

Early maps show geography of Chequamegon Bay area

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French and English maps record early geographical conceptions of the Chequamegon Bay region and the names that were applied to its major features — the bay itself, Bayfield Peninsula, Chequamegon Point sand spit, and Apostle Islands.

A Jesuit map of 1670-71 shows these features in their correct relationship to one another and in their proper position with respect to the west end of the lake and the Keweenaw Peninsula to the east.

Nine unnamed islands are shown grouped around the end of the peninsula with one large island in the position of Madeline Island. At the southwest end of the bay appear the words "La Pointe du St. Esprit" and "Mission du St. Esprit," but no other features are named.

A French map of North America from 1688 shows a less accurate representation of the peninsula and bay. Only one large island is shown labeled "I.S. Michel" or Island St. Michel.

At the southwest end of the bay appears the label "Ance (bay) Chagouamigon," perhaps the first occasion on which the name was applied to the bay. Another French map of 1744 again shows "Ance de Chagouamigon" and within it a "Baye S. Charles," perhaps referring to Vanderverter Bay at Washburn.

Ten islands are shown, named "I. des 12 Apotres." This might have been the first time that the name "Apostle Islands" was applied to the islands. Another French map of the Great Lakes from 1755 shows the peninsula and bay with 12 islands grouped around it labeled "I. es 12 Apotres." A large island in the approximate position of Madeline Islands is labeled "I.S. Michel." A second large island placed at the end of the peninsula is named "I. du Detour." The name "Ance Chagouamigon" again appears at the southwestern end of the bay.

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A map from 1766 shows the Bayfield Peninsula much exaggerated in size and projecting far into the lake with 14 islands grouped around it labeled "The 12 Apostles."

The Keweenaw Peninsula is mistakenly labeled "Point Chegomogan." The far western part of the lake is labeled "West Bay." A map from 1820 is particularly interesting. Scattered on both sides of the peninsula are 28 islands named after the states, the whole being called the "Federation Group."

Chequamegon Bay, itself, is named "Bay of St. Charles" and the sand spit on its northwestern perimeter is labeled "Point Chegoimagon." While the peninsula, bay, islands and sand spit are shown in their approximate relationships to one another, their shapes and sizes are badly distorted.

Finally, a lake survey chart from 1825 shows the peninsula, bay, sand spit and islands in their nearly correct positions and proportions. The bay is labeled "Chaquamegon Bay" and the sand spit is called "Point Chaquamegon."

Twenty islands are shown, several with their modern names, including "Madelene Island" with the village of La Point in its proper location.

According to these maps, the name "Chequamegon" (with spelling variations) was applied to the bay from 1688 onward. The bay was known by other names, however — "Bay of St. Charles" in 1820, "Long Island Bay" in the 1852 survey report, "Ashland Bay" and "La Pointe Bay" in some documents — before "Chequamegon Bay" became firmly established 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 spit, which is now Chequamegon Point, but differ as to what the word was and what it meant originally. A history of the Ojibway people states that the Indian word was "Sha-ga-waum-ik-ong." Apparently the word meant "the soft beaver dam" because Chequamegon Point was supposedly built by an Indian god "to bar the egress of a great beaver which he once hunted on the Great Lake, and which had taken refuge in this deep bay," but the "great beaver had easily 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 a large territory to the south and west, accessible by the rivers and Indian trails radiating from the bay.

Indeed, one author insisted that the word "Chequemegon" 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 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 one of the driving forces behind the early exploration and settlement of the Chequamegon Bay region by the French, British and Americans.



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