

Washburn's Early Economy

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Washburn's early economy had three major components, each of which was based on the exploitation of a natural resource: shipping—a natural harbor; quarrying—huge deposits of building-grade sandstone; and lumbering—vast pine forests on the Bayfield peninsula and surrounding region (discussed in a future article).

In 1883 the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha Railroad constructed a lake transfer terminal, consisting of a large coal and merchandise dock on a protected natural harbor, on the south coast of Chequamegon Bay. Grain from the rich agricultural region in northwestern Iowa, eastern Kansas, and Nebraska was transported to this transfer terminal for shipment east, and coal, merchandise, freight and lumber were shipped back to the growing settlements in the west. Several executives of the Omaha Railroad and several prominent men from Ashland, Bayfield, and Minneapolis organized the Bay Land and Improvement Company. The company purchased land adjacent to the Omaha terminal and laid out a townsite, which they named Washburn, after Cadwallader C. Washburn, governor of Wisconsin from 1872 to 1874. (There are ten other post offices in the United States named Washburn.)

A second major component of Washburn's early economy was the quarrying of sandstone, also known as brownstone.



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Sandstone is a sedimentary rock composed of cemented grains of sand, which have accumulated in a lake or stream and then compacted by overlying rock strata. The sandstone that outcrops along the southern coast of the Bayfield Peninsula and on the Apostle Islands is known as the Chequamegon formation and has an estimated thickness of 1,000 to 2,000 feet. The stone is composed of quartz grains, cemented with calcite, silica and iron oxide, the last of these giving the stone its red to brown color. The first quarry on Chequamegon Bay was opened on Basswood Island in 1868 by the Bass Island Brown Stone Company. Stone from this quarry was used in the construction of the Milwaukee County Courthouse in 1870, the first major civic building to use Lake Superior sandstone. Stone was also shipped to Chicago, where buildings constructed of it withstood the high temperatures of the great Chicago fire on October 8 1872 (confirm-

ing what laboratory tests had already shown), resulting in a substantial increase in demand for the stone for rebuilding the city. Other reported minor brownstone quarrying operations during this period included a quarry on Stockton Island in 1871 owned by Samuel S. Vaughn, which provided broken stone for a breakwater at Ontonagon; and operations at Houghton in 1872, which provided stone for the piers and abutments of the Wisconsin Central Railroad bridges over the White River and Silver Creek, south of Ashland. The next large quarry was started in the summer of 1883 by Robinson D. Pike, prominent lumber mill owner and investor from Bayfield. It was located at Van Tassell Point, about two and one-half miles southwest of Bayfield. Stone was quarried along the shore and at two locations farther inland, one of which can still be seen on the north side of Highway 13. After the Civil War, the market for brownstone greatly expanded. It was in demand for numerous uses in railroad construction and the growing towns and cities of the nation, where it was used for monumental public and private buildings, and for row houses and tenements. Also, there was a general expectation, which brownstone met, that large, important buildings—banks, schools, churches, libraries, corporate headquarters, government buildings—should be massive and somber in appearance, reflecting a permanence

and stability consistent with the important business carried on inside. Sandstone was used extensively for large build buildings in the Chequamegon Bay communities during these years—in Washburn, the Washburn Bank, Walker School, Northern State Bank, and Bayfield County Courthouse; in Bayfield, the first Bayfield County Courthouse (now the National Park headquarters); and in Ashland, the Union Passenger Depot, the post office, and the enormous Knight Block. The stone was also used for facades of buildings otherwise constructed of brick—for example, in Washburn, the Meehan Block, the second Opera Block, the Union Block, and the Bayfield County Bank.

This large market for brownstone, in 1883, led to the establishment of an extensive brownstone quarrying industry centered in the Houghton Point region. From 1885 to 1905, 19 companies, all of them short-lived, were established to quarry brownstone around the bay and on the islands. But the brownstone industry was already in decline due to a change in architectural taste from the somber tones of brownstone to lighter colored stone; the replacement of the traditional massive masonry wall by a load bearing steel frame to which a curtain wall was attached; a decline in railroad construction; and the replacement of stone masonry by cheaper concrete. By 1910 brownstone quarrying in the Chequamegon Bay region had ended.

Shipping and Quarrying