

As was clearly demonstrated on the 1835 map of Michigan, very little was known about the interior of the northern portions of the Michigan Territory. No lakes and very few rivers were identified on that map. Indeed, it was not until the 1840 surveyors came into our township that the multiple bodies of water within the county were “discovered” by the Europeans who came to map the terrain. Although it is likely that most if not all of the lakes, streams, and rivers had been given names by the native inhabitants, the names that they utilized have, for the most part, been lost in the mists of time. At least one of them [i.e., the Sheboigan River] may have been retained, however.

Two of the larger lakes had been explored and mapped by deputy surveyors William Burt and John Mullett during the summer of 1840. In the subsequent naming of these lakes, we see a pattern that was to be repeated in the settlement process. By the time the second group of surveyors had arrived 15 years later to check on the accuracy of the markers and the lines, each of these two men who had been so intimately involved in their discovery and original mapping had been honored by having a lake named after him. And so it came to be that Mullett’s Lake and Burt’s lake were formally named.<sup>1</sup>

The lake that we now know as Douglas Lake did not originally follow that earlier pattern, however, in that it was probably was originally named either for an animal found living there or it was given an anglicized version of its original Native American name. In those early years, the three smaller lakes to the immediate north of our lake had remained unnamed at the time of the first township map dated 1856, immediately following the second round of surveys that had taken place one year earlier. Our lake, however, was clearly identified as “Turtle Lake.”

By 1875, the United States District Land Office was prepared to issue the patents for the property located in what was to become Munro Township. Would-be settlers came to purchase sections or fractions of sections then and in the years that followed. The pattern noted with regard to Mullett and Burt Lakes seemed to repeat itself, to the extent that two of the three smaller lakes were given the names of the people closely identified with them, in this instance, the adjacent landowners. Munro Lake was named for one or more members of the Munro family who purchased land along its shores. The same thing occurred with Lancaster Lake, the surrounding land having been originally acquired by patent by William Lancaster. The source of the name Vincent was not easy to pin down, given the identities of the early landowners. However, the fact that “Vincent” was likely either a first name or a surname would tend to support the pattern noted in the other two lakes.

Given the fact that four of the six lakes noted here acquired the names of individuals historically associated with them in some way raises the specter that the name Douglass (or Douglas) was

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<sup>1</sup> In time the designated names were slightly revised to read: Mullett Lake and Burt Lake.

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somehow linked to someone somehow associated with the lake itself or with events taking place in the geographical area.

In this context it is noted that the first documented reference to “Douglass” Lake was in the manuscript of the Reverend W.H. Ware, published in 1876 in conjunction with the centennial of American independence. Accordingly, the focus turns to individuals whose first or last name was Douglass and who probably had some connection with northern Michigan during the years between 1855, when the final survey was completed, and 1876, when the Reverend Ware’s manuscript was written.

A review of the patent records has failed to demonstrate anyone named either Douglas or Douglass who was directly associated with the lake itself. However, when the local and statewide historical records were reviewed, several possibilities come to the fore. The fact that the earliest references used the “double-s” ending for that surname caused corresponding records to be examined more closely, since the spelling was somewhat unusual.

The first candidate did not personally participate in any activities directly related to Cheboygan County and for that reason is somewhat of a long shot. His name was Douglass Houghton, a man of extraordinary achievement who played a substantial role in the surveying of the northern counties shortly after statehood was achieved. Both a physician and a professor of geology, mineralogy, and chemistry at the University of Michigan, his career touched many fields. At one point, he had served as the quite successful mayor of Detroit. He also was named the state geologist, a position he held until his untimely death at the age of 36.

The work for which he was primarily noted, however, for his work as a Michigan-based surveyor, mapping and evaluating Michigan’s natural resources, primarily in the Upper Peninsula. He was credited with helping to trigger the first great mining boom in America and was thought by many to be the father of copper mining. His efforts had identified deposits of salt, copper and iron in the state, which, in turn, had had a huge impact on Michigan’s early economy.

One of Houghton’s deputy surveyors was William A. Burt, the same surveyor who, along with John Mullett, had performed the early survey work in Munro Township and in other townships in Cheboygan County. As was noted earlier, this man was the same William Burt for whom Burt Lake was named. At the time of Douglass Houghton’s tragic death in 1845, at the age of 36, he had been on yet another surveying trip in the Upper Peninsula when he and his crew drowned when their boat was swamped in Lake Superior. After his death, William Burt took over Houghton’s field notes and completed the survey on Houghton’s behalf.

Because of Houghton’s prominent role as a pioneer surveyor, he was memorialized in the naming of multiple locations throughout the state, to include a county, a city and, reportedly, two lakes. The village of Houghton, Michigan, founded around 1852, platted in 1854, and incorporated in 1857, was one of those so named. So, too, was the Upper Peninsula county of

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Houghton, which was marked off in 1843 and organized in 1846. Only one of the two lakes said to be named for him could be easily identified: Houghton Lake, which had been renamed for Douglass Houghton in 1879 in honor of his surveying role here in Michigan. I could not find another lake bearing the designation "Houghton" Lake, however, which raised the question as to whether his first name might have been used instead.

Interestingly enough, there were two men more closely identified with the early years in Cheboygan County, each of whom bore the common surname of Douglass. The first of these two men was Samuel Douglass, a Wayne County Circuit Judge and member of the Michigan Supreme Court, who presided over court matters in Cheboygan County during a period in the mid-1850s. Although he lived in Detroit, he conducted circuit court sessions in various locations within the state between 1851 and 1857, when he resigned his position to return to private practice in Detroit. As the Reverend Ware noted in [The Centennial History of Cheboygan County and Village](#), the first court session in Cheboygan County was held in the United States Land Office in Duncan on July 22, 1856. That session had been presided over by Judge Samuel Douglass. However, it is unclear how frequently Judge Douglass conducted court sessions in Cheboygan during the following year prior to his resignation or the impact he might have had on the northern Michigan community.

The final candidate was James S. Douglass, who headed the list of elected officials in the initial election conducted in the newly-organized county of Cheboygan. He was chosen to fulfill the very important position of County Clerk, who would have been in charge of administrative matters within the county. He was elected to that position in a special election conducted in May of 1855. Two years later, he was appointed to the position of first Circuit Court Commissioner under rather unusual circumstances:

James S. Douglass, the first Circuit Court Commissioner, was admitted to the bar in a somewhat different manner in those early days from the course now taken. It was necessary in order to carry on the business of the Circuit Court in 1857 that a commissioner be appointed. So Judge B.F. Witherill [Judge Samuel Douglass' successor] asked Mr. Douglass, the man regarded as being the most eligible, whether he had studied law, had read Blackstone or Kent? He replied, "No." The judge handed him a copy of Blackstone and a pair of green spectacles, and told him to read it at once. After perusing its pages a few minutes to become posted as best he could upon the points of the law of which it was necessary he should be informed, the Judge asked him a few questions, and he was admitted to the bar and appointed to the office of Circuit Court Commissioner.

It is unclear for how long James Douglass held this position. However, the 1860 census found him living in Moran Township in Mackinac County, where he was employed as a bookkeeper.

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Sometime between the 1870 and the 1880 census, however, he returned to Cheboygan, this time working as a hotel keeper.

One final variable needs to be assessed before determining which of these three men, if any, was the individual for whom Douglas Lake was named. The earliest references to the name of this lake adopted a spelling with a double "s" [Douglass]. In later years, however, the spelling was changed to Douglas, with a single "s." This fact may prove significant in making a determination as to the likely source of that name.

Various factors have led me to conclude that Douglass Houghton was probably not the individual in question. First of all, at least 10 years had passed from the date of Houghton's death to the time when the name of our lake was likely changed from Turtle Lake to Douglass Lake. Secondly, Douglass Houghton had no known association with either the surveys conducted here or with the government and/or the community of Cheboygan County. Additionally, why would the county choose to use Houghton's first name instead of his surname. Had the choice been made some time after 1879, when Roscommon Lake had been renamed Houghton Lake, then the choice to use his first name to avoid conflict or confusion would have been understandable. However, we know from the Reverend Ware's manuscript that the name Douglass Lake was already being utilized at least three years earlier than the name change in Roscommon County. Since Houghton Lake was not named for the surveyor and explorer until 1879, or three years after the Reverend Ware's mention of Douglass Lake, the Cheboygan county officials, had they chosen to honor Douglass Houghton by naming a lake after him, they would likely have used his surname instead. And lastly, there is no evidence that Douglass Houghton ever changed the spelling of his first name to "Douglas."

A slightly stronger case can be made for Samuel Douglass, since he did have at least some direct contact with the citizens and the officials of Cheboygan in his capacity as a circuit court judge. However, the chronology suggests that such contact was probably only sporadic and of relatively short duration, since he only heard cases here between 1856, the time of the first circuit court session, and 1857, when he subsequently resigned his judicial position in favor of a law practice in downstate Detroit. However, it is interesting to note that he did alter the spelling of his last name after leaving the court, choosing to spell it "Douglas" instead.

The case for James Douglass is strengthened by the fact that he held two very important positions in Cheboygan County at roughly the same time that the name of Douglass Lake likely came into usage. As County Clerk serving as a county administrator, his influence was likely significant. Coupling that fact with the fact that he was subsequently appointed to the position of Clerk of the Circuit Court, another important political position, seems to attest that he was a person of significance in the Cheboygan County community. He also fits the pattern seen with Judge Douglass, since he, too, changed the spelling of his last name to "Douglas" at roughly the

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same time.<sup>2</sup> This change in the spelling of his last name might explain the change of spelling in the name of the lake, as well.

None of these individuals can be demonstrated conclusively to have been the source of the name of our lake. Furthermore, additional research might reveal an altogether different candidate for that honor. However, based upon the information available at this time, I think that James Douglass/Douglas was the most likely source.

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<sup>2</sup> James Douglass changed the spelling of his last name between 1857, when he became Clerk of the Circuit Court, and 1860, when he appears on the census rolls with the last name of "Douglas." Since James Douglass, Samuel Douglass, and Samuel Douglass' brother Silas all changed the spelling from Douglass to Douglas at roughly the same time, there is a question as to whether they were somehow related. However, I could find nothing to verify that possible inference.