

LaBonte eventually settled for good in 1836

LABONTE continued
from front page

the winter of 1813-14.

Manangan said she found the list of Astorians – as the Pacific Fur Co. men were colloquially known at the time – in her papers after having received it originally in 2007 from a friend who is a history buff.

“Gosh, I was so happy about it,” Manangan says. “It has Louis LaBonte’s name and probably his brother. Years ago ... 1800s. He was a carpenter and a fur trapper.”

LaBonte was listed as a carpenter who was stationed at Fort George, the name that Fort Astoria adopted after proprietor Duncan McDougal sold the entire enterprise to the Canadian North West Co. on Nov. 12, 1813, after learning of the outbreak of the War of 1812.

Also on the list of employees who wintered was J. Bte. LaBonte – Jean Baptiste – Louis’ brother.

Famed New York City merchant John Jacob Astor founded the American Fur Co. and its subsidiary, the Pacific Fur Co., which competed against the North West Co., in June 1810.

Astor’s plan to establish Pacific Fur Co. posts in the distant Oregon country to improve his fur trade with China was two-pronged: He dispatched employees overland following the Lewis and Clark Expedition route and also sailed a contingent around South America’s Cape Horn.

According to the reminiscences of Louis LaBonte Jr. published in the June 1900 *Quarterly of the Oregon Historical Society*, his father accompanied St. Louis businessman Wilson Price Hunt on the overland journey to the Pacific coast that

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occurred from 1810-12.

Hunt, who received five shares of Astor’s company, recruited employees between May and July 1810 in Montreal for the overland journey. Hunt, who had no previous outback experience, was charged by Astor to lead the party.

Hunt and his party reached Mackinac Island in current-day Michigan on July 28, 1810. After hiring more men, Hunt led his party to St. Louis, arriving on Sept. 3. LaBonte, who had moved there four years earlier, was among the men who signed contracts to join the overland party in St. Louis.

They left St. Louis on Oct. 21, 1810, for Fort Osage and traveled 450 miles up the Missouri River before establishing winter camp on Nodaway Island in what is now Andrew County, Mo.

Hunt’s expedition broke winter camp on April 21, 1811, and reached a major Omaha village in early May. While continuing up the Missouri River, they encountered a large group of Yankton and Lakota Sioux and after explaining that they were traveling to the Pacific Ocean and had no interest in trading with neighboring Indian Nations that were at war with the Sioux, they were allowed to proceed farther north.

Continuing westward toward the Continental Divide, the Pacific Fur Co. party followed the Wind River,

crossed the divide and followed the Gros Ventre River, reaching Fort Henry near present-day St. Anthony, Idaho, on Sept. 8.

At Fort Henry, canoes were carved to take the party down Henry’s Fork to the Snake River and eventually to the Columbia. The last members of Hunt’s party reached Fort Astoria on Jan. 18, 1812, while those who sailed around South America had an easier sojourn, arrived in the spring of 1811 after stopping in Hawaii to pick up provisions.

According to LaBonte Jr.’s recollections, his father married the daughter of Clatsop Indian Chief Kobayway and a Tillamook princess, Kil-akot-ah or Little Songbird. LaBonte Jr. was born in 1818 near Astoria.

His father, after the demise of the Pacific Fur Co. in 1813, took a job with the rival North West Fur Co., which was absorbed into the Hudson’s Bay Co. in 1818.

LaBonte Sr. worked for Hudson’s Bay for six years: three at Spokane and three at Colville. He then returned to Fort Vancouver and asked to be dismissed in 1828 and was allowed to remain in Oregon.

According to his son’s memoir, this was against Hudson’s Bay policy because the company did not want any of its trappers to become settlers or free laborers in its territory. But LaBonte was “an astute Frechman” and argued that he was entitled to stay in Oregon since he was not employed by Hudson’s Bay when he came to the area, so it wasn’t an infraction of company policy.

Despite his ingenious argument, his request was refused, which forced him to return to Montreal, where he received his dismissal papers and he immediately began the journey back to Oregon, arriv-

ing again in November 1830.

“This shows him to have been an independent and determined man, and a good husband and father. It may also have had much more bearing than has yet been credited as to the settlement of Oregon,” LaBonte Jr.’s reminiscences state.

LaBonte ended up moving to French Prairie along with Joseph Gervais, another member of the Astorians of the Pacific Fur Co. LaBonte helped him raise wheat and build a barn.

“They formed a little company of comrades and became the first group of independent Oregon people,” the reminiscences state.

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Louis LaBonte Jr. and his wife, Caroline Montour, had a son, Alexander, born in 1851. LaBonte Jr. walked on in 1911 and his son, Alexander, died in 1896 in Grand Ronde.

Alexander LaBonte and his wife, Clementine Agnes LaChance, had 11 children. The ninth of those 11, John Baptiste LaBonte, is Rosetta Manangan’s father. Her mother was Esther Mary Jones LaBonte, a full-blooded Native American, who walked on in 1987 and is buried at the Tribal Cemetery.

Grand Ronde resident Gene LaBonte is the grandson of Manangan’s uncle, Bartholomew LaBonte.

Also on the list of Astorians of the Pacific Fur Co. given to Manangan is another familiar name to Oregonians – John Day – for which a town, dam and river are named. Day’s infamous claim to fame in Oregon history is being a trapper who was robbed and stripped naked by Natives on the Columbia near the mouth of the river that now bears his name in eastern Oregon. ■

(Editor’s note: This article includes information from Wikipedia, the Oregon Historical Society, oregonencyclopedia.org, historylink.org, nativeamericannetroots.net and June Olson’s research into the family tree of Eugene Joseph LaBonte.)

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