Subscribe Now | Donate Now
Donation system not supported by Safari

Shortcuts

Libraries
Cyberpedias
Timeline Essays
People's Histories

Selected Collections
Cities & Towns
Counties
Biographies
Interactive Cybertours
Slideshows
Public Ports
Audio & Video

Research Shortcuts
Map Searches
Alphabetical Search
Timeline Date Search
Topic Search

Features
Book of the Fortnight
Audio/Video Enhanced
History Bookshelf
Klondike Gold Rush Database
Duvall Newspaper Index
Wellington Scrapbook

More History
Washington FAQs
Washington Milestones
Honor Rolls
Columbia Basin
Everett
Olympia
Seattle
Spokane
Tacoma
Walla Walla
Roads & Rails

Peone, Baptiste (1820-1902?)

HistoryLink.org Essay 8550 : Printer-Friendly Format

Baptiste Peone was a chief of the Upper Spokane band of the Spokane Tribe. He was portrayed in Spokane news accounts as a most unusual kind of chief -- a wealthy, shrewd businessman. Yet for 1837-1928 most of his life, his story revolves around more traditional themes. He was born around 1820, probably at the Spokane House, a fur-trading post, to a Spokane Indian mother and a French-Canadian trapper father. In 1848, he was picked by the Hudson's Bay Co. to establish a new trading post about two-thirds of the way along the trade route between Fort Colville and Lake Coeur d'Alene. He built a small post in a beautiful, lush prairie just a few miles northeast of present-day Spokane and before long became the chief of the Upper Spokane people who lived there. He lived on the prairie for most of the rest of his life, with his family and band, and was instrumental in assisting the Jesuits in establishing a mission there in 1866. His home site was famous for the white flag he raised at the top of an ancient ponderosa pine, to commemorate an Indian treaty. He apparently gained legal title to his land in the early 1880s, and then sold it. He and his family left soon after for the Flathead Reservation, where Peone died, probably around 1902. Yet the land where his cabin once stood is still named Peone Prairie and the Treaty Tree, minus the tattered flag, still towers above.

An Uncommon Character

Baptiste Peone's life encompasses many of the common themes of early Washington history: fur-trading, Jesuit missions, Indian treaties, and removal to reservations. Yet Peone was a most uncommon character: A chief of a band he was only "adopted" into, and a clever businessman who made a fortune playing the white man's real-estate game. His story is not well-known or well-documented and can only be pieced together through tantalizing bits of historical evidence.

By his own account, Peone was born "about the year 1820" in what became Spokane County (Affidavit). He was probably born at Spokane House, an early trading post just a few miles northwest of present day Spokane, because his father, Louis Peone, was a fur trader who worked there for the North West Co. Louis Peone (whose name was often spelled Pion) was a half-French-Canadian, half-Indian trapper from Montreal. Peone married a Spokane woman and they had at least two sons, William and Baptiste.

The family moved around between the trading posts in the region. Baptiste eventually ended up at Fort Colville, near present-day Kettle Falls, when he was in his 20s. He must have gained a reputation as an all-around competent hand, because he was chosen by the Hudson's Bay chief clerk at Fort Colville, Angus McDonald, to establish a new trading post about two-thirds of the way along the trail from Fort

This essay made possible by:
The State of Washington
Washington State Department of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Peone Prairie and the Treaty Tree, with Mount Spokane in the distance, 2008
HistoryLink.org Photo by Jim Kershner

Treaty Tree, Ponderosa pine (*Pinus ponderosa*), Peone Prairie, 2008
HistoryLink.org Photo by Jim Kershner

Colville to Lake Coeur d'Alene. McDonald thought this location, just northeast of present day Spokane, would be more convenient than the old Spokane House site.

McDonald's daughter, Christina M. M. Williams, wrote about the establishment of this post in a 1922 memoir.

> "A little post was built on the side hill on the Indian trails on the second bench near what is now Biglow (Bigelow) Gulch, and Baptiste Peone, a Hudson's Bay Company employee of no education but a good fur trader, was placed in charge," wrote Williams. "He married a local Indian wife, gave his name to the Prairie and was founder of the powerful Peone family among the Upper Spokane Indians" (Williams).

She wrote that she didn't know the exact date of the post's establishment, but Peone himself testified in a land affidavit that he came to Peone Prairie in 1848.

Peone Prairie

He found a beautiful, green, gently rolling prairie, well watered with springs and creeks, surrounded by pine-covered hills. Snow-capped Mount Spokane loomed just to the northeast. This gorgeous spot had long been a favorite hunting ground of the Upper Spokane band.

"Here in former years the Indians were wont to gather and stage great game drives, herding the deer, bear and other wild things more into the open where they might easily slaughter them with spear and arrow," said the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* in 1923 (Chrysler).

Peone built the trading post at the southeast edge of the prairie, near a spring. No one knows how many years he ran the trading post, but it's evident that he built a cabin and other buildings and stayed on once the post was no longer needed.

Peone apparently had already become an influential leader of the prairie's Upper Spokane band when the region was embroiled in the bloody Indian wars of 1855 and 1858, culminating in the campaigns of Colonel George Wright (1803-1865). This band remained mostly peaceable, and when the region's tribes signed a peace treaty with Wright, Peone is said to have "placed a flag of truce on a lone pine tree near his camp on Peone Prairie, and this flag was never taken down for 22 years" ("Historic Old Peone Ranch").

The tree became known as the Treaty Tree. The white flag was attached to a staff that reached a few feet above the treetop, and eventually disappeared in tatters. Yet as late as 1923, a clause attached to a land deed stipulated that "no hand of man shall harm the treaty tree" (Chrysler).

Father Cataldo's Mission

In 1863, a Jesuit missionary, Father Joseph Caruana, visited the prairie and baptized Peone and several other members of his family. In 1866, another Jesuit missionary, Father Joseph Cataldo (1837-1928), arrived and tried to preach Christianity among the band. The Indians told him that his timing was bad -- they were too busy catching fall salmon.

"Then I inquired from one, Baptiste Pione [sic], who was a half-breed -- or rather he was one-fourth white, one-fourth Spokane, one-fourth Kalispel and one fourth -- I don't know what -- anyway, he came in fourths," recalled Cataldo in 1925. "He was already a Christian. 'You cannot expect busy people to listen to religion,' he said. 'You should come back when we are not so busy'" (Crosby).

So Cataldo left and returned to Peone's cabin a few months later. Peone was welcoming and gracious and offered to gather some Indians to help Cataldo build a log cabin. But it was soon evident that Peone was stalling for time, because he kept telling Cataldo that all of the Indians who could help were gone on buffalo hunt. After more stalling, Peone finally said he was nervous about allowing a Catholic father to build a mission without the permission of Chief Garry, the chief of the larger Spokane Tribe. Garry was already baptized a Protestant.

"I haven't enough power to build it [the cabin] for you," Cataldo quoted Peone as saying. "I belong to the Spokanes only by adoption" (Crosby).

Cataldo slept in a tent for weeks, waiting. Finally, he proposed a compromise. If the Indians would help him build a little log cabin, he would stay for only four months. He would baptize anyone who wanted, and then leave the house in their possession. If Chief Garry came back from the buffalo hunt and was pleased, fine. If he was displeased, then they could just burn the house down.

So Peone found some Indians to help build the tiny cabin, which was finished in December 1866. Cataldo called it "camp house, rectory, church and everything, all in one room and very rough" (Crosby). The mission immediately attracted several families, including Peone's. Cataldo says that his day typically started with one of Peone's daughters bringing him coffee. Then he spent the rest of the day teaching religion, prayers, and songs to the gathered children.

One day, Peone approached Cataldo with a delegation of older Indians who said they wanted to learn, too -- but not with the children.

"I cannot learn fast, like the children," Peone told Cataldo (Crosby).

So Cataldo's solution was to start a "night school" for the older people. By the time the four months were up in March 1867, Cataldo had baptized 100 people and 55 had made their first communion.

When Cataldo prepared to leave, Peone asked him to stay, saying, by one account, that if Chief Garry didn't like it, "he may go somewhere else" (Bond).

Yet Cataldo had been ordered back to the Coeur d'Alene mission. After Mass on the last day, Peone solemnly approached Cataldo and asked the priest to "look behind the door" of the little mission (Crosby). Cataldo looked and saw nothing. Peone repeated the request. Cataldo looked again and still saw nothing.

Finally, Peone said., "The devil is behind that door. As soon as you go away, he will come out and destroy all your good work. You must stay."

Cataldo had to leave, but he and other Jesuits returned over the next two decades and built a series of mission schools on Peone Prairie, which came to be called St. Michael's Mission. It still exists today as Mount St. Michael, a church and convent high on a hill above Peone Prairie. Father Joseph Cataldo went on to found Gonzaga College in Spokane in 1887, which is now Gonzaga University.

Peone's Land

Peone and his band adopted a more settled, agricultural life under the influence of the missionaries, growing oats, wheat, potatoes, and corn and selling to settlers and military personnel. Peone himself built a barn to go with his house, which apparently had the luxury of glass windows, brought by wagon from an abandoned boat near Walla

Walla.

Peone was already exhibiting unusual foresight about land dealings. Peone apparently filed for the 480 acres of land surrounding his cabin as early as the 1860s. He fenced off about 70 acres for cultivation.

Yet land ownership was hardly a straightforward issue for tribal members, especially after white settlers began to descend on Spokane and Peone Prairie around 1879. The uncertainty around Peone's land claim is reflected in an anxious letter written on Peone's behalf by John A. Simms, the Colville Indian Agent, to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C., on April 25, 1880.

"I would respectfully call to your attention the case of Baptiste Peon [sic], their chief ...," wrote Simms. "He is now desirous of asserting his citizenship, as he does not wish to remove from his home and from upon which he has lived for 31 years, which he has cultivated ... . It is claimed for him that he is entitled to the benefit of the Donation Act of Sept. 27, 1850, in right of his long residence and he has already taken steps to attain that end" (Simms).

Simms noted nervously that Peone's section "happens to be a railroad section, and as it is valuable, he may expect to meet with some opposition to his claim from the Rail-Road Company" (Simms).

Simms warned that if Peone's claim were denied, it could have significant repercussions on the entire tribe.

"It will be a great discouragement to them in their desire to become citizens and take homesteads if they find that their Chief, who claims to be a citizen, cannot get a title to his claim," wrote Simms. "Owing to the influence exercised by Baptiste Peon, it would seem of some importance to retain his good-will, as he could do more than any other man towards settling them upon reservations or inducing them to become citizens as they would like, and in view of there being some impediment to the establishment of his claim, I think Congress might properly be asked to confirm his title, as he and his people have never received any compensation for their valuable lands, of which they are rapidly being deprived by white settlers" (Simms).

To bolster his claim, Peone filed an affidavit with the county clerk in 1881 in which he said he had been living there continuously since 1848. He signed it with an X.

Proud Eminence

Apparently, he did gain title to his land, because in 1884 the *Spokane Falls Review* portrayed Chief Peone as an extraordinary Indian: One who made a killing in real estate.

The correspondent wrote that he "has risen to the proud eminence of a capitalist, and now wields a power and influence which, in this day and generation, falls only to the lot of bonanza kings and railroad magnates" ("Chief Peone").

"Twenty years ago, Peone's assets were a dirty shirt, a blanket and a rifle," said the *Review*. "Today his balance sheet shows an amount to his credit of about $25,000" ("Chief Peone").

How did he gain this fortune? By using "the methods of the palefaces," said the *Review* ("Chief Peone").

The paper said he gained legal title to his estates, built up his herds and diligently improved his houses and outbuildings to attain maximum value. Then he sat and waited.

"When the newcomers began to make offers to him, he fought shy and

pretended he did not care to sell," said the *Review.* "He was coming the Jay Gould racket on them -- 'roping them in.' Inability to pluck the prize only created greater competition and the bidding went on until an offer was made far above the ruling value of any land on the prairie. Then Peone, with an air of reluctance, relented and agreed to sell. And he did, retiring from the agricultural avocation with a snug fortune.

"And what did he do then? … He simply gathered his tribe around him and resumed his aboriginal mode of existence -- tepee, camp fire, harem, rolled-up-in-a-blanket-on-the-ground and all the other Indian accessories. He invested a large proportion of his money in government bonds, kept an immense herd of ponies ... invested here and there in town lots in Spokane Falls, Portland and other cities, and settled down in camp -- in a picturesque spot on the Spokane River, some eight or ten miles from the farm -- to enjoy his old age in peace and contentment" ("Chief Peone").

Vacating the Land

Peace and contentment eluded him. In 1887, a treaty was negotiated in which the Upper and Middle bands of the Spokane Tribe agreed to vacate their traditional lands and go to either the Coeur d'Alene or Flathead reservations.

Basil Peone, a relative, later wrote, "He [Baptiste] took a leading role in the making of this treaty, which resulted in many Indians leaving lands which the whites would have seized anyway" (Coeur d'Alene Teepee). (A second, less-likely version of the Treaty Tree story claims that the flag commemorated this treaty.)

So in either 1887 or 1888, Peone and his family drove 150 head of livestock to their new home on the Flathead Reservation near Arlee, Montana, which they chose so they could be near the Catholic mission at St. Ignatius.

Was he still a rich "bonanza king"? Either his nest egg vanished quickly or that newspaper writer in 1884 vastly exaggerated it. A 1909 newspaper account claimed he received only $5,500 for the land. No other account of Peone mentions his alleged riches.

In fact, nothing more is heard of Peone in the historical record except one mention that he re-married at St. Ignatius in 1894. He died on the Flathead Reservation several years later -- in 1902, according to one published but unconfirmed account.

Yet his name survives on the prairie he called home. Even today, the farm fields of Peone Prairie serve as winter range for deer and elk, although it has been increasingly fenced off and subdivided.

One of those subdivisions is called Peace Treaty Estates, encompassing the Treaty Tree, which still stands, bent but still strong, a monument to a remarkable leader.

Sources:
Christina M. M. Williams, "A Daughter of Angus McDonald," *Washington Historical Quarterly*, April 1922; "Chief Peone: Sketch of the Aboriginal Financier," *Spokane Falls Review*, December 29, 1884; "Basil Peone," *Coeur d'Alene Teepee* (newsletter of Sacred Heart Mission, DeSmet, Idaho), January 1938; "Affidavit of Settlers on Unsurveyed Lands, Claiming Under the 4th Section of Act of the 27th September 1850," March 14, 1881, Baptiste Peone file, Northwest Room of the Spokane Public Library; Rowland Bond, *Early Birds in the Northwest* (Nine Mile Falls, Wash.: Spokane House Enterprises, 1972); "Historic Old Peone Ranch Cut Into Small Tracts," *The Spokesman-Review*, July 25, 1909; Dorothy Chrysler, "Old Mission and Treaty Tree Historic Landmarks in Spokane County," *Spokane Daily Chronicle,* January 19, 1923; John Simms, Letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, April 25, 1880, Baptiste Peone file, Northwest Room of the Spokane Public Library; Laurence E. Crosby, *Kualiks Metatcopun: Black Robe Three-Times-Broken, A Biography of Joseph Cataldo*, pamphlet available at Foley Library at Gonzaga University (Wallace, Idaho: Wallace Times Press, 1922); Durheim, Roger, "History of Peone," ca. 1964, manuscript in possession of Robert H. Ruby

and copy in possession of author; Jim Kershner, "Prairie Tale," *Spokesman-Review*, July 10, 2005; Hudson's Bay Company Archives, Winnipeg, records of Louis Pion (Peone); Kathryn Highberg, *Orchard Prairie: The First Hundred Years* (Fairfield, Wash.: Ye Galleon Press, 1998).

By Jim Kershner, April 12, 2008

< Browse to Previous Essay | Browse to Next Essay >

Related Topics: Northwest Indians | Religion | Biographies |

Major Support for HistoryLink.org Provided By: The State of Washington | Patsy Bullitt Collins | Paul G. Allen Family Foundation | Museum Of History & Industry | 4Culture (King County Lodging Tax Revenue) | City of Seattle | City of Bellevue | City of Tacoma | King County | The Peach Foundation | Microsoft Corporation, Other Public and Private Sponsors and Visitors Like You