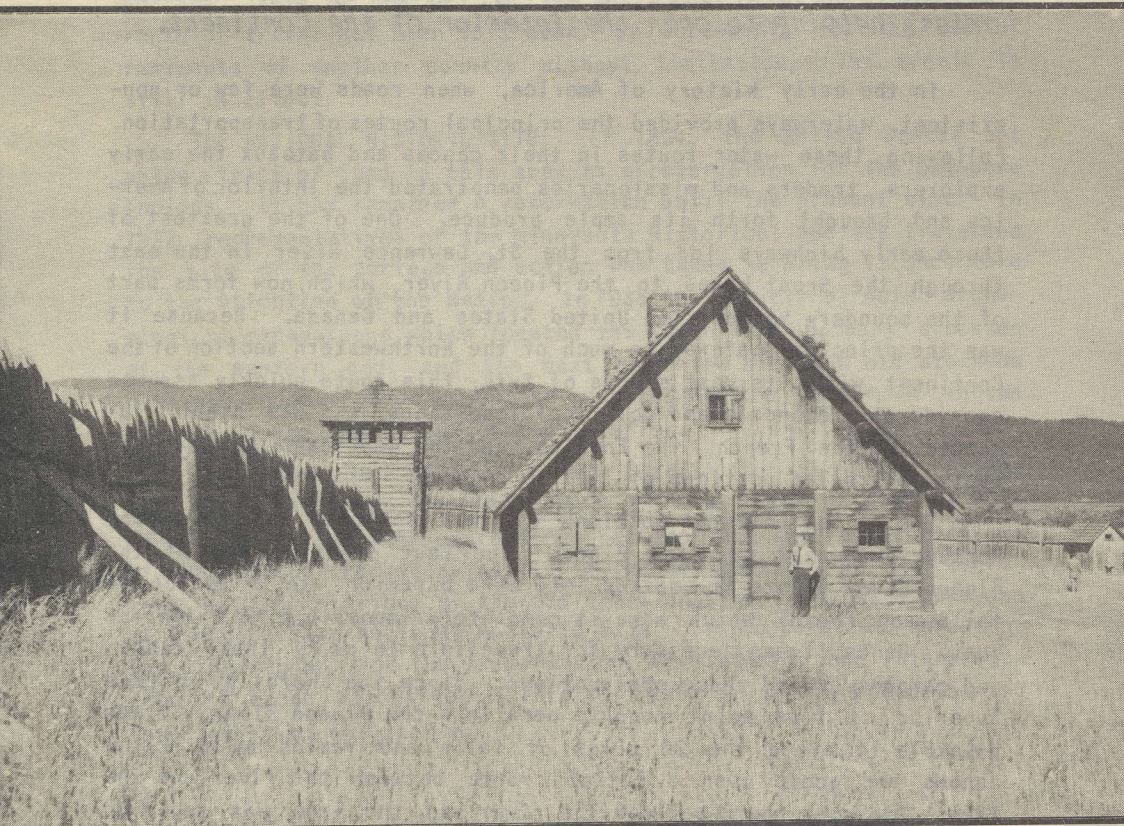


GRAND PORTAGE



NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

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MINNESOTA



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
Oscar L. Chapman, Secretary

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Arthur E. Demaray, Director

Over this historic trail passed thousands of travellers, Indians, explorers, fur traders, soldiers, and missionaries, helping to open the interior of the Continent.

In the early history of America, when roads were few or non-existent, waterways provided the principal routes of transportation. Following these water routes in their canoes and bateaux the early explorers, traders and missionaries penetrated the interior of America and brought forth its ample produce. One of the greatest of these early highways led from the St. Lawrence River in the east through the Great Lakes to the Pigeon River, which now forms part of the boundary between the United States and Canada. Because it was the principal gateway to much of the Northwestern section of the Continent with its vast stores of furs, this route quickly assumed considerable economic and political importance, and was highly regarded by the French, the English, and the Americans who successively controlled portions of it.

One of the integral portions of this waterway was the Grand Portage or Great Carrying Place. The last twenty miles of the Pigeon River before it empties into Lake Superior are a series of falls and rapids which make it completely impossible to travel by boat. Hence it was necessary for travellers to carry their canoes and cargoes around these obstructions. Since the shoreline of Lake Superior at this point roughly parallels the Pigeon River, it was possible to avoid the 20 miles of falls and rapids by carrying canoes and goods over a cut-off route between the river and the lake. One such route between the river and the lake was superior to all others because of its gentler grades and lack of obstructions, and consequently this trail soon became almost universally used. The length of this portage, as such carrying places were called, was about nine miles, and because of this unusual distance it received its name, Grand Portage. It is said that many of the

rocks on the portage were worn by the tramping feet of the thousands of men who, during the boom days of the fur trade, travelled the portage in both directions, carrying on their backs canoes, furs, and supplies.

THE FRENCH PERIOD. The origins of the Grand Portage are lost in antiquity. Undoubtedly the Indians had used it for generations before the first Europeans visited the area. Some of the early French explorers of the middle 1600's may have used it too, but there is no positive evidence. The first white man who definitely is known to have passed that way was the Sieur de la Verendrye who travelled the portage in 1731. In his account, however, Verendrye refers to the portage by name and seems to indicate that it was already well-known. Certainly a thriving fur trade was developed over the route within a few years after that date.

THE BRITISH TAKE OVER. Great Britain became dominant in Canada in 1760, and the impact of this event was soon felt at Grand Portage. British traders probably reached the portage first in 1763. Pontiac's conspiracy and the resulting strife hindered trade for a

Entrance to Grand Portage Trail looking northwest.



time, but another British party definitely made the portage in 1765. In 1767, an explorer reported a temporary trading establishment set up at the end of the trail in Grand Portage Bay. In 1775, another explorer, Alexander Henry, visited the site and reported intense rivalry among the many traders and trappers whom he met there. In that year also the American Revolution began, and in order to protect its interest in an annual trade that was then estimated at 40,000 pounds and employed 500 men, the British sent a small detachment of troops to the area in 1778. These soldiers constructed a small fort and may also have built a road across the portage.

THE NORTH WEST COMPANY. The period of greatest activity along the portage came at the close of the American Revolution in 1783. In that year the North West Company was organized from among the many competing groups of traders. In 1785, the North West Company built a stockade 24 by 30 rods in size, and enclosing 16 buildings. Adjoining this was a wharf for the company's lake ship and a canoe yard. At the other end of the trail a storage depot named Fort Charlotte was built, and gradually the trail itself was improved until ox-carts could pass over it.

The peak of activity at Grand Portage Bay came each year in July and August. Then the trappers and traders of the Northwest came to the company fort to exchange their furs for goods and liquor. At the same time the partners and their helpers from Montreal came to the fort to bring new supplies of goods and to take the furs back to the East. Upwards of a thousand people sometimes foregathered on these colorful occasions, and the rendezvous was frequently the scene of hilarious celebration as the trappers relaxed in their one yearly experience with civilization.

AMERICAN PERIOD. Although the Treaty of Paris which formally ended the American Revolution in 1783 had ceded the land on which Grand Portage was located to the United States, a technicality arising from faulty maps permitted Great Britain to retain control of the portage until 1796. In 1797 a rival fur trading company known as the X.Y. Company moved in and built a small fort at Grand Portage and probably another at Fort Charlotte. The competition did not seriously threaten the North West Company, but indications that the American Government intended to collect taxes on the tremendous amount of goods being brought into the country at this point caused the Company to look around for another location. A new route was found, and in 1801 the North West Company removed its headquarters to Fort William in Canada. The X.Y. Company remained at Grand Portage until it united with the North West Company in 1804.

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 WEBSTER-ASHBURTON TREATY. At the close of the War of 1812 the peace treaty had provided for a commission to make an accurate map of the territory and set an exact boundary between the United States and Canada in the various disputed areas. One of these areas included the Grand Portage. The British had wished to retain control of half of the portage, but the Americans had refused. The disagreement was finally settled by the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842 which set the Pigeon River as the boundary line but provided that citizens of both nations should have free and open use of the portage. This is one of the few instances in which a recognized route of travel has been left open, by agreement, for the use of residents of another country without limitation. The treaty is still in effect.

THE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE. In 1854, the United States set aside a tract of land in this area as a reservation for the Chippewa Indians. It has remained a reservation until the present time. In 1922, representatives of the Minnesota Historical Society traversed the site of the portage and action was taken to bring it once more to the attention of the Nation. In 1936 the Society directed archaeological excavations which located the North West Company stockade at the eastern end, and the next year the historic old stockade post was reconstructed under the auspices of the Bureau of Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior.

The Minnesota Chippewa Tribal Council and the Grand Portage Band of Indians were also well aware of the historic significance of the site. In 1951 conferences between them and representatives of the National Park Service led to the designation, by the Secretary of the Interior, of the old trail and the sites at either end as Grand Portage National Historic Site. A cooperative agreement was also signed, for the preservation, development, and interpretation of these significant historic features for the benefit and inspiration of the people.

Cover picture—View along restored stockade wall of old North West Company trading post at Grand Portage Bay showing southwest elevation of museum building.

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TO PORT ARTHUR ONT.
45 MILES



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