



Preparing wild rice.



Ojibwe Village, Three Sisters Garden, and Canoe Warehouse.



Ojibwe dancers at the annual Pow Wow.



Montreal canoe arrives for Rendezvous Days.



Looking into the stockade from Mount Rose.

## Kitchi Onigaming—The Great Carrying Place

### The Voyageurs—Backwoods Navy of Canoemen

**Voyageurs**—French for “travelers.” The hardy French Canadians were more at home in birchbark canoes than on land. Their reputation for working energetically without complaint, chanting nostalgic French songs as they paddled, and vigorously defending the honor of their profession has earned them the status of folk heroes. “There is no life so happy as a voyageur’s life,” reminisced one who retired after 41 years.

But in return for adventure and camaraderie they sacrificed comfort, health, and permanent homes. In the employ of fur-trading corporations they labored to meet European demand for beaver skins. While they fueled a young nation’s economy and opened new territory, the voyageurs often fell victim to disease, collapsed along grueling portages, or drowned in the icy waters of the Canadian wilderness.

A water network linked Montreal, capital city of the Great Lakes fur trade, with western Canada’s fur-bearing animals. Where streams were un-

after 1722, the Grand Portage bypassed rapids on the lower Pigeon River. It was the thoroughway to Canada’s prime fur country. In 1784 Grand Portage became headquarters of the North West Company, owned by Highland Scots. To transport furs the company hired a backwoods navy of voyageurs.

The company’s post on Grand Portage Bay was a convenient meeting place for the voyageurs. They had evolved into two groups based on geography: the north men, or “winterers,” and the Montreal men, also called “pork-eaters.” Late in July brigades of north men set out from Grand Portage for trading posts in the Canadian north. Trade goods bought furs from Native Americans. Like tobacco in colonial Virginia, beaver furs were currency in the Northwest. Ultimately they were fashioned into elegant felt top hats for European and American upper classes.

Through the harsh winter the north men traded out of their lonely posts. With the break-up of the ice in about mid-May they returned to the Grand Portage. Meanwhile the Montrealeers propelled their craft up the Ottawa River and westward across the Great Lakes. Two months later they joined their counterparts for the annual Rendezvous. At this company-sponsored event the north men exchanged furs for trade goods and supplies furnished by the Montreal men, partners struck deals, and Europeans and Indians alike engaged in raucous entertainment.

Afterward the winterers headed to the backcountry, and Montreal men paddled canoe-loads of furs eastward. The Grand Portage trading cycle continued until 1803 when the company moved upshore to Fort William. By 1821 the portage had fallen into disuse. As the fur trade lost momentum toward the mid-1800s—fashions changed and beaver populations diminished—the hardworking, rambunctious voyageurs found their profession becoming obsolete.



Totaling some 3,000 miles, the routes of the north men (green) and Montreal men (orange) met here at the Grand Portage.

Between Montreal and Lake Athabasca there were over 100 portages, none longer than 13 miles.

navigable, canoemen carried boats and cargo over a portage, or trail. Named Kitchi Onigaming by the Ojibwe and “The Great Carrying Place” by French explorers and missionaries sometime

“Shooting the Rapids,” painted by Frances Anne Hopkins in 1879, shows four passengers (sitting amidship) and 16 canoe-

men on an express run. Fur companies, however, rarely substituted passengers for payload.



ABOVE AND BELOW—PUBLIC ARCHIVES CANADA, OTTAWA

### Birchbark Canoes

On foot voyageurs might have trudged 15 or 20 miles a day. By canoe they covered 60 to 80 miles and hauled tons of cargo. Were it not for the lightweight, speedy birchbark canoe, an invention of the region’s Indians, North America’s fur-trading empire would not have existed on such a vast scale.

Canoes used by the winterers on narrow, rapid waters were about 25 feet long and carried four to six voyageurs. Lake canoes about 10 feet longer carried twice as many Montreal men and up to 8,000

pounds of cargo. Both were built from large sheets of birch bark—lashed with split spruce roots to a wooden gunwale, then lined with cedar planks and stabilized with ribbing. Spruce pitch waterproofed the seams. No hardware was used.

As practical as these canoes were, they were not indestructible. Easily punctured bark skin required constant care and frequent repairs. Many a voyageur spent his evenings patching a canoe before crawling underneath to sleep.



“The Portage” by Dennis Gale (top) shows canoe men beginning the overland haul between two waterways. William Arm-

strong’s watercolor (below) shows voyageurs at the end of a portage turning their canoe into a temporary shelter.

### Native Americans

The arrival of French explorers in the mid-1600s began a new era for the few hundred Cree and Ojibwe who lived at Grand Portage, as well as the Sioux, Blackfoot, Beaver, Chipewyan, and Slave Native Americans of the Canadian Northwest. Superb canoeists and hunters, they practiced their ancient skills as vital participants in the international fur trade. They furnished sought-after pelts and equipment and knowledge essential to the voyageurs, who spent most of the year in the lands the Indians had inhabited for generations. Tribesmen taught the newcomers to build canoes from birch bark and guided them along the water routes into the wilderness. Sometimes the relationship between Indians and new settlers went beyond business, and many voyageurs married Indian women.

Voyageurs offered the Indians exotic new items, curiosities at first that eventually became necessities. Glass beads from Venice decorated ceremonial clothing. Wool blankets and woven cloth replaced animal skins. Iron implements—kettles, axes, firearms, and traps—became indispensable, as did distilled spirits. By the 1800s European culture had left its indelible mark on the lives of even the most remote people.



Like the canoe that kept the fur trade in motion, Ojibwe homes and other items requiring light-

weight, decay-resistant, waterproof material were made of birch bark.

### The North West Company

In 1763, after the French and Indian War, France ceded Canada to Great Britain. Under British rule just about anyone was allowed to extract the natural wealth of the Canadian Northwest. Those with foresight pooled their resources and formed wilderness corporations. The North West Company was formed in 1784. Company head Simon McTavish and his partners, canny businessmen with a ready eye for expansion, inspired Washington Irving’s description, “lords of the lakes and forests.” Canoemen themselves, these partners accompanied voyageurs into the wilderness or back to Montreal.

The enterprise succeeded mainly because of the expedient waterway into the Canadian interior via the Grand Portage. Voyageurs paddled far into the wilderness, intercepting Indian hunters before they had traded away furs to the competition. Intense rivalry heightened in the early 1800s as the partners vied with the Hudson’s Bay Company for business, and profits diminished for both. In 1821 the two merged, putting an end to the sometimes violent feud.



Native Americans, French-Canadian voyageurs, and British partners carried on a profitable fur trade for over a century.

ENGRAVED FROM SKETCH BY OGDEN. REPRODUCED IN PICTURESQUE CANADA, 1802. PUBLIC ARCHIVES CANADA, OTTAWA



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BUILDINGS NOT TO SCALE



Grand Portage National Monument is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. Visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).