

THOMAS BENTLEY: The Rest of the Story

As indicated in an earlier article, U.S. Census data placed Mr. Bentley in Cheboygan County, Michigan, in both 1870 and 1880 but offered few details as to his life, other than identifying him as a “grocer” in the first census and as a “printer” in the second.

At some point during the interval between 1870 and 1880, Mr. Bentley moved from an apparent boarding house situation with a family named McKay in Inverness Township to the log cabin on Bentley Point, where he was living with his wife Eliza and an Englishman named John Wilson at the time of the 1880 census.

Several local history books indicate that Thomas Bentley worked as the printer for the first newspaper published in Cheboygan County, The Manitawaba Chronicle, whose publisher, Dr. W. P. Maiden, a local physician, had served as the village of Cheboygan’s first president. That newspaper was a weekly publication that only lasted for 12 or 13 issues.

There was no further mention of Thomas Bentley or his activities for the next five years until he joined forces with James J. Brown, a Cheboygan attorney, to generate a new newspaper, the Cheboygan Free Press, a publication described as “an earnest Democratic weekly paper....[that was] well conducted, and afford[ed] interesting reading matter to its numerous subscribers.” [The Centennial History of Cheboygan County and Village, Rev. W.H. Ware, 1876] The first issue came out in January, 1876. Mr. Bentley’s partner, James J. Brown, served as the paper’s editor, while Thomas Bentley, its co-publisher, handled the actual printing. The histories do not disclose how long that paper remained in operation, only that it was “discontinued after a time.” It is also unknown how Mr. Bentley made his living between the closure of his newspaper and his arrival on Bentley Point in 1878, when he was first seen by Georganna Judson. However, most records and oral histories indicate that he was, in fact, the first European settler to live on Douglas Lake, closely followed by the arrival of his neighbors Clark and Georganna Judson.

The earlier article suggested that Mr. Bentley later left the area to live elsewhere, based on his absence from later Cheboygan County census data and upon the lack of any reference to his death in any Cheboygan County or Emmet County records. Fortunately, Kathy Vaughn was able to locate further information in a database recording deaths and burials in Michigan during the 19th and most of the 20th centuries. According to the document that she found, Thomas Bentley had died in Port Huron, Michigan, on January 10, 1888. His occupation was still listed as “printer.”

Interestingly enough, Thomas Bentley never owned the property that still bears his name. According to the land records found in the office of the Registrar of Deeds for Cheboygan County, the actual owner was Anson R. Dodge, who received the 27.28 acres via a United States patent issued in July of 1878, just about the time when Mr. Bentley took up residence there. Anson R. Dodge remained the owner until he finally sold the property in May of 1891 to Edward Crawford of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.

Local records also indicate that Anson R. Dodge, the original owner of Bentley Point, was a

prominent Cheboygan County farmer, who was farming nearly 100 acres in nearby Inverness Township at the time of the 1880 census. According to one record, a Mr. A. R. Dodge had been in attendance at a meeting of 60 leading farmers and citizens that was held on the steps of the Cheboygan County Courthouse in January of 1878. The purpose of that meeting was to organize a County Agricultural Society. The following month, Mr. Dodge was elected as one of the organization's officers and continued to hold various positions within that organization for several years thereafter.

Like Mr. Bentley, Anson Dodge also eventually moved away. Mr. Dodge's whereabouts between 1891, when he sold Bentley Point to a Mr. Edward Crawford of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and the time of his death in Saginaw County in 1918, are unknown.

And, thus, is the irony here. Mr. Thomas Bentley, who never owned property on the lake and who only lived here, at most, for a handful of years, has been generally recognized as the first European settler on Douglas Lake and has been memorialized by having a prominent location on the lake named after him, whereas the true owner of the land, who held it for almost 13 years, has been all but forgotten in the mists of time.

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