

# James P. Beckwourth

1798–1866



**WHY HE MADE HISTORY** James P. Beckwourth was an explorer whose travels took him across the American West. He discovered a pass through the Sierra Nevada Mountains that was named after him.



*As you read the biography below, think about how Beckwourth's desire for excitement and travel led him to see America.*

Many African Americans took part in the settlement of the American West, but James Pierson Beckwourth was the only one who recorded his adventures. He witnessed much of history, including Indian wars, the Mexican-American War, and the California gold rush.

Beckwourth was born in Virginia, the son of a white father and a slave mother. His father raised him, but Beckwourth was still considered a slave by the laws of the time. His father went to court three times to declare that Beckwourth was a free man.

When he was a teenager, Beckwourth's family moved to St. Louis, Missouri. Beckwourth was a blacksmith's apprentice for a time, but he hated the work. He had learned about the **mountain men** and wanted to be one. He wanted adventure, so in 1822 he ran away to join a mining expedition. The next year he signed up for a series of fur-trading expeditions in the Rocky Mountains.

In 1826 the Crow Indians captured Beckwourth. He lived with the Crow for several years and even fought in wars with the Crow against other nations. The nation made Beckwourth a war chief, and he later married a Crow woman.



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## VOCABULARY

**mountain men** fur traders and trappers who explored the West

**Bear Flag Revolt** uprising against Mexico by American settlers in California who declared the territory an independent republic

**forty-niners** migrants who came to California seeking gold

Beckwourth returned to St. Louis in 1837 and joined a group of mountain men to help the army fight the Seminole Indians in the Florida Everglades. Then he set out West again as a trapper, and he eventually moved to California where he became involved in the **Bear Flag Revolt** in 1846.

When gold was discovered in California in 1848, Beckwourth spent some time as a prospector. He also began to lead **forty-niners** through the mountains into California. In 1850, Beckwourth discovered a pass that would open up a route to California's Sacramento Valley. The pass, which provided easy access for wagons through the mountain range, was named the Beckwourth Pass in his honor.

Beckwourth later told his story to Thomas D. Bonner, a justice of the peace from California. Bonner published *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth, Mountaineer, Scout, and Pioneer, and Chief of the Crow Nation of Indians* in 1856. Many of the tales in Beckwourth's autobiography may have been exaggerated, but the book is a valuable record of the era.

### WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. When did James Beckwourth discover the pass that now bears his name? Why was it so important at the time?

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2. **Evaluate** Would you want to be an explorer? Give one reason based on what you read.

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### ACTIVITY

3. Use a map or atlas that shows North America. Locate each place that James Beckwourth explored.