

by Janet Taylor Huntley

Once upon a time, long before the arrival of European settlers, there was a beautiful, pristine lake in Northern Michigan, known only to the area's original inhabitants. It is unknown what name they gave to this lake, since no dispositive documentation exists. In time, however, the name "Turtle Lake" came to be attached to this place in maps created after this region began to be explored in the mid-1800s.

Our lake was originally part of the Northwest Territory, a geographical area created in 1787 in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War. The Northwest Territory was defined as the region that was south of the Great Lakes, west of Pennsylvania, north of the Ohio River, and east of the Mississippi River. Ultimately, five states and a small portion of a sixth would be carved out of that territory.

Michigan, one of those five states, was originally designated as the "Michigan Territory," when it was formed in 1805. Various federal ordinances enacted between 1785 and 1787 established a land policy and a system of territorial government that remained in place until Michigan was formally admitted into the Union in 1837. As part of the federal oversight, Michigan and the other states were to be formally surveyed as a prerequisite for the federal government's distribution of the land contained within each state's borders. Each state was to be divided into counties. Each county within the state would, in turn, be divided into identifiable units consisting of townships, ranges, and sections. Every township would be divided into 36 sections arranged in a square measuring six sections to a side. Every section encompassed one square mile (or 640 acres). This new method of defining and allocating land produced clear and concise legal descriptions that would make the individual land grants easier to identify and to record. As new settlers arrived, it became necessary to complete the surveys in each county before it could be opened up for settlement and the land sold.¹

Once the land had been surveyed and divided into sections, it could be transferred via patent from the federal government to private individuals at a regulated price per acre. Those patents would be issued by clerks in federal land offices. The initial transactions and all that led up to them were supervised by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. Once the original transfer into private hands was completed, however, all subsequent transfers of that specific property would be recorded by the registrar of deeds in the county in which it was located.

The federally-mandated surveys here in Michigan were primarily conducted during the early to mid-1800s, with those areas in southern Michigan, where the population was concentrated,

¹ The same system was followed for the new settlers who had arrived before statehood was granted. Indeed, some land had already been deeded under the earlier governments representing France and England prior to the formation of the Michigan Territory. The first public-domain land within our borders was purchased by settlers as early as 1818, nearly 20 years prior to statehood.

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being surveyed first. The process proceeded northward as new settlers entered the Michigan Territory, spurred in part by the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825.

A map of the Michigan Territory and the Great Lakes that appeared in an atlas published in Boston by Thomas Bradford in 1835, reveals an almost total lack of formal knowledge of the interior geography of the northern regions of what would become Michigan only a few years later. The area north of Gladwin and Arenac counties was identified as “Michilimackinac County”, which consisted of the northern part of the Lower Peninsula plus territory in the Upper Peninsula, as well. When examining the areas of what would become Emmet and Cheboygan counties, there were no cities or towns identified, save for “Fort Mackinac,” which had been established over a century earlier. Furthermore, the only inland water noted in Cheboygan County was the “Sheboigan River.” Not one of the larger inland lakes (Black, Burt or Mullett) had been noted or physically identified on that map, revealing both the absence of settlement and the lack of knowledge about these land tracts.

Within five years, during the summer of 1840, a team of surveyors, under a contract issued by the Surveyor General of the United States, would perform a survey of the township in which our lake was located. Included on that team were two deputy surveyors, William A. Burt and John Mullett. On their journey through what was then Inverness Township (of which our current Munro Township constituted one part), these surveyors set the lines and markers establishing the boundaries of the sections as they passed through rough terrain in some heavily forested areas. Along the way, they had encountered hills, swamps and lakes, rivers and streams. Their field notes as well as those added by a second set of surveyors sent 15 years later to check the earlier findings for accuracy, give us an interesting narrative about our lake and the surrounding terrain immediately before and during the earliest years of European settlement. Included were references to soil types, the land contours, the locations of swamps, the types of trees [with an eye to potential future logging], and the suitability of the land for farming.

Typical of the recorded observations was the enumeration of the types of trees located in Sections 20 and 21, which included the area on and around Bentley Point. Among the species noted were hemlock, elm, cedar, ash, tamarack, maple and alder. The surveyors later noted they had “intersected” a “small [unnamed] lake” between Sections 16 and 17 [Vincent Lake] and another small unnamed lake in Sections 5 and 8 [Lancaster Lake]

The notes go on to state:

There were several small Lakes in the township. The one situated in Sections 4 – 9 & 16 [now known as Munro Lake] is a very shallow Lake having from one to 10 feet water with a muddy bottom. . . .

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The large Lake in this Township is a beautiful Lake of deep clear water mostly surrounded with good farming land, and is the head of, the Maple River which empties itself into Burts Lake.²

What was truly surprising, however, was the name given to the island located in our yet as unnamed lake that we now know as Douglas Lake. The 1855 field notes clearly identify it as “Generals Island”. The identification in question specifically references the “Meanders of Generals Island” that was “situated on line of sections 20 – 29 & 30” commencing “at Mender Corner on line between Sections 29 & 30 on North Side of Island thence...”³ The presence of the explicit citation to Sections 20, 29 and 30 leaves no doubt that the island being discussed was Pells Island, which lies within those three specified sections.

At the time of the original survey in 1840, the lake we live on remained formally nameless. That fact should not be altogether surprising given the fact that European settlement in Cheboygan or its subdivision Munro Township did not begin to occur until a matter of years thereafter. The first settler did not arrive in what became the village of Cheboygan until 1844, or roughly four years after the initial township survey was completed. However, there had been earlier inhabitants living nearby on Mackinac Island, some of whom had been connected either to the area’s fur trade or to the presence of a military fort on the island. The earliest settler arriving in Cheboygan County had come across the Straits from Mackinac Island to what is now Cheboygan, where he built a rude cabin near the mouth of the Cheboygan River. His family followed one year later, as did others who arrived shortly thereafter. The first settler on Mullett Lake arrived in the latter 1840s once the small “village” settlement of Cheboygan had begun to grow. Since the underlying surveys had not been completed and certified, land acquisition took place by means of “pre-emption papers.”

The earliest map that I could locate in which a name was provided for our lake was the one prepared in conjunction with the re-survey of “Township 37” that had taken place in 1855. Although the three smaller lakes just north of it were still not named, our lake was prominently identified as “Turtle Lake.” That map was received and accepted by the U.S. Surveyor General’s office in Detroit in January of 1856.

The designation of “Turtle Lake” was repeated on the 1878 “Map of Cheboygan County” which was drawn, compiled, and edited by H.F. Walling CE. That rendering was later included in the David Rumsey Historical Map Collection.

Munro Township was established in 1878, roughly three years after United States patents for the lands surrounding our lake first became available. The first map of Munro Township was

² This language is found in the later 1855 field notes, given the fact that the “Maple River” and “Burts Lake” were now identified by name. Both Burt Lake and Mullett Lake had been named in honor of the two deputy surveyors who had performed the earlier 1840 survey that had included both of the then unnamed lakes.

³ P. 557 of the 1855 field notes.

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issued in 1881 when the results of the 1840 and 1855 surveys were certified by the State of Michigan. Once again, our lake was formally identified as “Turtle Lake.”

That identification also appeared on paperwork accompanying the original land grants on our lake, beginning in 1875 and continuing at least through 1885. The patent for the land my family has owned since the 1920s was issued and dated February 15, 1875 by the United States District Land Office located in Traverse City. Accompanying the grant was a map identifying the land in question as Section 30 [part of government lot #2] on “Turtle Lake.” The description of the original patent for the land purchased by the Lighthammers in 1972 appears to involve an identical format given their description of the paperwork identifying their parcel as part of “Lot #4 on Turtle Lake” that “was awarded to Edgar Pells in 1885.” The final reference that I could find describing our lake as “Turtle Lake” was found in the composite map of the State of Michigan, located on pages 39 and 40 of the 1902 publication entitled Plat Book of Cheboygan County, Michigan. The map clearly shows the Bryant Hotel on the southern shore of a lake identified as “Turtle Lake.”⁴ The fact that this second Bryant’s Hotel was included on the map shows that this portion of the state-wide map was probably drafted between 1900 and 1902.

As will be demonstrated in the accompanying article, Turtle Lake was not the only name given to this body of water during the interval between 1855 and 1902. However, that name seems to have been the name of choice when either federal or state authorities were involved.

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⁴ Plat Book of Cheboygan County, Michigan, The Consolidated Publishing Company, 1902, pp. 39-40.