

Chequamegon Bay and La Pointe CJ 6/7/12

Toward the western end of Lake Superior a verdant peninsula with an attendant archipelago protrudes into the lake, sheltering a large bay on its southeast side.

This is Chequamegon Bay, ancient home of Native Americans, whose tranquil beauty has inspired generations of poets and romantics, while its rich resources attracted the fatal thievery of the white man. The bay is about 12 miles long from the head of the bay to the southwest to the sandspit that lies across its mouth to the northeast. This spit extends northwestward from the low lying mainland to within about four miles of the Bayfield peninsula and consists of Chequamegon Point and Long Island, the two separated by a narrow water gap. The spit and island serve as a natural breakwater, protecting the bay against the fury of storms on the main lake. The water is shallower in that part of the bay that lies to the southeast of a line from the outer tip of Chequamegon Point, southwest to the head of the bay, and at the head of the bay itself, than on the northwest side, where it ranges in depth up to 70 feet.

Chequamegon Bay was identified by several different names on early maps of the region. According to these maps the name "Chequamegon" (with spelling variations) was applied to the bay from



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1688 onward. The bay was also known by other names, however—Bay of St. Charles, Long Island Bay, Ashland Bay, and La Pointe Bay—before Chequamegon Bay became the accepted name after the Civil War. There are several ideas about the original meaning of the word "Chequamegon." They all agree that the word is a corruption of an Indian word that referred to the sand point or spit which is now Chequamegon Point and Long Island, but differ as to what the word was and what it meant originally. One historian suggested that the Indian word was "Sha-ga-waum-ik-ong," meaning "the soft beaver dam" because the point was built by an Indian god to bar the egress of a great beaver which he one hunted on the Great Lake, and which had taken refuge in this deep bay, but the great beaver had possibly broken

through it back into the lake.

The Europeans used the name Chequamegon with a broad geographic reference, encompassing not only the bay but also the large if ill-defined territory to the south and west accessible by the rivers and Indian trails radiating from the bay. Indeed, more recently the author of a history of the Montana Territory insisted that the word "Chequamegon" was an Indian name for beaver and referred to the vast domain in northern United States and southern Canada where this animal was hunted for its fur. While this author was incorrect in his translation of the word and greatly over extended its geographic reference, he was right when he went on to say that "On account of its fur, the beaver incidentally became the forerunner of civilization in these territories." For it was the lust for the fur of the beaver that was a main driving force behind the early exploration and settlement of the Chequamegon Bay region by Europeans and their descendents, French, British, and American.

A prominent feature of the bay is an archipelago of islands, which shelter the bay on its northeast side. A French map from 1744 shows ten islands but named them "I des 12 apotres," probably the first time the name "Apostle Islands" was applied to the islands

Maps prepared by early explorers differ in the number of the islands, from as few as ten to as many 28. A survey chart from 1825 shows the Bayfield peninsula, the bay, and the islands in their nearly correct positions and proportions. Twenty islands are shown, several with their modern names including Madeline Island with the village of La Pointe in its proper location.

Madeline Island was named after the daughter of White Crane, Chief of the Chippewa at La Pointe village, whose Christian name was Madelaine. The name La Pointe was applied to three locations around the bay. In 1665 or 1666 the Jesuit Father Claude Jean Allouez constructed a small chapel on the bay shore, possibly near Thompson's Creek, naming his mission La Pointe du Saint Esprit, or the Point of the Holy Ghost. When the French missionaries were driven away by the Sioux Indians in the summer of 1671 the few French fur traders who remained fled to the northwestern end of Chequamegon Point for protection, and this location became the second La Pointe. Finally, in 1695 French, having arranged a truce between the warring tribes, constructed a small fort on the southwestern tip of Madeline Island, the site of the present village of La Pointe.