Because the Montreal River was part of Michigan’s western boundary, it naturally became a portion of Wisconsin’s eastern boundary when that territory attained statehood in 1848. From the mouth of the river’s main channel, the first section of Wisconsin’s Lake Superior boundary ran “to the middle” of the lake. From that point, its northernmost boundary lay “through the centre of Lake Superior to the mouth of the St. Louis River; thence up the main channel of said river to the first rapids in the same, above the Indian village, according to Nicollet’s map.” When Minnesota joined the union in 1858, it was assigned that portion of Lake Superior west of Michigan and north of Wisconsin. Although the three states all included parts of Lake Superior, subsequent calculators of their areas acted as if the boundaries ended at the lakeshore.

DURING MINNESOTA’S FIRST 50 YEARS, three federal agencies—the General Land Office, census bureau, and U.S. Geological Survey—as well as the Minnesota Geological and Natural History Survey all played roles in determining the state’s size. Relying on federal public-land surveys, the General Land Office in 1860 first reported Minnesota’s area as 83,531 square miles. Twenty years later, Henry Gannett, geographer and special agent for the census, reduced the calculation by 166 square miles. Minnesota State Geologist Newton Horace Winchell complained that Gannett’s figure had

short-changed Minnesota by 921.58 square miles. He noted that Gannett had not only failed to consider Minnesota’s half of Lake of the Woods and Rainy Lake but also had given only round-number estimates for seven unorganized northern counties and reported erroneous totals for two western counties.³

In the early-twentieth century, officials from the census bureau, geological survey, and land office conducted a joint, systematic study of state areas. Their aim was to compile and issue a single, authoritative set of federal statistics. During their discussions about the meaning of “area” they even calculated the extent of coastal waters for states abutting the Great Lakes. Evidently, there was some support for including these precise calculations in the total state areas. But in their 1906 report, the officials merely identified each state’s lake area as containing “approximately an additional number of square miles.” Minnesota’s 84,682 square miles represented a slight gain over its 1880s area.⁴

The federal government did not revise state areas again until 1940, when the census bureau slightly reduced Minnesota’s to 84,068 square miles. Most of the adjustment was caused by cartographic refinements. But a small portion of the inland-water subtotal, which had increased, resulted from a 1920 U.S. Supreme Court decision that resolved a Minnesota-Wisconsin controversy over the boundary in the St. Louis River estuary.⁵

While compiling the 1940 census, the bureau’s administrators and geographers again considered the possibility of adding coastal waters to the state-area totals but, ultimately, again decided against doing so. Instead, the census report included a separate table of “WATER AREA, OTHER THAN INLAND WATER, FOR STATES BY PRIMARY BODIES OF WATER.” Minnesota was credited with 2,212 square miles of Lake Superior, compared to 16,231 for Michigan and 2,675 for Wisconsin. In essence, the bureau acknowledged that each of the states encompassed some of the lake but did not add those portions to the official areas. The same principle was applied all other Great Lakes and ocean-fronting states.⁶

While this solution probably seemed like an artful compromise to census personnel, it was sharply criticized by Chase S. and Stellanova Osborn, the principal champions of a “Greater Michigan.” Born in 1860, Chase Osborn was, by the 1940s, in the literary stage of a long, colorful life that featured newspaper publishing, iron-ore prospecting, and politics. He had served in various state administrative positions before he was elected Michigan’s governor in 1910. His two-year term as a progressive Republican highlighted his political career. After failing to be re-elected or nominated for the U.S. Senate, he turned to writing on a variety of topics. While he and his adopted daughter Stellanova were doing research on the Hiawatha legend, he attempted to have Michigan’s claims in lakes Huron, Michigan, and Superior added to the state’s official area.⁷

In attacking the census bureau’s decision, the Osborns noted, “It will be a surprise to practically every one to realize that the leading reference books of the world give

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**Minnesota’s Shifting Size**

Altered boundaries, changing definitions, and advancing technology have all contributed to fluctuations in Minnesota’s total area as reported by federal officials. Area totals below are square miles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>AREA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>83,531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>83,365*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>84,682</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>84,068</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>86,943</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>86,939</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Minnesota State Geologist Newton H. Winchell quarreled with the 1880 figure; he said the total should be 84,286.58 square miles.

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For a wide-ranging look at Minnesota maps, atlases, geographic features, and more, visit [www.mnhs.org/maps](http://www.mnhs.org/maps).
The 1947 compact fixed the interstate boundaries in both Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, the latter provision, of course, affecting Minnesota.

the total area of the United States some 61,000 square miles less than it actually is; the State of Michigan some 40,000 square miles less.” In self-defense, the various reference publishers replied to the Osborns that they were merely quoting official census bureau figures. But the Osborns insisted that the bureau had betrayed them, because director William L. Austin had promised that Michigan’s area would be changed to include its share of the Great Lakes. They complained in Science magazine that after Austin left the office in 1940, his successor, J. C. Capt, had reneged on the pledge.8

Responding for the census bureau, two of its principal geographers, Clarence E. Batschelet and Malcolm J. Proudfoot, insisted that anyone could easily compute Michigan’s total area by referring to the 1940 water-area table. The heart of their defense, however, was the contention that expanding Michigan could conceivably create a problem with ocean-fronting states, which, like Michigan, might be lured by the traditional American quest for bigness. Determined to have the last word, the Osborns not only responded in Science but expanded their case in a 1945 book.9

Despite their arguments, neither the Osborns nor the U.S. Census Bureau had absolutely accurate statistics for the Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota areas in Lake Superior, because the demarcations in the nineteenth-century enabling acts had never been precisely defined. The three states finally negotiated and signed a boundary compact in 1947. This agreement was prompted by a long-standing controversy between Michigan and Wisconsin over their boundary from the headwaters of the Montreal River to and through Green Bay to their Lake Michigan demarcation. The U.S. Supreme Court had twice considered this issue and, in its final 1936 ruling, not only resolved the inland-boundary question but also defined the line through Lake Michigan.10

The 1947 compact fixed the interstate boundaries in both Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, the latter provision, of course, affecting Minnesota. In Lake Superior, Michigan’s western boundary started at the point “where the line through the middle of the Montreal River enters Lake Superior” and ran directly to the point “where a line drawn through the most easterly point of Pigeon Point and the most southerly point of Pine Point intersects the international boundary.” The southern half of this 108.86-mile boundary separated Michigan and Wisconsin and the northern half, Michigan and Minnesota. Its midpoint—the middle of the lake as specified in Wisconsin’s enabling act—was the starting point for the Minnesota-Wisconsin demarcation, which was defined with reference to four points equidistant between designated spots on the Minnesota and Wisconsin shores. This 109.18-mile demarcation comprised three direct line courses to a western terminus, the “midpoint in a direct line at right angles to the central axis of the Superior entry between the tops of the eastern ends of the pierheads at the lakeward ends of the United States government breakwaters at the Superior entry to Duluth Superior Harbor.”11

Interstate boundaries in Lake Superior for Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan, finally fixed in 1947
Before the end of 1947, the compact was approved by the three state legislatures and governors. On June 30, 1948, it was enacted into federal law by a joint resolution of both houses of Congress. These precise boundaries made it possible to definitively measure the Lake Superior area of the three states.

THE MINNESOTA AREA REPORTED in the 1940 census was accepted longer than any of its predecessors. It stood until 1990 when the census bureau decided, after all, to include coastal waters in the areas of the Great Lakes and ocean-bordering states. The advent of Global Positioning System cartography, based on satellite imagery and digital mapping programs, had yielded a wealth of accurate data. The bureau developed a digital database of geographic features, which it named Topographically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing (TIGER). The 1990 TIGER statistics increased Minnesota’s area to 86,943 square miles (79,617 land, 7,326 water)—the biggest gain in the history of the state’s shifting size.

The inclusion of Minnesota’s 2,546 square miles of Lake Superior, in turn, increased the size of counties bordering the lake: Cook, Lake, and St. Louis. Cook County gained slightly more than two-thirds of this new area, vaulting it to second place in size among Minnesota’s counties and making its water area larger than its land area. Lake County received more than one-fourth of the Lake Superior area, and St. Louis County, bordering the lake’s narrowest reach, gained the remaining one-twentieth.

Minnesota’s enlargement was relatively modest compared to other states with coastal waters. Alaska, a huge peninsula, gained coastal waters to a three-mile limit, growing slightly more than 10 percent. The Osborns would be pleased to know that Michigan was, by far, the biggest gainer of the Great Lakes states. Its share of lakes Huron, Michigan, and Superior amounted to 38,301 square miles, boosting it from twenty-third to the eleventh-largest state in the nation. Despite various shifts of position among the 50 states, Minnesota remained at twelfth because its added Lake Superior area made it larger than Utah.

It may seem that area is an arcane statistic, of interest only to trivia seekers. But the addition of Great Lakes waters to Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan changes perceptions of them. Before the 1990 census, there was no state east of Minnesota larger than it. Now, Michigan, the giant of states east of the Mississippi, holds that honor.

The traditional image of Minnesota as ending at the Lake Superior shore will also have to be reconsidered. The Arrowhead region—that pronounced piece of land cedes its borderland prominence when Minnesota’s Lake Superior area is included.
wedged between Ontario and Lake Superior in the state’s northeast—cedes its borderland prominence when Minnesota’s Lake Superior area is included. In addition, the conventional wisdom that Minnesota is bordered by North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, and Wisconsin will have to be revised to include Michigan.

And, finally, the Land of 10,000 Lakes has lost bragging rights on one of its definitive features. It was historian Theodore C. Blegen who wrote, “The total area of the state in square miles has been measured as 84,068, and of this, water occupies 4,059 square miles—a greater water area than that of any other state.” (Others have also cited these figures.) Future writers will not be able to make this watery claim.¹⁶

The inclusion of Lake Superior waters in Minnesota’s area has changed not only its size but also its shape. Although nearly two decades have passed since the census bureau’s decision, the new dimensions have only recently been portrayed in some published maps.¹⁷ General recognition that Minnesota, south of its international boundary, abuts five states will take far longer. But, as changes are made in geographies, maps, and histories, Minnesota’s location relative to all of its neighbors will become established.

Notes

4. Henry Gannett, The Areas of the United States, the States, and the Territories (1906), in Proudfoot, Measurement, 111–13. The 84,682 square miles included 3,824 of inland water. Minnesota’s share of Lake Superior was 2,514 square miles.
5. Proudfoot, Measurement, 117; Minnesota v. Wisconsin, 252 U.S. 273 (1920). The total included less land than in 1906 (80,009 square miles) but more inland water (4,059).
17. See, for example, John Fraser Hart and Susy Svatek Ziegler, Landscapes of Minnesota: A Geography (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 292; David A. Lanegran with the assistance of Carol L. Urness, Minnesota on the Map: A Historical Atlas (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008), 201. Neither map shows Minnesota’s adjoining states.

The maps on p. 306 and 310 are courtesy the David Lanegran Collection; the photograph of Winchell is in MHS collections.