

# Grand Portage

## National Monument



### THE GRAND PORTAGE OR GREAT CARRYING PLACE

THIS TRAIL, BY-PASSING A 20-MILE SERIES OF FALLS AND RAPIDS, WAS AN IMPORTANT LINK IN THE GREAT WATERWAY WHICH LED FROM THE ST. LAWRENCE RIVER THROUGH THE GREAT LAKES TO THE PIGEON RIVER. OVERSEAS HUNDREDS OF TONS OF FURS AND TRADE GOODS WERE CARRIED BY INDIANS, FRENCH AND ENGLISH DURING THE 18TH AND EARLY 19TH CENTURIES.

THE WEBSTER-ASHBURTON TREATY OF 1842 SET THE PIGEON RIVER AS THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES BUT PROVIDED FREE AND OPEN USE OF THE PORTAGE TO THE CITIZENS OF BOTH COUNTRIES.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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In the extreme northeastern corner of Minnesota, on the shore of Lake Superior about 5 miles below the mouth of the Pigeon River, lies Grand Portage, the great depot or distributing center in the late 1700's for the North West Company of Montreal, Canada.

The French appropriately described the 9-mile trail between the lake and a point above the unnavigable falls and rapids of the Pigeon River as the "Grand Portage," or "great carrying place."

To this post the traders and voyageurs of the North West Company transported their goods and furs by canoe and sheer manpower through more than 2,000 miles of wilderness in the Canadian Northwest. Partners from Montreal, wintering partners from the remote interior posts, clerks, interpreters, Indians, and French-Canadian voyageurs gathered annually for a summer rendezvous.

Today the portage, which bisects an Indian reservation occupied by the Grand Portage Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, is no longer traversed by the "voyageurs" who once made the woods ring with their oaths and songs.

### A BIT OF PREHISTORY

This portage route, connecting the Great Lakes with the interior network of waterways, was probably used by the Indians before the advent of the white man. When and under what circumstances the first white man crossed the portage and who he was, we do not know. Nor do we know who the first white man was to visit the little bay at the eastern end of the trail, which takes its name from the portage.

Pierre Esprit Radisson and Médard Chouart, Sieur des Groseilliers, the first white men known to have visited Minnesota, are believed to have reached the north shore of Lake Superior in 1660, but there is no evidence that they went as far east as Grand Portage. Du Luth coasted along the north shore in 1679 and established a fort or trading post, the location of which was near what is now Fort William, Canada, about 30 miles northeast of Grand Portage. It is probable that Du Luth or some of his men entered the bay at Grand Portage and traversed the portage

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

itself. Fort Kaministiquia, as Du Luth's post was called, was maintained for several years, was abandoned, and then was reestablished in 1717.

### THE MONUMENT'S RECORDED HISTORY

The first white man to leave a record of the use of the portage is the Sieur de la Vérendrye, who crossed it in 1731 on the first of several exploring expeditions in search of the western sea. In his account he called it the Grand Portage and inferred that it was already well known by that name.

*The French Period.* From this time until the French and Indian War (1754-63), French traders were pushing constantly farther and farther into the Canadian Northwest, and practically all the traffic passed over the Grand Portage route.

During this period a post was presumably established on the shore of Lake Superior, where the goods destined for the trade were landed from the large canoes used on the lake and prepared for the portage to the Pigeon River. With the surrender of Canada in 1763, the trade on Lake Superior and westward was temporarily abandoned, and the Indians had to go to the posts of the Hudson's Bay Company far to the north or get along without white man's goods.

*The British Take Over.* In November 1761, a British garrison took possession of Fort Michillimackinac on the south shore of Mackinac Strait between Lakes Michigan and Huron. Shortly before this, an explorer, Alexander Henry, arrived at the post prepared to engage in Indian trade on the upper lakes. Soon after, other English traders made their appearance in the vicinity.

The Indians, however, did not welcome the substitution of the English for the French; in 1763 the post at Michilli-

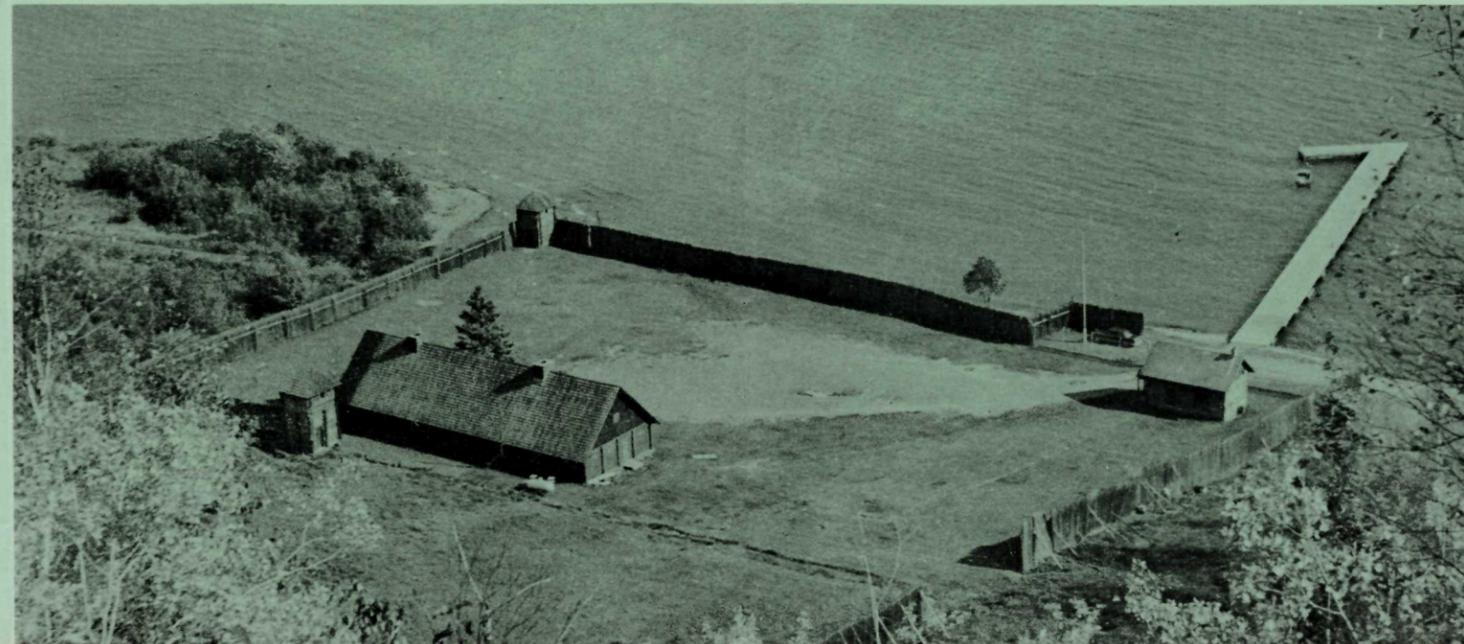
mackinac was surprised, the garrison was massacred, one of the traders was killed, and others were taken captive. This outbreak, which was part of the conspiracy of the Indian chieftain, Pontiac, put an end to British attempts at trade in the Northwest until the close of Indian hostilities in 1765. In that year some traders made their way from Mackinac to Rainy Lake, doubtless over the Grand Portage. Every year thereafter, apparently, the portage was used by traders, who soon reoccupied the old French posts in the interior and established new ones.

*The North West Company Is Formed.* When Alexander Henry arrived again at Grand Portage Bay in 1775, he "found the traders in a state of extreme reciprocal hostility, each pursuing his interests in such a manner as might most injure his neighbour. The consequences were very hurtful to the morals of the Indians."

The Northwest trade had grown to such proportions and competition between different interests was resulting in so many abuses that movements were underway for consolidation. After several preliminary "joint stocks," the famous North West Company was organized in 1783. The next 20 years comprise the best known period in the history of the Grand Portage.

During July and August, Grand Portage was a very busy place. Here the brigades from Montreal, with goods for the trade of the ensuing winter, met the wintering partners and other traders coming in from their posts which were scattered throughout the Northwest. Here was held the annual meeting of the company, at which arrangements were made and agreements entered into for the coming year. Here the employees received, and largely spent, their annual wages. In the evenings the great hall was often the scene of much merriment.

Stockade area from the top of Mt. Rose



At the 1951 dedication of the area as a National Historic Site, the role of the voyageur was reenacted.



There were about 1,120 canoe men, or voyageurs, in the North West Company's service, of whom about 350 were engaged in the annual transportation of goods from Montreal to Grand Portage, some of them going as far as Rainy Lake. These faithful canoe men carried the heavy loads on their strong backs, up the slopes, over the flat rock ledges, through stretches knee-deep with mud in the rainy seasons, 9 miles to Fort Charlotte, the North West Company post on the Pigeon River; probably few pack animals were ever used over the portage.

The North West Company was not able to maintain a complete monopoly over the trade which passed across the Grand Portage. Rival companies were established from time to time, usually to flourish a few years and then amalgamate with the North West Company. One of these rivals, the X. Y. Company, which operated from 1797 to 1804, had nearby establishments at Grand Portage Bay and the Pigeon River.

Apparently the X. Y. Company retained its headquarters at Grand Portage until the union of the two companies in 1804. At this same time, fearing that the encroachment of American traders would threaten its business, the North West Company built Fort William at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River in Canadian territory and abandoned Grand Portage.

Thereafter Grand Portage rapidly declined in importance. The company maintained a local post there until after the War of 1812 when the United States excluded representatives of other countries from the American fur trade. John Jacob Astor's American Fur Company purchased the post at that time, and for a while it served as one of the central stations in the Lake Superior fishing industry. Fishing proved unprofitable, however, and the post was abandoned, apparently in the 1840's.

*The Boundary Controversy.* The region was carefully explored and mapped in 1822 by the surveyors of a joint American and British commission provided for in the Treaty of Ghent.

When the commissioners held their final meeting in 1827, the representative of Great Britain offered to accept the Pigeon River route as the boundary, provided the line

should be drawn through the portages, including the Grand Portage. When this was rejected, he offered to accept the river as the boundary, provided the portages should be free and open to the use of both parties. This offer was also rejected. However, when the boundary controversy was finally settled by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty in 1842, it was exactly on these terms. The treaty is still in force today.

In 1854 the United States purchased the triangle north of Lake Superior from the Chippewa Indians, but a tract extending from the lake to the Pigeon River and including the entire line of the portage was set aside as a reservation for the Indians.

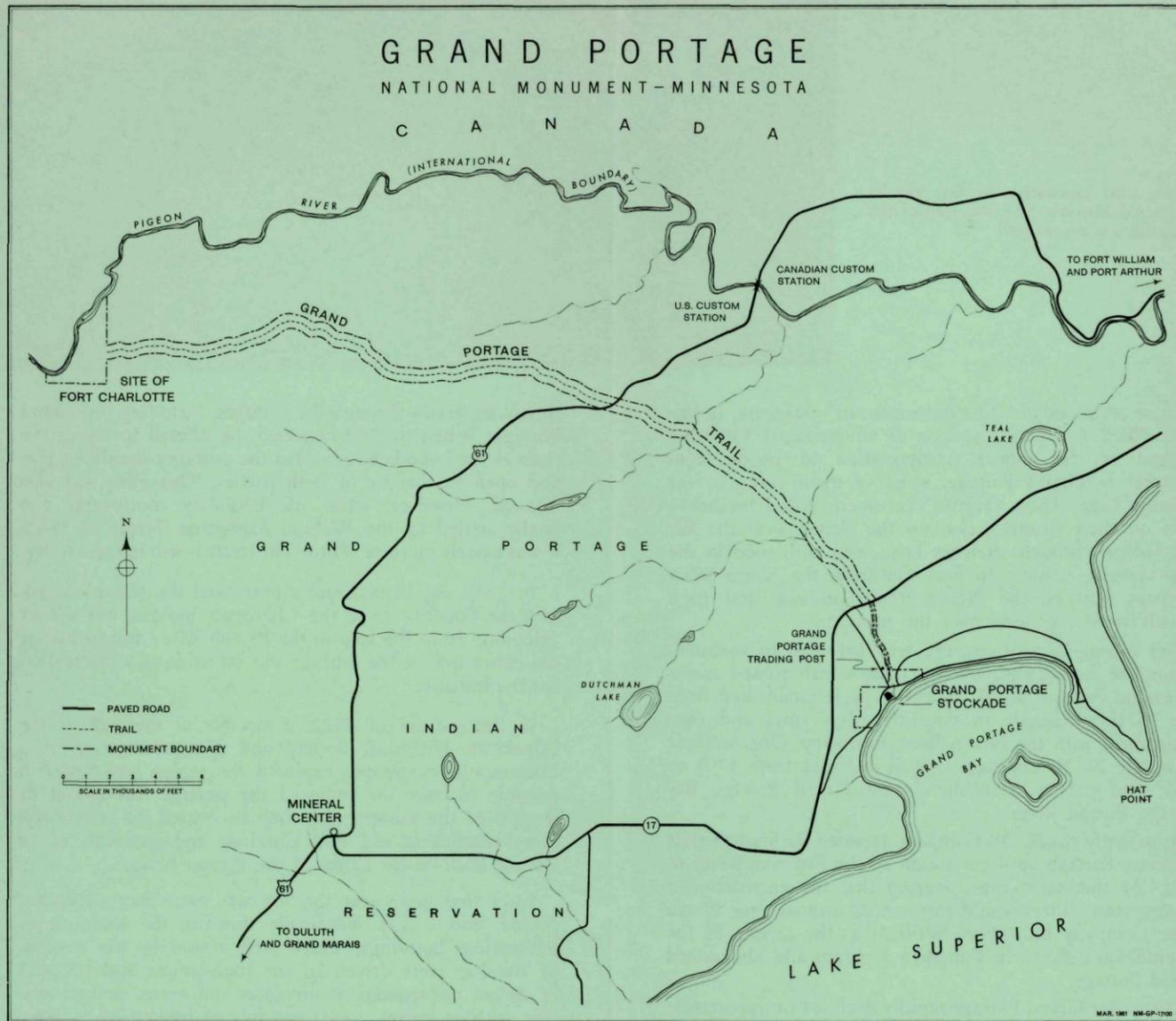
In the summer of 1922, a member of the staff of the Minnesota Historical Society and a representative of a Minneapolis newspaper explored the region and found it possible to trace the route of the portage throughout its length. At the western end, they discovered the cellars and other remains of old Fort Charlotte and remnants of an ancient dock on the banks of the Pigeon River.

Later that same year the site was more thoroughly explored, and a map was made showing the locations of the various buildings, which were traced by the remains of the log piers driven in for foundations and by piles of stones, the remains of fireplaces and ovens. Several articles, such as knives, tools, and bits of broken china, were discovered—interesting evidence of the white man's sojourn in the wilderness.

In 1936 the Minnesota Historical Society directed archeological excavations which located the North West Company stockade at the eastern end, and in the next year the historic old stockade post was reconstructed under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the U. S. Department of the Interior.

### THE MONUMENT TODAY

Much of the charm of the Grand Portage area today is the old trail itself, with its lichen-covered rocks, its reindeer moss, its hidden springs with their black waters, and rare glimpses of the solitary moose.



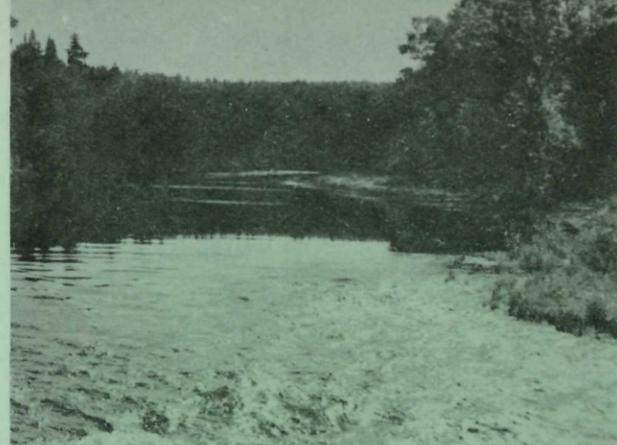
Still unspoiled by attempts at change, the wilderness of the Grand Portage route is preserved much as it was during the great and exciting fur-trade era of the past.

A weathering hewn-timber building on the bay, with stockade, blockhouses, and a "great dining hall," has been reconstructed on the excavated site of the once great depot of the North West Company.

**THE MONUMENT IS ESTABLISHED**

In 1951, conferences among the Minnesota Chippewa Tribal Council, the Grand Portage Band of the Chippewa Tribe, and representatives of the National Park Service led to the designation, by the Secretary of the Interior, of the old trail and the depot sites at either end as a National Historic Site in non-Federal ownership.

Because of its unique role in the history of the old Northwest, the area, containing about 770 acres, was redesignated a National Monument on January 27, 1960.



Looking up the Pigeon River from the site of Fort Charlotte

**HOW TO REACH THE MONUMENT**

Grand Portage National Monument is on U.S. 61 — 38 miles from Grand Marais, Minn., 148 miles from Duluth, Minn., and 49 miles from the Canadian cities of Fort William and Port Arthur, Ontario.

**ABOUT YOUR VISIT**

During the summer, National Park Service ranger-historians are on duty to give information about the area.

Visit Isle Royale National Park, 25 miles across Lake Superior, by way of excursion boats. You may make a round trip daily, weather permitting, with a 2-hour stop-over at Windigo for lunch or dinner. Be sure to bring your camera. Wildlife and scenery are abundant.

**ADMINISTRATION**

Grand Portage National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U. S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is P.O. Box 62, Grand Marais, Minn., is in immediate charge.

**MISSION 66**

MISSION 66 is a program designed to be completed by 1966 which will assure the maximum protection of the scenic, scientific, wilderness, and historic resources of the National Park System in such ways and by such means as will make them available for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations.

COVER: ENTRANCE TO GRAND PORTAGE TRAIL LOOKING NORTHWEST.



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Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



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