

Chequamegon Bay discovered by expeditions from Europe

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The Great Lakes and Chequamegon Bay were discovered by expeditions sent by the European maritime powers to reach China and India.

For centuries the exotic products of those countries had been transported by caravans to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea, then shipped to Italy for distribution to the wealthy classes of Europe.

But in the 1400s the Muslims closed this land route to Europeans. The kings and merchants of Europe knew that the Earth was a sphere and reasoned that China and India could be reached by sailing westward over the Atlantic Ocean, but they had no idea how large the earth was or that a huge land mass, North and South America, lay between Europe and the fabled countries of Asia.

Explorers from Spain, Portugal, England and France believed that the land they stumbled across — North America — was the eastern shore of Asia. But it was soon recognized that this newly discovered land was a separate continent, separated by vast distances from Asia.

Spanish, French, and English explorers' expeditions probed the estuaries, bays and rivers of North America, seeking a passage through the continent to the Pacific Ocean.

In 1535, a French expedition discovered the Gulf of St. Lawrence and the St. Lawrence River. The French were told by the Indians that a great body of water lay to the west, which the French assumed to be the Pacific Ocean.

By 1635, exploration had revealed much about the lower Great Lakes but that "great body of water" remained a mystery.

In 1658 and 1659, two Frenchmen, Medard Chouart Groseilliers and Pierre-Esprit Radisson, continuing the search for the Pacific Ocean but with the more practical purpose of collecting furs from the Indians, traveled from Montreal to Sault Ste. Marie, then west along the south coast of Lake

SUPERIOR.

They built a fort at the head of the bay, probably near Fish Creek, west of Ashland. During the winter of 1659-'60 they visited Indian villages in Wisconsin and eastern Minnesota. Returning to Chequamegon Bay, they built a second fort, possibly on Houghton Point, where they spent the remainder of their stay. They returned to Montreal in the spring of 1660 with a rich cargo of furs. With them began the recorded history of the Chequamegon Bay region.

Soon after Radisson and Groseilliers returned to Montreal, Father Rene Menard and his assistant, Jean Guérin, along with several fur traders, journeyed to Chequamegon Bay, arriving in the spring of 1661.

Menard conducted missionary work among the Ottawa, who were living in a village near Fish Creek. He disappeared under mysterious circumstances in July 1661 while on a trip to minister to starving Huron Indians living on the upper reaches of the Black River. His assistant Guérin was accidentally killed by one of the fur traders.

The traders intended to stay for only one winter but were forced to remain for three difficult winters. Barely surviving, they returned to Montreal in the summer of 1663 with their cargo of furs.

The next expedition to visit Chequamegon Bay consisted of the Jesuit Father Claude Jean Allouez and six fur traders, who departed Three Rivers with a party of Indians in August 1665.

Allouez arrived at Chequamegon Bay on Oct. 1, 1665, where he found the Ottawa at their village on Fish Creek and another village of Hurons, probably near Bono Creek, plus representatives from five or more other tribes living among them.

Allouez built a crude chapel and a hut on the shore of the bay, possibly near Thompson's Creek, naming his mission "La Pointe du Saint Esprit," the first location to be named La Pointe. Despite heroic efforts over a period of three years, Allouez was successful in converting few of the Indians to Christianity, and in the spring of 1668 he was recalled to Quebec.

Allouez was succeeded at the mission by Father Jacques Marquette, who arrived from Sault Ste. Marie on Sept. 13, 1669. He apparently occupied the chapel left by Allouez and was more successful than Allouez in converting the Indians to the Catholic faith.

The Ottawa and Huron, and members of other tribes living with them, had sought refuge at Chequamegon Bay from the terrible raids of the Iroquois. But their security proved illusory, for in the summer of 1671 they and Father Marquette were driven away by the Sioux, the fearsome "Iroquois of west," the Ottawa fleeing to the Manitoulin Islands in Lake Huron and the Huron with Father Marquette to Mackinac.

Marquette's departure marked the end of missionary work at Chequamegon for more than 160 years. The few French traders who remained established themselves at the northwestern end of Chequamegon Point for protection against the Sioux, and this location became the second La Pointe.



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