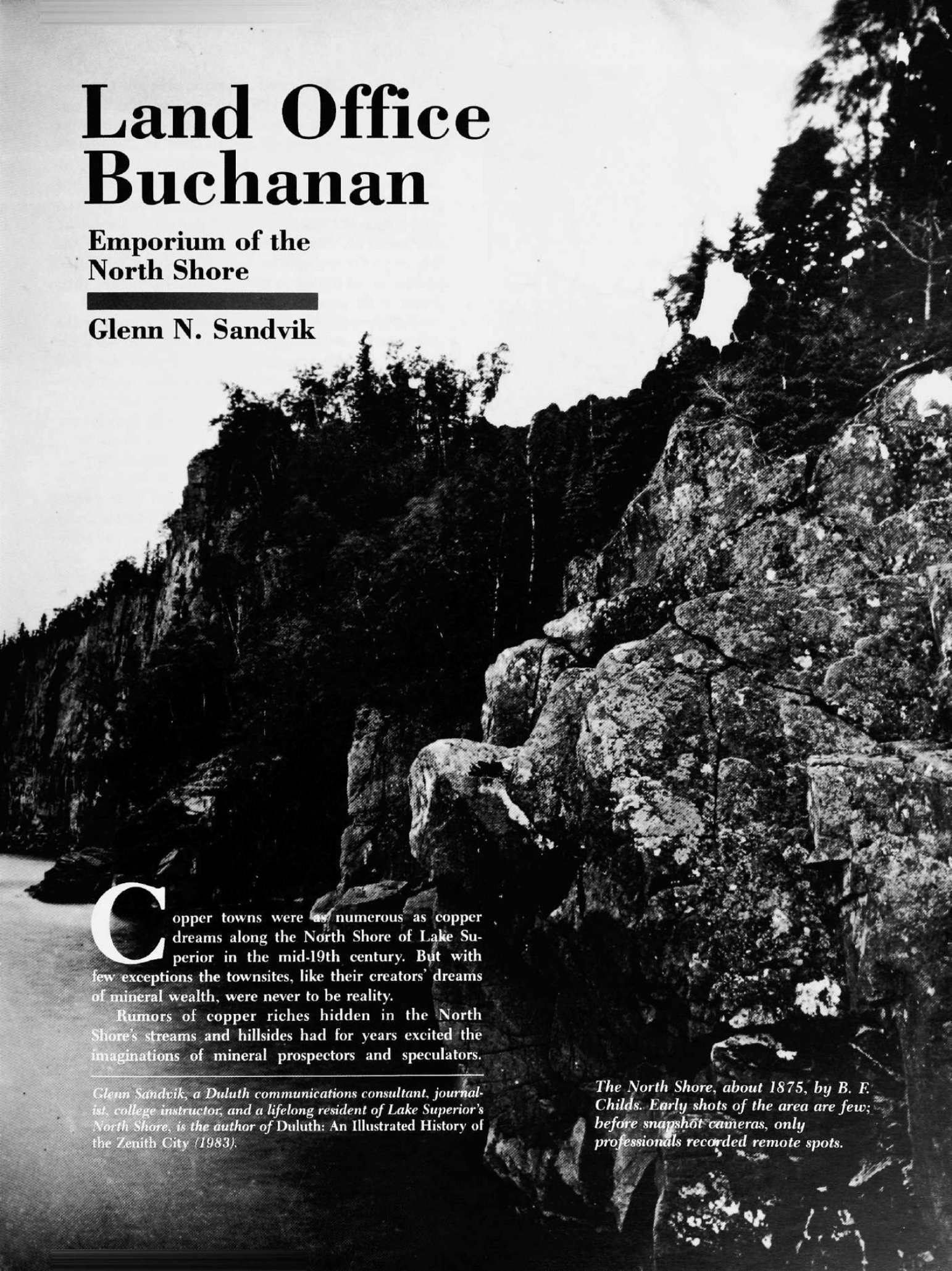


Land Office Buchanan

Emporium of the
North Shore

Glenn N. Sandvik

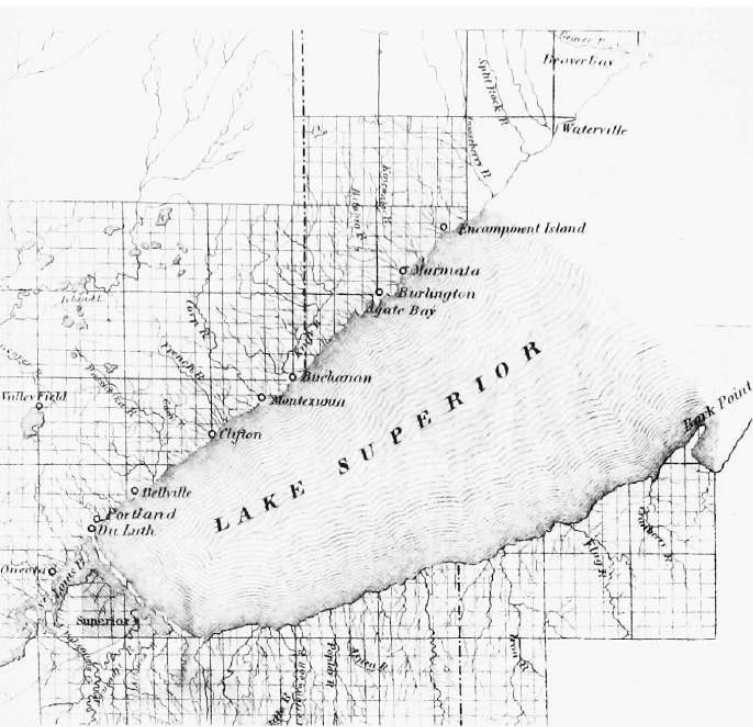


Copper towns were as numerous as copper dreams along the North Shore of Lake Superior in the mid-19th century. But with few exceptions the townsites, like their creators' dreams of mineral wealth, were never to be reality.

Rumors of copper riches hidden in the North Shore's streams and hillsides had for years excited the imaginations of mineral prospectors and speculators.

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The North Shore, about 1875, by B. F. Childs. Early shots of the area are few; before snapshot cameras, only professionals recorded remote spots.



Detail of a sectional map of the surveyed portion of Minnesota, 1858, drawn by A. J. Hill

But the length of Minnesota's coast, from Fond du Lac at the head of the lake to the international boundary on Pigeon River, was Indian territory restricted from white settlement by federal treaties. When profitable copper operations were opened along Superior's South Shore and on Isle Royale in the 1840s, mining men pressed the government for rights to explore and exploit the North Shore.¹

Interest in the region had undoubtedly been spurred by the reports of Joseph G. Norwood, who made the original United States geological survey of the area in the late 1840s. Traveling by canoe from Fond du Lac to Grand Portage, he found signs of copper in several streams. Along the French River, Norwood reported "the best surface indications of any vein met with on the north shore." The federal geologist was not the first person to know of the French River ore, for he also noted, "In 1846 cabins were erected at the mouth of this creek, by the agent of a mining company, for the purpose of securing a pre-emption claim to the veins which occur here. When the effort made by the government, in 1847, to purchase these lands failed, the 'location' was abandoned." Just a few miles down the shore, along the Knife River, Norwood found more copper traces and concluded, "I can only say, in reference to the metalliferous indications in the rocks of this river, that I consider them sufficiently important to deserve the attention of the miner."²

The United States government made more than one effort to secure title to the territory from the Ojibway people but was not successful until 1854. In September of that year the Lake Superior and Mississippi bands signed the treaty of La Pointe at that federal outpost on the Apostle Islands. There, the Ojibway ceded to the government "that triangle north of Lake Superior, having its apex at Pigeon River and its base on the line of the Vermilion, East Swan, and St. Louis rivers." Even before the agreement had been officially ratified, prospectors were rushing to the North Shore to claim their shares in the copper riches.³

Each prospector staked his claim on or near the shore, with the first to arrive selecting sites in the Knife River–French River vicinity. When claims were filed and the search for copper had commenced, many of the prospectors and their financial backers platted towns at the places of their hoped-for riches. Maps showing the North Shore in the late 1850s are dotted with such picturesque-sounding settlements as Oneota, Endion, Montezuma, Marmata, Agate Bay, and Waterville. A total of 23 townships had been registered with government sources by 1858. It has been estimated that nearly the same number of towns were platted yet never officially filed.⁴

Clifton, the first North Shore township recorded in the St. Louis County register of deeds office, is placed only in "Superior Co., Minnesota Ter." The original survey map is dated October 31, 1855; about a year later, John S. Watrous of Ashtabula County, Ohio, filed this site on the Talmadge River about a dozen miles from present-day downtown Duluth. Watrous was prominent in settlement and land speculation along the North Shore and became the first speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives after statehood. On the map, his town has more than a score of square blocks, each subdivided into lots that measure 50 by 150 feet. The blocks are separated by wide streets and avenues and further split by alleyways paralleling the streets. At

¹See, for example, William Watts Folwell, *A History of Minnesota* (rev. ed., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], 1956), 1:4, 6n13, 102, 305.

²Norwood, "Dr. J. G. Norwood's Report," in David Dale Owen, *Report of a Geological Survey of Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1852), 349, 350, 353.

³Folwell, *History of Minnesota*, 1:306; Charles A. Kappler, *Laws and Treaties* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 2:648–652.

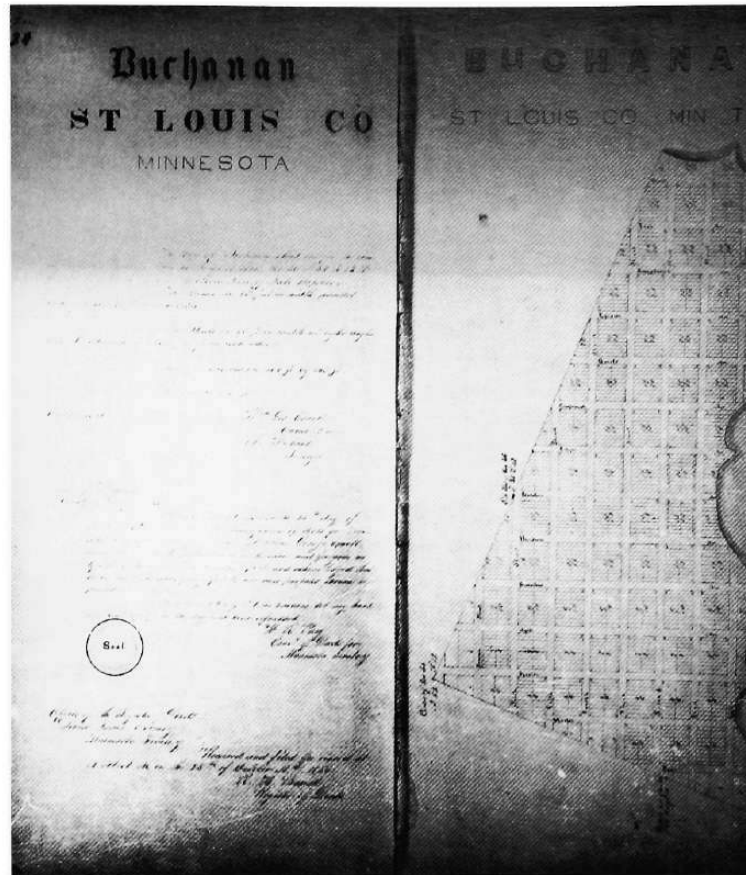
⁴Otto E. Wieland, "Some Facts and Incidents of North Shore History," paper presented to the 9th Annual Tri-County Historical Meeting, Duluth, Sept. 4, 1937, p. 2–3, copy in Otto E. Wieland Papers, Northeast Minnesota Historical Center (NMHC), Duluth.

the mouth of the Talmadge two “proposed piers” extend hundreds of feet into the lake and together form the community’s harbor basin. Although there has been settlement at that spot for most of the hundred-plus years since Clifton was platted, the grand dreams drawn on paper never materialized.⁵

A year after Watrous’s dream town was recorded, another townsite was platted just a few miles northeast of it, in what later became Lake County. The site, filed by land speculator William G. Cowell, was for the next three years to play a vital role in the region’s development. Cowell claimed portions of three sections immediately west of the mouth of the Knife River and hired Christian Wieland of Beaver Bay, an oft-mentioned figure in North Shore history, to survey his tract. Wieland laid out a townsite “for the owners and occupants in Sec[ti]on 1, Town[ship] 51, Range 12 West, Sec 36, T 52 R 12 W, and Sec 31, T 52 R 11 W on the North Shore of Lake Superior.”⁶

The townsite covered 315.53 acres and was completely subdivided into 400-by-150-foot blocks and lots that were 40 by 150 feet. Streets, 80 feet in width, paralleled the lake; the closest to shore was named Lake, and the others were numbered First through Seventh. Fourteen avenues, named for the region’s stone formations, ran perpendicular to the streets. From the east their names were: Granite, Trap, Amygdaloid, Epidote, Quartz, Conglomerate, Feldspar, Sandstone, Hornblende, Greenstone, Agate, Syenite, Marble, and Spar. Cowell filed Wieland’s survey and his preemption claims for the sections on October 25, 1856. He named his townsite for the Democratic presidential candidate, James Buchanan. Cowell’s motives for selecting the candidate’s name for his town stemmed from more than personal admiration. The land speculator sought, and received, a political plum for townsite Buchanan.

In 1856 Congress had created the northeastern land district in Minnesota Territory. Like the territory’s other six districts, established several years earlier, this



Vision of townsite Buchanan, recorded on Christian Wieland’s survey map, 1856

one was to have a land office staffed by federal employees, who were to record all transactions, receive payment for government lands, and settle any title disputes that arose. The northeastern Minnesota district, which included the rumored copper riches of Superior’s North Shore, covered all territory ceded in the 1854 treaty at La Pointe. Cowell went to the nation’s capital to lobby for the office site. He returned to the North Shore successful and took up residence as proprietor at Land Office Buchanan.⁷

COWELL also likely sought for himself appointment as one of the district’s federal officers, but this lobbying came too late. Even before the location of the northeastern office was decided, political favor seekers were campaigning for the posts of receiver and register. The receiver’s title was awarded to John Whipple, a dry goods merchant in Rome, New York. A crony from nearby Utica described him in a letter of endorsement to Robert McClelland, secretary of the interior, as “a gentleman of fine abilities and address and of high

⁵Charles E. Adams, “The North Shore from Minnesota Point to Knife River,” paper presented to the 4th Annual Historical Assembly, Two Harbors, Aug. 20, 1932, copies in Lake County Historical Society, Two Harbors, and NMHC. See also Walter Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County, Minnesota, Their Story and People* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1921), 1:97; “Clifton,” in *St. Louis County Plats*, book A, 6–8, St. Louis County Recorder’s Office, Virginia, microfilm copy in St. Louis County Courthouse, Duluth.

⁶Here and below, see “Buchanan, St. Louis Co. Min Ter,” in *St. Louis County Plats*, book A, 23–24.

⁷Verne E. Chatelain, “The Public Land Officer on the Northwestern Frontier,” *Minnesota History* 12 (Dec., 1931): 379–381.

character and standing. His friends in this state are influential and numerous.”⁸

Whipple, however, did not want the appointment at Buchanan. He would have preferred the office near Fort Ripley and told the interior secretary so. “For many reasons Fort Ripley would be the most amenable location for myself. All of my Minnesota friends reside near Fort R—, besides I should have some fear as to the climate of St. Louis Bay agreeing with my health. I have once been quite an invalid from muk [sic] lungs and should have some fear the lake winds might prove prejudicial to my present good health. The friends who have assisted me in procuring the appointment will endorse my request.”⁹

But Whipple’s appointment was for the northeast office and it was not to be changed. The receiver did not report to his station until a year after writing the above letter; in the meantime, activity along the North Shore continued in full swing. Prospectors were crisscrossing the area in search of the elusive copper riches. Other men came to exploit the region’s vast timber resources, and small sawmills were erected all along the shore. One government agent touring the district in the late 1850s reported that nearly all trees cut were being taken illegally from federal lands.¹⁰

Receiver Whipple arrived at Buchanan on September 16, 1857, and immediately wrote to general land office commissioner Thomas A. Hendricks in Washington that “I find things in a rude state, but we are doing our best to set matters in shape. . . . I find our office not only too small, but badly arranged.” The “we” Whipple refers to likely included himself and his assistant, Samuel Clark of Kalamazoo, Michigan, who was to be the land office register.¹¹

Conditions that the gentleman from New York considered “rude” were viewed otherwise by seasoned North Shore citizens. One such man was William Burt, a deputy land surveyor commissioned by the United States surveyor general to map sections of the newly opened lands. With a party of three, he platted township 52 north, range 11 west (containing a portion of townsite Buchanan) in August, 1857, one month before Whipple reached his office. In field notes recorded during his survey, Burt noted that “Considerable improvement has been made at ‘Buchanan’ in section 31, where the U. S. Land Office is located, a pier built and several buildings erected.”¹²

Whipple and Clark set about to improve their situation as much as they could. By mid-September the steamer *City of Superior* had delivered a large metal safe to Superior, Wisconsin, ready for the trip to Buchanan. But by month’s end the receiver again pessimistically reported to Hendricks that “We have made the office only comfortable, as we cannot get the workmen or suitable furniture here.” A week later Whipple

President James Buchanan



submitted to his superior an estimate of office operating expenses for the final quarter of 1857. The bill totaled \$715 and included salaries and commissions of \$225 each for Whipple and Clark; a \$20 postal account, as the land office was also to be a post office; and \$105 for furniture. For the last sum Whipple noted that he had procured two black walnut desks, four office chairs, and a black walnut letter case. The office finally appeared ready for operation.¹³

But the land office could not open, and Whipple’s troubles had really just begun. The government plats, records, and journals intended for Buchanan had not arrived, and the receiver set out on a six-week chase to find them. He related the tale of his journey to Hendricks in a letter from Buchanan after his safe return.¹⁴

⁸Horatio Seymour to R. McClelland, June 21, 1856, in Appointments Division, Buchanan Land Office, Record Group 48, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as NARG 48).

⁹John Whipple to R. McClelland, Aug. 25, 1856, NARG 48.

¹⁰Wieland, “Some Facts and Incidents,” 2.

¹¹Chatelain, “Public Land Officer,” 382; John Whipple to Thomas A. Hendricks, Sept. 18, 1857, in United States, General Land Office, Duluth District Records, NMHC. All Whipple-to-Hendricks correspondence cited here is in this location.

¹²William Burt, field notes for survey of Lake County Township 52 North, Range 11 West, p. 33, typewritten transcription in Lake County Highway Department, Two Harbors.

¹³Whipple to Hendricks, Sept. 18, 28, Oct. 4—all 1857.

¹⁴Here and five paragraphs below, see Whipple to Hendricks, Nov. 25, 1857.



North Shore amenities in the late 1870s, when photographer William Illingworth (center) and his associates journeyed there

Whipple went to Chicago by steamer and thence overland to Dubuque, a regional headquarters for the United States surveyor general, where he had been told the records would be found in the mail. He did not find them there; worse yet, a Dubuque attorney informed him that a letter had been received in August, stating that “they [the surveyor general’s office] had yet to learn that there was a land office at any such place as Buchanan.”

Undaunted, the receiver returned to Superior, but the plats were not in the mail there, either. He again went to Dubuque via Chicago and thence up the Mississippi River to St. Paul. Not finding the documents there, he returned to Dubuque only to turn around again and go upriver to Taylors Falls. There he found several parcels of mail misplaced and forgotten in a warehouse. He wrote later that he “spent the day overhauling the mail and found the plats and other land office matter.”

Whipple then decided to take the overland route to Superior and hired a team in Taylors Falls to convey himself and the records to Deer Creek in northern Pine County. He found the road nearly impassable and at Deer Creek had to abandon the wagon and hire packers (likely, local Indians, mixed-bloods, or white trappers). But conditions grew worse and the receiver reported that the route was “the worst road I ever experienced; much of the way it was mud above our knees. At Kettle River my packers gave out and would

not go further.” Whipple hired new packers, but for the rest of the journey he had to carry part of the parcels himself.

At Superior his situation was little better: “We were five days . . . and were obliged to camp out, without any comforts in the wet and cold. I have hardly been able to walk since as my feet were bruised and bleeding when I reached Superior.” The land officer finally returned to Buchanan in late November, completing a trip that was truly miraculous for a man who, just one year earlier, had requested an appointment at Fort Ripley to protect his frail health.

For this strenuous search Whipple submitted a bill for “extra services” to his superiors in Washington. Added to his hardships had been a personal loss, which he also recorded in his letter. The bedraggled civil servant related that “My trunk, which I was obliged to send to Detroit by the steamer *Superior City*, I suppose is lost as the boat has been due some three weeks. She is reported lost; my trunk contained all my winter clothing to the amount of some two hundred dollars.”

But with plats in hand, Whipple and Clark officially opened Land Office Buchanan and did, quite literally, a land-office business. At year’s end the agent reported that the large number of preemption claims and title disputes caused him to restrict office hours from 8 A.M. to noon daily.¹⁵

BUSINESS continued to boom at Buchanan through the long and doubtlessly severe Lake Superior winter. Whipple regularly mailed reports to Hendricks and every three months sent receipts from his office to Treasury Secretary Howell Cobb. He evidently took pride in the proper execution of his duties and the collection of the greater part of the office fees in government currency, writing that whenever circumstances warranted, no Indian scrip, military poverty scrip, or forfeited land stock had been received as payment at his bureau. Many of his reports also contain political comments, doubtless to guarantee his position with James Buchanan’s Democratic administration.¹⁶

Whipple refrained from further comments, dismal or promising, on conditions at Buchanan. Any picture of the village must be drawn from the few contemporary descriptions previously cited and pioneer reminiscences, perhaps embellished with knowledge of the general conditions of the period and location. We know that, in addition to the land office, Buchanan had at least one hotel, several taverns and boardinghouses, and some private residences, all likely constructed of logs. The streets and avenues were certainly nothing more than mud paths, but the town did have a fairly substantial dock on the lakeshore. Lakes steamers, commencing with the ill-fated *City of Superior*, made regular stops there. The community had to bustle, as

¹⁵Whipple to Hendricks, Dec. 28, 1857.

¹⁶See, for example, Whipple to Hendricks, Jan. 1, Feb. 1—both 1858.

placed by elected officials. The legislature set the first Monday of October, 1858, as election day.²⁰

Sometime during this period the North Shore's first known newspaper also appeared. Stephen Walsh, a clerk in Clark's office, brought out the *North Shore Advocate* at Buchanan, about January 1, 1858. It began as a semimonthly, but from June until May, 1859, the last known issue, the *Advocate* was published weekly. As no copies of the paper are now available, its nature and content can only be speculative. But land-office activities that were to feature Walsh and Clark within the next year indicate that the *Advocate* was likely expounding politics not always favorable to the Democratic administration that had appointed Whipple, Clark, and Walsh himself.²¹

In September, 1858, Walsh quit his Buchanan post. Although his motives are lost to history, politics can once more be suspected. The wilderness journalist apparently left with some bitterness toward his superior, for his resignation letter to Clark simply stated, "Circumstances of recent occurrence compel me to discontinue my connection with your business. You can be at no loss for the reason of this course."²²

Through the latter part of 1858 business slowed at Buchanan and money, which had never been as abundant as rich dreams, grew scarce. An economic panic and depression had swept the nation shortly after the land office opened in 1857, and its effects reached even the Lake Superior wilderness. While the copper rumors continued and traces of the blue-green metal were found all along the North Shore, few if any got rich mining it. In October Whipple again sent an extra-services bill to his Washington superiors, noting that he

²⁰*General Laws of the State of Minnesota for 1858* (St. Paul: Earle S. Goodrich, 1858), 447. On the three trustees, see Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:87, 92, 104, 107, 112, 121, 122, 131.

²¹Adams, "North Shore"; George S. Hage, *Newspapers on the Minnesota Frontier, 1849-1860* (St. Paul: MHS, 1967), 146; Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:125, 228.

²²Stephen Walsh to Samuel Clark, Sept. 6, 1858, NARG 48.

²³Whipple to Hendricks, Oct. 1, 1858.

²⁴Whipple to President James Buchanan, May 15, 1859, NARG 48.

²⁵Here and below, see Samuel Clark to Jacob Thompson, June 20, 1859; Whipple to Buchanan, May 15, 1859; affidavits of William Nettleton, May 19, 1859, Lloyd M. Harrington, May 16, 1859, and Carlisle Doble, May 17, 1859, all sworn before Washington Ashton, clerk of Douglas Co. (Wisconsin) court; Denis Dean [?] to Jacob Thompson, May 17, 1859; 12 residents of the North Shore to Hon. Secretary of the Interior, undated—all NARG 48. Where Clark received treatment is unclear. Whipple's letter to President Buchanan states that the register went to New York; Clark's physician in Superior, however, gave his patient a letter of introduction to a Philadelphia doctor. See J. P. Wilson [?] to James Buchanan, May 23, 1859, NARG 48.

had had to advance \$264.89 of his own funds to meet government disbursement contracts in the district.²³

IN THE EARLY WINTER of 1858-59, as land office activities withered, Whipple urged Clark to take a leave of absence from his post to seek medical attention on the East Coast for "a disease of the skin known as 'Lupus' which has made such progress as to seriously injure his eye-sight." The register left Buchanan in January, 1859, not waiting for written permission from his supervisors in Washington, as slow and unreliable mails might have combined with restricted winter travel conditions to delay his departure for months.²⁴

Clark went to New York, where he apparently attended to his medical needs. According to his own account, he also spent some time in the nation's capital visiting with the Minnesota congressional delegation. On his return trip to Minnesota, Clark visited North Shore entrepreneur John Watrous at the latter's family home near Ashtabula. He also stopped at his own home in Kalamazoo to retrieve some personal belongings and have his son accompany him to Buchanan. After several weeks' delay due to adverse spring traveling conditions both overland and on the ice-clogged Lake Superior, the register arrived at his office on May 15, 1859.²⁵

But awaiting him at Buchanan, Clark found "a notice of his removal and the appointment of John S. Watrous in his place." The notice apparently gave no reason for Clark's dismissal. The ousted register returned to Washington to find reasons for his removal and, if possible, to regain his office. Backed by such local support as an endorsement letter from Whipple to President Buchanan, Clark was prepared to defend himself against two charges that he had abused the duties of his office.

To answer the charge that he had taken a prolonged and unexplained absence from the district land office, he obtained a statement from a physician in Superior who wrote that he had sent Clark to the East "to place himself under the best medical treatment that could be had as he was in imminent danger of losing his sight." He also obtained affidavits from area mail carriers testifying that the overland route from St. Paul to Superior—the road Whipple had struggled over with the land-office records a year and a half earlier—was "hazardous and almost impracticable, the streams being broken up and extremely swollen, the swamps inundated and impassable, and several of the bridges on the route having been swept away by the spring freshet. That during April there was no mode of conveyance for passengers over the said distance." And as if description of these conditions was not bleak and convincing enough, Clark also obtained a statement from a fellow passenger on the steamer he took to Buchanan. The man related that the vessel was stranded for two weeks



Joshua B. Culver

in ice near Sault Ste. Marie and, after navigating the length of the lake, again became icebound for five days near Superior. The former register thus seemed justified in the time spent away from Buchanan.²⁶

A second and much more serious charge against Clark challenged his loyalty to the Democratic administration. Some irate politicians or office seekers, including John Watrous himself, accused the register of allowing his former clerk, Stephen Walsh, to run for legislative office in 1858 against the party-endorsed candidate, Joshua B. Culver. Again, northern Minnesota leaders wrote refuting this claim. Chief among them was Culver himself, who praised Clark as "one of my strongest and most indefatigable Supporters, and that you Exerted yourself most Strenuously to defeat Mr. Walsh, the opposition Candidate." And Clark himself claimed, "I am no mendicant for office. I have devoted my time and what talent I possess, and spent my money freely for the advancement of the democratic cause."²⁷

But all this could not aid the ousted officer. Not even the editorial support of the local press, which lauded him as "one of the best officers ever connected with the land Department. . . . a consistent democrat

throughout a long life," could retrieve Clark's post. He was not to return as a government agent at Buchanan.²⁸

At the time of Clark's removal, however, Buchanan was not long to be the northeastern land office. Copper fortunes had not been found and economic depression still gripped the nation. All up and down the North Shore, claims cabins stood deserted. Buchanan was likely no exception. Receiver Whipple noted the steady decline, reporting to President Buchanan in May, 1859, that "there have been only six warrant locations (embracing 920 acres) and 46 32/100 acres sold for cash during the past four months."²⁹

On June 26, 1859, the federal land office was relocated to Portland, which later became a part of the city of Duluth. What little commercial life was left in the northwoods congregated in the sister settlements of Duluth and Superior at the very peak of the big lake. Whipple was to remain as a government agent at Portland until 1861.³⁰

ABANDONED Buchanan began its recession to wilderness. Perhaps the town's first fatality was its steamboat pier, claimed by breaking spring ice. Cabins stood empty, inhabited only infrequently by local Indians, prospectors, loggers, and other North Shore transients. The buildings were reportedly razed by fires which frequently swept the forest in the wake of timber barons who cut rich pine harvests across northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

By whatever means, nature quickly reclaimed all traces of Land Office Buchanan. The process was so fast and so complete that for the past half century state

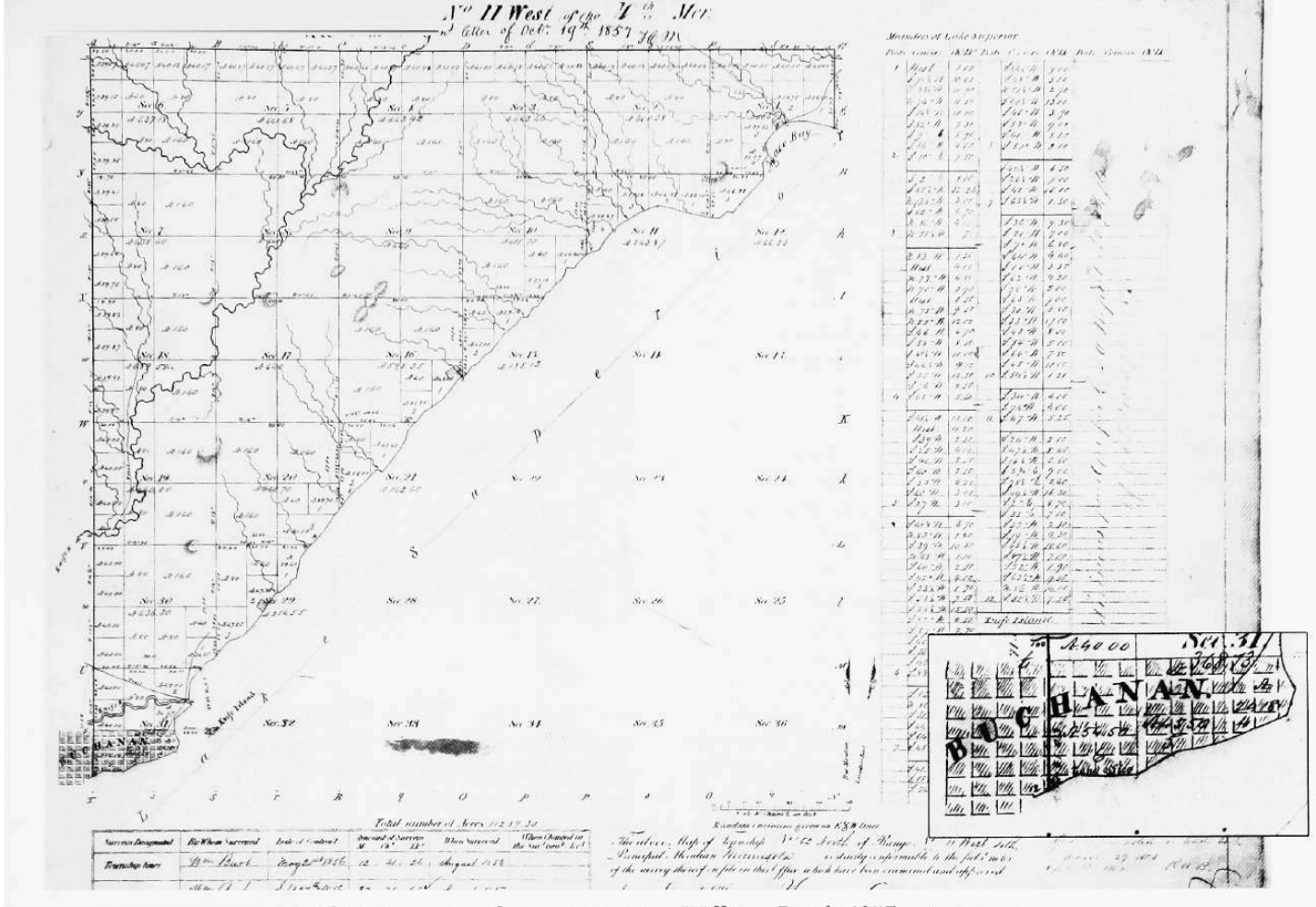
²⁶Wilson [?] to Buchanan, May 23, 1859; Harrington, Nettleton, and Doble affidavits.

²⁷J. B. Culver to Clark, June 7, 1859, NARG 48; Clark to Thompson, June 20, 1859.

²⁸*Superior Chronicle*, May 14, 1859. What became of Clark remains to be discovered.

²⁹Whipple to Buchanan, May 15, 1859.

³⁰Here and below, see Buchanan reference file, NMHC; Anne S. Bailey, "The Towns that Became Duluth," in *Duluth, Sketches of the Past*, ed. Ryck Lydecker and Lawrence J. Sommer (Duluth: American Revolution Bicentennial Commission, 1976), 99-100. Sidney Luce of Duluth was appointed receiver in 1861, the year that the presidency went to Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party; Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:160. After losing his appointment, Whipple served in the Minnesota House of Representatives in 1862; the legislative manual lists his residence as Duluth and his occupation as lawyer. That same year he was commissioned a captain and assistant quartermaster in the United States Volunteers. Shortly after being mustered out in 1866, he was stricken with paralysis, from which he never recovered. He died in 1879. Charles H. Whipple, comp., *Genealogy of the Whipple-Wright Wager Ward-Pell McLean-Burnet Families* (Los Angeles: Commercial Printing House, 1917), 108; *Minnesota Legislative Manual, 1862* (St. Paul: William R. Marshall, 1862), 47.



Buchanan, inset enlargement, from William Burt's 1857 survey map

and local historians have disputed the townsite's location, appearance, and, indeed, argued whether Buchanan existed at all. For example, R. B. McLean, an early copper prospector and the first United States postmaster at the North Shore community of Beaver Bay, recorded in his reminiscences an optimistic beginning for the town: "Timbers were taken out, nicely hewed for five two-story buildings." Two of these were used by the land officers and the others served as hotels and boardinghouses. McLean also noted several cabins occupied by "miners, loggers and workmen."³¹

³¹R. B. McLean, "Reminiscences of Early Days at the Head of the Lakes," undated, unpublished paper in Lake County Historical Society, partially quoted in Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:122.

³²Here and below, see John R. Carey, "History of Duluth, St. Louis County, to the Year 1870," in *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society* (St. Paul: The Society, 1901), 9:272; Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:122, 152; Writers Program, Works Projects Administration, comp., *The WPA Guide to the Minnesota Arrowhead Country* (1941; reprint, St. Paul: MHS Press, 1988), 11. On Carey, see Warren Upham and Rose B. Dunlap, *Minnesota Biographies, 1655-1912* (St. Paul: MHS, 1912), 106.

Judge John R. Carey, who settled in the area in 1854, was more vague and less complimentary toward Buchanan: "Like many other paper towns on the north shore [it] never amounted to anything. Cowell never obtained title to the land embraced in the townsite. It was a wilderness while the land-office was located there, and it became still more so, after the removal of that office to Portland."³²

Writing a generation after Buchanan was abandoned, Carey also claimed that when Whipple arrived at the townsite in 1857, "there was not a single human habitation to be found." Years later, members of a federal writers' project recorded, "In 1856 the Government established a land office at Buchanan, a forest-covered wilderness offering not even a place to land a boat. John Whipple, the receiver, viewed the site with dismay, then opened his office in 1857 in an abandoned house two miles distant, in the deserted Montezuma [townsite], which thereupon became Buchanan. . . . Here the mouth of the Sucker River provided at least a good beach."

But Buchanan was more than a paper town and a forest-covered wilderness. The suggestion that the land office was not even located at Cowell's original townsite is soundly refuted by primary sources, most notably

the documents left by federal land surveyor William Burt. His 1857 field notes place the town at Cowell's location, just west of the mouth of the Knife River, and the maps he drew also confirm the site.³³

The area has been occupied for most of the past century, and today is encompassed, in part, by the small fishing and tourist town of Knife River. Besides countless copper hunters, loggers, and fishermen who have tramped the Buchanan woods, the site has also been crossed by two major thoroughfares—U. S. Highway 61 and the scenic North Shore Drive. Two railroads also traversed the site: the Duluth, Missabe & Iron Range, between Duluth and Two Harbors, and the now-gone Duluth & Northern Minnesota logging line, which was headquartered at Knife River for the first two decades of this century. The area has undoubtedly been much altered since John Whipple moved his office to Portland in the summer of 1859.

A historic marker along the scenic roadway places the office in the southwest corner of the platted townsite. But Burt's maps contradict the plaque and settle a dispute between local historians who do not agree on the exact location of the land-office quarters within the 315-acre Buchanan townsite. The surveyor pinpointed the federal building (or buildings) very near the lake-shore and immediately east of the range line between Lake and St. Louis counties. The exact spot may well be beneath the asphalt surface of the old North Shore highway.

Carey's claim that Cowell never held title to the townsite cannot be substantiated but may well be true. Few, if any, of the original settlers paid cash for their holdings; rather, they filed federal preemption claims and owned the land simply by living on it. But when rich dreams faded and disillusioned homesteaders left the northwoods, their plots reverted to the government. Cowell's town probably followed this general rule.

But Land Office Buchanan did exist and did flourish. The lives of such men as John Whipple and Samuel Clark are testimony to the fact. And while references to the townsite will always be open to speculation, perhaps the most accurate description of the location was written by Leonidas Merritt in 1914. Merritt, commemorated as one of the "seven iron men" of Minnesota mining history, arrived at Superior as a child in 1856



and spent most of his life exploring and exploiting the region's wilderness. From memories of his youth, the iron man reconstructed the forest community: "Not many may know that in 1856 and 1857, on the North Shore of Lake Superior, just this side of Knife Island, was located a pretty little city called Buchanan, at that time the emporium of the North Shore, with a pretentious hotel, kept by one George Stull, the United States land office, steamboat docks, several saloons, boarding houses, etc. The town was abandoned soon after Minnesota was admitted to the Union. The several homes and business places mentioned stood for many years tenantless and intact, until finally destroyed by forest fire."³⁴ Merritt recalled the true air of Land Office Buchanan, now totally gone but once the commercial hub of Lake Superior's bustling North Shore.

³³Burt, field notes and survey maps, Township No. 52 N., Range No. 11 West of the 4th Mer[idian], and Township No. 52 N., Range No. 12 West of the 4th Mer., received Oct. 19, 1857, in U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Washington, D.C., copies in Lake County Highway Dept. Various contradictory locations for the land office proper appear in Wieland, "Some Facts and Incidents"; Adams, "North Shore"; and William E. Scott, "The Political Development of Lake County," unpublished paper, Aug., 1935, in Lake County Historical Society.

³⁴Paul De Kruif, *Seven Iron Men* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1929), 5; Adams, "North Shore"; Van Brunt, *Duluth and St. Louis County*, 1:123.

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