Toussaint Charbonneau, A Most Durable Man

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Toussaint Charbonneau is known today, when recognized at all, only as the husband of Sacagawea of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. And because of the overly romanticized image of Sacagawea, Charbonneau is badly downgraded even in that role. As Annie H. Abel summarized, "There was nothing particularly worthy about Charbonneau. For the most part he shines by reflected glory, the glory that is Sacajawea's halo." [1] In 1893 Elliott Coues called him a wife-beating French coward who could have served Lewis and Clark best by drowning in the Missouri. [2] This article is intended to help fill in the gaps of what is known about Charbonneau's life and also to reevaluate the reputation given him by the majority of historians. To his contemporaries Charbonneau was renowned (other than for his connection with Lewis and Clark) only for his longevity, his women, and his cooking. Yet, his life is worth studying for the simple fact that for over forty years, he participated in nearly every major enterprise on the upper Missouri.

Toussaint Charbonneau was born about 1759, supposedly

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1. F.A. Chardon, *Journal at Fort Clark, 1834-1839,* ed. Annie H. Abel (Pierre, S.Dak.: South Dakota Department of History, 1932), p.270n. 258.

2. Elliott Coues, ed., *History of the Expedition Under the Command of Lewis and Clark*, 4 vols. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1893), 1:190n, 311n, 2:497n.

in the vicinity of Montreal, Canada. [3] Nothing is presently known about his life before 1793, except that sometime prior to that year he became an employee of the North West Company, a Montreal-based fur trading firm established in 1783 as the major rival of the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1793 Charbonneau appears in the journal of John Macdonell, a North West Company clerk at Fort Esperance on the *Qu'appelle* River. This fort was one of a string of posts built along the Assiniboine River by the Hudson's Bay, North West, and XY companies. These companies traded with the Saulteurs (Chippewas), Crees, Assiniboines, and, occasionally, the Sioux. In November 1793 Charbonneau was one of five men who left Fort Esperance for a nearby post called Pine Fort. [4]

In the spring of 1794 he may have gone with Cuthbert Grant, a North West Company *bourgeois*, and the annual brigade to deliver the winter's trade to Grand Portage on Lake Superior, or he may have helped Peter Grant build a new post forty miles up the Assiniboine on the *la Coquille* River. On 10 November Charbonneau arrived at Fort Esperance from *la Coquille*, only to return two days later. In December he was back at Fort Esperance, where he ran errands between the fort and the Indian camps. In the spring of 1795 he and two men went to the North West Company post at *Montagne a la Bosse* for trade goods, but Charbonneau found something more interesting than supplies at the post. After returning the trade goods to Fort Esperance on 3 March, he and two others started to return to the North West Company post "to court the Foutreau's daughter a great beauty." [5] The Indian girl apparently had more than enough suitors, and nothing is known about Charbonneau's success with this romance.

On 18 May Charbonneau left Fort Esperance with Macdonell and the summer brigade for Grand Portage. [6]

3. John C. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri, 1812-1813*, ed. Stella M. Drumm (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1920), p. 136. Three different sources state that Charbonneau was eighty-years-old between March 1838 and August 1839.

4. Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1965), pp. 96n.60.

5. Chardon, *Journal*, p. 271.

6. Louis R. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest,* 2 vols. (Quebec: A. Conte et cie., 1889-90), 1:294.

Charbonneau was sent across the twelve-mile *Portage la Prairie* to *Lac Manitou-a-Banc,* probably to pick up the winter's trade at William McKay's post. On 30 May, while he was still at the lake end of the portage, "an old Saultier woman" caught him "in the act of committing a Rape upon her Daughter."[7] To be fair to Charbonneau, who never told his version of this incident, it should be pointed out that Macdonell, who recorded this from hearsay, was so strait-laced that his voyageurs nicknamed him "the Priest."[8] It is possible that Charbonneau had seduced the daughter with words or goods; but whether rape or seduction, it made little difference to the mother. She stopped his sexual activity with a canoe awl. Charbonneau was hurt badly enough so that "it was with difficulty he could walk back over the portage."[9] The brigade reached Lake Winnipeg on 4 June. Shortly thereafter Macdonell's journal ends, and so do all references to Toussaint Charbonneau as a regular employee of the North West Company.[10]

However, Charbonneau did not immediately leave the company; he must have traveled back to the Assiniboine area with the fall brigade. Then, during 1796, he quit the company and moved to that part of the Missouri River now in North Dakota. He was not the first Frenchman who had rejected the lowly status of *engage*, or common laborer, and gone to the Missouri. A man named Menard had lived with the Mandans since 1778. About 1791 Rene Jusseaume had become a free trader on the upper Missouri with goods he regularly obtained from the Assiniboine posts. By 1796 the trade on the Missouri as far up as the Minitari villages had been well established, and even a Saint Louis company under the field command of John Evans had gone as far as the Mandans.[11]

7. Chardon, *Journal*, p. 271.

8. Gates, *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, pp. 63-64.

9. Chardon, *Journal*, p. 271. Actual rape was very rare among traders at this time. Women were readily available, and traders did not want to offend their customers. *See* Walter O'Meara, *Daughters of the Country* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) for an excellent survey of the relations between traders and Indian women.

10. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Compagnie du Nord-Ouest,* 1:295.

11. Alexander P. Maximilian, Prince of Wied, *"Travels in the Interior of North America, 1832-1834"* in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, 3 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1904-7), 2:222-23; A.P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark: Documents Illustrating the History of the Missouri, 1785-1804*, 2 vols. (St. Louis: St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952), 1:161, 331; Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, p. 79; Nasatir, "John Thomas Evans," in L.R. Hafen, ed., *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West,* 10 vols. (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1965-1972), 3:99-117.

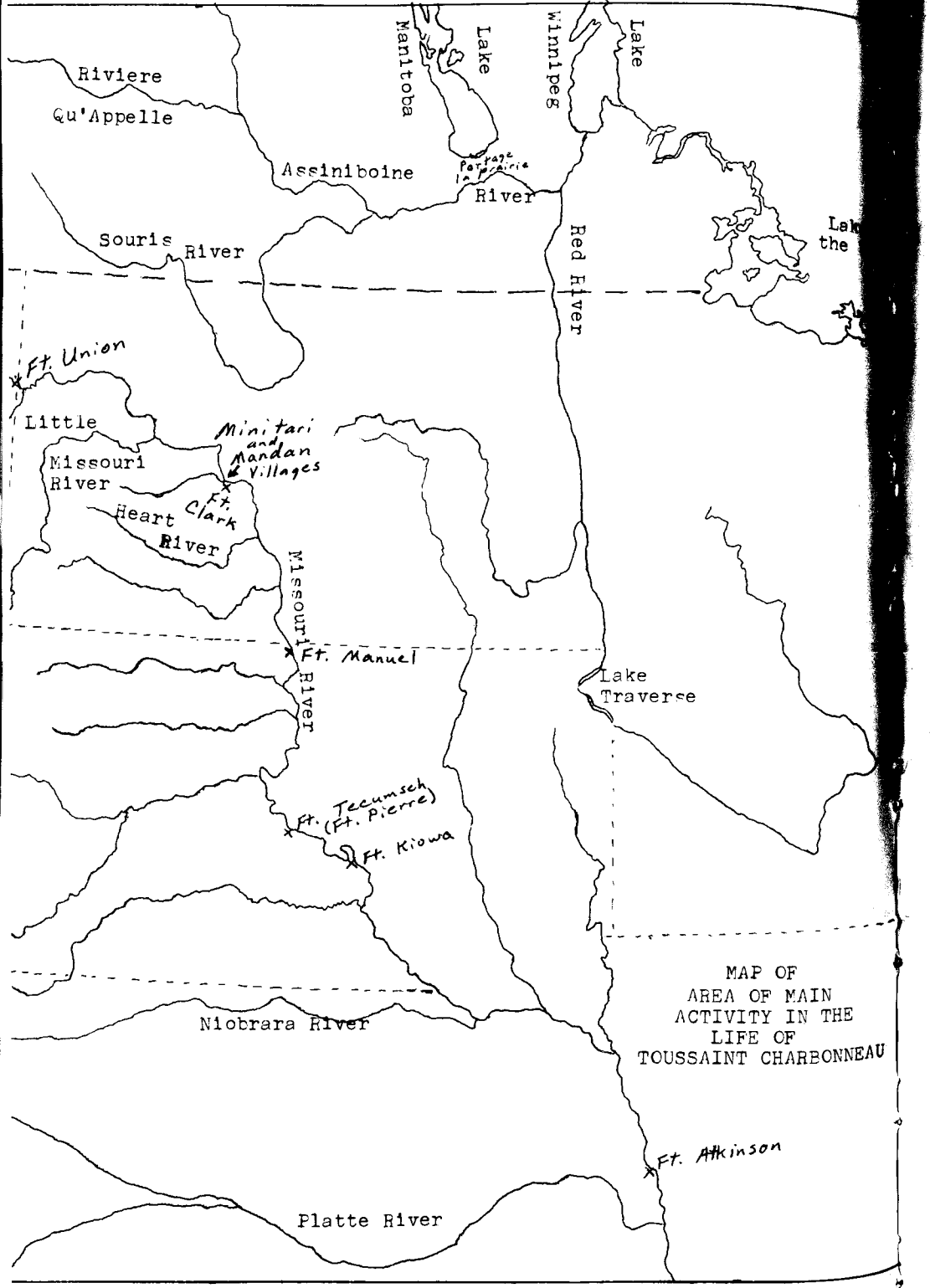
Charbonneau established himself at the Minitari village of Metaharta, which was on the right (southwest) bank of the Knife River about a half mile from its mouth. This village remained his home for most of his life. A second and larger village was located about one and one-half miles up the Knife. The Minitaris were a sedentary people who traditionally never lived anywhere else than at the earth-lodge villages on the Knife. They were a large-bodied, proud people who were generally at peace with their Amahami, Mandan, and Cheyenne neighbors and with their Crow relatives; but they fought nearly every other tribe in the upper Missouri area. Their women raised corn, squash, and other plants; the men periodically made organized hunts on the plains for buffalo, deer, and antelope.[12]

There is very little information about Charbonneau's relations with the Minitaris. Apparently, they accepted him, liked him, and gave him nicknames such as "the chief of the little village; the man who possesses many gourds; the great horse from abroad; the forest bear; and [a] fifth, which, as often happens among these Indians, is not very refined." He learned to speak at least the commercial and domestic parts of their language, a Siouan tongue that, he admitted years later, he had never learned to pronounce properly.[13] As an interpreter, though, he was just as valuable to the Minitaris as he was to the white traders. When he was not needed for interpreting, he apparently involved himself in the social life of the Minitaris.

It was a Minitari war party that brought him the girl who, long after both their deaths, became far more famous than he did. In 1800 or 1801 the raiders struck a Shoshoni camp at the Three Forks of the Missouri in present western Montana and

12. Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 2:222-23. The Minitaris have also been called Gros Ventres, Big Bellies, and Hidatsa; the prevalent term in Charbonneau's time was some form of Minitari. Maximilian, Alexander Henry, Jr., and other travelers on the upper Missouri include a wealth of material on these Indians in their books and journals. Maximilian called Metaharta "Awatichai."

13. Ibid., 2:221, 222-23.



MAP OF
AREA OF MAIN
ACTIVITY IN THE
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TOUSSAINT CHARBONNEAU

captured some young girls. After the war party returned to its villages, Charbonneau bought two of the girls, including one 11-to 13-year-old the Minitaris called Tsakakawia (now spelled Sacagawea).[14] It appears that the other one, from a different band of the Shoshoni, was even younger than Sacagawea.[15] Four years later they were called "wives," which has been taken to mean that Charbonneau went through a marriage ritual with them.[16] But unless they were first adopted by a family in the Minitari village (which is possible, but not too likely), such ceremony would have been unnecessary. Captives, unless adopted, were chattels.

On 26 October 1804 the Lewis and Clark Expedition, on their way to the Pacific Ocean, arrived at the Mandan villages and settled in for the winter. On 4 November Charbonneau, who passed by with several Minitaris on a hunt, was invited to join the expedition after he told the captains that he was the Minitari interpreter and that he would accompany them with one of his wives, who could be used as an interpreter among the "Snakes"–Shoshonis and related tribes. By 20 November he and his wives had moved into the expedition's Fort Mandan.[17]

14. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, 1804-06,* 8 vols. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1904-05), 2:282-83; Patrick Gass, *Gass's Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* ed. James K. Hosmer (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1904), p. 117. "Sacagawea" seems to be the most correct spelling. The best of the many accounts of this woman are Irving W. Anderson, "Probing the Riddle of the Bird Woman," *Montana, the Magazine of Western History* 23, no. 4 (Autumn, 1973), pp. 2-17, and Harold P. Howard, *Sacajawea* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971).

15. Donald Jackson, ed., *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition with Related Documents, 1783-1854* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1962), p. 527; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:247.

16. This apparently originates with Nicolas Biddle, who edited the expedition journals into *History of the Expedition* (n.p., 1814); *see* Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, p. 540. Grace R. Hebard wanted Charbonneau and Sacagawea legally wed so badly that she cited an account that says they were married by Lewis and Clark on 8 February 1805, three days before the birth of their child (Hebard, *Sacajawea* [Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1957], p. 49n.16). The main problem is that Charbonneau and Clark were forty miles away from Sacagawea that day.

17. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:217; Ernest S. Osgood, ed., *The Field Notes of Captain William Clark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 174; Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway . . . 1803-1806* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1916), p. 166.

On 24 November North West Company trader F.A. Larocque arrived at the Minitari village and was surprised to find that Charbonneau had been employed by some Americans at the Mandans. The next day he started for the Mandans and met Lewis and Charbonneau going upriver to the Minitaris. Lewis and Larocque merely exchanged small talk and continued in their respective directions. At Metaharta Lewis had a friendly talk with the Minitaris and slept in the lodge of the principal chief, Black Moccasin. Two days later, however, he was coldly received at the upper village; the Minitaris there had heard rumors that the Americans were going to attack them, and the fact that Charbonneau had moved into Fort Mandan was interpreted as evidence of the truth of the rumor. The next day Lewis' party returned to Fort Mandan where Larocque asked Charbonneau to work for him when he was not needed by the Americans. The captains agreed to let him go, but because of their suspicions of Larocque's attitudes toward Americans and because of a Sioux attack on the Mandans, Charbonneau did not actually join Larocque until 1 December.[18]

Larocque and Charbonneau returned to the Minitaris where they entered into competition with Hudson's Bay (HBC) traders, but Charbonneau was back at Fort Mandan for Christmas. The men fired salutes, drank brandy, and danced with each other. The only women in the fort, Charbonneau's two wives and Rene Jusseaume's wife, simply watched. On 26 November an urgent request came down for Charbonneau to rejoin Larocque. A party of Minitari hunters was returning, and Larocque needed an interpreter in order to compete against the Minitari-speaking HBC trader. The subsequent events illustrate the rivalry of the times. When Charbonneau reached the village, he was placed in a party led by Charles McKenzie, who waited until nightfall and then turned loose and scattered the HBC horses. But when his own party got ready to leave, they could not find their guide. They set out without him, but later sent Charbonneau back to find him. Charbonneau returned to McKenzie without the guide, but with the news that the HBC men had rounded up their horses and had already left on a

18. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Campagnie du Nord-Ouest,* 1:303-6, 330; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* 1:226-27; 228-32.

different trail. McKenzie decided to keep going, but a snowstorm forced the party to seek shelter in a creek bed for three days. Finally, some Indians found them and escorted them to their destination. The HBC had already been there and gone, but the hunters had reserved part of their trade for McKenzie.[19]

Charbonneau was back at Fort Mandan on 13 January 1805, with a frost-bitten face and a load of meat and grease. He told Lewis and Clark that the HBC traders were stirring up the Indians against the Americans and that the North West Company intended to build a fort at the Minitari village. Just how true these statements were is unknown, but it is probable that Charbonneau larded his tale about the HBC somewhat.[20]

At Fort Mandan he soon became more involved with family matters. Beginning on 11 January, Sacagawea, then eight months pregnant, was repeatedly mentioned in the Lewis and Clark journals as being "Sick." Even so, on 4 February, Charbonneau went on an extended hunt with a party led by Clark. On 10 February he brought back three meat-laden pack horses. The next evening his first child by Sacagawea was born after a difficult labor. They named the boy Jean Baptiste.[21]

When Charbonneau went up to the Minitari village with the news of his new son, he returned on 7 March with a large present from North West Company *bourgeois* Charles Chaboillez, who may have intended it as a bon voyage gift or a gift to the new parents, though Lewis and Clark soon considered it a bribe. On 11 March Charbonneau voiced some doubts as to whether or not he wished to continue working for the captains under their terms. Instead, he said he would go along if (a) he did not have to do manual labor or stand guard, (b) he could return at any time if he could not get along with any man, and (c) he could have the control of as many

19. Masson, *Les Bourgeois de la Campagnie du Nord-Ouest,* 1:306-9, 332-33; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* 1:240; 7:72. Rene Jusseaume had been hired as the Mandan interpreter.

20. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* 1:248; Quaife, *Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway,* p. 177.

21. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* 1:247, 253-54, 257-58. A short biography of Jean Baptiste is given in Hafen, *Mountain Men,* 1:205-24.

Meriwether Lewis

William Clark

provisions as he chose to carry. Lewis and Clark gave him and themselves a day to think it over, and on 12 March they dismissed him. The captains put the blame on the North West Company. It may have been, however, that Charbonneau was having second thoughts about the trip. He was about forty-seven years old, at least ten years older than any man on the expedition; most were in their twenties.[22] He would have to take along a new mother and infant; Indian women and children were used to traveling, but not on cross-continental journeys. And his relations with the North West Company may have involved loyalty rather than venality; his associations with the traders had been long and probably, for the most part, friendly. In short, there were plenty of good reasons why he should stay at the Minitari village and not be tramping off into the unknown.

22. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:269, 271; Charles G. Clarke, *The Men of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1970), pp. 38, 53. The next oldest men were John Shields and William Clark, born in 1769 and 1770, respectively.

For whatever reason, by 14 March Charbonneau and his family had moved into a lodge outside the fort, and Joseph Gravelines, an Arikara interpreter, had taken his place. Then Charbonneau changed his mind. Perhaps a longing for adventure made him want to go; perhaps it was the twenty-five dollar a month interpreter's pay (compared to five dollars a month for most of the party). When he sent in a feeler, the captains deliberately ignored it and waited until he started moving across the river on 17 March. After he had most of his packs across, they called him in to tell him that if he would accept the same responsibilities and duties as the rest, he could go. Thoroughly humbled, he accepted. He moved his goods back to the fort and repitched his lodge outside. The journal entry for 18 March reads: "Mr. Tousent Chabono, Enlisted as Interpreter this evening."[23]

The next three weeks were spent getting ready. A 1 April entry in Clark's field notes indicates that Charbonneau was at one time planning to take both wives with him, but on 7 April, the day of departure, only one "Indian woman wife to Charbono with a young child" is listed. The other wife disappeared from what little notice she ever had. The party set off in two pirogues and six canoes with a total of thirty-three members. Charbonneau and his family were placed in the captains' mess. That night Lewis wrote, "Capt Clark myself the two Interpretters [George Drouillard and Charbonneau] and the woman and child sleep in a tent of dressed skins."[24]

The journey up the Missouri demonstrated both Charbonneau's strengths and weaknesses. On 13 April Charbonneau, "perhaps the most timid waterman in the world" and a nonswimmer, nearly upset the white pirogue that he was steering when he panicked and threw the boat broadside to a sudden gust of wind. The next day the captains named a creek after him, because it was the highest spot on the Missouri definitely known to have been visited by a white man. Charbonneau had been there with Minitari hunters. On 18 April

23. Quaife, *Journals of Captain Meriwether Lewis and Sergeant John Ordway*, pp. 186, 187; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:274-75; Coues, *History of the Expedition*, 1:171-72.

24. Osgood, *The Field Notes of Captain William Clark*, p. 185; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:284-85.

Clark noted in his journal the first of many days that Charbonneau and Sacagawea walked on the shore rather than rode in the boats. It was safer for Charbonneau, and Sacagawea usually found some roots or berries to add to the supper. On 9 May near the Milk River Charbonneau made himself popular by preparing *boudin blanc*, which Lewis called "one of the greatest del[ic]acies of the forest." It was a boiled and fried sausage of buffalo intestine stuffed with salt, pepper, flour, and meat. [25]

Five days later, while near the Musselshell, Charbonneau blundered again with the white pirogue. Both captains were ashore, but Pierre Cruzatte, an expert waterman, was at the bow. Four other men, Sacagawea and her baby, and the captains' book, instruments, medicines, and other things were aboard. Again, a violent wind hit the boat; Charbonneau luffed her into it, and the boat turned over. The sail kept her from completely capsizing, but only Cruzatte and Sacagawea kept their heads. Charbonneau let go of the helm and began "crying to his god for mercy." Cruzatte made him grab the helm by threatening to shoot him if he did not. The boat at last righted, nearly filled with water. Several articles had floated out of the craft, but Sacagawea, who was sitting in the rear, grabbed most of them as they came by her. Cruzatte told two men to bail out the boat, while he and the other two rowed ashore. Lewis and Clark, who had despairingly watched the whole scene from shore, calmed the men's nerves with a "gill of sperits" apiece. Charbonneau's troubles with the white pirogue were not unique; by 29 May Lewis was convinced that the boat was "attended by some evil gennii." [26]

Charbonneau's bad luck continued. In early June he and Drouillard were almost attacked by a grizzly, and on 10 June at Marias River, Sacagawea became ill. Clark tried to cure her, but by 15 June she was refusing to take medicine. Charbonneau wanted to take her back to the Minitari village; Clark blamed Charbonneau for giving her medicine while she was out of her head. Lewis saved the situation and probably Sacagawea by taking over as doctor after he returned from a scouting trip.

25. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 1:301, 308, 321, 2:15-16. Jean Baptiste LePage and another man had been higher, but they were lost and had no definite idea of where they had been.

26. Ibid., 2:34-37, 92.

When he added mineral water to her regimen, the improvement was almost miraculous. She had a setback on 19 June when she gorged herself on raw *pommes de terre* (potatoes) and dried fish, and Lewis blamed Charbonneau for letting her do it, but the effects were only temporary. [27]

The party had now reached the Great Falls of the Missouri, and they took their time in portaging; they all needed to rest and make new leather clothes. Charbonneau cooked *boudin blanc*, guarded baggage, and rendered buffalo tallow. On 29 June, while Clark led a small party to look at the falls, a black storm cloud appeared, and Clark hustled his charges into a deep ravine to escape the wind. Sacagawea took advantage of the stop to change her infant's clothes. A few moments later, hail and rain created a flash flood in the ravine. Sacagawea scrambled up the slope with her naked son in her arms, while Charbonneau pulled her from the front and Clark pushed her from behind. They escaped with their lives, but they lost their weapons, an umbrella, a large compass, and Jean Baptiste's clothes and *baire* (leather cradle). They revived their damp spirits with grog from the canteen of Clark's black servant, York. [28]

Indians had told them that they would find no buffalo beyond the falls. When they left the falls on 15 July, the *boudin blanc* was "irretrievably lost and Sharbono out of employment." [29] A week later, near present Placer, Montana, Sacagawea began to remember the landmarks from her childhood. Clark, Charbonneau, and three others went ahead to try to find the Shoshonis. When they returned, they found Lewis' camp on an island a mile up the Madison Fork—on the exact spot Sacagawea had been captured four or five years earlier. On 30 July the main party went up the Jefferson Fork, while Lewis, Charbonneau, and two others tried again to find the Shoshonis. They came back on 6 August without any success. Two days later Sacagawea recognized the outcropping of rock that her people called the Beaverhead. Lewis and three men started out ahead, and the main group followed more slowly. [30]

27. Ibid., 2:109, 140-174 passim.
28. Ibid., 2:180-81, 187, 189, 197-200.
29. Ibid., 2:207.
30. Ibid., 2:260, 262, 282-83, 286, 290, 314, 321.

On 14 August an incident occurred that later writers have often blown completely out of proportion. The entire reference is, as given by William Clark, "I checked our interpreter for Striking his woman at their Dinner." [31] It is the only such incident in the journals; it was a domestic quarrel with a common conclusion, especially for that time and place, and hardly worth all the heart-pumpings the romantics have added to it.

A far more valid opportunity for emotion came on 17 August. Lewis' advance party had finally found the Shoshonis, and a party of Shoshonis led by Drouillard guided Clark's group to the camp. Sacagawea became joyful at the sight of Shoshoni riders, embraced a woman who had been captured with her but had escaped, and cried over her brother Cameahwait, now chief of the band. [32]

The expedition spent about two weeks with the Shoshonis. The interpreting was unwieldly but apparently effective: the Shoshonis spoke to Sacagawea, who repeated the words to her husband in Minitari; Charbonneau spoke in French to Francois Labiche, who translated into English. Labiche's part in the proceedings indicates that Charbonneau knew about as much English as the captains knew French. The captains bought pack horses from the Shoshonis for the trek to a navigable part of the Snake River. With a red cloak Lewis had given him, Charbonneau purchased a riding horse for Sacagawea. [33]

After leaving the Shoshonis, the members of the expedition talked with some Kutenai Indians with the help of a Shoshoni boy living with that tribe, [34] and then moved into the Snake River country, where they were plagued by broken terrain, short rations, and dysentery. They obtained canoes at a Nez Perce village on the Clearwater River and reached the Columbia on 16 October. A cryptic note on Charbonneau appeared on 27 October: "Some words with Shabono our

31. Ibid., 2:349. Grace Hebard even suggests that Sacagawea was refusing her husband's attempt to share her with the other men (Hebard, *Sacajawea,* pp. 239-40). As can be seen, such lurid imaginings have no factual basis.

32. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 2:361, 365; Coues, *History of the Expedition*, 2:381-83.

33. Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, p. 519; Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 3:28; 7:143.

34. Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, p. 519.

interpreter about his duty." On 18 November Clark led a party, including Charbonneau, to Cape Disappointment to get a good view of the ocean that they had strived so hard to reach. They were far from disappointed. [35]

The party began trading with the Indians and selecting a spot at which to build a wintering post. On 1 January 1806 when Fort Clatsop was completed, the captains issued orders for its maintenance. Charbonneau was assigned to help the duty sergeant and his men clear out visiting Indians from the post at sunset, but as interpreter he was exempted from guard duty. [36]

The easy monotony of the post was broken on 6 January when Clark led a party including Charbonneau and Sacagawea, to see a beached whale on the coast. By the time they reached the whale, the local villagers had stripped it to a 105-foot-long skeleton, but it was still impressive. The only other mention of Charbonneau's activities that winter was that he brought in a dead Oregon robin for Lewis' examination. [37] His lack of mention in some portions of the journals, however, points up one advantage of traveling with a wife; many of the party had to be treated that winter for venereal disease picked up from the local trading girls.

The expedition started back up the Columbia on 23 March. In mid-April they traded with some Indians for horses, but had to pay high prices. Charbonneau bought three, but lost one through carelessness. At the Walla Walla village, a captured Shoshoni woman provided the language link for interpreting. In May and part of June the expedition rested at the Nez Perce villages on the Snake. On 30 May Charbonneau and Jean Baptiste LePage started for a village with a horseload of goods to trade. The horse fell into the river from a cliff and swam to the other side; an Indian hazed him back, but the goods were wet and some were destroyed. The men spread out the merchandise to dry and sent word that they were ready to trade. The villagers piled roots and bread on a raft and attempted to cross with it, but the raft hit a rock and tipped

35. Thwaites, *Original Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, 3:164, 230-31.

36. Ibid., 3:303-4.

37. Ibid., 3:316, 324, 4:27.

over. Feeling that it was not their day, the traders returned to camp with empty bags. [38]

The party set out for home on 10 June. They passed through Shoshoni country without meeting any Indians. On 3 July the group separated at Clark's Fork. Lewis led part of the group into Blackfoot country on the Marias River. Clark started for the Yellowstone; on the Beaverhead River on 13 July Sergeant Ordway and a crew took the party's cached boats down the Missouri to the mouth of the Yellowstone. Clark's reduced group encamped on the Yellowstone on 15 July.

They soon found signs of Indians, but not friendly ones. On 19 July Charbonneau reported seeing an Indian on the high bluffs across the river. Smoke signals were also seen in the distance. On 20 July the party, having reached navigable waters, began making canoes. The next day half of their supply of horses disappeared. Charbonneau helped search in vain for tracks. At last, Labiche determined that Crows had stolen them. [39] Sergeant Pryor and a small crew took the remaining horses downriver, but lost them to the Crows anyway. The rest of the group reached the mouth of the Yellowstone on 3 August and started down the Missouri. Lewis caught up with them on 12 August. During his journey he had killed a Blackfoot in self-defense and had been wounded accidentally by Pierre Cruzatte.

On 14 August the expedition arrived at the Mandan villages. As soon as they landed, Clark sent Charbonneau to the Minitaris with an invitation to a council the next day. On 16 August Clark prepared honorable discharges for Charbonneau and John Colter (who was turning back to trap upriver). He gave Charbonneau the party's blacksmith tools. The next day he paid Charbonneau $500.33 1/3 for his services plus the price of a horse and lodge. If a Minitari chief could have been persuaded to go to Washington, Charbonneau would have continued downriver as an interpreter with Clark. But none would go, and he and his wife were of no further use to the expedition. Clark offered to take them along anyway; he wanted them to let him raise Jean Baptiste. But Charbonneau said "that he had no

38. Ibid., 4:294, 316, 319, 331, 5:88,97.
39. Ibid., 5:276, 279-81.

acquaintance or prospects of makeing a liveing below, and must continue to live in the way that he had done." As for the boy, he was not yet weaned, but if Clark were willing to wait a year, both Charbonneau and Sacagawea were willing to take him downriver for Clark to raise as he "thought proper." Clark agreed, and the expedition left for Saint Louis with the Mandan chief Shahaka. [40]

Three days later Clark wrote Charbonneau a letter in which he declared his friendship, again promised to raise and educate Jean Baptiste, deplored his inability to reward Sacagawea at the Mandans with all she deserved, and offered to give Charbonneau land and livestock. If Charbonneau wanted to visit his friends in Montreal, Clark said that he would lend him a horse and watch over his family. He also gave Charbonneau two other options: (a) A military fort was planned for the Mandan-Minitari area and Clark would get him the position of interpreter; or (b) Clark would set him up in a small-scale trading venture. Charbonneau could make his decision when he brought Jean Baptiste down the next year. In the meantime, Clark told him to keep his money and collect as many furs and hides as he could during the winter. Clark then promised to help him find the best market for them. [41]

Although Clark's entries in the journals are usually more favorable to Charbonneau than Lewis', the daily entries simply are not consistent with this extraordinary letter of friendship and generosity. If it were not that Clark followed through with what he promised, this letter could be viewed as evidence of flattery and bribery to get Charbonneau's son from him. This is particularly true in the light of Lewis' statement about Charbonneau: "A man of no peculiar merit; was useful as an interpreter only, in which capacity he discharged his duties with good faith." [42] While this statement is not as negative as Charbonneau's detractors have claimed, it is on the other side of the spectrum from Clark's letter. Charbonneau had simply done what he had been paid $25 a month to do—no more, no less; further compensation (which is what Lewis' statement is about)

40. Ibid., 5:338, 344-45; Gass, *Journal of the Voyages and Travels*, p. 276.
41. Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, pp. 315-16.
42. Ibid., p. 369.

was unnecessary. (It is interesting to note that Lewis said nothing about Sacagawea's services, and it is also interesting that the intensely xenophobic Lewis found only the two Canadians hired at the Mandans—Jean Baptiste LePage and Toussaint Charbonneau—entitled to no peculiar merit.

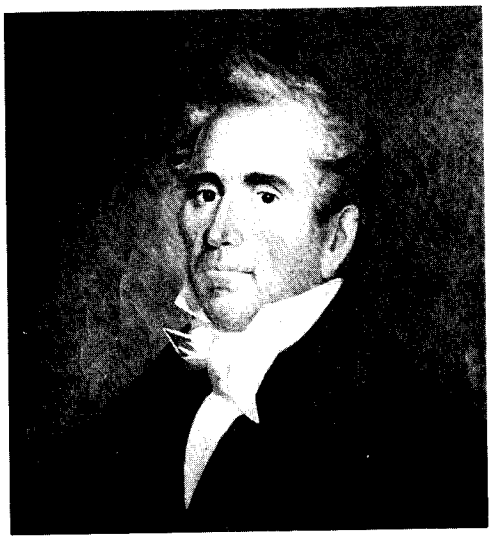
Fortunately, the government was not as tight as Lewis. On 3 March 1807 after the expedition's triumphant return, Congress passed a bill authorizing a 320-acre land warrant, applicable to public land west of the Mississippi, to be issued to each enlisted man of the expedition, including Charbonneau. His $409.16 2/3 salary was also doubled. On 6 March Clark endorsed Charbonneau's warrant and promised to deliver it to him. Clark was back in Saint Louis in May and left for Louisville in July. On 20 August he delivered to Meriwether Lewis, now governor of Missouri Territory, vouchers signed by all the expedition members except LePage.[43] That means that Charbonneau had kept his promise to come down to Saint Louis with Sacagawea and their son.

What happened next is open to speculation. Possibly, Charbonneau and Sacagawea left Saint Louis in late May 1807, with the Pryor-Chouteau party that attempted to return Shahaka to the Mandan village, and went overland around the Arikaras after that nation drove the rest of the party back downriver. They spent the next two years interpreting for the American trader Manuel Lisa and for any Canadian traders who came to the Mandan-Minitari area. It is likely that they came downriver in the fall of 1809 with the Chouteau party that finally returned Shahaka to his home. They reached Saint Louis on 20 November.[44]

Coincidentally or not, Charbonneau begins to show up in the documents again. In January 1810 the War Department received what was left of the draft with which he had been paid on 17 August 1806. Nicolas Biddle, who began compiling notes

43. Ibid., pp. 377-78, 380, 384, 411.

44. Accounts of these expeditions can be found in Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* pp. 432-37, and Dr. (Peyton?) Thomas, "Journey to the Mandans, 1809; The Lost Narrative of Dr. Thomas," ed. Donald Jackson, *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 20, no. 3 (Apr. 1964): 179-92. For this and other aspects of Lisa's career, *see* Richard E. Oglesby, *Manuel Lisa and the Opening of the Missouri Fur Trade* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963).



Manuel Lisa

for the *History of the Expedition* in April 1810, made notes that indicate Charbonneau was available to William Clark. It is clear that Charbonneau, now about fifty-two years old, tried to settle in a white community. On 30 October he received a tract of land (perhaps the bounty land Congress had provided) on the south side of the Missouri in Saint Ferdinand Township of Saint Louis District.[45]

If Charbonneau had any thoughts of farming, he did not take long to change his mind. In March 1811 he bought supplies and turned over his land to William Clark. At Saint Charles on 2 April H.M. Brackenridge, a traveler going upriver with Manuel Lisa, noted, "We had on board a Frenchman named Charbonet, with his wife, an Indian woman of the Snake nation, both of whom had accompanied Lewis and Clark to the Pacific, and were of great service." Both were said to have grown tired of civilization. The Lisa party hurried up the Missouri to catch up with the W.P. Hunt group that was on its way to Astoria.

45. Account books of the Office of the Accountant of the War Department, journal P, p. 8231, 31 January 1810, National Archives, Washington, D.C., as cited in Anderson, "Probing the Riddle of the Bird Woman," p. 10; Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* pp. 501, 506; Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri,* p. 138.

Charbonneau went ahead at one point to ask the Hunt party to wait, but they did not.[46] Lisa caught up with them anyway, and the combined parties reached the Arikaras on 12 June. A week later Lisa and probably Charbonneau and Sacagawea left for the Mandans. Lisa hired him as an interpreter, most likely to work under Reuben Lewis, Meriwether's brother and Missouri Fur Company partner, at Fort Mandan.

Charbonneau worked for the Missouri Fur Company at times until 1813, at $250 a year, but details of his work are lacking until September 1812. During the summer of 1812 Sacagawea bore a second child, a daughter named Lizette. On 9 August Lisa returned to the Mandans; before the end of the month he had made a trip to the Minitaris to get horses. There Charbonneau must have attached himself to the traders again, though he was not yet rehired. On 17 September he rode into Fort Manuel to report horse thieves. Until early October he and Rene Jusseaume were involved in efforts to get the horses back.[47]

Meanwhile, word had finally reached the upper Missouri of the war between Great Britain and the United States. The British/Canadian traders of the North West Company, who still held the loyalty of many Indians in the area, began fomenting trouble. The Minitaris and the Arikaras were also at war, with the respective sympathies of the Canadian and American traders. Charbonneau and Jusseaume not only represented the views of their Minitari friends, but as Canadians, were also highly suspected by the Americans. Clerk John Luttig wrote on 9 October, "Charbonneau & Jessaume Keep us in Constant uproar with their Histories and wish to make fear among the Engagees, these two Rascals ought to be hung for their perfidy,

46. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri,* p. 138; Henry M. Brackenridge, *Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River in 1811* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966 [facsimile of 1814 edition]), pp. 202, 230, 234; John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966 [facsimile of 1817 edition]), pp. 75-76; Washington Irving, *Astoria,* ed. Edgeley W. Todd (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 172-75.

47. *Ledger of Missouri Fur Company, 1812-1817, Clark Books,* Kansas State Historical Society, Topeka, cited in Chardon, *Journal,* p. 277; Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri,* pp. 78-79, 83, 106. In August 1813 Lizette was said to be about one year old. Nothing beyond these references is known about the girl.

they do more harm than good to the American Government, stir up the Indians and pretend to be friends to the white People at the same time but we find them to be our Ennemies." The next day he reported that the Arikaras complained that Charbonneau and Jusseaume were liars and not good men.[48]

After such language it is astonishing to find that five days later Michel Immel, Hypolite Papin, and Charbonneau were leaving for the Minitari village, "Mr. M. Lisa having engaged Charbonneau for some good reasons." Also, on 24 October the journal entry read, "our Heroes[!] arrived from the Bigbellies," having successfully negotiated a peace between the whites and the warring tribes. During November Charbonneau was one of those who helped keep the fragile peace cemented. On 19 November Fort Manuel was completed, baptized, and celebrated with festivities and "a good Supper."[49]

The next month tragedy struck the Charbonneau family. Sacagawea developed a "putrid fever," probably diptheria, and, on 20 December, died. Luttig's eulogy read, "she was a good and the best Woman in the fort, aged abt 25 years she left a fine infant girl."[50] Charbonneau's reaction is not recorded, but he

48. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri,* pp. 84-85.

49. Ibid., pp. 86-87, 92-94.

50. Ibid., p. 106. For nearly twenty years professional historians have known that Sacagawea was almost certainly the Shoshoni woman who died at Fort Manuel. Yet because of the influence of Grace R. Hebard's *Sacajawea,* such publications as *Encyclopedia Americana* and *National Geographic* still repeat the story of an imposter who died in 1884. On the other hand, while it is no longer hard to show that Hebard's premise is false, the statement that Sacagawea died on 20 December 1812 rests on circumstantial evidence. Luttig did not name her beyond "the wife of Charbonneau, a Snake squaw." The circumstantial evidence, though, is very strong.

(1) A list of the expedition members, made out by William Clark in 1825, shows "Secarjaweau Dead" (Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* p. 638). A photographic plate of this document is located in the South Dakota State Historical Society library. The original can be found in a notebook in the Newberry Library in Chicago.

(2) Brackenridge very clearly states that the woman who traveled with him in 1811 was the same one who had been with Lewis and Clark.

(3) Luttig includes few details in his 20 December entry, but his description of the woman who died fits the nationality, the personality, and the age of Sacagawea.

(4) In August 1813 William Clark became the legal guardian of Jean Baptiste and a one-year-old girl name Lizette, both children of Toussaint Charbonneau, who was reported dead. It seems evident that Lizette was the "fine infant girl," whose mother was dead. It is likely that if the mother of either child were alive at the time, the fact would have been established in the decree. Hebard's (and others) contention

A statute of Sacagawea located in Saint Louis

probably felt a real loss. Sacagawea had borne both his children and, from all evidence, had been his sole bedmate for nearly eight years. Without romanticizing her in the least, it can be said that she was the best wife he is known to have had.

At the end of December Charbonneau left Fort Manuel with several men and a load of trade goods for the Minitaris. At the villages were also North West Company men who were urging the Minitaris to rob and kill the Americans. Probably because Lisa was the most respected American trader on the Missouri and because the well-liked Charbonneau was his employee, the Minitaris declined, although one old troublemaker split from the tribe and robbed Charbonneau of some ammunition. Trade was poor, however, and hostile Sioux

that Toussaint, Jr., not Jean Baptiste, was under Clark's guardianship is shattered by present knowledge that "Toussaint, Jr." was Jean Baptiste, as evidenced by the 1825 list mentioned above. *Ed. Note:* See Irving Anderson's "Fort Manuel: Its Historical Significance" in this issue for an in-depth study of Sacagawea's identity.

were moving into the area. Charbonneau was back at Fort Manuel on 21 February and returned to the Minitaris on 1 March with an armed escort. Shortly thereafter, the Sioux attacked Fort Manuel, driving Lisa and his men downriver. There is one story that Charbonneau was made prisoner by the British and taken in irons to Canada. [51]

When Lisa's party reached Saint Louis at the end of May, John Luttig had Charbonneau's daughter with him. In the absence of William Clark, he decided to become the guardian of the girl and her brother, who was still in Saint Louis. On 11 August Luttig was declared guardian, but Clark had Luttig's name scratched out and his own inserted. The document declared that Toussaint Charbonneau was dead; while that may have been a deliberate falsehood, it was most likely based on rumors Lisa had heard on the way downriver. [52] Though Charbonneau was not dead, he disappeared from view for a while. War was raging on the frontiers, and trade operations on the upper Missouri were completely suspended.

One questionable story indicates that perhaps in 1814 Charbonneau and Ed Rose made a trip to Shoshoni country to purchase Arapaho captives to be sold to traders on the Missouri. The story includes Charbonneau largely as a cowardly foil to Rose's bravery (Rose was not brave; he was insane), but there may be an element of truth in the tale. As a widower, Charbonneau may have tried to replace Sacagawea with another Shoshoni and settled for an Arapaho. The description Charbonneau gave naturalist Thomas Say in 1819 of the culturally deformed genitals of Arapaho women may add to the veracity of the tale. [53]

In 1815 A.P. Chouteau and Jules DeMun led a party of

51. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri,* pp. 109, 121-22, 124, 127-28; Reuben Holmes, "The Five Scalps," Missouri Historical Society *Glimpses of the Past* 5, no. 1-3 (Jan.-Mar. 1938): 19n. Stella Drumm's note is undocumented, but the lady is usually right.

52. Luttig, *Journal of a Fur-Trading Expedition to the Upper Missouri,* pp. 106, 134. The document is reproduced opposite p. 106.

53. Holmes, "The Five Scalps," pp. 19-22; Edwin James, *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains . . . 1819 and '20,* 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966 [facsimile of 1823 edition]), 2:187. Charbonneau may also have gained this knowledge while he was with Chouteau-DeMun.

traders to the then American-Mexican border area along the upper Arkansas River. In February 1816 DeMun went back to Saint Louis for supplies and men. Charbonneau was one of the *engages*, hired at $200 for the year. DeMun's new party left Saint Louis on 15 June and reached the Kansas River on 11 July, where they were to rendezvous with Chouteau. Delayed by a fight with Pawnees, Chouteau did not arrive until 10 August, when the partners put together their outfit of forty-five men and set out again for the upper Arkansas. There they traded with the Indians, trapped beaver, and got into trouble with Spanish officials in Santa Fe. In the spring of 1817, shortly after seventeen men had been sent down the Platte River with the worst of the party's horses, the rest of the traders were arrested, taken to Santa Fe, and imprisoned. After their goods were confiscated, the men were released and ordered never to return. They arrived at Saint Louis on 7 September.[54] While Charbonneau could have been one of those arrested, it is more likely that he was one of the seventeen who went down the Platte. His disposition of the case, signed with an X, mentions nothing of the arrest and was taken in December, while the depositions of those mentioning the arrest were taken in September. Charbonneau and the others had probably taken the horses to the mouth of the Platte or to Council Bluffs, and had waited there until hearing from their employers. Whichever party he was with, he was definitely in Saint Louis in December.

The next notice of Charbonneau came with his employment as United States "interpreter for the Mandan & Minitary nation" at $400 a year, stationed at Council Bluffs. The first known date of this employment is 1 April 1819, but he may well have been working at the job from the summer of 1818 when the machinery for a grand Missouri expedition was being prepared. William Clark no doubt got him the job; Missouri River Indian Agent Benjamin O'Fallon was Clark's nephew.[55] As territorial governor of Missouri and as

54. *American State Papers: Foreign Relations,* 4:210-13; T. M. Marshall, ed., "The Journals of Jules DeMun," trans. Mrs. Nettie H. Beauregard, *Missouri Historical Society Collections* 5 no. 3 (June 1928): 318-21.

55. Chardon, *Journal,* p. 278; An account of Benjamin O'Fallon is in Hafen, *Mountain Men,* 5:255-81.

superintendent of Indian Affairs at Saint Louis, Clark often had the opportunity to do his old interpreter favors.

Because the Mandans and Minitaris were a long way from Council Bluffs, Charbonneau seldom had the opportunity to exercise his authorized role while stationed there. But that was the highest United States post on the river at the time, and Charbonneau was used as a general interpreter. He and O'Fallon were aboard the steamboat *Western Engineer* when it left Saint Louis in late June 1819. The Kansas Indians, upset at the grand military invasion of their country, had been harassing the soldiers, largely by stealing horses and robbing scattered parties. Before the *Western Engineer* left Fort Osage on 10 August, O'Fallon sent Charbonneau overland to their villages on the Kansas River to get them to a council at Isle au Vache on 18 August. However, when a small party of naturalists and scientists, led by Thomas Say, arrived at the village two days later, the chiefs were just getting ready to go.[56] They left, but Charbonneau stayed at the village with Say. When Say's party left the Kansas four days later, they lost all their horses to a war party of Pawnees. Charbonneau and one of the scientists walked back to the Kansas village to get help. Say's party finally arrived at Isle au Vache on 29 August. The *Western Engineer* had already gone on, so Charbonneau and part of the scientific party hurried to catch up with it near the mouth of Wolf River.[57] On 17 September the steamer arrived at Fort Lisa at Council Bluffs, and the military establishment that became Fort Atkinson was begun nearby.

For the rest of the year Charbonneau served as interpreter at the post, part of the time working with the sutler's store run by John O'Fallon. He also helped Thomas Say, no doubt providing the information Say recorded on Minitari customs and the Minitari vocabulary. In January 1820 Benjamin O'Fallon sent Charbonneau upriver with a message to the Mandans and Minitaris. This may have been the news that plans for posts further upriver had been canceled. Charbonneau did not return until the end of May 1821, when he was paid $150 for his services.[58]

56. James, *Account of an Expedition,* 1:111, 119.

57. Ibid., 1:131-37.

58. David Meriwether, *My Life in the Mountains and on the Plains,* ed. R. A. Griffen (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 78; James, *Account of an Expedition,* 1:273-80; 2:appendix 70-78, 84-85; Chardon, *Journal,* pp. 278-79.

For two years the record is blank about Charbonneau's activities, but it is likely that he was working with traders on the Missouri, perhaps those of the French Company (Berthold, Chouteau & Pratte). On 2 June 1823 the Arikaras attacked the trading party of William H. Ashley when it camped near their village. The incident put the whole Missouri River area in an uproar. Traders above the Arikaras moved downriver to join the retaliatory force commanded by Colonel Henry Leavenworth. In August he made a rather ineffective attack on the village and then talked peace.[59] On 14 August he was astonished to learn that during the night the entire tribe had silently abandoned their village. He sent out a party with a note:

> "Ricaras You see the pipe of peace which you gave to me in the hands of Mr. [Toussaint] Charbonneau and the flag of the United States.
>
> "These will convince you that my heart is not bad . . . ."

In the late afternoon Charbonneau and the rest of the party came back without seeing even a sign of the Arikaras.[60] Leavenworth returned downriver to counter the storm of criticism leveled at him by traders.

Charbonneau met another influential traveler at this time. On 23 August Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wurttemberg in Germany, arrived at Fort Recovery, ten miles north of the White River. On 25 August the duke returned to the fort after exploring to find Charbonneau waiting for him with an invitation from the *bourgeois* at the French Company's Fort Kiowa twenty miles upriver. During the trip and his overnight stay at the post, the duke no doubt spent considerable time talking to Charbonneau, for he had met the eighteen-year-old Jean Baptiste at a Kansas River post and was planning to take the youngster back to Europe with him, probably at the instigation of William Clark, whom the duke admired greatly. The enterprise presumably received Charbonneau's approval.[61]

59. Excellent accounts of this action can be found in Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (1953; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969) and Dale L. Morgan, ed., *The West of William H. Ashley: 1822-1838* (Denver, Colo.: Old West Publishing Co., 1964).

60. Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, p. 56.

61. Paul Wilhelm, Duke of Wurttemberg, "First Journey to North America in the Years 1822 to 1824," trans. Wm. G. Bek, *South Dakota Historical Collections* 19 (1938): 408-10. A new edition of this work has recently been published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

On 6 October veteran French Company trader Joseph Brazeau arrived at Fort Kiowa and dismissed Charbonneau's fears that Brazeau's old friends, the Arikaras, would be hostile to his party. Therefore, on 11 October a trading party under Antoine Citoleux left the fort in a canoe with five men, including Charbonneau, who was no doubt intended to be the interpreter when they reached the Mandans. At a point about one day's travel below the temporary Arikara village on the Cannonball River, Charbonneau prudently left the canoe and walked around the village. Citoleux and the other four men were never seen again, and word eventually came that they had been killed at the Arikara village.[62]

Charbonneau reached the Mandans safely, but without trade goods he could do no work for the French Company. The Columbia Fur Company, however, whose partners were mostly ex-North West Company men and whose headquarters was at Lake Traverse on the present South Dakota-Minnesota border, had already built a post at the Mandans and capitalized on their status as ex-British traders to safely stay where the Americans could not. It was still not completely safe; about the time Charbonneau arrived an *engage* was killed by an Arikara. In December, though, Charbonneau and two other men went to Lake Traverse for supplies and returned safely. In the summer of 1824 he evidently made a trip to Saint Louis with William Tilton and got himself reinstated as government interpreter. By the spring of 1825 he was upriver again. He and three other men were then sent to get supplies from Lake Traverse. They met a band of Assiniboines on the way back and lost their wagon, horses, and goods.[63]

On 28 July Charbonneau returned to the Mandans after a visit to a Crow village two or three days' ride away and found Benjamin O'Fallon and General Henry Atkinson, with nearly five hundred troops, at the post. The expedition was on a

62. Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, pp. 72-73; Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 2:225.

63. Accounts of the Columbia Fur Company can be found in Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, and Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 2 vols. (1935; reprint ed., Stanford, Calif.: Academic Reprints, 1954). Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 2:225, 227; Morgan, *West of William H. Ashley*, pp. 72-73, 246; Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, pp. 648-49. James Kipp reported that Charbonneau was the only white man left at the Mandans that summer, and Joshus Pilcher said that Charbonneau had been the interpreter for fifteen years prior to 1839.

treaty-making mission up the Missouri to the Yellowstone area. On 30 July Charbonneau served as interpreter for the Mandans and Minitaris as they made treaties of trade and friendship with the United States. The expedition journal mentions that Charbonneau had a wife again, apparently a Minitari. As the expedition camped six miles above the Minitari villages on 6 August, the journalist wrote, "Shabano & his wife & her brother came to us here & staid all night." The expedition also left subagent Peter Wilson at the Mandans. Charbonneau helped him negotiate with the upriver tribes that fall. [64] On 6 April 1826 the Missouri River flooded at the Minitari village. Charbonneau managed to escape with some of his goods, but he spent three days on a stack of corn "without fire, in a cold north wind, and drifting snow." [65]

For the next few years most of the information available on Charbonneau is from the receipts for his salary as a United States interpreter at the Mandan Agency, for both Mandans and Minitaris and sometimes Crows. Most of the receipts were signed upriver at the Mandan villages, but he signed at Saint Louis on 30 June 1829 and on 31 December 1831. Both times he probably came downriver with Indian Agent John Sanford, the second time as part of Sanford's partially aborted scheme to take a large Missouri River Indian delegation to Washington. Charbonneau helped in the round-up of delegates and must have been part of the group that reached Saint Louis by early December. Sanford left Saint Louis on 1 January 1832, with his party of Indians and two interpreters. Charbonneau did not go, for if any Minitaris came downriver, they did not go to Washington and he was not needed. He may have waited in Saint Louis until Sanford was back, but he was upriver by fall. On 12 September he and two other Frenchmen and two Arikara women arrived at Fort Pierre from upriver, and started back two days later, presumably on American Fur Company business. [66]

64. Russell Reid and Clell G. Gannon, eds., "Journal of the Atkinson-O'Fallon Expedition," *North Dakota Historical Quarterly* 4 no. 1 (Oct. 1929): 35,37; Charles Kappler, ed., *Indian Treaties, 1778-1883* (1904; reprint ed., Broadway, N.Y.: Interland Publishing Co., 1972), pp. 242-44; Chardon, *Journal,* p. 279.

65. Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 2:237.

66. Chardon, *Journal,* p. 281; John C. Ewers, *Indian Life on the Upper Missouri* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), p. 83; Charles E. DeLand and Doane Robinson, eds., "Fort Tecumseh and Fort Pierre Journal and Letter Books," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 9 (1918): 160-61.

On 18 June 1833 Charbonneau served as interpreter at Fort Clark during a council between Mandans, Minitaris, and Crows and a group including Agent Sanford, American Fur Company "King" Kenneth McKenzie, and German Prince Maximilian. He also served as a private interpreter for the prince as he toured the Mandan and Minitari villages. Sanford put Charbonneau's job as interpreter in jeopardy during the summer, for he suggested closing the agency, complaining of its inadequacy, including the employment of only one interpreter for the multi-lingual upper Missouri. William Clark, however, urged Washington to provide the necessary funds to continue the Mandan Agency in proper style, and on 18 October Clark was sent word that two interpreters would be employed, with the assurance that "Mr. Charborneau will be retained as one of them." [67]

Charbonneau could not have known of Clark's help during the summer, however, and it is evident that he was looking for more financial security. He had been employed by the American Fur Company at Fort Clark when the Indian agent did not require his aid, but now a better offer appeared. Two veteran traders, William L. Sublette and Robert Campbell, had set up a company to challenge the AFC monopoly of the Missouri. When Sublette showed up at the Minitari village in August and left a load of goods and some experienced traders to establish a post, Charbonneau probably did not have to be asked twice. Hannibal Dougherty was the chief trader at the new post and probably knew Charbonneau from Council Bluff days. On 6 November Dougherty and Charbonneau moved with the Minitaris to their winter village. The next day Maximilian arrived with letters from Robert Campbell at the headquarters post on the Yellowstone. Charbonneau again interpreted for the prince and went with him to Fort Clark on 8 November. En route, they were stopped and treated to a meal at every village when the Indians recognized Charbonneau. Finally, Charbonneau hid from view to avoid any more invitations, and the party reached Fort Clark, where Maximilian's group settled in for the winter. [68]

67. Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 1:345, 350-52, 357; Chardon, *Journal,* p. 281.

68. For an account of this operation, *see* John E. Sunder, *Bill Sublette: Mountain Man* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1959) and George R.

Charbonneau did not stay with the new company much longer. He may have heard from William Clark that his government job was safe, and he certainly heard by early December that the one with Sublette and Campbell was not. Trade had not been good, for one thing, though there is one interesting note from Kenneth McKenzie, who wrote that at the Mandan post "the Indians are all for us" and started to add, "Old Charbonneau cannot . . . ," apparently intending to say that Charbonneau's influence was not great enough to persuade the Indians to trade with Dougherty.[69] McKenzie crossed it out, however, indicating that, on second thoughts, he was not sure enough of that to report it to Saint Louis. It is known, though, that in late November, while Charbonneau was entertaining Maximilian at Minitari "medicine feasts," Campbell sent a proposal to McKenzie suggesting that Sublette and Campbell would be only too happy to leave the Missouri in AFC hands if it were financially feasible to do so. McKenzie, who wanted to bankrupt the new company, did not agree to the proposal. But on 10 December, in just enough time for word of Campbell's proposal to get downriver to the Minitari post, Charbonneau quit and rejoined James Kipp at Fort Clark. Maximilian was happy to see him and considered the change "an opportunity to have much conversation with him respecting the Manitaries."[70] William Laidlaw, the AFC *bourgeois* at Fort Pierre, was not so happy; after hearing of it, he wrote Kipp, "I am much surprised at your taking Old Charboneau into favour after shewing so much ingratitude, upon all occasions (the old Knave what does he say for himself."[71] For the rest of the winter Charbonneau worked at Fort Clark and the Minitari village for the AFC and gave Maximilian the information on

Brooks, ed., "The Private Journal of Robert Campbell," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 20, no. 1 (Oct. 1963): 3-24 and 20, no. 2 (Jan. 1964): 107-18; Dougherty is mentioned in Maximilian's and Campbell's accounts without a Christian name and has been identified as John and Joseph, but Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 1:218, says that he had been with the Long party. The only Dougherty with Long was Hannibal (James, *Account of an Expedition,* 1:425); Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 2:217-221.

69. Chardon, *Journal,* p. 365.
70. Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 3:20-35, 44.
71. Chardon, *Journal,* p. 276.

Minitari customs and vocabulary that he later included in his travel volumes.[72] Meanwhile, AFC backers in the States, lacking McKenzie's knowledge and nerve, bought out Sublette and Campbell.

In June 1834 F.A. Chardon stepped off the AFC steamer *Assiniboine* to take the post of *bourgeois* at Fort Clark. His journal, kept until 1839, provides a full, candid picture of the life, men, and events at the post. His first mentions of Charbonneau are of routine trading business, but on 22 October, "Charbonneau and his Lady started for the Gros Ventres, on a visit–(or to tell the truth,) in quest of one of his runaway Wives–for I must inform you he has two lovely ones–Poor old Man." The seventy-six-year-old Charbonneau was back four days later with only the news "that Buffaloe are plenty." During November he traveled back and forth between the fort and the Minitaris on routine business. In December Chardon reported that at 10:30 P.M. on Christmas Eve, "we partook of a fine supper Prepared by Old Charbonneau, consisting of Meat pies, bread, fricassied pheasants, Boiled tongues, roast beef–and Coffee."[73]

During 1835 Charbonneau's work was entirely routine. One of his more important functions was that of gossip collector for Chardon; this was not merely a social function, for Chardon had to keep abreast of everything that went on if he wished to be a successful trader. Then, during the summer a new subagent, W.N. Fulkerson, appeared on the upper Missouri and rehired Charbonneau at an annual salary of $300, which was in addition to what he got from the AFC. In December Charbonneau was briefly ill "with something like the Cholic."[74]

The beginning of the year 1836 offered Charbonneau some unpleasant excitement. On 9 January he returned from the Minitaris with news that the Sioux had stolen some corn from the village. Despite Chardon's journal entry that "the quarrel however seems to have been amicably Setled," AFC trader D.D. Mitchell later wrote W.N. Fulkerson that on 10 January, "8 or 10 young men" of the Yanktonai Sioux arrived at Fort Clark as

72. Maximilian, "Travels in the Interior of North America," 3: 53-56, 65-67.
73. Chardon, *Journal,* p. 12, 18.
74. Ibid., pp. 23, 31, 37, 46-48, 50, 282.

the only survivors of a Minitari-Mandan attack on a forty-five-lodge camp at Knife River. He added, "After telling their melancholy tale, one of the Young Sioux deliberately fired at a Gros Ventre boy in the Interpreters room—Old Charbono, made a narrow escape two balls having passed through his hat." The Sioux were allowed to leave the fort peacefully.[75]

Throughout the rest of 1836 Charbonneau's activities were again routine, carting in hides and pelts from the Minitari village, collecting news, and cooking occasional feasts. In December, however, he began to bring in news of starving Indians. Buffalo were scarce, and by the spring of 1837, starvation was evident even at the trading post. In May Charbonneau tried to get food for his Minitari friends, but Chardon finally had to say, "unfortunately I had none to give him." In June Fulkerson was back upriver with words and gifts, but the Indians were not particularly impressed; they were still too hungry. On 1 July Chardon and Charbonneau tried to retrieve six horses stolen by Minitaris from the AFC herd. The Indians refused to return them, probably needing them for hunting; on 10 July Charbonneau reported "Indians all out makeing dried meat." For a while things looked good. At Fort Clark on 16 July Charbonneau prepared "a Jackson dinner, of Pot pye, and pudding."[76]

Unfortunately, smallpox had been brought upriver on the company steamers. As it spread from band to band, the Indians blamed the whites, perhaps with due cause, as an effective quarantine would have left the traders without supplies. Hostility grew. On 11 August Chardon reported, "Sent old Charboneau up to the Gros-Ventres with some tobacco, and a bag full of good talk, as yesterday they sent a very severe threat to me." Two days later he added, "Several reports from the Gros Ventres that they are bent on the destruction of us all, as yet I do not place Much confidence in what report says, Charboneau will bring us the strait News." On 14 August, "Charboneau arrived late last night, all the reports from the Gros Ventres, it appears to be without foundation, as they say, they never had any thoughts of killing the Whites, but the Rees have made several threats, Which of the two, to believe, I Know

75. Ibid., pp. 52, 386.
76. Ibid., pp. 53-56, 61-62, 69, 75, 80, 83, 89, 90, 112, 114, 119-21.

not, however, I will still be on my guard." An Arikara killed a post employee on 17 August, and two days after that "Charboneau and his family, started for the Gros Ventre last night, being afraid to trust himself in the day time."[77]

The Minitaris had not yet been hit by the disease, but on 6 September Charbonneau's wife died of it at the Minitari village, the first to do so. On 27 September Charbonneau reported that though there was no bad talk among the Indians, ten Minitaris had died and two or three Arikaras were dying every day. The Indians decided to isolate themselves from the epidemic. On 31 December, "Charboneau arrived from the Gros Ventre Camp—he was accompanied by 2 Mandans and one Gros Ventre, he is encamped with only ten Lodges, the rest of the Lodges are scattered, on the Little Missouri—he has had No News of them, for two Months, in all probability they are all Dead, the last News that he had from them was, that 117 had died, and the disease was still rageing."[78] Eventually, the smallpox subsided, but at terrible costs to the tribes.

In the spring of 1838, the closest thing in existence to a physical description of Charbonneau was recorded by trader Charles Larpenteur. As Larpenteur and a companion came down the Missouri in a canoe on 25 March, they saw a large band of Indians on the bank. Because they had been fired upon several times previously, they were very fearful until "we perceived an individual with pants and a red flannel shirt on, looking very much like a white man. To our surprise and joy, we found that it was old Mr. Charbonneau, who had been 40 years among the Missouri Indians. He used to say that when he first came on the river it was so small he could straddle it."[79]

In April Charbonneau demonstrated that he had not learned much boatmanship in the previous thirty-three years. On 29 March he picked up some trade goods. A week later a report reached Fort Clark that he had traded the goods for 400 robes and a half pack of beaver at the Minitari village. On 12 April, however, word came down that his skin canoe, loaded

77. Ibid., pp. 126-27, 129.
78. Ibid., pp. 135, 138, 144-45.
79. Charles Larpenteur, *Forty Years a Fur Trader on the Upper Missouri: The Personal Narrative of . . . 1833-1872*, ed. Elliott Coues, 2 vols. in 1 (1898; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1962), pp. 141-42.

with buffalo robes, had been sunk by a gale of wind. Chardon sent help. Not until another week later did Charbonneau finally arrive with the robes retrieved from the river. [80]

On 27 October Chardon reports that there was still life in his interpreter, for

> Old Charboneau, an old Man of 80, took to himself and *others* a [another] young Wife, a young Assinneboine of 14, a Prisoner that was taken in the fight of this summer, and bought by me of the Rees; the young Men of the Fort, and two *rees,* gave to the Old Man a splendid *Chariveree,* the Drums, pans, Kittles &c Beating; guns, fireing &c. The Old gentleman gave a feast to the Men, and a glass of grog--and went to bed with his young wife, with the intention of doing his best. [81]

The aging Charbonneau apparently carried on his normal activities until July 1839. Not until then did Charbonneau learn that Fulkerson was no longer Indian agent, and that his employment as interpreter had been terminated. He immediately boarded a boat for Saint Louis. The new superintendent of Indian Affairs, Joshua Pilcher, reported to the commissioner that on 21 August,

> Toussaint Charbonneau, the late Mandan Interpreter, arrived here from the Mandan villages, a distance of 1600 miles, and came into the office, tottering under the infirmities of 80 winters, without a dollar to support him, to ask what appeared to me to be nothing more than just, and I accordingly have paid his salary as Interpreter for the Mandan sub-agency, for the 1st & 2d quarters of this year, with the understanding that his services are no longer required. This man has been a faithful servant of the Government—though in a humble capacity. He figured conspicuously in the expedition of Lewis and Clark to the Pacific, and rendered much service. For the last fifteen years, he has been employed as the Government interpreter at the Mandans. [82]

What Charbonneau did after this is unknown. He had some land in Missouri that he had previously left in William Clark's hands; perhaps he lived there or rented it out. It is possible, but not very probable, that he went back upriver. By August 1843 he was dead. The specific time or manner or whereabouts of his

80. Chardon, *Journal,* pp. 154-57.
81. Ibid., p. 173.
82. Jackson, *Letters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition,* pp. 648.

death is unknown. His son, Jean Baptiste, was the only known claimant to his estate. [83]

When seen in context, the negative reports about Charbonneau, much quoted by his detractors, seem to reflect the prejudices of the authors more than the personality of Charbonneau. Significantly, William Clark was willing to serve as Charbonneau's patron until his own death. Fellow Frenchman and German travelers found nothing really bad about him. Indians apparently considered him a friend, probably beyond normal business considerations. His actions, except for the 1795 rape incident, seem to reflect very much the vices and virtues of the ordinary frontiersmen of his time. He was pragmatic about issues, cautious in a hostile environment, sensual about sex and food, and indeed humble in capacity. He was not a hero nor a villain; he was simply a common and a durable man.

83. Hafen, *Mountain Men,* 9:62.