits the Negro is so incomplete as to give a false impression, for representatives of that race were to be found in all three groups connected with the trade."⁵

Yet the truth is that African Americans were not just involved in the fur trade; their linguistic facility and social ease among Native American tribes made them a necessity to some fur trading expeditions. They were able to positively interact with the Native Americans in such a way that their Caucasian counterparts could not, thus making their presence vital.⁶

The analysis of six moderately documented fur trading African Americans, first identified by respected historian Kenneth W. Porter, will provide the introductory framework for a renewed perspective. I will examine the existing works on African Americans involved with the North American fur trade, both in the Trans-Mississippi West and the Great Lakes region from 1720-1840. These men include Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, York, George Bonga, Edward Rose,

⁴ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1: 1892: 1 (New York, 1902), 2.

⁵ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934, 423.

⁶ Dixie Ray Haggard, *African Americans in the Nineteenth Century: People and Perspectives*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO), 2010, 152.

James P. Beckworth, and John Brazeau.⁷ An analysis of historical, cultural, and linguistic sources will support the argument regarding both linguistic abilities and substantial cultural influence that African American fur traders possessed in relation to Native American populations.

"Any survey of the racial aspects of the American fur trade, to be complete, must include the people whose African blood is sometimes mingled with that of the Caucasian or the Indian or both, who are colloquially known as the American Negroes."⁸

Here Porter shows us that African Americans had skills that made significant contributions to their fur trading parties. Unfortunately, since Porter's article in the 1930s we have not seen a substantial scholarly piece of work highlighting African American achievements in the fur trading industry or collectively noting their linguistic facility or social ease with Native Americans. The goal of this paper will be to argue that the reason African American fur traders were so often included in the fur trading parties was because of their linguistic abilities and cultural influence with Native American populations.

⁷ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934.

⁸Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", 433.

This can especially be seen in the Trans-Mississippi West and Great Lakes region of North America from 1720-1840.

I will identify a pattern between the linguistic ability in African Americans and their cultural influence with Native Americans. In 1999, Arwin Smallwood brought to light, that Native Americans were aware of the cruelty and expansion of slavery, which initially made them empathetic to African slaves. He mentions accounts of several Native American nations aiding runaway slaves. The alliance between Native Americans and African slaves was so resilient one that suggested in that the two races began to intermarry, solidifying the protest of the institution of slavery.⁹

George Bonga, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, York, Edward Rose, James P. Beckworth, and John Brazeau were all at least partially descendants of African heritage. These men contained the ability to master Native American languages and had the ability to execute social ease among the Native American tribes. Thus resulting in these individuals playing significant roles in the fur trading

⁹ Arwin D. Smallwood, "A History of Native American and African Relations from 1502 to 1900." *Negro History Bulletin*, 1999, 13.

parties since these were not qualities that all Caucasian fur traders possessed.¹⁰

My assessment will begin in the Great Lakes Region with African American fur trader George Bonga and the Ojibwe tribe. The Ojibwe were in the western boundary of the Great Lakes region, and had population estimates of about 25-30,000 in the mid-18th century.¹¹ Research shows that the African American's language facility skill set made them invaluable to the leaders of the fur trading expeditions.

"I have always been sorry, that I did not ask my father while living, if he knew where he immigrate from. I am now inclined to think, that they must have come, from the new State of Missouri, as he did not Speak any thing but French."¹²

This direct quote from George Bonga shows the linguistic facility and cultural diversity that African Americans had at that time, but until now has not been cumulatively recorded, argued, or assessed. Although Bonga's is not referring to his father's facility in a Native American language, this shows the ability of African American's during that time period to learn foreign languages.

¹⁰ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934, 433.

¹¹ "Ojibwe History." Ojibwe. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.tolatsga.org/ojib.html>.

¹² George Bonga. "Letters of George Bonga." *The Journal of Negro History*, 1927, 54.

Conversely Bonga spoke Ojibwe so he did exhibit Native American language fluency.¹³

George Bonga is unique compared to the other mentioned African American fur traders because his father, Pierre Bongo or Pierre Bonzo, was also involved in the fur trade.¹⁴ He was born of African and Ojibwe descent and then married into the Chippewa tribe.¹⁵ Bonga's trading and interpreting skills made him valuable to Alexander Henry.¹⁶ Henry was a very well noted explorer that was involved in the fur trade as well.¹⁷ He is often known for the impact he had on the local history of Minnesota. Bonga's superb interpersonal skills and interpreting ability made him a model of assimilation into Native American culture.¹⁸ William W. Warren describes how Bonga interpreted negotiations between the Ojibwe's and the Sioux while under the employment of Henry.¹⁹

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¹⁴ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934, 425.

¹⁵ William Durbin. "Who Was George Bonga?" Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/mcvmagazine/young_naturalists/young-naturalists-article/george_bonga/george_bonga.pdf.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Alexander Henry and David Thompson. *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest: The Manuscript Journals of Alexander Henry, Fur Trader of the Northwest Company, and of David Thompson, Official Geographer and Explorer of the Same Company, 1799-1814 ; Exploration and Adventure Am. Vol. 1*. New York: Francis P. Harper, 1897. XV.

¹⁸ Dawn Renee Jones. "Red and Black: Sisters and Brothers to the Bone." *The Circle : News from an American Indian Perspective* 20, no. 4 (1991), 18.

¹⁹ William W. Warren, and Edward D. Neill. *History of the Ojibway Nation*.

Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, also known/spelled as Jean Baptiste Point de Sabre, or Baptiste Pointsable was a mulatto of St. Dominican blood.²⁰ Point du Sable had affiliations with the Wyandotte and Potawatomi tribes.²¹ Accredited with being Chicago's first resident, Point du Sable's personality and work ethic helped contribute to his success.²² Chicago falls within the Great Lakes region, making du Sable an example of Native American facility within the area.²³ Point du Sable has several inconsistencies in the record of his earlier life but what we can verify is that he is overwhelmingly considered the founding father of Chicago and married a woman from the Pottawattomie tribe, which is in the Algonquian language family.²⁴ With du Sable we see our first example of the relationship between linguistic facility and interpersonal skills. It is dexterity of both sides that allow for him

Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1957. 488.

²⁰ John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-trading Expedition on the Upper Missouri*, 1812-1813, (St. Louis, 1920), 153.

²¹ John H. Kinzie, Wau-Bun: "The Early Day" in the Northwest, 219, 220 (Quaife edition, Chicago, 1932), 20.

²² Ibid, 191.

²³ "Black History in Wisconsin." Wisconsin Historical Society. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org>.

"Jean Baptiste, the Black Chief, Was a 'father' of Chicago." *Indian Life* 32, no. 2 (2011), 8.

Thomas Meehan. "Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, The First Chicagoan." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56, no. 3 (1963), 440.

²⁴ "Jean Baptiste, the Black Chief, Was a 'father' of Chicago." *Indian Life* 32, no. 2 (2011): 8.

Thomas Meehan "Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable, The First Chicagoan." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 56, no. 3 (1963), 440.

and others similar to him to gain favor with the Native Americans.

The Trans-Mississippi West is commonly considered the area within the United States that is west of the Mississippi River and can run to the country's north and southern most boundaries within that area.²⁵ The Great Lake region or Great Lake Basin is considered the lands surrounding the Great Lakes of North America; Lake Huron, Lake Ontario, Lake Michigan, Lake Erie, and Lake Superior.²⁶ This vast area spans eight modern day US states and one modern day Canadian territory. These US states include Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York with Ontario being the Canadian providence.²⁷ The fur trade was an industry of obtaining furs and pelts from animals such as beaver, otter, mink, foxes, and other animals as well.²⁸

York was an African slave and Captain William Clark's personal servant during the legendary Lewis and Clark

²⁵ Donald Mabry, "Trans-Mississippi West, 1860-1890." Historical Text Archive.

<http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?action=read&artid=596>.

²⁶ "Basic Information." EPA. Accessed November 10, 2014.

<http://www.epa.gov/greatlakes/basicinfo.html>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 1: 1892: 1 (New York, 1902), 2.

expedition.²⁹ The Expedition of Lewis & Clark spanned roughly 10 states in the Trans-Mississippi West.³⁰ Unfortunately, being a slave, information regarding York's early life. Lack of recordkeeping is a major problem when researching African Americans in the fur trade. While on the expedition, York's responsibilities revealed several different skill areas, which helped the expedition. These included hunting, trading, and interpreting.³¹ York's diverse skill set and ability to successfully communicate and interact with the Native Americans made him a valuable asset to the expedition.³² Arwin Smallwood even recalls a specific instance when York's social ease and interpersonal skills with a Native American woman saved the lives of all who were on the expedition.³³ In addition to his contributions via his daily operational duties as a member of the expedition, his presence and social ease was an invaluable asset to Lewis & Clark. York had interpersonal skills that allowed him to better negotiate, interact, and

²⁹ William W. Gwaltney, "Black Fur Traders and Frontiersmen." *Lest We Forget*. <http://lestweforget.hamptonu.edu/page.cfm?uuid=9FEC4006-CDFF-44A2-E3D69CC34C3AE4FE>.

³⁰ Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark*. Boulder, Colo.: Colorado Associated University Press, 1985, 1-2.

³¹ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934, 424.

³² Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark*. Boulder, Colo.: Colorado Associated University Press, 1985, 57-58.

³³ Arwin D. Smallwood, "A History of Native American and African Relations from 1502 to 1900." *Negro History Bulletin*, 1999, 12.

communicate with Native Americans. An example for York's interpersonal skills at work would be his contributions regarding the procurement of horses from the Shoshoni tribe.³⁴ This was a very critical point because the horses they received aided them during the next leg of their journey through the Bitterroots, which was extremely taxing.³⁵

Edward Rose, Nez Coupe, Five Scalps or Cut Nose was a guide and interpreter for fur trading parties who was born around 1775-1780.³⁶ He is often known for his physical appearance because he lost part of his nose in a fight.³⁷ His father was a white trader who served his mother's native Cherokee tribe.³⁸ Aside from being a successful interpreter and guide, Rose is perhaps best known for his role as the Chief of the Crow tribe. It is my belief that he was able to gain such an achievement due to his own Cherokee and linguistic ability, as he also knew the language of the Arikara, which is in a completely different

³⁴ Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark*. Boulder, Colo.: Colorado Associated University Press, 1985, 57.

³⁵ Robert B. Betts, *In Search of York: The Slave Who Went to the Pacific with Lewis and Clark*. Boulder, Colo.: Colorado Associated University Press, 1985, 58-59.

³⁶ Carl Waldman and Alan Wexler, *Encyclopedia of Exploration*, Vol. 1 (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2004), 513.
Bruce E. Johansen and Donald A. Grinde, Jr., *The Encyclopedia of Native American Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 326.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934, 426.

language family.³⁹ The Crow tribe that Rose lead was roughly located in northern Wyoming and southern Montana, which was across the country from his maternal Cherokee roots.⁴⁰

James P. Beckwourth or Jim Beckwourth was an African American scout, pioneer, mountaineer, hunter, and ultimately chief of the Crow tribe who was born in 1798.⁴¹ We have an oral account of Beckwourth's biography which was transcribed by Thomas D. Bonner: *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation Indians*. Beckwourth's physical appearance was a very likely contributing factor to his success with Native American tribes like the Crow because he was more culturally valid. Beckwourth was of a mixed racial background and projected similarities of a Native American, as shown below in Figure 1, "James P. Beckwourth".⁴²

³⁹ Bruce E. Johansen and Donald A. Grinde, Jr., *The Encyclopedia of Native American Biography* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997), 326.

⁴⁰ "Native American Languages." Native American Languages. Accessed December 21, 2014. <http://www.cogsci.indiana.edu/>

⁴¹ James Pierson Beckwourth, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation Indians*, edited by Thomas D. Bonner, front cover, 13. Quintard Taylor, "African American Men in the American West, 1528 1990." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569, The African American Male in American Life and Thought (2000), 105.

⁴² Harrison C. Dale, "James P. Beckwourth," in *Dictionary of American Biography*, 2:122 (New York, 1929), 112.

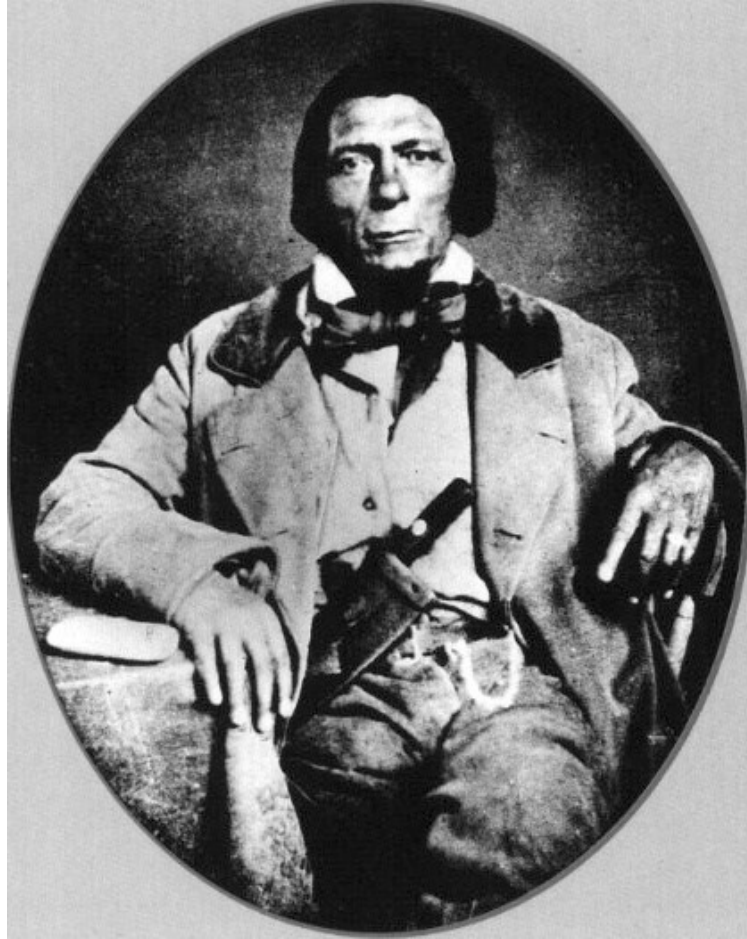


Figure 1. A photograph of James P. Beckwourth, c. 1855.
SOURCE:James Pierson Beckwourth 1798-1866.⁴³

Beckwourth pictured here showed a significant resemblance to someone of a Native American racial background, especially in his facial structure and the tone of his skin.

⁴³ Jim Beckwourth, "Jim Beckwourth".
<http://www.beckwourth.org/Biography/>.

Those characteristics aided him throughout his life. For example, one time Beckwourth was captured by the Crow while on an expedition and was mistaken for the Chief's absent son, thus resulting in him living among the Crow for years to come.⁴⁴ The time he spent living amongst the Crow provided an environment for him to become adapted to their language and customs. Although Beckwourth was a native of Virginia, we have records of him trading and trapping throughout several modern day states within the Trans-Mississippi West and outside of the region.⁴⁵ Those states are Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and California.⁴⁶ Beckwourth having traded and trapped in 7 different states speaks volumes to the type of cultural capitol he was exposed to when encountering different Native American tribes. That kind of diversity within his travels would have exposed him to a number of Native American that would've varied from each other, ultimately increase his exposure and understanding of

⁴⁴ "James Pierson Beckwourth: African American Mountain Man, Fur Trader, Explorer." Colorado Virtual Library. Accessed November 10, 2014. <http://coloradovirtuallibrary.org/content/james-pierson-beckwourth>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Quintard Taylor, "African American Men in the American West, 1528-1990." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569, The African American Male in American Life and Thought (2000), 105.

⁴⁶ Quintard Taylor, "African American Men in the American West, 1528-1990." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 569, The African American Male in American Life and Thought (2000), 104.

Native American individuals. Dale Morgan in his rendition of the life of prominent explorer Jedediah Smith makes a number of references to Beckwourth.⁴⁷ The way he incorporates Beckwourth into the story is more than his time spent with the Snake tribe or battles fought, but more so using Beckwourth's own words to reinforce his story.⁴⁸ This shows the kind of influence and ability that Beckwourth had in the fur trading community.

The Trans-Mississippi region contained another fur trader of importance was John Brazeau or John Brazo who was a trilingual mulatto that worked for the famous fur trader Charles Larpenter.⁴⁹ He is most noted known for being multilingual with the notoriously difficult Sioux and several Native American languages.⁵⁰ Like Beckwourth after living with the Crow tribe Brazeau became fluent in their language.⁵¹

The lives of Bonga, York, Rose, and Point du Sable provide examples of African Americans who mastered Native

⁴⁷ Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953, 440.

⁴⁸ Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953. 180, 228.

⁴⁹ Kenneth W. Porter, "Negroes and the Fur Trade", *Minnesota History*, December 1934, 430.

⁵⁰ Mark L. Loudon "African-Americans and Minority Language Maintenance in the United States" *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 4, (Autumn 2000), 232.

⁵¹ William W. Gwaltney, "Black Fur Traders and Frontiersmen." *Lest We Forget*. <http://lestweforget.hamptonu.edu/page.cfm?uuid=9FEC4006-CDFF-44A2-E3D69CC34C3AE4FE>.

American languages. Nevertheless, it was also their interpersonal skill set that gave them the ability to excel in effectively communicating with the Native Americans.⁵² That ultimately led to success within the fur trade industry and holistically with the Native Americans.⁵³ These factors made them invaluable to Caucasian fur traders, who found that communicating, negotiating, and trading with Native American tribes became easier and more efficient once an African American was added to the equation. This can be seen as an early business practice to keep their Native American trading partners informed, comfortable, and ultimately stay in business.

As we have seen African Americans were likely able to learn Native American languages with ease due to their multicultural backgrounds that often included Native American descent. However, runaway slaves and other African Americans also had successful relations with Native American tribes.⁵⁴ There was a positive relationship between African Americans and Native Americans in the West and parts of the East which mostly stemmed from either their

⁵² Dixie Ray Haggard, *African Americans in the Nineteenth Century: People and Perspectives*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO), 2010.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ William W. Gwaltney, "Black Fur Traders and Frontiersmen." *Lest We Forget*. <http://lestweforget.hamptonu.edu/page.cfm?uuid=9FEC4006-CDFF-44A2-E3D69CC34C3AE4FE>.

mutual dislike of Caucasians, their experiences of the cruelty of slavery, or from shared adaptability.⁵⁵ Whatever the reason this wouldn't be the first time two groups were brought together by a common enemy.

Having played the role as the middlemen between Caucasian fur traders and Native American counterparts during trading discussions and/or negotiations, and also functioning as guides during fur trading expeditions, African Americans emerge in the record as important. The sociocultural background that African Americans brought to the fur trade was a significant factor within the industry.⁵⁶ It was not just the fur trading African Americans men who were gifted in linguistics, but others as well. James F. Brooks tell us of an account by an African American woman, a Mrs. Taylor, who was fluent in two native languages. Her father was fluent in seven native languages as well.⁵⁷ Most of the known African American fur traders were acknowledged for their cultural influence with Native Americans because they were more receptive to them than the

⁵⁵ Arwin D. Smallwood, "A History of Native American and African Relations from 1502 to 1900." *Negro History Bulletin*, 1999, 12.

⁵⁶ Mark L. Loudon "African-Americans and Minority Language Maintenance in the United States" *The Journal of Negro History* 85, no. 4, (Autumn 2000), 233.

⁵⁷ James F. Brooks, "Confounding the Color Line: Indian-Black Relations in Historical and Anthropological Perspective." *American Indian Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1998), 1.

white members of the fur trading expeditions. The fact that African Americans were consistently able to achieve fluency in complicated and varied Native American languages is truly significant, and historians have not recognized it.

Given their geographic locations, the two primary Native American language families that the African American fur traders would have been fluent in were Algonquian and Siouan.⁵⁸ However, there are some outlying languages on a case-by-case basis that are not of the Algonquian and Siouan family. Perhaps the most important information to grasp when evaluating the Algonquian and Siouan language families is that all Native American language families contain various regional and tribal dialects making the language extremely complex.⁵⁹ There were some cases when an African American fur trapper would have most likely encountered Native American tribes, in the Trans-Mississippi West, that that would not be included in the Siouan or Algonquian language families, according to Figure 2 below.

⁵⁸ John Rehling. "Native American Languages." Native American Languages. <http://www.cogsci.indiana.edu/farg/rehling/nativeAm/ling.html>.

⁵⁹ Levette Jay Davidson. "Old Trapper Talk." *American Speech* 13, no. 2 (1938): 83.

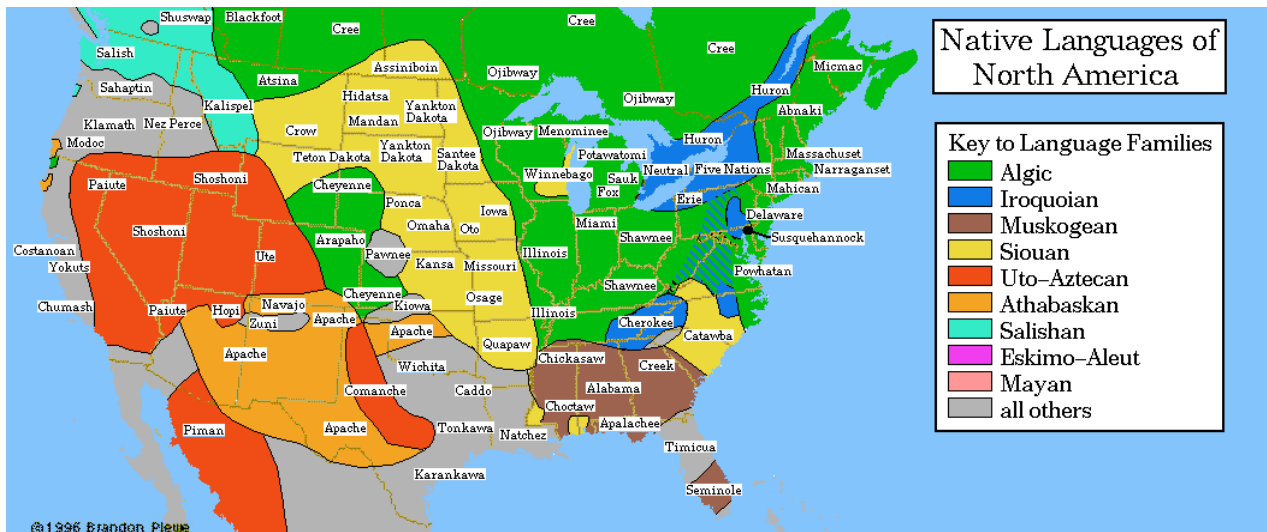


Figure 2. Digital map of the Native Languages of North America, c. 1996. SOURCE: Native American Languages. <http://www.cogsci.indiana.edu/farg/rehling/nativeAm/ling.html>.⁶⁰

According to figure 2, the majority of the Great Lake region falls under the Algonic umbrella. Conversely, the areas of the Trans-Mississippi West are more diverse. However, the Siouan language family covers a significant amount of the Trans-Mississippi West where African American fur traders worked.

The list of reasons contributing to why this kind of research is important is endless. We do not see a significant amount of cumulative modern day research

⁶⁰ John Rehling. "Native American Languages." *Native American Languages*. <http://www.cogsci.indiana.edu/farg/rehling/nativeAm/ling.html>.

regarding African American fur traders or in the past with the exception of Porter. Even in *Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference* we see no mention to African Americans or their contributions.⁶¹ This is vital because it shows that even organizations devoted to the history of fur trading fail to recognize the numerous contributions made to the history of the industry by African Americans. These individuals were so much more than their stereotypical persona of physical strength. They were interpreters, guides, explorers, traders, negotiators, and leaders. Their knowledge and skills allowed them to become successful contributors to the history of the fur trade. Impressively they were able to master multiple Native American languages from several different language families, as well as use their interpersonal skills to communicate effectively with Native Americans for the betterment of themselves, fur trading parties, and tribes.

⁶¹ Dale L. Morgan, *Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference*. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1967.

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