Grand Portage

Grand Portage National Monument
Minnesota

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Preparing wild rice. NPS



Ojibwe Village, Three Sisters Garden, and Canoe Warehouse. © TRAVIS NOVITSKY



Ojibwe dancers at the annual Pow Wow. © RICK NOVITSKY



Montreal canoe arrives for Rendezvous Days. NPS



Looking into the stockade from Mount Rose. NPS

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 birch-bark 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 unnavigable, 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 after 1722, the Grand Portage bypassed rapids on the lower Pigeon River. It was the throughway 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.



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.

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 Montrealers 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 canoeloads 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 hard-working, rambunctious voyageurs found their profession becoming obsolete.



"Shooting the Rapids," painted by Frances Anne Hopkins in 1879, shows four passengers (sitting amidship) and 16 canoemen 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 canoemen beginning the overland haul between two waterways. William Armstrong'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.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Like the canoe that kept the fur trade in motion, Ojibwe homes and 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. 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.

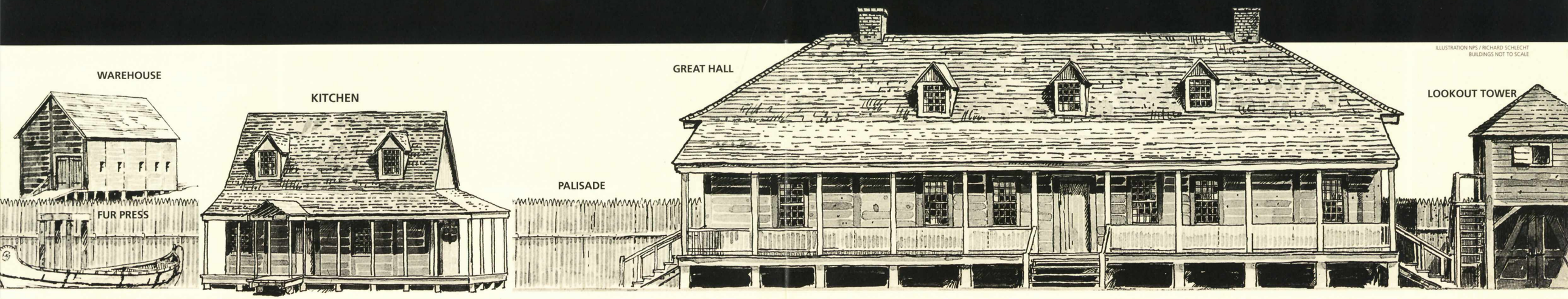
The enterprise succeeded mainly because of the expedient waterway into the Canadian interior via the Grand Portage. Voyageurs paddled far into the wilderness, intercepting Indian hunters before they had traded away furs to the competition. Intense rivalry heightened in the early 1800s as the partners 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

A Guide to Grand Portage



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, 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 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 [Montreal man] lodges beneath his canoe."



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 NPS / DENNIS SIMON

Food was plentiful and liquor flowed freely—at least for those willing to part with wages just received for the past year's work. Long-standing rivalries sometimes sparked fistfights and exploded into brawls, landing participants in the company jail.

On the final night of Rendezvous, partners and guests feasted and danced in the Great Hall, while outside voyageurs and Indians staged their own celebration. Grand Portage Ojibwe donned ceremonial garb, and canoemen sported trademark apparel: plumed caps, bright jackets, and fringed sashes. When Rendezvous ended, the voyageurs took up their paddles and headed for another season of travel and trade.

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 land 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 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**, behind the Great Hall.

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. The cedar-picket **palisade** was designed mainly as secure storage for extensive inventories of goods rather than as defense against attack. You may climb the **lookout tower** for a view of the grounds and Lake Superior.

Outside the palisade is a reconstructed **warehouse**. Its location suggests 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. Today the building displays historic items, including birch-bark canoes built by traditional methods.

A **fur press** converted 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.

Planning Your Visit

Getting Here Grand Portage National Monument is on Lake Superior's northwestern shore, seven miles south of the United States-Canada border and 36 miles north of Grand Marais, Minn. The park is east of Minn. 61.

Begin Your Visit The Heritage Center, open year-round except major winter holidays, has information, exhibits, films, and a bookstore. There is no entrance fee to the park.

Things To See The reconstructed depot area (Stockade and Great Hall) gives you a view of life at Grand Portage in the late 1700s. The historic buildings are open daily late-May through mid-October. Other park areas, including the Grand Portage trail and the Ojibwe village, are open year-round.

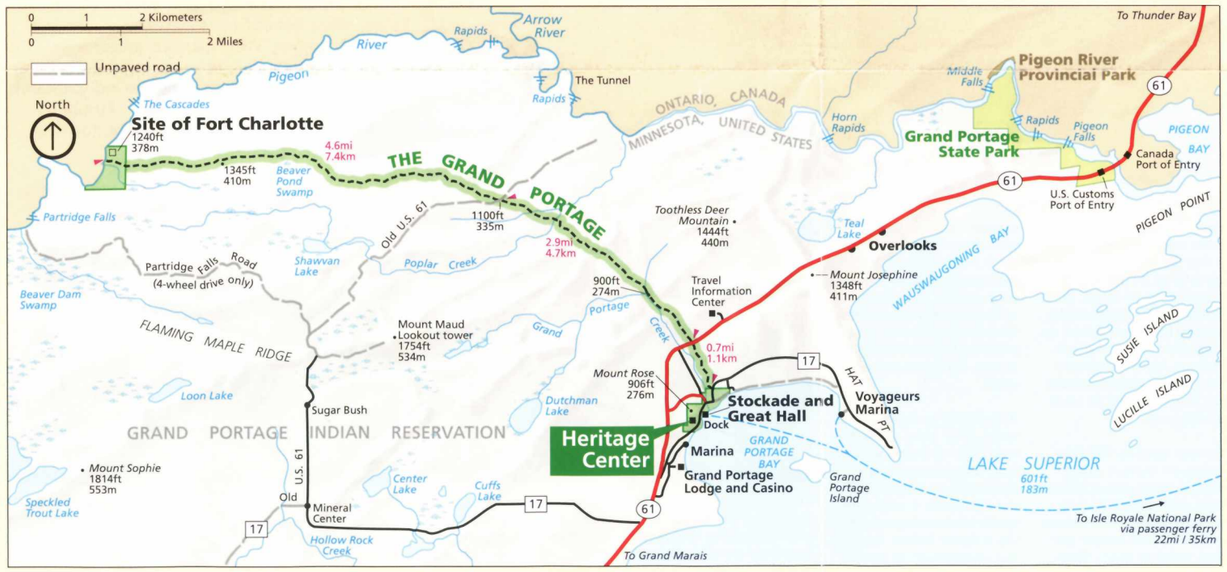


© JON CARNEY

Overlooks on Mount Rose offer views of the stockade and lake.

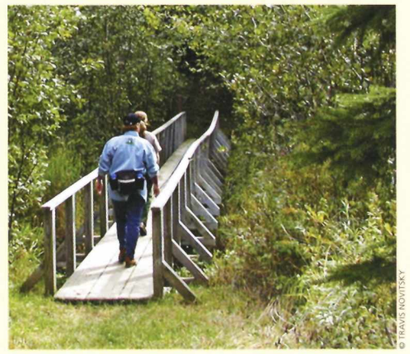
Picnicking, Food, Lodging A picnic area is within walking distance of the depot; roadside parking available. Find groceries at the Trading Post and food and lodging at Grand Portage Lodge.

Accessible Buildings and grounds are accessible for visitors in wheelchairs. Service animals are welcome.



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The Grand Portage Voyageurs carried two 90-pound packs along the 8½-mile portage between Lake Superior and Fort Charlotte, the company's smaller storage depot on the Pigeon River. Today the Grand Portage trail is open year-round to hikers and backpackers. In winter cross-country skiers enjoy the woods and rolling terrain. There are no modern facilities on the trail. Campers must register in advance for the primitive campsite at Fort Charlotte; primitive camping is free.



© TRAVIS NOVITSKY

Hikers on the 8½-mile Grand Portage trail can imagine what the voyageurs endured as they carried heavy loads of furs and trade goods.

Mount Rose Mount Rose trail begins across the road from the depot area and ascends 300 feet to the hill's summit. Get a brochure at the trailhead.

In summer you can take a ferry from Grand Portage to Isle Royale National Park. Ask staff for details.

Related Sites Old Fort William, Voyageurs National Park, Fort Michilimackinac, and Pine City Wintering Post are historic fur trading sites. The Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul has fur trade exhibits. Check websites.

Safety First Emergency help is a long way off. *Remember, your safety is your responsibility.* • Be careful crossing roads. • Watch your step on uneven surfaces. • Watch your children: the dock area can be dangerous, and the lake is extremely cold. • On the portage, wear sturdy footwear and carry plenty of water. • Mosquitoes and flies are abundant in June and July. • For firearms and other regulations check the park website. **Emergencies: call 911 or 218-387-3030**

More Information
Grand Portage National Monument
P.O. Box 426
170 Mile Creek Road
Grand Portage, MN 55605
V / TTY 218-475-0123
www.nps.gov/grpo

Grand Portage National Monument is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. Visit www.nps.gov.