

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

JEAN BAPTISTE CHARBONNEAU  
February 11, 1805 - May 16, 1866

Number 428

Of French and Shoshoni decent, Jean Baptiste Charbonneau was the son of Sacajawea and Touissant Charbonneau, interpreters for Lewis and Clark who were spending the winter at a Mandan village on the Missouri at the time of Jean Baptiste's birth. Young Baptiste got used to travel as an infant, since he accompanied the expedition to the Pacific and back before he was two years old. After the explorers returned to Saint Louis in 1806, William Clark took special interest in Baptiste, and arranged for him to get a good classical education. This proved decidedly useful. While he was growing up, Baptiste joined his father in outfitting and guide service on the Missouri; finally, as a youth of eighteen he had a chance to work for Prince Paul of Wurttemberg, who was a great traveler in pursuit of scientific interests. The two got along very well, and after a summer on the Great Plains, Baptiste accompanied the Prince back to Europe.

Arriving in France, February 14, 1824, he spent six years with his royal companion. They journeyed through France, Britain, Germany, and North Africa, meeting all kinds of people and seeing all kinds of places that normally would be beyond the experience of a western frontiersman. Prince Paul's castle near Stuttgart gave them a convenient base for Baptiste to demonstrate his talent in the Black Forest as a "hunter extraordinary."

Returning with the Prince to the Missouri country in 1829, Baptiste entered the service of the American Fur Company. By the fall of 1830 he was fur hunting on the Snake River with a party that became lost for two days in the lava between American Falls and later Craters of the Moon. More energetic than the others, Baptiste set out to find water--and then spent the next eleven days trying to find what happened to his lost comrades. Finally he discovered that they had been rescued by a Hudson's Bay

Company brigade that happened along. During the remainder of the Rocky Mountain fur trade, one adventure followed another. His superior education and his exceptional skill as a hunter and guide set him apart from the ordinary mountain man of his time. Toward the end of the fur trade era, he wound up in the South Platte-Bent's Fort region where he entertained John C. Fremont's surveying expedition in 1842. Later that year, R. B. Sage, a westbound traveler, reached his camp and reported that Charbonneau "proved to be a gentleman of superior information. He had acquired a classic education and could converse quite fluently in German, Spanish, French, and English, as well as several Indian languages. His mind, also, was well stored with choice reading, and enriched by extensive travel and observation. Having visited most of the important places, both in England, France, and Germany, he knew how to turn his experience to good advantage. There was a quaint humor and shrewdness in his conversation, so garbed with intelligence and perspicuity, that he at once insinuated himself into the good graces of listeners, and commanded their admiration and respect."

After 1842 he spent several years as a guide and hunter: during the Mexican War he guided the Mormon battalion from Santa Fe to San Diego in 1846. Then he lived for twenty years in California. For a time, in 1847 and 1848, he served as mayor of San Luis Rey, a community north of San Diego. Resigning that position because he refused to follow an Indian policy harsh enough to satisfy the whites, he joined the California gold rush. Then he became a hotel clerk in Auburn. Finally in the spring of 1866 he set out for the mines of Montana. On the way, he caught pneumonia at Inskip's ranch in Jordan Valley, and did not survive the trip. A short distance from the old station there is an unmarked grave, which by long tradition is that of a half-breed Indian. Presumably that is the grave of Jean Baptiste Charbonneau.