

grand portage

The Great Carrying Place

Only three water passages to the Northwest are scored into the broad rock face of the Laurentian Shield which forms the western shore of Lake Superior. They are the rivers known today as the St. Louis, the Kaministiquia, and the Pigeon. The last of these is navigable except for a few kilometers at its mouth, but a narrow, muddy trail links the lake with the navigable waters of the Pigeon. Indians had used this trail for ages before the first European explorer, a Frenchman, recorded it in 1722.

The French explorers, who continued to search for an easy passage to the western sea, and the French missionaries, who sought converts in the wilderness, gave the trail its name—"Le Grande Portage," The Great Carrying Place. It remained, however, for the Highland Scots and their partners in the North West Company to give Grand Portage its place in history as the vital link in a network of waterways that nurtured the fur trade empire.

The fur trade of North America developed in the 16th century between French fishermen and Indians along the banks of Newfoundland and the mainland coast. Furs gathered by the French for sale in Europe soon became the cash crop of New France. When fur-bearing animals, particularly beaver, became scarce, the French traders searched westward. Blocked to the north by the British fur domain of the Hudson's Bay Company, the French traders were forced over a long water and land route from Montreal through the Ottawa River and the Great Lakes to Grand Portage—gateway to the untapped fur riches of the Northwest.

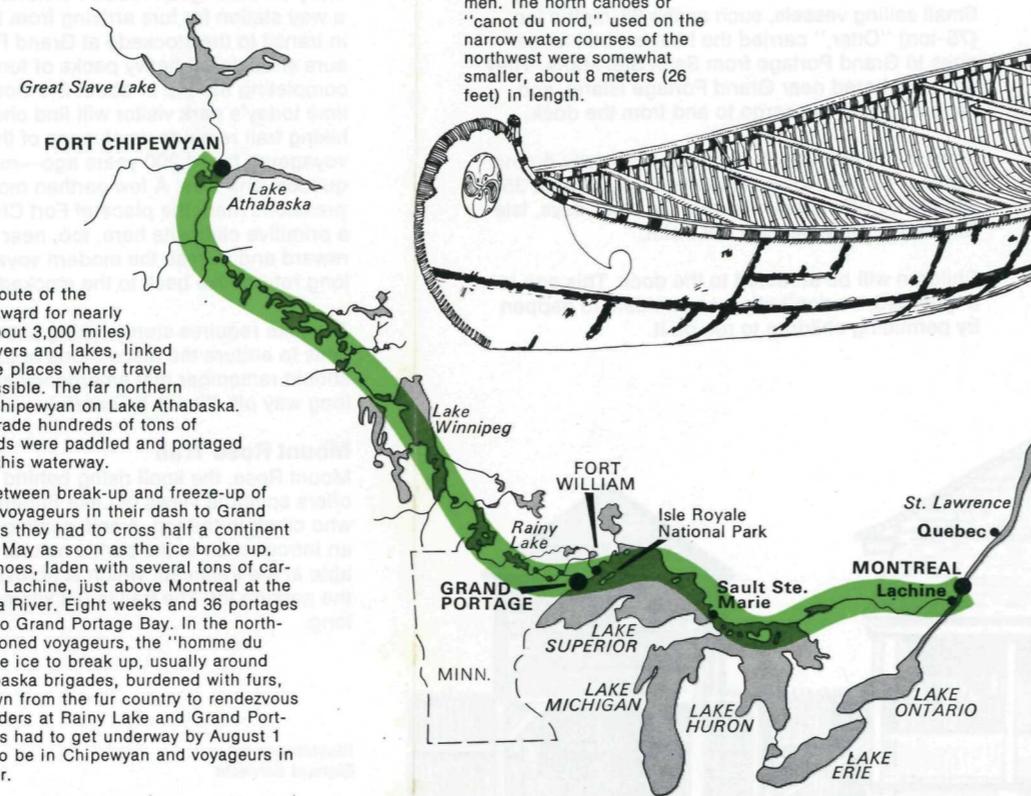
Under British auspices after 1763, the route over the Grand Portage was inherited by independent traders who founded the North West Company. Theirs was a fur trade empire based primarily on the exportation of beaver fur to supply the particular tastes of European fashion. Beaver pelts, from which the finest quality felt hats were made, were in tremendous demand.

In July the post at Grand Portage was the scene of the North West Company's annual rendezvous. From the east came canoe loads of trade goods from the warehouses in Montreal destined for the interior. From the northwestern outposts came wintering traders with loads of furs en route to Montreal.

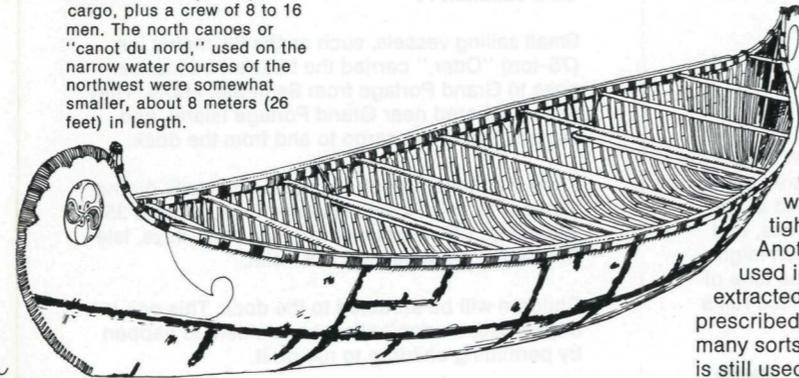
Though it was the North West Company's most important inland trading center, the Grand Portage post was short-lived; it was founded about 1778 and abandoned in 1803 when the North West Company moved north to avoid American taxation and established the post of Fort William. The buildings at Grand Portage were left to the elements and quickly disappeared. Traffic along the portage trail dwindled; then it, too, disappeared.

From Montreal the route of the fur trade swept westward for nearly 5,000 kilometers (about 3,000 miles) over a network of rivers and lakes, linked by portages in those places where travel by canoe was impossible. The far northern terminus was Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska. At the peak of the trade hundreds of tons of pelts and trade goods were paddled and portaged each season along this waterway.

The short season between break-up and freeze-up of the ice spurred the voyageurs in their dash to Grand Portage. In 5 months they had to cross half a continent and return. In early May as soon as the ice broke up, brigades of lake canoes, laden with several tons of cargo, moved out from Lachine, just above Montreal at the mouth of the Ottawa River. Eight weeks and 36 portages later they glided into Grand Portage Bay. In the northwest, crews of seasoned voyageurs, the "homme du nord," waited for the ice to break up, usually around May 15. Then Athabaska brigades, burdened with furs, began traveling down from the fur country to rendezvous in mid-July with traders at Rainy Lake and Grand Portage. Return journeys had to get underway by August 1 to allow northmen to be in Chipewyan and voyageurs in Montreal by October.



For at least 200 years the Indian birch-bark canoe served as the main transport in the fur trade. The biggest ones, the "canot du maitre," traveled the Great Lakes on the Montrealers' route to Grand Portage. They were usually about 11 meters (36 feet) in length and could hold up to 3.5 metric tons (4 tons) of cargo, plus a crew of 8 to 16 men. The north canoes or "canot du nord," used on the narrow water courses of the northwest were somewhat smaller, about 8 meters (26 feet) in length.



Bartered Goods and Beaver Pelts

It was a fact of the fur trade that beyond the places where the traders had already been lay the richest sources of beaver furs. This principle went unchanged on the North American continent until its entire breadth had been crossed. The beaver, a mild mannered, natural homebody, was an easy catch and it took a long time for beaver populations to restore themselves after the ponds had been trapped out. Relying on Indian guides who knew the country and where to look for beaver, the trader managed to keep one step ahead of the retreating line of the beaver frontier.

Otter, ermine, marten, mink, and the other fur-bearing animals of Canada were listed on the returns for pelts coming out of the northwest.

But beaver was the most highly prized. Bound for distant ports—London, Moscow, Berlin, and Canton—beaver was recognized as the medium of exchange of the colonial market. European taste in fashion, the principal reason for the high price of beaver, dictated a felted top hat, the finest of which were made out of beaver fur pressed tightly together by industrial methods. Another beaver by-product which was widely used in Europe was castor, the substance extracted from the scent glands. Europeans prescribed a potent concoction of castor for many sorts of bodily ailments, and castor extract is still used as a fixative in perfumes.

As the demand for beaver spread across the North American continent Indians took sharper notice of their little forest neighbor, an animal which had represented hardly more than an occasional source of food or warm clothing. Collected and taken to the trading post, beaver pelts could be exchanged for a surprising assortment of goods few of which the Indian had ever known. He especially liked iron kettles, axes, and other iron products. Cloth from England, beads from Italy, brandy from France, rum from the West Indies, and gunpowder and guns—these were luxuries, soon necessities, that soared as high on the Indian scale of values as the furs did on company profit sheets in Montreal. So the Indian became allies with the trader and became embroiled in his territorial disputes with other trading rivals.

The North West Company

Furs, to most Europeans, were the greatest resource of North America, and after 200 years the fur trade had pushed on to the north and west beyond Hudson Bay and the Great Lakes. In the 1770s the beaver frontier lay deep in the Northwest wilderness. Traders groping for new routes to the interior at Grand Portage stood on the threshold of immense opportunities for profit and an era of momentous discovery over the water highways that flowed northward to the Arctic Ocean and westward to the Pacific.

After the French and Indian War and the transfer of Canada from France to Great Britain in 1763, English and Scottish newcomers visited the old French trading centers on the St. Lawrence and outposts on the Great Lakes. Soon these men were reviving the French transportation system by river, lake, and portage to the interior. At the Grand Portage their paths converged.

Competition among these independent traders became fierce. By loosening trade restrictions, the new British government in Quebec had opened up the Great Lakes fur trade to anyone with a license, and plenty applied. The men of the Hudson's Bay Company, who dominated the Canada fur trade, derisively called these Montreal traders "pedlars." The Hudson's Bay men watched with intense interest, however, as their new rivals penetrated deeper into the continent and more and more goods were carried to the post at Grand Portage. In 1774 a total of 60 canoe loads moved over the portage. By water and birch-bark canoe the Montreal traders were building a strong line of transportation which neither the Hudson's Bay Company to the north nor the American colonies approaching independence to the south would be able to break into.

Free-wheeling competition had its harmful effects, too. Alexander Henry, a trader visiting Grand Portage in 1775, found the traders "in a state of extreme hostility, each pursuing his interests in such a manner as might most injure his neighbor." Those far-sighted enough to see the ruinous consequences of such cutthroat dealing formed partnerships to protect themselves and their vital supply lines to the fur country. The North West Company emerged the most profitable of these partnerships. It was a joint stock

company, though it would not have qualified as a company in the modern sense because it was never legally responsible for its debts or accountable for its actions. Partners in the North West Company "joined their stock together and made one common interest of the whole," but were still free to trade outside the company as well as within it.

Benjamin and Joseph Frobisher, Simon McTavish, and James and John McGill were the Montreal traders who formed the nucleus of the company in 1778. As the new company took form, they began holding their annual meetings at the fort at Grand Portage. Here the fur returns were counted and stock was redistributed; new partners were accepted and sent out into the northwest as winterers; and clerks were given their instructions and voyageurs their pay. Here, in the words of historian Jeannette Mirsky, "a thousand men from Montreal and others who had been working months or years in solitude gorged on talk, food, and drink. Fights and friendships were renewed, appetites assuaged; eyes and ears and voices had their fill of sociable function. Grand Portage was lusty and lively, hugely satisfying; it was active, animated, strenuous. And through the clamor and movement of canoe men and guides, northmen and clerks, moved the employers, partners in the North West Company, the Pedlars; respect and obedience attended them as they moved about, masters of many men and half a continent."

As fur returns mounted steadily and the company prospered, the original partners quickly joined the ranks of the wealthiest and most powerful men in Canada. After further consolidation of company interests in 1783, the Frobishers and Simon McTavish traveled no further inland than Grand Portage, where they acted as middlemen between the wintering partners and the European markets. Besides contending with competitors as ruthless as ever, the company partners were constantly fighting among themselves over management problems. Nevertheless, by the time the company had moved its operations from Grand Portage to Fort William, it was on equal footing with the Hudson's Bay Company in the contest for the riches of the North American fur trade.

The passage from Jeannette Mirsky's THE WESTWARD CROSSINGS is used with the permission of the University of Chicago Press.

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"The bottom of the bay, which forms an amphitheatre, is cleared of wood and inclosed; and on the left corner of it, beneath an hill, three or four hundred feet in height, and crowned by others of a still greater altitude, is the fort, picketed in with cedar pallisadoes, and inclosing houses built with wood and covered with shingles. They are calculated for every convenience of trade, as well as to accommodate the proprietors and clerks during their short residence there. The north men live under tents: but the frugal pork-eater lodges beneath his canoe."

From an account of the fur trade by Alexander Mackenzie

The Stockade

The company stockade, consisting of palisade, blockhouse, and gates, was designed not so much for defense as it was to maintain order and provide some sense of privacy during the furious activity of the rendezvous. The palisade is made up of individual cedar pickets. Nails were scarce, so the pickets were attached to horizontal poles, or "walers," with wooden pins. Beneath the ground, the butts were locked between a pair of parallel logs for stability. The gates and blockhouse were points of control over the post.

Crawford Cabin

Settlement of Grand Portage Bay did not stop completely after the demise of the North West Company post. The "Scottie" Crawford cabin was built near the mouth of Grand Portage Creek around the turn of the 19th century. Compare the "dovetailed" corner construction of the cabin with the earlier Canadien-style construction of the other post buildings.

Fur Press

Beaver pelts were packed into tight bales with a fur press so they could be handled on portages. First, a bottom pack cover of buckskin and 4 binding cords were laid out. Piled on that were about 60 beaver pelts weighing about 45 kilograms (100 pounds). A top cover was put on, and two or three men pressed down on the pile while another tied up the pack. Finally a seal was attached for identification.

Children should not climb on the fur press.

Canoe Warehouse

Reconstruction of this warehouse followed excavation on the site in 1963-64. Its location outside the stockade probably indicates that it was built by an independent trader. Possibly it belonged to a competitor who later joined with the North West Company. Originally, trade goods or furs were stored here. Today it houses two authentic birch-bark canoes.

The ramp is not intended as an entrance-way. Please use the stairs.

Kitchen

Meals served to the "executives" in the Great Hall came from a kitchen building at the rear. The remains of the original kitchen were uncovered in 1970.

The Great Hall

The largest of the buildings was the "Great Hall." Here partners of the North West Company wrangled over the privileges of partnership while trying to forge agreement on policy for the forthcoming season's trade. In the evening, business was laid aside and a hundred or more clerks, bourgeois (superintendents), interpreters, guides, and other "junior executives" would sit down with the partners to a feast. They then might have joined in a long night of fun as Indian women danced with the men to the tune of fiddle, bagpipe, and flute. Archeologists discovered the foundation and fireplace ruins of the Great Hall in 1937.

The Dock

Word of the arrival of the first canoes from Montreal spread quickly through the stockade each year. Imagine the excitement as they came into view around Hat Point, the point of land to your left as you face the Bay. Another rendezvous would be starting, and for the next couple of weeks there would be news of the outside world to mull over, reunions with old friends, and lots of laughter and storytelling. Remembering his arrival from the north in the summer of 1793, John Macdonald wrote:

"The men were always regaled with plenty—a feast on arrival of Bread and Pork—an unusual diet—& a cup to make them merry—there were usually about 6 to 8 hundred men on the ground on a summer. . ."

Small sailing vessels, such as the 68-metric ton (75-ton) "Otter," carried the heavier, bulkier cargoes to Grand Portage from Sault Ste. Marie. They often anchored near Grand Portage Island, and canoes ferried the cargo to and from the dock.

From the modern dock, a boat leaves daily during summer for Isle Royale National Park, located 35 kilometers (22 miles) offshore. On clear days, Isle Royale is visible beyond Hat Point.

Children will be attracted to the dock. This one is unguarded, so don't allow an accident to happen by permitting children to run on it.

Visiting Grand Portage

Wander about the stockade as you wish and take a hike on one or both of the trails. If you have any questions, ask a ranger.

Please be careful. What you see is a re-creation of a 200-year-old trading post with rough timbers, uneven ground and irregular steps. Watch your children near the water; Lake Superior is extremely cold.

Grand Portage Trail

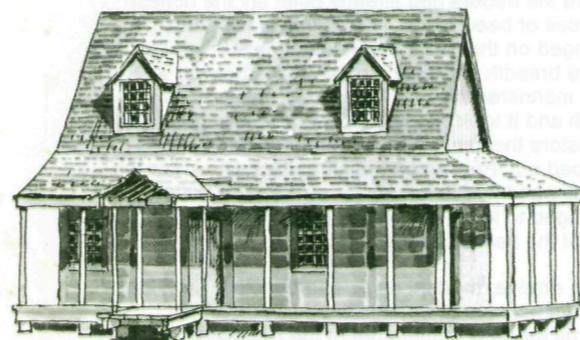
The portage trail winds through the woods to the site of Fort Charlotte 13.6 kilometers (8.5 miles) away on the Pigeon River. Fort Charlotte once was a way station for furs arriving from the Northwest in transit to the stockade at Grand Portage. Voyageurs shouldered heavy packs of furs over this trail, completing the trip in about 2½ hours, a hiking time today's park visitor will find challenging. The hiking trail reminds us of many of the problems the voyageurs faced 200 years ago—mud, rocks, mosquitoes, and flies. A few earthen mounds and depressions mark the place of Fort Charlotte. There's a primitive campsite here, too, near the river. These reward and refresh the modern voyageur before the long return hike back to the stockade.

The hike requires sturdy hiking shoes and a willingness to endure the discomforts of the trail. Hikers should remember that emergency assistance is a long way off. Please be careful.

Mount Rose Trail

Mount Rose, the knoll rising behind the stockade, offers splendid views of Lake Superior for those who climb to the top. A self-guiding trail leaflet with an introduction to the park's natural history is available at the trailhead, which is across the road from the parking lot. The trail is 0.8 kilometer (0.5 mile) long.

Illustrations by
Richard Schlecht



We're Joining The Metric World

The National Park Service is introducing metric measurements in its publications to help Americans become acquainted with the metric system and to make interpretation more meaningful for park visitors from other nations.

Administration

Grand Portage National Monument is located off U.S. Highway 61, 58 kilometers (36 miles) north-east of Grand Marais, Minn., 232 kilometers (145 miles) from Duluth, Minn., and 72 kilometers (45 miles) southwest of the Canadian city of Thunder Bay, Ontario. The portage trail, included as part of the park, bisects the reservation of the Grand Portage Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe. The park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent whose address is Box 666, Grand Marais, MN 55604, is in immediate charge of the area.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

National Park Service
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