

Penokee history: Settlers found 'there's iron in them thar hills'

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The earliest settlers on the future location of Ashland — Asaph Whittlesey, Martin Beaser, Edwin Ellis and Frederick Prentice — were townsite speculators, men who selected a location for settlement because of its "natural advantages."

Among the many advantages of the Ashland site were the prospective copper and iron mineral wealth in the Penokee Range, a few miles south of Ashland.

In Wisconsin, copper-bearing formations extend from the Montreal River, the boundary with the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, to English Lake, just west of Mellen. These formations are for the most part buried beneath clay deposits and glacial drift and exposed only where rivers have cut through this overburden into these formations.

In 1846 the Montreal Mining Company and then the Cambrian Mining Company attempted to mine copper on the Montreal River, but the works were eventually abandoned. In his exploration of the south shore of Lake Superior in 1849, Charles Whittlesey (Asaph's brother) examined these copper-bearing formations.

In his report he stated that from the Ontonagon River westward, "copper does not seem to be so plentiful or as well concentrated." He noted that mining works in the Porcupine Mountains had been abandoned and that in 1846 and 1847 "many locations were made for mining copper" west of the Montreal River but without success.

His assessment was that the prospect of profitable copper deposits west of the Montreal River were no better than at that river "where a fair trial was made and abandoned," a reference to the earlier operations of the Montreal River and Cambrian Mining Companies. West of English Lake on the South Range, copper mining operations were



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undertaken in 1845 and 1846 at Copper Creek, Black River Falls and near the Brule River by the American Fur Company out of La Pointe, but these were unsuccessful.

It was not copper but the prospect of exploitable iron-ore deposits in the Penokee Range that attracted the interest of speculators and miners. Iron ore was discovered on the Marquette range near what is now the city of Nequamee in the fall of 1844 by a government surveying party as a result of the strong effects of the magnetite deposits on their compasses.

A company was soon formed to mine and smelt the ore, and the first iron bar was produced on a primitive forge in the winter of 1848.

Mining, smelting and forging grew steadily thereafter, and this region of the Upper Peninsula, with Marquette as its port, soon became a major supplier of iron to the nation's developing industry. But these operations were too far east to have any important effects on developments in northern Wisconsin.

Rather, it was the prospect of exploitable iron-ore deposits in the Penokee Range that attracted the interest of speculators and miners. The first evidence of iron ore in the Penokee Range was uncovered in 1848 during a survey along the fourth principal meridian southward from Lake Superior.

The ore was discovered as a result of the influence of the magnetic ores or magnetite on the compasses of geologists and surveyors. The ores of the Gogebic Range (a topographical extension eastward of the Penokee Range) are much less magnetic, and it was not until geologists had developed a better understanding of the geologic structure and processes of that region that iron-ore mining developed there.

In 1849, Charles Whittlesey traced the iron ore-bearing strata along the Penokee Range from the Montreal River westward to English Lake.

In his report he concluded that mines "may be wrought hereafter at a profit, and rival the works of Northern Europe" (that is Sweden). He noted that the best exposures of ore were located about 18 to 28 miles from Lake Superior. He thought a good harbor could be constructed at Bad River if the sand bar at its mouth were removed and piers constructed to keep the river clear.

The "nearest natural harbor" to the ore deposits was "Cheqwomigon Bay, about 25 miles from the central part of the Penokie Range." Whittlesey's report created considerable interest in the Penokee Range. In short order the government surveyed the region, followed by preemptors who erected "their rude cabins on each quarter section" along the range. There is no record of any mining operations being undertaken at this time, however.

Whittlesey was responsible for naming the range in which he had discovered iron ore, but not for the name by which it is known. He apparently named it "Pewabic," the Chippewa word for iron. But a typesetter interpreted that word in Whittlesey's handwritten report notes to be "Penokie," which is how it appeared in the published report, thereby becoming the accepted name of the range, later changed to "Penokee."