

EARLY POLITICAL HISTORY OF THIS AREA

The Straits area, where Lakes Michigan and Huron come together, was a naturally strategic region, both for the earlier Native American populations and for the later European arrivals. The earliest permanent European settlement was the establishment of a Jesuit mission by Pere (or Father) Marquette in 1671 in the Upper Peninsula village that came to be known as St. Ignace. The area itself became part of a developing French trading system serving a vast area extending from the Mississippi River to the St. Lawrence River, which included the Great Lakes, since transportation via water was the primary method of moving people and goods throughout the region.

Within a relatively short period of time, France established a military presence, as well, when it constructed Fort de Buade, likewise in St. Ignace, in 1683. However, when the French garrison was later moved south to Fort Detroit, no military units remained in the area until roughly 1715, when Fort Michilimackinac was constructed by the French. Its primary purpose was not military, however. Instead, it functioned mostly as a supply post for trade in the western portion of the Great Lakes, and it was situated at the site of the present reconstructed fort in Mackinaw City. Like the reconstructed fort, it was made primarily of wood, from its outer palisades to the inner buildings, and, thus, it was potentially vulnerable to fire and to attack.

The British, the Spanish, and the French had maintained spheres of settlement and influence in various parts of the undeveloped regions of the eastern North America, with the British holding sway over parts of Northern Canada in and around the Hudson Bay as well as the eastern seaboard from Maine down to the northern portions of Georgia and Alabama. The Spanish controlled what is now Florida and had influence in later disputed areas consisting of the southern portions of Georgia and Alabama. The French controlled a large swath from Nova Scotia down through the Great Lakes and into the Mississippi River valley as far south as the Gulf of Mexico. Major French cities in this extensive region included Quebec, Montreal, Detroit, St. Louis, and New Orleans as well as Lakes Ontario, Erie, Huron, Superior, and Michigan. As is clear from this description, our Douglas Lake constituted a tiny portion of the region claimed by the French.

In time, the interests of the two major powers then exerting influence in the developing New World regions in North America came into conflict, spawning a world-wide conflict known in Europe as the Seven Years War, which lasted from 1754 to 1763. That war consisted of both European and North American theaters. On the North American front, skirmishes were largely confined to those regions extending from Nova Scotia to Virginia, pitting royal French forces and various Native American tribes against the colonial British army, made up primarily of a some regular British units and numerous colonial militias, with the support of other indigenous tribes. The French and its “Indian” allies having been identified by the British as their enemy, the more familiar name for this conflict, as it played out in North America, was The French and Indian War. As a practical matter, however, the American version actually only lasted about 6 years, ending in 1760.

In the Great Lakes region, most of the Native American tribes, including the Huron, the Mississauga, the Ojibwa, the Winnebago, and the Potawatomi, sided with France, their primary trading partner and the supplier of arms to them.

In 1761, once the North American portion of the conflict had concluded, the French fort in Mackinaw City was formally transferred to the British, although a French presence continued due to the significant settlement in this area. Because of its wooden structure, however, the British felt that it was too vulnerable to continue serving as the local military garrison, leading them to construct the limestone fort on Mackinac Island. As part of the building process, the wooden buildings from the original fort were dismantled and transported across the Straits, over both water and ice, a process that took roughly two years. Thereafter, the original site of Fort Mackinac was destroyed by the British forces.

It is interesting to note that various names were ascribed to the Michilimackinac region, which consisted of what are now Emmet, Cheboygan and Mackinac counties as well as the Straits of Mackinac and Mackinac Island. The regional name was purportedly a phonetic configuration of a Native American phrase that was said to mean “Great Turtle,” probably a reference to the shape of Mackinac Island. Early spellings varied, however, with two eighteenth century written references to “Michilimakina” and “Michilimackinak”, which might explain the apparent discrepancy between “Mackinaw” and “Mackinac”, which persists to this day.

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