

WHEN FOND DU LAC WAS BRITISH¹

EVENTS AND SCENES far removed from Fond du Lac determined the course of its history in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Scarcely a decade elapsed between the beginning of continuous trade by the French in this area and the outbreak of the last French and Indian War. The final defeat of the French at Montreal in September, 1760, resulted in the acquisition by England of Canada and eastern Louisiana. Even before the definitive treaties were concluded, British forces had occupied the frontier posts at Detroit, Mackinac, and Green Bay. Distant Fond du Lac thus came under the British sphere of influence.

For several years no attempts were made by British traders to reach the Head of the Lakes, because conditions on the frontier during Pontiac's rebellion were unsettled. Though the eastern Chippewa from La Pointe to Mackinac joined with the famous chief in his unsuccessful war, those about Fond du Lac remained neutral. The Chippewa to the west had a war of their own, that with the Sioux, which had been fought intermittently for some decades. About the time that the British gained control of French Canada, the Chippewa were establishing their villages about the headwaters of the Mississippi, from Sandy Lake to Leech Lake. The almost annual raids of these two tribes into one another's territories seriously interfered with the fur trade, and the commandant at Mackinac was finally compelled to intervene. Peter Pond, a trader on the Minnesota River in 1774-75, records in his journal that the traders in the upper Mississippi region were urged to bring in the principal Chippewa and Sioux leaders for a great peace conference.

¹A paper read on July 30, 1938, at the Fond du Lac session of the sixteenth state historical convention held under the auspices of the Minnesota Historical Society. *Ed.*

The chiefs met at Mackinac in the summer of 1775, agreed to the Mississippi as the common boundary, and temporarily buried the hatchet. Thus peace was established in the Fond du Lac area about the time that the war for independence broke out in the thirteen colonies.²

At the close of the American Revolution the Chippewa were in control of the entire region from Lake Superior to the Crow Wing River. More settled conditions led to a revival of the trade with the Indians. Previous to 1783 the comparatively few traders in what is now north-central Minnesota entered by way of the Mississippi River; after that time they came in larger numbers by way of the St. Louis River and Sandy Lake.

Far removed from the eastern seaboard, the Fond du Lac region played no direct part in the controversy and war between George III and his American subjects. The royal proclamation of 1763, one bone of contention, created the government of the Province of Quebec, but Fond du Lac was not placed under its jurisdiction. The first written constitution nominally in effect at the Head of the Lakes was that extended by the Quebec Act of 1774. It is doubtful, however, that this constitution ever operated west of Lake Michigan. When the Revolutionary War broke out, some of the eastern Chippewa fought for the British under Captain Charles de Langlade of Green Bay; but the Indians at the Head of the Lakes seem to have remained neutral. Their enemies, the Sioux, especially those of southern Minnesota, did take part in the unsuccessful attack on St. Louis in May, 1780. Though the Indians of Fond du Lac avoided participation in the war, they could not escape from an enemy more dangerous and fatal than war itself—the dreaded disease of smallpox. In the year 1782 an epidemic broke out among the western Chippewa, which was

² H. A. Innis, *Peter Pond, Fur Trader and Adventurer*, 47-50 (Toronto, 1930); Charles M. Gates, ed., *Five Fur Traders of the Northwest*, 48 (Minneapolis, 1933).

estimated by one writer to have resulted in the deaths of fifteen hundred persons.³

The Fond du Lac area was recognized by the treaty of 1783 as a part of the United States. It came very near remaining British, for John Adams, one of our negotiators, was authorized to consent to the forty-fifth parallel as the boundary, if the English would not accept the middle of the Great Lakes waterway. Fortunately, the English ministers agreed to the latter, and Fond du Lac became American.

Title to this region did not immediately pass to the central government, since Virginia, under its charter of 1609, laid claim to the land northwest of the Ohio River. In 1781 the legislature of Virginia authorized the cession of this territory to the central government. Not until March, 1784, did Congress accept this cession, and the land about the Head of the Lakes then became a part of the public domain, the disposal of which was to be left to the legislature of the national government. Seventy years were to elapse before this particular section was opened to permanent white settlement.

Shortly after the cession by Virginia, Thomas Jefferson offered a plan for the creation of future states in the newly acquired West, and this was accepted by Congress, becoming known as the Ordinance of 1784. No part of this ordinance seems ever to have been put into effect, but it is of interest to note that the region at the Head of the Lakes was included in the proposed state of Sylvania, which also would have taken in most of what is now Wisconsin.

The recorded visitors to the western Lake Superior country in the early part of the British regime were comparatively few. Alexander Henry, survivor of the Indian massacre at Mackinac, seems to have been among the first. In 1765 he was given the exclusive right to the trade about

³ William W. Folwell, *A History of Minnesota*, 1:65 (St. Paul, 1921); William W. Warren, "History of the Ojibways," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5:260-262, 344 (1885).

Lake Superior. In the fall of that year he built a wintering house on Chequamegon Bay and carried on trade largely in that vicinity. From his *Travels*, however, we learn that he sent one of his clerks, as his agent, with two loaded canoes, to trade with the Chippewa at the Head of the Lakes.⁴ No mention is made in Henry's *Travels* of the outcome of this trading venture. It should be noted, nevertheless, that this clerk was undoubtedly the first licensed trader in the Duluth-Superior area during the British period.

Less than two years later, in the summer of 1767, Captain Jonathan Carver, the famous traveler, entered Lake Superior by way of the Brule River, and passing outside of Wisconsin and Minnesota points continued along the North Shore to Grand Portage. In his famous book he assigns the name West Bay to the end of the lake, and remarks that the Indians had most fittingly given the term "Moschettoe [*mosquito*] Country" to the land between Lake Superior and the Mississippi.⁵

One of the most interesting records of trading at the Head of the Lakes is that related in the "Narrative" of Jean Baptiste Perrault. Employed by the trader Alexander Kay, he was one of a party of seventeen that left Mackinac in the latter part of August, 1784, and was shipwrecked on Wisconsin Point on November 3. Two days later, having repaired their canoes and collected the scattered goods, they entered Superior Bay, on the shores of which they found the wintering house of a Mr. Dufault, a trader of the Northwest Company. From a map by Perrault it is ap-

⁴ Alexander Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*, 183-188 (Boston, 1901).

⁵ Jonathan Carver, *Three Years Travels through the Interior Parts of North-America*, 53, 54 (Philadelphia, 1789). In his Journal, under date of July 12, 1767, Carver wrote: "arrivd at a small Chipeway Village on the Entrence of the River St Louis at the Wistern Extremity of Lake Superiour. This Village is a most dirty Begarly Village I Ever saw Capt Tute held a Counsel with their Chief made him some presents the next day tarryd to supply our selves with fish as our Provisions was near gone." Carver's manuscript Journal is in the British Museum; the Minnesota Historical Society has a photostatic copy.

parent that this house was on Rice's Point in the present city of Duluth near the end of Garfield Avenue.⁶

Perrault describes with some detail the difficulty met in transporting the goods into the interior by way of the St. Louis River, the Savanna Portage, and Sandy Lake. Weak from hunger and hindered by ice and snow, the traders took eleven days to cover the distance from Fond du Lac to the neighborhood of present Floodwood. For some days they lived on the seed pods of the wild rose and the sap of trees. They then crossed the portage to a point on Prairie River not far from the outlet of Prairie Lake, about nine miles north of the present town of Cromwell. There they built a temporary shelter and subsisted for some time on roots and a small species of whitefish. About Christmas, near the point of starvation, Perrault set out for Pine River, about twenty miles west of Aitkin, where some of the party under Kay had collected a scanty supply of food. In company with several others, Perrault returned to the site near Prairie Lake, built a substantial log cabin, and entered into trade with the Indians. Kay was stabbed by an Indian during a drinking bout early in May, and was so seriously wounded that it was thought best to take him immediately to Mackinac. Perrault and several others remained to trade near Prairie Lake, Sandy Lake, Swan River, and Leech Lake. They reached Superior Bay on June 7, 1785, and were there held up for seven days until the ice moved out from the outlet between Wisconsin and Minnesota points.

Four years later, in the summer of 1789, Perrault with six other traders returned to the Fond du Lac region. Trading areas were assigned by lot. One trader stayed on the St. Louis River, two went to Leech Lake, two to Pine River, one to Red Lake, and one to distant Otter Tail Lake. Upon the close of a successful season the traders met at Sandy Lake in the spring of 1790. There the division of the re-

⁶ Jean Baptiste Perrault, "Narrative," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 37:518, 519 (1910).

turns was made, after which the entire party set out for Mackinac.

Practically the same group returned to Fond du Lac in the fall, and, as before, divided the trading areas by lot. The Nemadji River was assigned to Belle Harris, and he was left with an outfit consisting of "Two pieces of cloth, and an assortment of 3 Kegs of rum, $\frac{1}{2}$ keg of sugar, $\frac{1}{2}$ keg of tallow, 1 sack of flour, and 1 of corn, 2 nets, $\frac{1}{2}$ Case of hardware, some traps and kettles." The six others went in pairs to the St. Louis River, the Crow Wing, and Leech Lake. When the company was dissolved in the spring of 1791, Perrault felt elated over the twelve packs of furs which constituted his share, but he was disappointed in Harris, who, as a result of excessive drinking, had collected but two packs on the Nemadji.⁷

These trading expeditions to Fond du Lac between 1784 and 1792 were so profitable that the Northwest Company decided to establish permanent posts in this section. In the summer of 1793 John Sayer, a Northwest partner, engaged Perrault to go to Fond du Lac and build a fort which would serve as a depot for the whole region. Perrault and ten workmen arrived at Connor's Point, in what is now Superior, on August 16. The building of the fort is best described in the "Narrative":

The Next Day The men prepared for Work and the 18th I gave them rough estimates of dimensions of the timbers and put them in the Wood-yard to Build 2 houses, of 40 feet each and a shed of 60 feet. . . . I set 2 men to sawing, 6 to squaring, Two I kept with me. The 12th of September mr. sayer arrived, and took up his quarters in his house, half of which Was finished. It was not Long before he was enjoying The other half, which was finished the 24th of September. After this, we Began The second house to shelter ourselves and went into it towards all-saints. In the Course of The autumn, winter, and spring we built the warehouse and stockade. All was ready on The arrival of mr. M'Kenzie, who came to fond du Lac in la Loutre, commanded by Capt. m'xwell, and bringing the merchandise for the outfits sent out from Fond du Lac.⁸

⁷ Perrault, in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 37: 557.

⁸ Perrault, in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 37: 569.

It may be of interest to mention that this boat, the "Otter," was probably the first sailing vessel to enter what is now the Duluth-Superior Harbor.

The post built by Perrault was given the name Fort St. Louis and was occupied by the Northwest Company until it withdrew from American territory shortly after the War of 1812. The exact location of the old fort has been rather definitely determined. The site was on Connor's Point about three miles from the Superior entry and, measuring along the point, was about halfway between the mouth of the Nemadji River and the end of the point. It was in what is now known as Roy's Addition of Superior, near the intersection of the present Bay and Winter Streets, not far from the municipal gas plant.

Fort St. Louis played an important part in the history of the Fond du Lac region for over twenty years. For more than half of that period it served not only as the central distributing point, but also as the Northwest Company headquarters for the whole Fond du Lac department. What a lively place it must have been for four or five weeks in mid-summer when the traders came in from all directions— from the upper St. Louis, the Nemadji, the Crow Wing, Pine River, Sandy Lake, Cass Lake, Leech Lake, Red Lake, and points as far away as the Red River! Here was the economic center of the then far American Northwest.

In 1805, when the fur trade in this area was probably at its best, a hundred and nine men were employed in the whole department. Fourteen large canoes were necessary to carry over four hundred pieces of goods, of ninety pounds each, from Fort William to Fort St. Louis. A third of the cargoes constituted provisions and the remainder trading goods. In exchange for the latter the traders collected from the Indians, during the season of 1805-06, a hundred and eighty-two packs of furs weighing about ninety pounds each.⁹

⁹ Elliot Coues, ed., *Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 1:285, 286 (New York, 1895); Coues, ed., *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, 1:280 (New York, 1897).

Fort St. Louis was not the only post erected by the Northwest Company in the Fond du Lac department. A permanent post was established at Sandy Lake in 1794, and shortly thereafter others were set up at Leech Lake, Upper Red Cedar (Cass) Lake, Lower Red Cedar (Cedar) Lake, and other points. About 1805 the post at Leech Lake became the headquarters for the department, but Fort St. Louis on Superior Bay remained the chief collecting and distributing point.

The Northwest Company did not enjoy a complete monopoly of the trade about the Head of the Lakes. Individual traders as well as organized groups offered stiff competition. From the "Journal" of the trader, Michel Curot, we learn that the short-lived XY Company had a post on Superior Bay in 1804 and perhaps before.¹⁰ Charles Grignon and John McBean built a rival fort, the exact location of which has not been determined. In the fall of 1804 the XY concern was absorbed by the Northwest Company, and the post was probably given up.

By the Jay treaty of 1794 the British agreed to evacuate all posts that were held on American soil contrary to the terms of the treaty of 1783. The forts at Detroit, Oswego, Mackinac, and Green Bay were taken over by American forces in July, 1796, and the traders and Indians about those posts first felt the authority of the American government. About 1800 the Northwest Company, realizing that its depot at Grand Portage was in American territory, moved its headquarters to a new point, Fort William on the Kaministiquia River. No immediate change, however, occurred at Fond du Lac. A British military force had never been stationed there, but the traders, being British in sympathy, passed out foreign medals to the Indians and displayed the English flag at all the posts. The uncertainty as to the exact boundary between British and American territory in this region may

¹⁰ Michel Curot, "A Wisconsin Fur-Trader's Journal, 1803-04," in *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, 20:401, 454, 469 (1911).

in part account for this situation. Even as late as after the War of 1812, there were proposals that the St. Louis River be made a part of the international boundary.

In the early winter of 1806 the authority of the United States government was first carried to the Fond du Lac country by the expedition of Lieutenant Zebulon M. Pike. Approaching from the south by way of the Mississippi River, he visited several of the Northwest Company posts and was entertained by Hugh McGillis, the trader at the chief fort of the Fond du Lac department on Leech Lake. Pike, disturbed by the widespread display of pro-British feeling, ordered that clerks in charge of the various posts haul down the English flag and fly only the Stars and Stripes. It is doubtful if the orders were faithfully carried out; undoubtedly the Union Jack was raised again after Pike's departure, and it is questionable whether the American flag was ever raised over old Fort St. Louis at the Head of the Lakes. It is interesting to note that, though Pike did not visit this post, he suggested that the American position in this area be strengthened by a garrison of a hundred men and the establishment of a customs office at Fond du Lac.¹¹ No action, however, was taken on this proposal.

In 1809 the control of the Northwest Company at Fond du Lac was challenged by a new American-owned enterprise, the American Fur Company of John Jacob Astor. During and following the season of 1809-10 he employed several traders in this region. In January, 1811, a combination representing both Astor and the Northwest Company was organized to take over the trade south of the boundary. This Southwest Company, as it was called, fell heir to Fort St. Louis and the other posts in the Fond du Lac department shortly before the beginning of the War of 1812. During the war the Northwest Company again assumed direct control, since it regarded the previous agreement as to division of territory suspended by the hostilities. The fur companies

¹¹ Pike, *Expeditions*, 1:250, 280.

suffered heavily during the war, for while the volume of trade was reduced to a fourth, the overhead expenses remained about the same, as the men under contract continued to draw their wages.¹²

When relations between the United States and England came to the breaking point in 1811–12, both sides strove to secure the support of the Northwest Indians. The British, however, had the advantage through their control of the fur trade. The leading agents of the Northwest Company received commissions in the British army and were ordered to enlist the support of the Indians. The British interpreter St. Germain was sent by Robert Dickson to Leech Lake to obtain the co-operation of the Chippewa. With few exceptions, however, the Indians about Fond du Lac remained neutral.

The years 1816–17 mark the close of British authority at the Head of the Lakes. The treaty of Ghent, closing the late war, provided for the mutual restoration of territory and authorized a joint commission to survey and definitely determine the northwest boundary. The British forces in Wisconsin were withdrawn in 1815, and shortly thereafter American soldiers were sent to occupy the forts at Prairie du Chien, Green Bay, and the Portage. American influence with the traders and Indians of Fond du Lac was strengthened thereby. Then in April, 1816, Congress passed a law which forbade foreigners to engage in the Indian trade in United States territory. Early in 1817 the interests of the Southwest Company were bought out by John Jacob Astor, and for the next thirty years the American Fur Company maintained posts in the Fond du Lac country. It did not see fit to use old Fort St. Louis at Superior, but instead it built a new post near the head of navigation on the St. Louis River, at Fond du Lac, Minnesota.

The Hudson's Bay Company, overlord of the Canadian

¹² Kenneth W. Porter, *John Jacob Astor, Business Man*, 1:253–256 (Cambridge, 1931).

Northwest, had its brief day of authority at the Head of the Lakes just as the curtain went down on the British phase of its history. Long-standing rivalry between the Hudson's Bay people and the Northwest traders and dispute over a settlement project in the Red River Valley finally resulted in open warfare between the representatives of the two concerns. In 1816 the Hudson's Bay men actually occupied Fort William, successor to Grand Portage as the headquarters of the Northwest Company. Lord Selkirk's emissaries also invaded the Fond du Lac department, confiscating the goods and arresting the men of the Southwest Company. Selkirk then sent twelve canoes and fifty traders into the Fond du Lac region to secure the trade for the season of 1816-17. They did not enter without opposition, however, as a number of the former Nor'westers reappeared during the winter and succeeded in securing half their usual quota of furs. Though definite information is lacking on this point, Fort St. Louis on Superior Bay was undoubtedly in the hands of the Hudson's Bay group for a part of this season. It is definitely known that by the summer of 1817 the Selkirk men had withdrawn from this section.¹³

The story of the British regime at the Head of the Lakes closes at this point. Though this area was recognized as belonging to the United States by the treaty of 1783, it remained under British control, without legal sanction, for more than three decades. Until the close of the second war with England, American influence in this section was negligible. During this period, however, Congress passed several important acts which, on paper, affected the Fond du Lac region. The famous Northwest Ordinance was to apply there, and General Arthur St. Clair, who was inaugu-

¹³ Kenneth W. Porter, "John Jacob Astor and Lord Selkirk," in *North Dakota Historical Quarterly*, 5:8 (October, 1930); Ramsay Crooks to John Jacob Astor, June 23, July 21, 1817, in *American Fur Company, "Mackinac Letterbook," 1816-28*. The letterbook is among the American Fur Company Papers in the possession of the New York Historical Society; the Minnesota Historical Society has copies of the letters cited.

rated at Marietta, Ohio, in July, 1788, may rightfully be claimed as its first territorial governor. After May 7, 1800, this section was included in Indiana Territory and came under the jurisdiction of Governor William Henry Harrison, whose seat of government was at Vincennes. From 1809 until 1818 Governor Ninian Edwards at Kaskaskia claimed authority over Fond du Lac as a part of the Territory of Illinois. As a matter of fact, no agents of these governors ever visited the Head of the Lakes, for the land was not as yet opened to permanent white settlement.

The few thousand Chippewa and several score of traders had as yet no need for judges, tax collectors, and representative assemblies. A Robert Dickson, a John Sayer, a Hugh McGillis, or a Jean Baptiste Cadotte had more immediate influence at Fond du Lac during this period than the Great White Father at distant Washington.

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