Grand Portage

Grand Portage National Monument
Minnesota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



Ojibwa dancer R. Hamilton Smith



Great Hall and kitchen from Mt. Rose overlook Ed Cooper



Voyageurs' garb R. Hamilton Smith



Sunrise over Lake Superior Ed Cooper



Modern-day "voyageurs" R. Hamilton Smith

"The Great Carrying Place"

The voyageurs: Backwoods navy of canoemen

Voyageurs: French for "travelers." Hardy French-Canadian fur traders 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 finally retired after 41 years, and who neglected to mention that in return for adventure and camaraderie, they sacrificed comfort, health, and permanent homes. In the employ of fur-trading corporations they labored exhaustively to meet the demand for beaver skins in Europe. While they fueled a young nation's economy and opened new territory, the voyageurs fell victim to disease, collapsed along grueling portages, drowned in the icy waters of the Canadian wilderness.

A water network linked Montreal, capital city of the Great Lakes fur trade, with northwestern Canada and its "soft gold," the pelts of fur-bearing animals. Where streams were unnavigable, canoemen carried boats and cargo over a "portage," or trail. Christened by French explorers and missionaries sometime after 1722, Grand Portage, the "Great Carrying Place," bypassed rapids on the lower Pigeon River and was the acknowledged throughway to Canada's prime fur country. In 1784 it became headquarters of the North West Company, a group of Highland Scots who recognized a good location when they saw one. To transport furs the company hired a backwoods navy of voyageurs.



Totalling some 3,000 miles, the routes of the north men (green) and Montreal men (orange) met at Grand Portage. Between Montreal and Lake Athabaska there were more than 100 portages, none longer than 13 miles.

The company's post at the mouth of the Pigeon was a convenient meeting place for the voyageurs, who 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 Indians who had come to desire the trappings of European civilization. Like tobacco in colonial Virginia, beaver furs were currency in the Northwest. Ultimately they would be fashioned into elegant felt top hats to grace the heads of the 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, about mid-May, they returned to the Grand Portage. Meanwhile, the Montrealers propelled their craft up the Ottawa River, then 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.

Afterwards the winterers headed into the backcountry once more, and Montreal men paddled canoeloads of furs back east. 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-19th century—fashions changed and beaver populations diminished—the hard-working, rambunctious voyageurs found their profession becoming obsolete.

Though Frances Ann Hopkins' "Shooting the Rapids" shows a lake canoe transporting 20 people, indicating that the boat is on an express run, fur companies rarely substituted passengers for payload.
Public Archives Canada, Ottawa



Public Archives Canada, Ottawa

Birchbark canoes

On foot, the voyageurs might have trudged 15 or 20 miles a day. By canoe, they covered 60 to 80 miles—and hauled tons of cargo as well. 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 types were constructed from large sheets of birch bark, lashed with split spruce roots to a wooden gunwale, then lined with cedar planks and stabilized with ribbing. Seams were waterproofed with spruce pitch. No hardware was used.

As practical as the canoes were, they could not be characterized as indestructible. Easily punctured bark skin required constant care and frequent repairs. Many a voyageur spent his evenings patching a canoe before crawling underneath to catch a few hours' sleep.



Public Archives Canada, Ottawa



"The Portage" by Dennis Gale *(top)* shows canoemen beginning the overland haul between waterways. In William Armstrong's watercolor, weary voyageurs at the end of a portage turn their canoe into temporary shelter before it becomes water transportation once again.

The Indians

The arrival of the French explorers in the mid-1600s began a new era for the few hundred Cree and Ojibwa who made Grand Portage their home, as well as the Sioux, Blackfoot, Beaver, Chipewyan, and Slave Indians of the Canadian Northwest. Superb canoeists and hunters, the natives now practiced their ancient skills as vital participants in the international fur trade. They furnished not only the sought-after pelts but 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 fashion canoes from birch bark and guided them along the age-old water routes into the wilderness. Sometimes the relationship between Indians and whites went beyond business; more than a few voyageurs married native women.

For their part, the voyageurs offered the Indians exotic new items, eye-catching curiosities at first that eventually turned into 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 19th century, European culture had left its indelible mark on the lives of even the most remote peoples.

Library of Congress

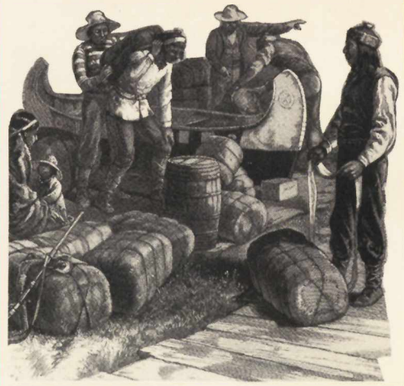


Like the canoe that kept the fur trade in motion, Ojibwa homes—as well as other items requiring lightweight, decay-resistant, waterproof material—were made of birch bark.

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. Thus was born the North West Company 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, the partners accompanied the 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 for business with the Hudson's Bay Company, and profits diminished for both. Finally, in 1821, the two merged, putting an end to the sometimes violent feud.



Indians, French-Canadian voyageurs, and British partners carried on a highly profitable fur trade for more than a century.
Public Archives Canada, Ottawa

A Guide to Grand Portage

For your safety
Avoid uneven ground, rocks, tree roots, and irregular steps. Watch your children; the dock area can be dangerous and the lake is extremely cold.

Along the portage, you may encounter the same hazards as did the voyageurs. Wear sturdy footwear and carry plenty of water. In June and July mosquitoes and flies are abundant. Emergency assistance is a long way off; please be careful!



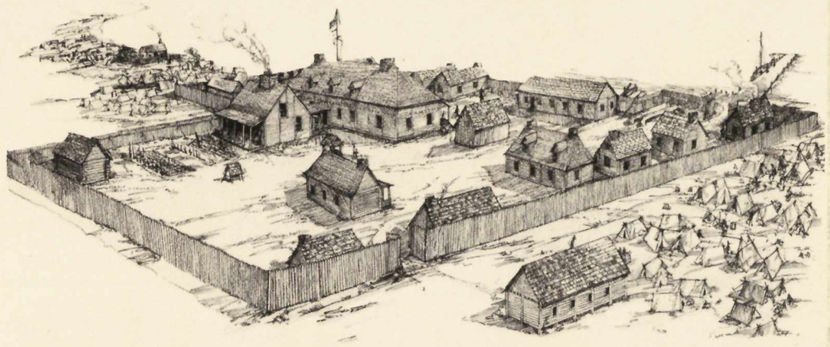
Illustration by Richard Schlecht

Buildings not to scale

A tour of the stockade

From 1784 to 1803, when Simon McTavish and his partners ran the most profitable fur company on the Great Lakes, their headquarters at Grand Portage was the largest post within hundreds of miles. Sixteen wooden buildings within a palisade, the station was business office, marketplace, fur depot, and living quarters. This was the site of the rendezvous, an annual gathering—eagerly awaited during the dreary winter months—of everyone connected with the company.

Hundreds of voyageurs spent the better part of July camped outside the stockade. "The North men live under tents" wrote explorer Alexander Mackenzie, himself a North West Company partner, "but the more frugal pork-eater lodges beneath his canoe." Food was plenty and liquor flowed freely—at least for those willing to part with the wages they had just been handed for the past year's work. Long-standing rivalries might spark fistfights or explode into all-out brawls, landing participants in the company jail. On the final night of the rendezvous, the partners and their invited guests feasted and danced in the Great Hall. Outside the voyageurs and Indians staged a celebration of their own. The local Ojibwa donned ceremonial dress and canoemen sported their trademark apparel: plumed caps, bright wool jackets, and fringed sashes. Festivities continued until daybreak. Soon the voyageurs took up their paddles and headed out for another season of travel and trade.



Alexander Mackenzie described the North West Company's headquarters during a summer visit: "Beneath an hill . . . 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."

Illustration by Dennis Simon

The compound was abandoned after the North West Company, a British concern operating on American soil, relocated in 1803 to avoid the complications of citizenship, licensing, and high import duties. Explorer David Thompson, surveying the area in the 1820s, saw only the clover-covered foundations; the portage itself was obscured by vegetation and partially blocked by fallen timbers.

In the 1950s, Grand Portage was designated a national monument. First-hand accounts and several archeological excavations provided data for accurate replicas of historically significant structures. Interiors are furnished 1797-style, allowing visitors to view the buildings as North West Company employees might have.

The **Great Hall,** dormant most of the year, came to life as the fur traders converged in late June for the rendezvous. Company partners, clerks, and Indian traders talked business in the Great Hall by day and dined in the evening. Food was prepared in the **kitchen,** to the rear of the hall.

A **fur press** converted the bulky furs into easily handled cargo. Sixty beaver pelts, piled atop four binding cords and sandwiched in burlap or cotton, were compacted and tied into a neat 90-pound bale. A bronze fur seal certified the package as North West Company property.

Designed mainly for private business transactions rather than as defense against attack, the **stockade** was constructed from cedar pickets. Instead of nails, luxury items in the Canadian wilderness, the builders secured the pickets with "walers"—horizontal poles—and wooden pins. Visitors can climb the **lookout tower** for a view of the grounds and lake.

Outside the stockade is the **warehouse.** Its location indicates that it might have belonged to an independent trader. Or, perhaps, the enormous volume of trade goods and pelts made storage inside the stockade impossible. During the company's heyday, all trade goods going to outposts in the Canadian fur country— and all furs bound for Montreal—funneled through Grand Portage. Now the building exhibits historic items including two authentic birchbark canoes.

About your visit

Grand Portage National Monument, on the western shore of Lake Superior, lies just south of the U.S.-Canada border. The park entrance is from U.S. 61, 36 miles north of Grand Marais, Minnesota. The portage bisects the reservation of the Grand Portage Band of Chippewa (Ojibwa) Indians, who in 1958 donated the land that became the national monument.

The reconstructed stockade area presents a view of life at Grand Portage in the late 1700s. Visitors are encouraged to see the exhibits and audio-visual program at the Great Hall.

The Mount Rose trail begins across the road from the parking lot and ascends to the summit of the 300-foot hill. A printed guide is available at the trail head.



Mount Rose, with several good overlooks, is the most accessible spot from which to view the stockade and lake.



The warehouse is one of the reconstructed buildings that help recall the stockade's appearance during the height of the fur trade.





Portage hikers can see first-hand what conditions the voyageurs met with as they hauled backbreaking loads for nine miles at a time.



Open year-round, the portage is quite popular in winter for cross-country skiing through the woods and over rolling terrain.

A rebuilt dock occupies the location of the original one used by the North West Company's small lake ships. In summer, boats depart for Isle Royale National Park.

The stockade area is open from mid-May through mid-October. Regular hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Visitors must pay a small fee for admittance to the stockade. Children under 12 are admitted at no charge, as are those with Golden Eagle passports. Other areas in the park are open year-round for outdoor activities.

The park has a picnic area near the parking lots. Visitors can find food and overnight lodging nearby at the Grand Portage Lodge.

It took the voyageurs about 2½ hours to carry two or more 90-lb. packs along the nine-mile portage between the stockade and the company's smaller storage depot at Fort Charlotte. Today the trail is open year-round to casual strollers, serious hikers, and cross-country skiers. There are no modern facilities along the way. There is a primitive campsite at Fort Charlotte. Campers must register in advance.

Related sites
Old Fort William, Voyageurs National Park, Mackinac Island State Park, and another North West Company Fur Post were sites important to the fur trade and are now open to visitors. The Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul exhibits art and artifacts from the era.

Administration
Grand Portage National Monument is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. For information contact the Superintendent, P.O. Box 666, Grand Marais, MN 55604.

☆GPO 1989—242-345/80134