Grand Portage

Grand Portage National Monument
Minnesota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide



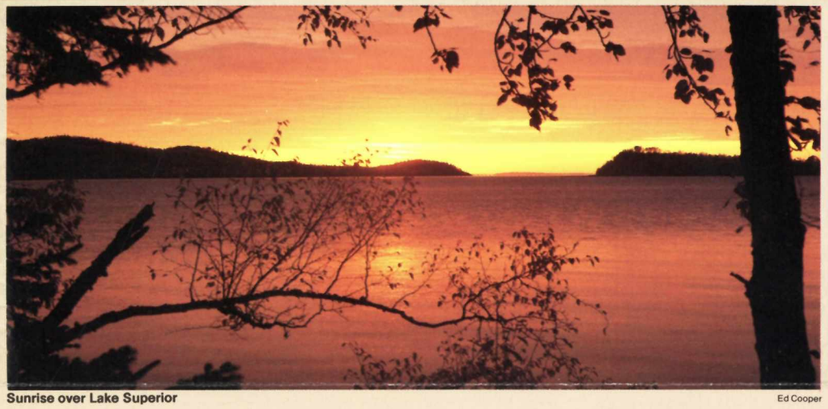
Ojibwe dancer R. Hamilton Smith



Great Hall and lookout tower



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.



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



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



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 Ojibwe 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, Ojibwe 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!

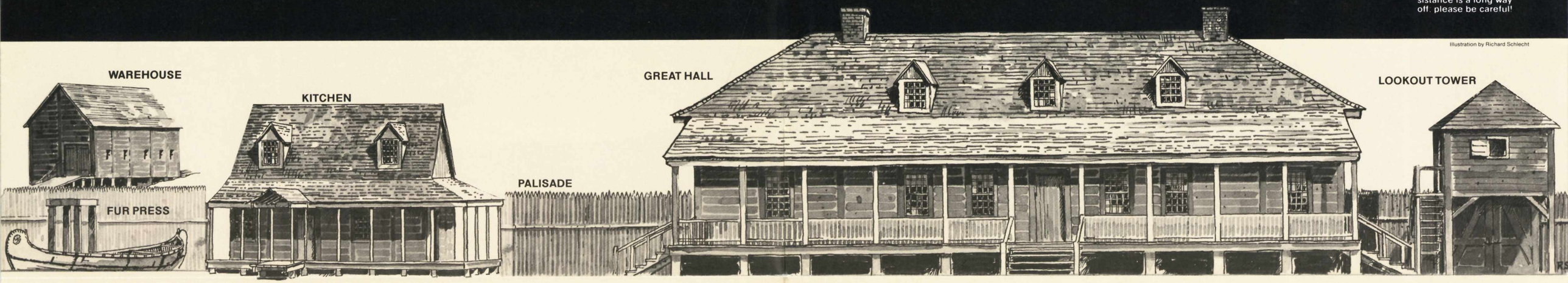


Illustration by Richard Schlecht

Buildings not to scale

A tour of the stockade

From 1784 to 1803, chief director Simon McTavish and his North West Company partners ran the most profitable fur trade operation on the Great Lakes. The company's inland headquarters was located at Grand Portage, the largest fur trade depot in the heart of the continent. Sixteen wooden buildings stood inside the palisade, including a business office, a warehouse for trade goods and furs, food storage buildings, and living quarters for the partners and clerks.

This was also the site of Rendezvous, an annual gathering eagerly awaited through the long winter season by everyone connected with the company. Hundreds of voyageurs spent the better part of July camped outside the palisade. "The North men live under tents," wrote explorer Alexander Mackenzie, a company partner, "but the more frugal pork-eater lodges beneath his canoe." Food was plentiful and liquor flowed freely—at least for those willing to part with the wages they had just received for the past year's work. Long-standing rivalries sometimes sparked fistfights and exploded into all-out brawls, landing participants in the company jail. On the final night of Rendezvous, the partners and their guests feasted and danced in the Great Hall, while outside the voyageurs and the Indians staged a celebration of their own. The local Ojibwe donned ceremonial dress and canoemen sported their trademark apparel: plumed caps, bright jackets, and fringed sashes. When Rendezvous ended, 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 post was abandoned in 1803 after the North West Company, owned by Scots but operating on American soil, relocated northward to avoid the complications of citizenship, licensing, and import duties. When explorer David Thompson surveyed the area nearly 20 years later, he saw only the remains of clover-covered foundations. The Grand Portage itself was obscured by vegetation and fallen trees. In 1958, the Grand Portage Band of Minnesota Chippewa donated the lands that became the national monument that same year. Written accounts and archeological excavations provided information for reconstructions. Interiors are furnished 1797-style.

The **Great Hall,** inactive most of the year, came to life as the fur traders converged in late June for Rendezvous. Company partners, clerks, and Indians talked business in the Great Hall by day and dined in the evening. Food was prepared in the **kitchen,** located behind the Great Hall.

A **fur press** converted the bulky furs into easily handled cargo. About 60 beaver pelts, piled atop four binding cords and sandwiched in burlap or muslin, were pressed and tied into a compact 90-pound bale.

During the company's heyday, all trade goods going to outposts in the Canadian fur country and all furs bound for Montreal were funneled through Grand Portage. Thus, the cedar-picket **palisade** was designed mainly as secure storage for extensive inventories of goods rather than as defense against attack. Visitors can climb the **lookout tower** for a view of the grounds and Lake Superior.

Outside the palisade is a reconstructed **warehouse.** Its location indicates that the original building might have belonged to an independent trader. It also may have provided extra storage space when warehouses inside the palisade were full. Now the building exhibits historic items, including two birch-bark canoes constructed by traditional methods.

About your visit

Located on the northwestern shore of Lake Superior, Grand Portage National Monument is 7 miles south of the United States-Canada border and 36 miles north of Grand Marias, Minnesota. The park entrance is one mile from Minn. 61.

The historic buildings are open mid-May through mid-October. Visitors must pay a small admission fee; children under 17 and visitors with Golden Age and Golden Eagle passports are admitted free. Other areas in the park are open year-round for outdoor activities.

The reconstructed palisade area presents a view of life at Grand Portage in the late 1700s. Visitors are encouraged to view the exhibits and audiovisual program in the Great Hall.



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 firsthand what the voyageurs encountered as they hauled backbreaking loads of furs and trade goods for 8½ 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.

The Mount Rose trail begins across the road from the parking lot and ascends 300 feet to the hill's summit. A trail brochure is available at the trailhead.

The park has a picnic area within walking distance of the parking lot. Visitors can obtain food and overnight lodging nearby at the Grand Portage Lodge.

During summer, passenger boats depart for Isle Royale National Park from a rebuilt dock. Information about Isle Royale National Park is available here at the national monument.

It took the voyageurs a few hours to carry two 90-pound packs along the 8½-mile portage between Lake Superior and Fort Charlotte, the company's smaller storage depot located on the Pigeon River. Today the portage is open year-round to hikers, backpackers, and cross-country skiers. There are no modern facilities along the way. Campers must register in advance for the primitive campsite at Fort Charlotte. There is no charge for primitive camping.

Related Sites
Old Fort William, Voyageurs National Park, Fort Michilimackinac, and the Pine City Wintering Post are other historic fur trade sites open to visitors. The Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul also exhibits art and artifacts related to the fur trade.

More Information
For park hours and other information contact: Superintendent, Grand Portage National Monument, P.O. Box 668, Grand Marais, MN 55604; 218-387-2788; or www.nps.gov/grpo on the Internet.

☆ GPO:2001—472-470/00425 Reprint 2000
Printed on recycled paper.