

The great boom: Brownstone and the obelisk

The brownstone (sandstone) of the Bayfield Peninsula and Apostle Islands is millions of years old and hundreds of feet thick. Sculpted over the eons by water and ice, it forms the beautiful coastal bluffs seen today. Dense, cohesive, and strong, it resists weathering and fire, and its surfaces harden when exposed to air. Until the 1890s, Chequamegon brownstone was in demand for public and business buildings, monuments, large houses, and for railroad construction.

Surviving brownstone buildings in the Chequamegon Bay region include the former courthouse in Bayfield, the bank, library, Catholic Church, and courthouse in Washburn, as well as the city hall and railroad depot in Ashland. The Knight Block in Ashland, four stories with a five story central tower, occupying almost an entire city block, was by far the largest brownstone structure in the bay region. It was constructed in 1889 and demolished in 1974. Among the many other buildings constructed of brownstone from Chequamegon Bay quarries still in existence are the Milwaukee County Courthouse; the Minnesota Block, city hall, and trade and commerce building in Superior; and Cen-

tral High School and civic center buildings in Duluth.

The first brownstone quarries in Chequamegon Bay were opened by Frederick Prentice on Hermit and Stockton Islands. By 1888, three quarries had been opened at

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Houghton. The largest of these, owned by the Prentice Brownstone Company, was a highly mechanized operation with a railroad spur and a wharf from which the cut stone could be distributed by train or ship.

Frederick Prentice was the president and major investor of the Prentice Brownstone Company. Born in Toledo, Ohio in 1822, Prentice was a shrewd businessman, accumulating a small fortune at an early age. In 1854 he came to Chequamegon Bay, investing in Bay City, which eventually joined with Whittlesey to form Ashland. After the two townsites were abandoned in the financial panic of 1857 he

went back to Toledo. With the revival of the townsites after the Civil War, he returned and over the years became an important figure in the Chequamegon Bay region, the Houghton quarry being one of his principal business interests.

Another venture was a townsite he planned at what was then known as Prospect Point. He named it Houghton after Douglas Houghton, a physician and geologist who, in the early 1800s, explored the north country of what would become Wisconsin and Michigan. The plan of the townsite was elaborate with 60-foot wide streets and 100-foot wide avenues dividing the site into numerous large lots, and three large docks on the waterfront. Prentice expected that the townsite would quickly become a thriving settlement, but as far as can be determined, the plan was never actually laid out on the ground. In August 1858 several families were reported living there, along with a dock and a small steam sawmill, but like so many other speculative townsites, Houghton was quickly forgotten.

From 1889 to 1893, the brownstone quarrying industry on Chequamegon Bay prospered, the four openings

of the Prentice quarry shipping over one million cubic feet of stone from 1889 to 1890, far more than the other Houghton quarries. There were many other quarries on the peninsula and islands, including the Pike quarry on Van Tansells Point, established in 1883 by Robinson D. Pike, an investor from Bayfield. Stone was quarried along the shore and on two inland locations, one of which can be seen from Highway 13, beyond the Onion River curve toward Bayfield.

In 1892 much of the work of the Prentice quarry was devoted to providing stone for Wisconsin's participation in the Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in 1893, which commemorated the 400th anniversary of the European discovery of America by Columbus in 1492. Included was stone for the foundation and trimmings of the Wisconsin exposition building, and four richly carved obelisks, 28 feet high with a combined weight of almost 120,000 pounds, which stood at the corners of the state's mineral exhibit. Also promised, but never delivered, was a huge 115-foot high obelisk.

Its story will be told in part 2.