

Early settlers, McClellan Mill and a horrible train wreck

Early Settlers: An 1855 plat of the coast of Chequamegon Bay, adjacent to the future site of Washburn, shows five dwellings — one owned by Peter B. Vandeventer, another by Stephen Butterfield, and three dwellings with unknown owners.

The 1860 census of La Pointe lists a Stephen Butterfield, age 30, born in New York, a laborer, married with two children. The 1880 census shows a Stephen Butterfield, age 60, born in New York, a laborer.

These two entries probably refer to the same person, although the 30-year difference between the ages shown does not match the elapsed period of 20 years between the two censuses.

Nothing else is known about Stephen Butterfield. Peter B. Vandeventer, a German, married a Chippewa woman named Caroline Marrow. He was a large man and was said to wear a "hellish countenance."

In the winter of 1863 he abandoned his family and was never seen again. The large bay formed by the curve of the coast at the west end of Washburn is known as Vandeventer Bay. The creek emptying into the bay was originally named Vandeventer Creek, later changed to Thompson Creek in honor of Hans J. Thompson, a long-time mayor of Washburn.



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The McClellan Mill: McClellan was a mill site established possibly as early as 1846, in the ravine on the east side of what is now Memorial Park.

During or after the Civil War a small settlement grew up adjacent to the mill. It seems to have consisted of a house for the mill foreman, and a small boarding house. An article in the Washburn Times in 1929, by a man who apparently had operated the McClellan sawmill, noted that it "was a very small affair. The building was about 30x50 (feet) and two stories high. The lower part held the

engine and boiler, the upper part had the saw and carriage. ... The saw was what is called a muley saw and was on the same principle as the gang saws in the large mills."

The mill could saw about 5,000 board feet of lumber a day. Articles in the Ashland Weekly Press in the spring of 1873 indicated that the McClellan mill was in operation, but in September 1880 the Press reported that, "The machinery in the old McClellan mill has been taken out and brought to Ashland, where it will be stored by Mr. Vaughn, who's the owner. This ends the old landmark at McClellan."

McClellan is said to have been an "antiwar town," founded during the Civil War by persons sympathetic to the Confederacy, possibly by southern expatriates. It was supposedly named after Union General George B. McClellan, whose insubordination and southern sympathies were tolerated by President Abraham Lincoln because he was one of the better generals among the mostly incompetent senior officers commanding the Union armies. Why people sympathetic to the Confederacy would settle in an obscure location in northern Wisconsin is an interesting question.

The Train Wreck at Pike's Creek: The only serious accident on the railroad lines around Chequamegon Bay occurred on Thursday, Oct. 2 1884.

A local work train of the Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis and Omaha railroad was running from Ashland to Bayfield in the afternoon. At Washburn three flat cars loaded with piles were attached to the engine. A crew of 22 men also boarded the train, two men riding on the "cow catcher" on the front of the engine, and the others on the coal tender behind the engine.

The engineer, firemen, and conductor were in the cab. About 2:30 p.m. as the train approached the bridge over Pike's Creek, the ground suddenly gave way under the weight of the locomotive, which plunged into the creek.

The flat cars with their loads of piles then telescoped into the tender and locomotive. A broken rail pierced the boiler and firebox releasing high pressure steam which scalded the men riding in the cab.

Several other men were crushed in the wreck. Those who escaped injury ran to Bayfield for help, and a large number of people and a physician hurried to the scene.

The telegraph operator at Bayfield notified Washburn and Ashland. Two physicians from Ashland soon arrived on a relief train, and the injured men were transported to Ashland hospitals.

The engineer, fireman and conductor were badly scalded and died when the relief train reached Ashland.

In all, seven men died and seven were seriously injured. An investigation revealed that a log dam located some distance upstream from the track had burst, releasing a raging flood of water. The water undermined the approaches to the bridge, which dropped into the creek.