

## KEWEENAW WATERWAY

Most information herein is from Web sites of the Coast Guard unless otherwise noted.

Getting the smelter ore into ingots out of area meant opening the Portage Lake at both ends for ships to carry the ingots.

### **Creating the Keweenaw Waterway- South Entry side:**

Before 1855 canoes came in to the Portage Lake Area over portages at the south entry. Freight had to be handled 3 times in order to reach Dollar Bay due to a land block at the present entry and this made for portaging which gave vent to the name Portage for the channel.

By 1859 a number of Portage Lake mining firms and merchants of the area contributed \$30,000 to the cause that the southeast channel might be opened to a depth of 10 feet.

By 1860 Copper Mining was peaking in price of 55 cents by 1864. By the close of the Civil War (1865) the prices started declining.

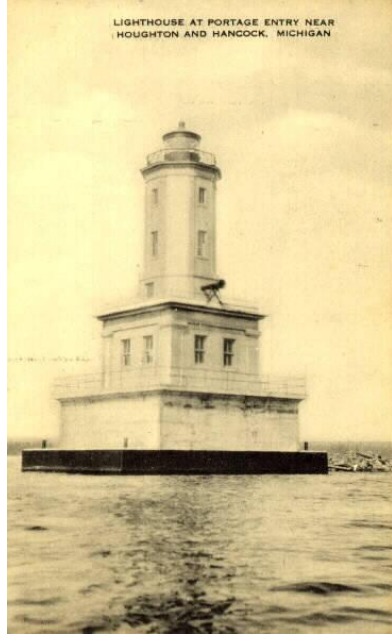
Between 1860 and 1882 most of the commodities for the Portage Lake district came from the outside via steamer. The first steam powered propeller ship to come thru the channel was the Illinois to a dock at Ripley. After 1882 railroads did the delivery.

Clarence Monette in his 1975 book Some Copper Country Names and Places says: Portage Entry was located near Jacobsville and White City. It was very well known to the Indians and traders. It was so named because of the point where Portage Lake entered through Portage River, which connected it and Lake Superior. This canal causes a part of Houghton County and all of Keweenaw County to be an island. This hamlet had a post office from October 10, 1851 to August 8, 1953.



Entry.

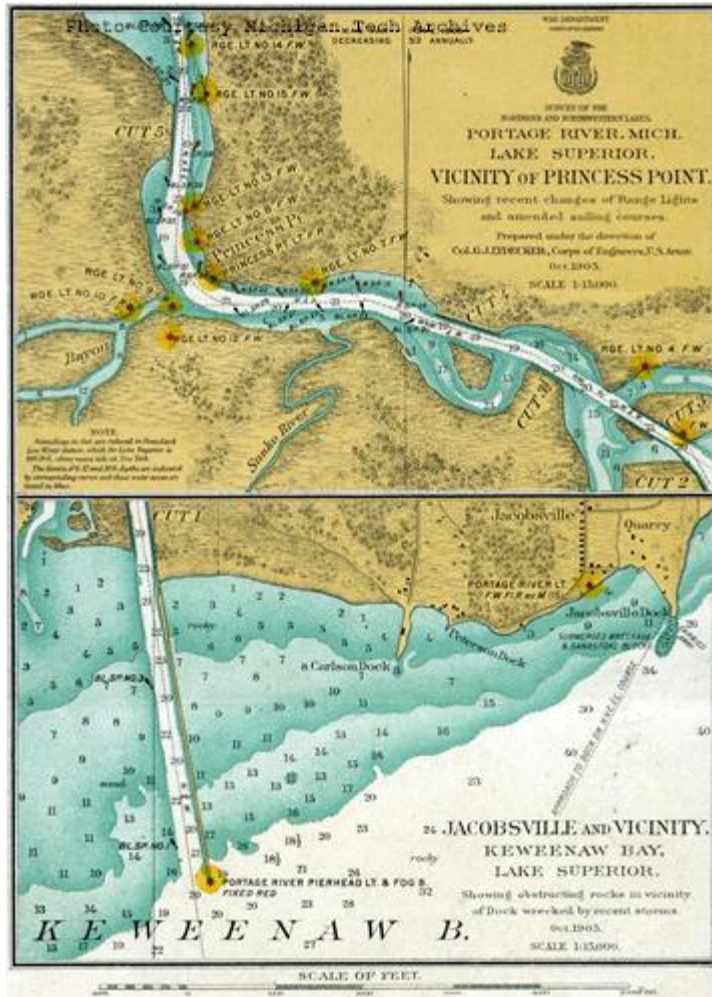
Lighthouse at Portage



In the early days only a shallow river entrance existed, so no traffic could go through from Lake Superior because of the sand bar and lack of a canal to the Big Portage. Much sand dredging has taken place by copper mining companies so that their ships carrying copper ore could use the canal. Later dredging was done by the Corps of Engineers in order to keep the canal in operation. The Township (Torch Lake) maintains a picnic park in this area now.



Dredging was needed often to keep canal free of sand bars. South Entry.



### Creating the Keweenaw Waterway-North Entry Side:

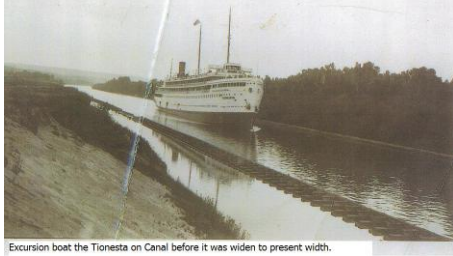
Don Hermanson, grandson of early settler Oscar Hermanson, shares: “Originally there was no (North) entry. It was an overland portage from very near where you live (Osma Plat Road), a little north at Lily Pond just past the creek on the east.

Everything moved out the south entry, and was the Portage River; in fact the lighthouse on the south entry was the Portage River lighthouse.

After it (north entry) was dredged then it was a canal; hence "portage canal or north canal entry".

Internet source shares: A tamarack swamp was cut through in 1861 that was 2 1/4 miles long, ten feet deep and 85 wide. Two breakwater walls and two piers to the entrance of channel were built out into the lake, part of which was a cement wall, the rest rocks. Ozzie Koski remembers that water was inside the breakwater where after rock crushing in Freda the stamp sand has washed over the breakwater and created land.

Ships could now negotiate the entire 25-mile waterway.



Excursion boat the Tionesta on Canal before it was widened to present width.

In 1874 a large two -story two-keeper lighthouse brick building was built with attached 43-foot high square brick tower.



In the 1880's considerable traffic passed through the canal. Tolls were levied to cover continuing expenses for repairs and dredging. After years of transfers, wrangling and legal maneuvering, full operation and maintenance of the waterway was taken over by the US Army Corps of Engineers. In 1891 tolls were eliminated.

In 1891 the depth was advanced to 13 feet.

In 1898 the draft was expanded to 20 feet.

In 1935, according to Richard Garnell the original lighthouse was torn down when the width of the canal was expanded. The original canal was only 85 feet wide.

A dredge named New Jersey was working on the Portage Canal in 1936-1938. Richard Garnell worked on the dredge Union. He says there were 3 dredges. The New Jersey had a thirty-inch pipeline for piping sucked soil under water to go over the cement breakwater towards now McLain State Park. It is said that it sucked up many pieces of mass copper. Robert Olson says that John Kangas helped with the dredging.

Gazette article Nov. 7, 1937. Hancock "The dredge that has been resting in the Portage Lake on the Hancock side for the past few weeks are a masterpiece of modern engineering. It is said to be the largest of its kind in the world, and its construction engineers claim that it can generate enough electricity to supply a city of 150,000 people.

A 300-foot vessel, displacing 5,000 tons, the dredge is powered with four 1,150-

horse power Busch and Sulzer diesel engines, whose fuel is supplied from the 160,000 gallon tanks which have a fuel supply sufficient to keep her operating for 90 days.

On the prow is a rotary cutter, which can be raised or lowered to a depth of 60 feet. This cutter is 8 feet by 8 feet, has 8 cutting blades, and is driven by a 500-horse power motor which can be stepped up to 2,500 horse power if necessary.

The silt and mud is sucked up from the bottom by a 300 horsepower motor-driven, centrifugal-suction pump, and is hurled into a 30-inch pipeline to be dumped at the spot selected by the engineers supervising the dumping. The pipeline is the tail of the dredge.

The maximum crew, which the New Jersey can accommodate, is 70 men.”



Richard Garnell (was resident of North Superior Road as youth and carried on the family farm with his family) said he was working 1936-38 on the dredge Union. He said the soil dug up was put on scows and brought to the dumping location. One such area was the high ground seen in the Stanton Township land by the park on the canal side just before the turn left into the park today. During this dredging some of the dredged soil created Kelly Bay between Osma Plat and Bay Shore properties.

Jack Ruohonen speaks of this in a 1972-taped translated interview:

(During the 1912 strike) A dredge ship cruised all summer on that Portage Lake. Whenever it was full of channel bottom dirt it brought its load to that Irish Bend (High Point). .. That kind of place where there is not bottom, even ‘though they hauled dirt there for tens of years.. Still not. The currents go around there so. On the opposite shore is Kuru’s where the Suomi College camp used to be.

Well, when the strike was on they cursed and yelled so.. while a Tyomies (socialist newspaper) was in their pockets. We were out back by Tikkanens (Lydia) and people were so afraid.. no one dares to go out. So I said “Let’s go to Suomi College. It must be a safe place.” Vaino Tikkinen said “Let’s go”. So we went. There was a girl there (probably the receptionist), someone they knew. I said “Guide us to the museum... in the highest tower. We went there. There was a human skull there. I put it in my lap and said, “There is some resemblance to me.” Yes, it is true... then he tells story of the dredge.. Barb Koski wonders if the skeleton came from the dredged dirt.. mystery of High Point. !!

Don Hermanson, grandson of early settler Oscar Hermanson shares: “Another story I don't have much info on but my Grandma (Selma Hermanson) had a dance hall down there by the park road during the digging of the canal. She had bands play and once brought a colored band from Chicago to play there. Eventually someone burned it down, probably some folks not liking it, however she rebuilt, I don't know much else, no poster etc only one picture of 4-5 coloreds at the apple orchard near the house. There was also a sawmill down there that my Grandpa (Oscar) owned for sawing the lumber to build the green house, garage, barns etc. (Once Don Hermanson's grandfather Oscar owned and now Don owns land next to the US Government Land, now Stanton Township land).

Passenger steamer Juniata with Great Lakes Transit Co. cruised the waterway. This is the one I hear saved John Koski and his cousin Verner Koski whose boat capsized



on Lake Superior in 1905.



In 1885 the United States Life-Saving Service created the Portage Ship Canal Station at



North Entry on Houghton side of canal.



See the red base of light beacon today in the hole of the roots? Picture taken by researcher's daughter, Melissa Koski.

Researched by Barb Koski. Osma Plat Road. Houghton, MI 49931  
Submitted in 2011.