

Sacajawea information sheet

Sacagawea , or Sakakawea , c.1784-1884?, Native North American woman guide on the [Lewis and Clark expedition](#) and the only woman to accompany the party. She is generally called the Bird Woman in English, although this translation has been challenged, and there has been much dispute about the form of her Native American name. She was a member of the Shoshone, had been captured and sold to a Mandan, and finally was traded to Toussaint Charbonneau, one of whose wives she became. He was interpreter for the expedition. She proved invaluable as a guide and interpreter when Lewis and Clark reached the upper Missouri River and the mountains from which she had come. On the return journey she and Charbonneau left (1806) the expedition at the Mandan villages. While some historians date Sacajawea's death around 1812, there are others who claim that she was discovered by a missionary in 1875 and that she actually died in Wyoming in 1884.

<http://womenshistory.about.com/library/weekly/aa051199.htm>



After a 1999 introduction of a new US dollar coin which features the Shoshone Indian Sacagawea, many are interested in the real history of this woman.

Ironically, the picture on the dollar coin is not really a picture of Sacagawea, for the simple reason that no known likeness exists of her.

Little is known of her life, either, other than her brief brush with fame as a guide to the Lewis and Clark expedition, exploring the American West in 1804-1806.

Nevertheless, the honoring of Sacagawea with her portrait on the new dollar coin follows many other similar honors. There are claims that no woman in the US has more statues in her honor. Many public schools, especially in the Northwest, are named for Sacagawea, as are mountain peaks, streams and lakes.

Origin

Sacagawea was born to the Shoshone Indians, about 1788. In 1800, at the age of 12, she was kidnapped by Hidatsa (or Minitari) Indians and taken from what is now Idaho to what is now North Dakota.

Later, she was sold as a slave to the French Canadian trader Toussaint Charbonneau, along with another Shoshone woman. He took them both as wives, and in 1805, Sacagawea's and Charbonneau's son, Jean-Baptiste Charbonneau, was born.

Translator for Lewis and Clark

The Lewis and Clark expedition recruited Charbonneau and Sacagawea to accompany them westward, expecting to make use of Sacagawea's ability to speak to the Shoshone. The expedition expected that they would need to trade with the Shoshone for horses. Sacagawea spoke no English, but she could translate to Hidatsa to Charbonneau, who could translate to French for Francois Labiche, a member of the expedition, who could translate into English for Lewis and Clark.

President Thomas Jefferson in 1803 asked for funding from Congress for Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to explore the western territories between the Mississippi River and the Pacific Ocean. Clark, more than Lewis, respected the Indians as fully human, and treated them as sources of information rather than as bothersome savages, as other explorers too often did.

Sacajawea or Sacagawea?

While most of the news stories and web biographies of this now-more-famous woman spell her name Sacajawea, the original spelling during the Lewis and Clark expedition was with a "g" not a "j": Sacagawea. The sound of the letter is a hard "g" so it's hard to understand how the change came to be.

PBS in a [website](#) designed to accompany the Ken Burns film on Lewis and Clark, documents that her name is derived from the Hidatsa words "sacaga" (for bird) and "wea" (for woman). The explorers spelled the name Sacagawea all seventeen times they recorded the name during the expedition.



** artwork from
www.arttoday.com
used with permission*

Others spell the name [Sakakawea](#) and with several other variations as well. Because the name is a transliteration of an unwritten name, these differences of interpretation are to be expected.

Traveling with Lewis and Clark



** artwork from
www.arttoday.com
used with
permission*

Accompanied by her infant son, Sacagawea set out with the expedition for the west. Her memory of Shoshone trails proved valuable, according to some sources; according to others, she did not serve as a guide to the trails so much as to useful foods and medicines along the way. Her presence as an Indian woman with a baby helped to convince Indians that this party of whites was friendly. And her translation skills, however indirect from Shoshone to English, were also invaluable at several key points.

The only woman on the trip, she also cooked, foraged for food, and sewed, mended and cleaned the clothes of the men. In one key incident recorded in Clark's journals, she saved records and instruments from being lost overboard during a storm.

Sacagawea was treated as a valuable member of the party, even given a full vote in deciding where to spend the winter of 1805-6, though at the end of the expedition, it was her husband and not she who was paid for their work.

When the expedition reached Shoshone country, they encountered a band of Shoshone. Surprisingly, the leader of the band was Sacagawea's brother.

Twentieth century legends of Sacagawea have stressed -- most scholars would say falsely -- her role as a guide in the Lewis and Clark expedition. While she was able to point out a few landmarks, and her presence was enormously helpful in many ways, it's clear that she did not herself lead the explorers in their cross-continental journey.

After the Expedition

On returning to the home of Sacagawea and Charbonneau, the expedition paid Charbonneau with money and land for the work of Sacagawea and himself.

A few years later, Clark apparently arranged for Sacagawea and Charbonneau to settle in St. Louis. Sacagawea gave birth to a daughter, and shortly after died of an unknown illness. Clark legally adopted her two children, and educated Jean Baptiste (some sources call him Pompey) in St. Louis and Europe. He became a linguist and later returned to the west as a mountain man. It is unknown what happened to the daughter, Lisette.

The [PBS' website on Lewis and Clark](#) details the theory of another woman who lived to 100, dying in 1884 in Wyoming, who has long been identified mistakenly as Sacagawea.

Evidence for the early death of Sacagawea include Clark's notation of her as dead in a list of those who were on the journey.

Picking Sacagawea for the \$1 coin

In July, 1998, Treasury Secretary Rubin announced the choice of Sacagawea for the new dollar coin, to replace the Susan B. Anthony coin.

Reaction to the choice has not always been positive. Rep. Michael N. Castle of Delaware organized to try to replace Sacagawea's image with that of the Statue of Liberty, on the grounds that the dollar coin should have something or someone more easily recognized than Sacagawea. Indian groups, including Shoshones, expressed their hurt and anger, and pointed out that not only is Sacagawea well known in the western U.S., but that putting her on the dollar will lead to more recognition of her.

The Minneapolis Star Tribune said, in a June 1998 article,

The new coin was supposed to bear the image of an American woman who took a stand for liberty and justice. And the only woman they could name was a poor girl recorded in history for her ability to beat dirty laundry on a rock?

The objection was to replacing Anthony's likeness on the coin. "Her struggle on behalf of temperance, abolition, women's rights and suffrage left a broad wake of social reform and prosperity."

Yet another irony: in 1905, Susan B. Anthony and her fellow suffragist Anna Howard Shaw spoke at the dedication of the Alice Cooper statue of Sacagawea, now in a Portland, Oregon, park.

How do you feel about this coin? Is Sacagawea's an appropriate recognition of the important role of this Native American woman who guided some of history's important explorers? Was she a slave or servant who did little of real note, and that not really willingly? Post your comments on the [Women's History forum](#).



** artwork from
www.arttoday.com
used with permission*