

The founding of Ashland ¹⁶² -1

Ashland is the oldest of the three mainland communities on Chequamegon Bay and is unique because it was founded twice.

In June 1854 Asaph Whittlesey and his wife and infant daughter arrived at La Pointe from Ohio. In early July, Whittlesey and his friend, George Kilborn, rowed across to the south shore of the bay, finally landing east of Fish Creek, approximately at the foot of Sanborn Avenue. There they constructed a small cabin, the first dwelling in what was to become Ashland. In the fall two more cabins were constructed, one of which was the Whittlesey family home and the social and administrative center of a developing settlement. The first religious services were here, also the first dance, the first July 4th celebration, and the first election of La Pointe County officers. In March 1844 a post office was established and the tiny settlement was officially named Whittlesey.

Sometime in August 1854, Martin Beaser arrived at La Pointe from Ontonagon. When it was suggested to him that the site of what is now Ashland might be the logical terminus for a Great Lakes-to-Mississippi ship canal and that there were reported to be iron ore deposits in the Penokee range, he sold his business in Ontonagon and returned



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to Chequamegon Bay with the intention of establishing a townsite. When he found that Whittlesey and Kilborn were already there, the three made an agreement by which in return for providing supplies for the winter and arranging for a survey of the site, Beaser would receive three-quarters of the land in the townsite, the remaining one quarter to be divided equally between the other two. Beaser went to Ontonagon for supplies and returned with a surveyor who platted the site in October 1854. Beaser named the townsite, Ashland, after the Kentucky estate of Henry Clay, a prominent lawyer and politician, whom he knew and admired.

Meanwhile, five speculators, including Frederick Prentice, founded another townsite about one and a quarter miles east of Whittlesey, nam-

ing it Bay City. They constructed a cabin for living quarters, a trading post, and a pier on which they stacked cordwood for the steamers they expected would soon arrive. These men were drawn to the south shore of the bay by the probability that the site would become a major port on the bay and by the prospective iron ore deposits in the Penokee range to the south, discovered by the U.S. geological surveys. In the fall of 1855 the area was surveyed and divided into townships and subdivided into sections. The settlers at Whittlesey and Bay City, who were technically squatters, then filed pre-emption claims and received clear titles to their lands. In 1859 a petition to the state legislature, from the citizens of La Pointe, Whittlesey, and Bay City for the formation of a new county, was approved. In March 1860 Ashland County was organized from La Pointe County with the county seat in the village of Ashland. The northern boundary of the new county ran through the center of the bay and between the mainland and the Apostle Islands, thereby including most of the islands in Ashland County. Despite the modest growth of the settlement because of panic of 1857, the lack of railroad connections, or even the prospect of such connections, and the economic and political turmoil accompanying the civil War, the settle-

ments were all but abandoned during the decade of the 1860s. The census of 1860 showed only 67 people living there with 82% of the dwellings unoccupied.

The resurrection of Ashland began after the 1871 railroad survey confirmed that it would be the Chequamegon Bay terminus of what was now (due to a name change) the Wisconsin Central Railroad. The Ashland Weekly Press noted that "Soon the note of preparation was sounded and many of the old settlers again pitched their tents in Ashland and prepared for a new trial of fortune." The first to arrive at the site in early or mid-October was reported to have been James A. Wilson, a returning settler from old Ashland. October 1871, then, can be taken as the date of the birth of the new Ashland. Late that month, Hank Fifield, editor of the Bayfield Press, made "a flying trip to the prospective city of Ashland." He found that construction of a dock for Samuel Vaughn was underway, and heard a rumor that "the old road from Ashland to Bay City is to be put in repair again." Fifield predicted that "Undoubtedly before two years pass by the population of Ashland county will be several thousand, as the W. C. R. R. is to pass through it, and future developments at the [Penokee] Iron Range will cause many to seek homes in that section."