

On Monday, September 6, 1965, historical plaques commemorating the Grand Portage were unveiled on either side of the Pigeon River. One is located at Grand Portage National Monument in Minnesota. The other is located in Ontario, near the entrance to Middle Falls Park, west of Highway 61, near the Pigeon River, in the District of Thunder Bay. These are two of many plaques erected throughout the province by the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario, and subsequently by the Ontario Heritage Trust.

The Minnesota unveiling ceremony was sponsored by the United States National Park Service. Mr. Raymond Nelson, superintendent of the Grand Portage National Monument, acted as program chairman. Speakers included: The Honourable Karl F. Rolvaag, Governor of Minnesota; The Honourable George C. Wardrobe, Ontario's Minister of Mines; Mr. Howard W. Baker, assistant director of the US Park Service; Miss Kathleen McFarland of the Archaeological and Historic Sites Board of Ontario; the Reverend E.A. Viren of Mount Rose Baptist Chapel in Grand Marais; and the Reverend Ignatius Candrian, O.S.B., of St. John's Catholic Church in Grand Marais. The plaque was unveiled by Mr. John S. Flatte, chairman of the Grand Portage Indian Council.

The Ontario ceremony was sponsored by the Thunder Bay Historical Society. Mr. George Macgillivray, a director of the society, acted as program host. Participants in the event included: Messrs Rolvaag and Wardrobe, mentioned above; Mr. R.W. Fridley, a director of the Minnesota Historical Society; Mr. Keith Denis of the Thunder Bay Historical Society; and Mr. E.G. Freeman, MPP (Fort William). The plaque was unveiled by Chief Frank Pelletier of the Fort William Indian Band.

The Ontario plaque reads:

THE GRAND PORTAGE

Circumventing 21 miles of falls and rapids, this portage ran some nine miles from Lake Superior to a point upstream on the opposite side of the Pigeon River. It was first mentioned in 1722 by a French trader named Jean Pachot. Following its use in 1732 by La Vérendrye, it replaced the Kaministiquia route as the canoe route to the West. About 1767 the Grand Portage became a rendezvous for Canadian fur traders and, after 1778, the North West Company's inland headquarters. By the Treaty of Paris, 1783, the Portage fell within American territory. In 1803 the Company moved its headquarters to Fort Kaministiquia (Fort William), and the

Pigeon River route was then abandoned.

Historical background

The Grand Portage was a nine-mile trail circumventing some 21 miles of falls and rapids in the Pigeon River. The coureurs de bois Radisson and Groseilliers may have visited the mouth of the river in 1662, but the first known record of the river is in 1722 when Jean Pachot, a young French officer and trader reputed to be "very well acquainted with the habits of the Indians of the back country," suggested the Pigeon River as a route to the West. There is no evidence, however, that he himself travelled up the river. In 1688, seeking a route to the fur-rich West, the young coureur de bois Jacques de Noyon had ascended the Kaministiquia River and thence had found his way as far as the Lake of the Woods. The Kaministiquia route was subsequently used by others and became an important link in the long canoe route west from Montreal, which was used extensively throughout the fur trade era.

One notable traveller on the route was Pierre Gaultier de Varennes, Sieur de la Vérendrye, an explorer and trader who secured the trading rights in the Lake Superior region for 1727. La Vérendrye was told by Auchagah, a Cree, that the Nantaouagan (Pigeon) River was superior to the Kaministiquia as a route to the west. Hoping that this route might lead to the fabled "western sea," La Vérendrye set out in 1731 resolved to explore it. Unfortunately, his voyageurs refused to go any further than Grand Portage and he had to return to Fort Kaministiquia for the winter. La Jemeraye, a nephew, and La Vérendrye's three sons, all of whom had accompanied the party, pushed on as far as Rainy Lake where they established a small fort near present-day Fort Frances. They were the first recorded European travellers on the portage and the Pigeon River. La Vérendrye himself journeyed over the portage in June 1732. The route proved to his liking, and the older Kaministiquia route was soon all but forgotten.

The French régime came to an end with the conquest of 1759-60, and the fur trade was quickly taken up by British interests in Montreal. Among the most famous of the early visitors to Grand Portage in this period was Alexander Henry the Elder who arrived there in 1775. He verified the hostility that had been reported among the individuals and small partnerships carrying on the trade. It was this ruinous competition that led to the formation of larger partnerships, culminating in the creation of the North West Company in 1779. That agreement was dissolved after two years, but the principle was acknowledged as a good one and the North West Company, newly constituted in 1784, became a vital factor in the economy and development of Canada. Grand Portage, which for many years had been the fur traders' rendezvous point, became the great inland depot and western headquarters of the North West Company. At the height of its development, it boasted some 16 buildings. Here, traders who

had wintered in the far west brought their furs to meet the canoes laden with trade goods and supplies from Montreal.

In 1783, the Treaty of Paris formally ended the Revolutionary War, and the international boundary was established along the Pigeon River. Although the portage then fell within American territory, the North West Company remained based at Grand Portage for two more decades. In 1800, it was rumoured that the United States government intended to levy duty on merchandise passing over the portage, and the Nor'Westers began to build a new headquarters at the mouth of the Kaministiquia River. (Named Fort Kaministiquia, the post was renamed Fort William in 1807 in honour of William MacGillivray – the North West Company's senior partner). The Kaministiquia canoe route had been “rediscovered” in 1798 by Roderick McKenzie, and once again became the voyageurs' route to the West.

Grand Portage, abandoned in 1803 when the North West Company moved into its new headquarters, was used for a time by American traders. But by 1822, when the explorer and surveyor David Thompson passed that way, it lay in ruins. Although the portage was seldom used, it figured in the terms of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1842, which guaranteed it to be "free and open to the use of the citizens and subjects of both countries."



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