

Jean Baptiste Charbonneau

By Karri R. Samson

Much has been written about Sacagawea, her little son "Pomp," and their adventure with Meriwether Lewis and William Clark but not much is written of Jean Baptiste Charbonneau's time in Placer County. What brought this well-educated, well-traveled man to Placer County? As with many others who came, it was probably the lure of gold.

Jean Baptiste Charbonneau was born February 11, 1805, at Fort Mandan to French Canadian fur trapper and interpreter Toussaint Charbonneau and his seventeen-year-old Shoshone wife, Sacagawea. The younger Charbonneau's adventures began, on April 7, 1805, when he joined his father and mother as they accompanied Lewis and Clark on their 5,000 20-month trip of discovery to the Pacific and back. Sacagawea was invaluable to expedition because of her skills as an interpreter as well as her presence with a child providing an expression of peaceful intentions.

Clark nicknamed the child "Pomp." "Pompey's Pillar," a landmark 28 miles east of Billings, Montana, was named for him, by Clark. Clark became very fond of the boy, and later saw to his education in St. Louis, Missouri.

In 1823 Prince Paul Wilhelm of Germany, on a scientific mission to American, met Charbonneau in a small settlement on the Missouri River. The Prince took a liking to the young man and persuaded Charbonneau to return to Germany with him. He spent the next six years learning numerous foreign languages, traveling throughout Europe and North Africa. Research shows that a child was born on February 20, 1829, named Anton Fries. His parents were noted as "Johann Baptist Charbonneau of St. Louis, 'called an American in the service of Duke Paul of this place' and Anastasia Katharina Fries, unmarried daughter of the late George Fries, a soldier here." The child died three months later.

In 1829 Prince Paul again ventured to the American West with Charbonneau by his side. At this point Charbonneau left to lead the life of a mountain man.

He scouted the route that was followed by the Mormon Battalion from New Mexico to San Diego in 1846-47. California was taken by the U.S. in July 1847 and Charbonneau was appointed Alcalde, of a subagency for Indians, at Mission San Luis Rey. He resigned in less than a year. Some believe it was because he could not tolerate the unjust treatment of the local Indians.

It is at this point that he ventured to Placer County. According to Thompson and West in the *History of Placer County*, he spent 1848-49 on Murderers Bar, on the North Fork of the American River, with trailblazer Jim Beckworth. In the fall of 1849, he was at Buckner's Bar with Tom Buckner.

Placer County paid him \$48 for assisting in a surveying job in 1852. In February 1854, he signed a petition at Rattlesnake Bar against the election of a U.S. Senator.

In June of 1857, Charbonneau petitioned the Placer County Board of Supervisors for permission to operate a ferry at Manhattan Bar. In August, they appointed him an Election Inspector at Manhattan Bar.

He is in the 1860 U.S. census at Secret Ravine. In the 1861 *Directory of Placer County*, he is listed as a desk clerk at the Orleans Hotel in Auburn. In May 1865, he was on the Tax Assessment rolls in Rocklin.

At his death, the *Placer Herald* published an obituary from information supplied by early

Placer County hotelkeeper and later California State Librarian, Dana Perkins. It states, "Mr. Charbonneau was known to most of the pioneer citizens of this region, being himself one of the first adventurers upon the discovery of gold where he remained with little intermission until his recent departure for the new gold field in Montana."

He headed for Montana in the spring of 1866 at the age of 61. He became ill with what is believed to have been pneumonia, at the Owyhee River in southeastern Oregon. His two partners helped him to the nearest settlement, Inskip's Station, where he died May 16, 1866. Nothing is left of the settlement near what is now Danner, Oregon. Charbonneau's grave site was placed on National Register of Historic Places in 1973.

In 2000 Sacagawea was honored on a one-dollar coin by the U.S. Mint. On her back was the baby Jean Baptiste Charbonneau.

On December 10, 2006, The Placer County Historical Society placed a plaque honoring Charbonneau in the park next to the fire house in Old Town Auburn. A revised plaque was placed there in 2020.

