

Memoirs of the Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan  
Number 39

**Ships and Shipwrecks of the Au Sable Shores Region  
of Western Lake Huron**

by

John M. O'Shea

Ann Arbor, Michigan  
2004

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Printed in the United States of America  
ISBN 0-915703-57-2

Cover design by Katherine Clahassey

The University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology currently publishes three monograph series: Anthropological Papers, Memoirs, and Technical Reports, as well as an electronic series in CD-ROM form. For a complete catalog, write to Museum of Anthropology Publications, 4009 Museums Building, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1079.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

O'Shea, John M.

Ships and shipwrecks of the Au Sable Shores region of western Lake Huron / by John M. O'Shea.  
p. cm. -- (Memoirs of the Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan ; no. 39)

Includes bibliographical references (p. ).

ISBN 0-915703-57-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Underwater archaeology--Huron, Lake, Region (Mich. and Ont.) 2. Shipwrecks--Huron, Lake, Region (Mich. and Ont.)--History. 3. Ships--Huron, Lake, Region (Mich. and Ont.)--History. 4. Huron, Lake, Region (Mich. and Ont.)--Antiquities. 5. Huron, Lake, Region (Mich. and Ont.)--History. 6. Au Sable River Region (Mich.)--Antiquities. 7. Au Sable River Region (Mich.)--History. 8. Iosco County (Mich.)--Antiquities. 9. Iosco County (Mich.) (Mich.)--History. I. Title. II. Series.

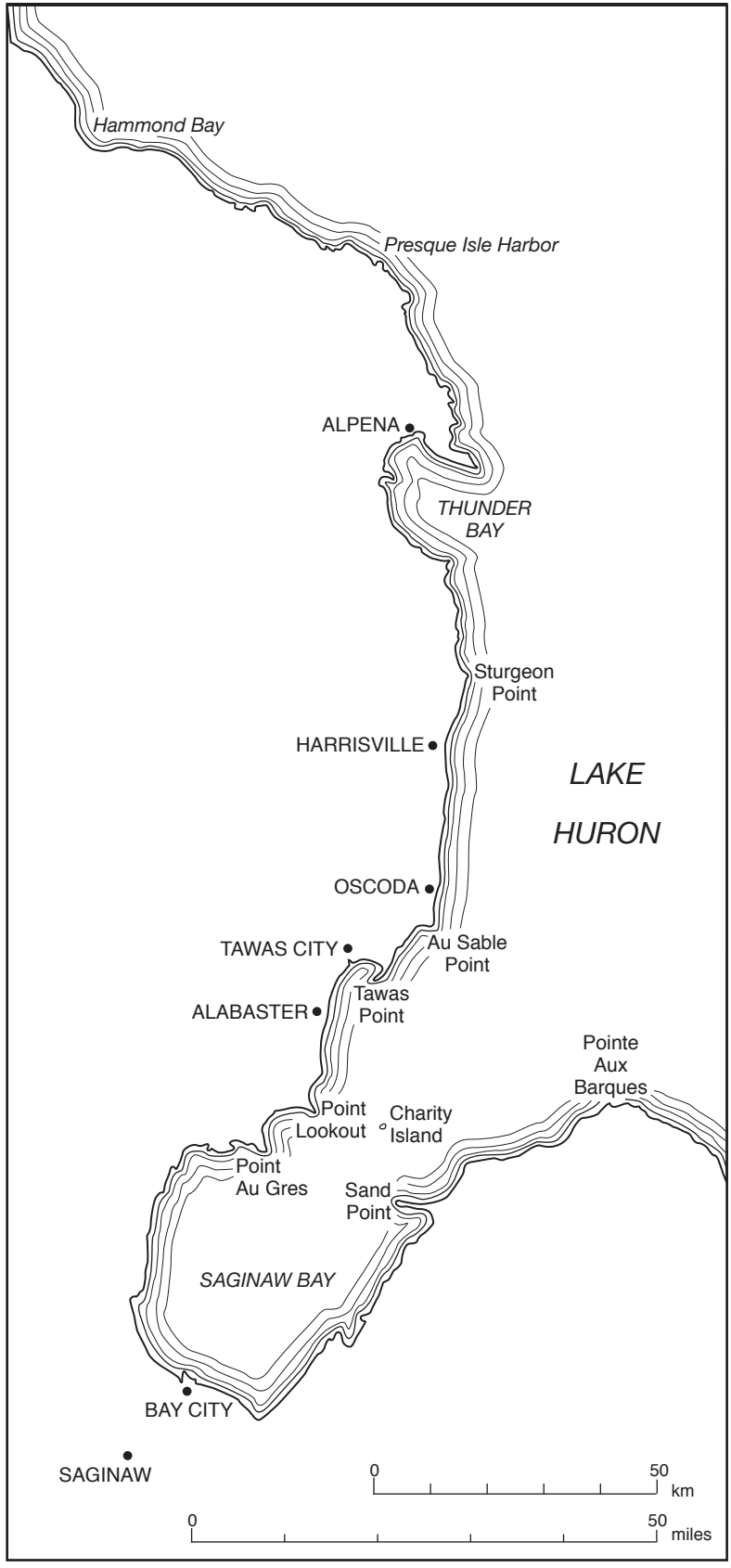
F572.H92O84 2004

917.747404--dc22

2004011481

The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the ANSI Standard Z39.48-1984  
(Permanence of Paper)





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## Foreword and Acknowledgments

The research described in this volume began with the same wide-eyed wonder that anyone experiences when they first view the weathered timbers of a long forgotten shipwreck.

This report has benefited from the assistance of numerous individuals. Dr. John Halsey, State Archaeologist, and Kenneth Vrana of the Center for Maritime and Underwater Resource Management (CMURM) were instrumental in my beginning the investigation of the Au Sable Shores region, and have been a constant source of advice and encouragement.

Shipwreck research in the Great Lakes is unique in the degree to which local and avocational historians have taken the lead in making the results of their archival research widely accessible via the Internet. The quantity of important reference material that is now available online is due in large part to their efforts. I would particularly acknowledge Dave Swayze who has created the most exhaustive and sourced compendium of Great Lakes wrecks, and who also patiently answered questions concerning shipping practices and sources. Local historians Neil Thornton of Tawas City and the late Pat Sherman of Oscoda were similarly generous with their knowledge and expertise, while Ralph Roberts generously made available photographs from his authoritative personal collection of historic lake vessels. Lake historians Pat Labadie and Wes Olesweczki were similarly generous with information and advice.

The pedestrian survey reported in Chapter 6 of this report was undertaken by students from the Great Lakes Division of the Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan. The crewmembers who braved the cold and stormy weather of Lake Huron in May included: John Norder, Linda Gebrie, Kate Droste and Matt Mehalic. Eric Rupley, also of the Museum of Anthropology, provided expert advice in the use and manipulation of air and satellite imagery.

The mapping work and the pedestrian survey of 2001 were supported by a grant from for the Coastal Management Program, Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (Project # 01-309-13). Christy Fox of the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ) supervised the progress of the research for the Coastal Management Program and provided useful advice over the course of the work. I am particularly grateful to Matt Warner, also of DEQ, who assisted in the acquisition of legacy air imagery for the region, including the important 1938 air photo series.

## **A Note on Units of Measurement**

The choice of units of measurement is a perennial problem in the archaeology of the historic era, when the metrics in use at the time of map creation and vessel construction differ from those in use at the present time. While any measurement system ultimately records the same physical reality, the use of a system that differs from the original runs the risk of obscuring significant patterning, which arises as manual activities in the past repeatedly approximated modal sizes and distances. For this reason, historic artifacts and materials encountered during the present research have been described in the standard “English” terms of measurement. The measurements of vessel timbers are given in feet and inches, as are the diameter of fasteners, and the lengths of submerged docks and piers. The reported weight of coal is similarly presented in decimal pounds.

For modern survey and measurement, however, metric values of kilometers and hectares have been retained. This usage permits consistent and standard measurements with modern maps and imagery. It also enabled the direct and uncomplicated use of the handheld GPS units, which formed the backbone of the pedestrian survey effort described in Chapter 5. All maps and images employed in the survey and presented in this report are referenced to the standard UTM values (Zone 17N) using the 1983 North American Datum (NAD83).

PART 1  
THE REGION

## Chapter 1

# Introduction to the Au Sable Shores

The shipwrecks of the Great Lakes are an enduring source of fascination for scholars and the general public alike. We are all intrigued by the preserved remains of these old ships and we are saddened by the often tragic stories of their loss. The increasing popularity of sport diving has also made many of these wrecks much more accessible than ever before. Yet not all of these wrecks are found in deep water. For every “ghost” ship that disappeared in the lakes without a trace, many boats ingloriously ran aground in shallow water. Most of the time, these vessels were recovered and returned to service, but other unlucky ones were smashed to pieces by surf and wind. These stranded wrecks are the subject of this study.

The remains of vessels that have been broken up, often termed “scattered wrecks” (Muckelroy 1975), pose daunting problems for historical study and identification. Yet if we overlook stranded vessels, we miss an important element in the whole picture of Great Lakes shipping and shipping losses. The unusually low levels of Lake Huron during the years 1999 through 2001 provided a unique opportunity to document vessel wreckage that survives in shallow shore areas, and also provided an invitation to develop archaeological techniques for investigating scattered wrecks.

The research described in this volume is focused on the Au Sable Shores region of western Lake Huron, an area particularly well known for vessel strandings. The following chapters include: histories of the vessels lost in the region and the causes for their wrecking; a description of the remains of vessels and wreckage documented during archaeological research in the area; and a consideration of how the shore area itself has changed over the last 150 years, and how these changes may affect where historic wrecks will be found.

### **Background to the Au Sable Shores Region**

The Au Sable Shores region in Iosco County, Michigan, extends from Tawas Bay in the south to the mouth of the Au Sable River in the north (Fig. 1.1). The area is part of the larger, western Lake Huron shore area, which begins at the mouth of Saginaw Bay at Point Lookout in Arenac County, and extends to the Thunder Bay and Presque Isle region in Alpena and Presque Isle counties.

The geography and geology of the western Lake Huron shore area provide a useful starting point for understanding the character of nineteenth-century lake travel and wrecks. Just as Lake Huron is the product of the advance and retreat of the continental ice sheets at the end of the Pleistocene, the shape and character of the western shore area is directly attributable to the meltwater from this glacier and the reestablishment of normal drainages in the postglacial period. Geologists have named a series of lakes that are precursors to modern Lake Huron, some having higher mean lake levels, and some lower. The oscillation of lake levels and the rebounding of the land surface following the removal of the great weight of glacial ice has left a series of well-dated fossil lakeshores. These fossil lakeshores are easily traced on modern topographic maps and satellite images.

The longer-term geological development of the Lake Huron basin is reasonably well established (see Farrand and Eschman 1974), although significant issues remain. One issue of particular importance to prehistoric archaeologists concerns the sequence of stable lake levels that have produced fossil lakeshores, and their associated dates. Traces of these earlier lakeshores are obvious in some of the air and satellite images that are presented later in this report.



Figure 1.1. Map of Au Sable Shores region.

Monaghan and Lovis (2002) provide a recent summary of these debates. These authors have challenged the view that the lakeshores were, in fact, stable and argue instead that they were ephemeral phenomena overlaid on what was a more gradual progression to modern lake levels (2002:13-14). While this debate has only limited importance for the study of nineteenth-century shipwrecks, it does have important implications for the relative dating of prehistoric sites that are known in the shore areas of Iosco County.

In the Au Sable Shores region, the most prominent of these fossil lakeshores is associated with the Nipissing stage, a lake

level episode dated from roughly 3300 to 1250 B.C. U.S. Highway 23 closely follows this lakeshore through the Tawas and Oscoda area. The significance of this location for the Lake Nipissing shore is that all of the land to the east of the fossil shoreline is very recent in age, dating to 1000 B.C. or younger. The rapid accretion of Tawas Point over the last century and the almost weekly changes in the location and form of Au Sable Point itself bear witness to the rapid buildup and change of the shoreline.

In addition to the dynamic character of the shoreline, this stretch of the Lake Huron shore is sandy and relatively shallow. Farther north, rocks were a hazard to mariners, but on the Au

Sable Shores, the main danger was stranding, as shall be seen.

A good sense of this stretch of the lake can be obtained from the modern navigational guide provided to mariners in the *Coast Pilot*, published by the U.S. Department of Commerce:

From Point Lookout to Tawas Point (44°15.1'N, 83°27.4'W), 15 miles NNE, the shoreline is bordered by shoals extending 0.5 to 1.2 miles off. A 2-foot shoal is 0.6 mile SE of Whitestone Point, 4.5 miles N of Point Lookout. About 10 miles N of Point Lookout, shoals with a depth of 4 to 7 feet extend 1 mile off. The shore in this reach is low from Point Lookout to Whitestone Point, thence bluff to Tawas City, and becomes low again to Tawas Point.

Tawas Bay is a bight about 4 miles wide, enclosed on the E by Tawas Point and on the N and W by the curving mail land. It is an excellent harbor, affording secure anchorage at its head in all but SW winds. The 18 foot contour is about 1.3 miles off the NW shore of the bay decreasing to 0.5 mile of the N shore. Inside this contour, the depths shoal gradually toward shore. On the E side of the bay, a sand flat with depths of 1 foot extends 0.4 mile SW and about 0.7 mile W from Tawas Point. At the NW limit of the flat, marked by a buoy, the depths increase rapidly to 20 feet or more. A lighted buoy off the SW limit of the flat marks the entrance to the bay.

From Tawas Point to Au Sable Point (44°20.0'N, 83°20.4'W), about 8 miles NE, shoals, submerged net stakes extend about 1.3 miles off shore. Shoals with depths to 14 feet extend off the same distance around Au Sable Point. A lighted buoy is 2.7 miles ESE of the point.

From Au Sable Point N for 5 miles to the mouth of the Au Sable River, the shore is low with no prominent landmarks. Along this stretch, shoals with depths of 9 to 15 feet extend as much as 2.1 miles offshore. [*Coast Pilot 6, 2002:234-35*]

Although the region was long inhabited by Native peoples, early historical references to the western Lake Huron shore area are relatively few. This is understandable, however, when one considers that there was little travel in a southerly direction from the Straits of Mackinac (particularly Fort Michilimackinac) until the establishment of Fort Pontchartrain, Detroit, in 1701. The French Jesuit, Father Henry Nouvel, was among the first to provide a written account of the shore in a letter describing his experiences in the Lower Peninsula of Michigan during the winter of 1675-76. After passing South Point at Thunder Bay, Nouvel continues:

We left together the very next day, and, going southwards, we found an entirely different country, quantities of great oaks, maples and other excellent woods, even beautiful apple-trees from which the Hurons and the Algonquin women [traveling with Nouvel], did not fail to make ample provision. On our 12th day [November 20th], after changing our course to the southwest [at Au Sable Point] we arrived in marshy lands where we had a hard time to find a shelter. We were so uncomfortable there, that being moreover pressed by bad weather, we left the very next morning to throw ourselves at the bottom of another one which was even worse.

. . . The day after having left in very foggy weather, we were thrown in a small bay [cove near the mouth of the Au Gres River] where the rain and thunder stopped us for a day but a cold north-east wind chilled the air so much the following night that the whole bay was frozen. [Nouvel 1957]

An early visitor to the western shore that did stop at Au Sable Point was Thomas McKenney. McKenney, along with Michigan Territorial Governor Lewis Cass, was appointed a Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the negotiation of the Fond du Lac Treaty in 1826. He wrote an account of his travels to the western end of Lake Superior and back in a volume titled *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*. During this tour, McKenney stopped near a Native settlement at Oscoda, and spent a night (September 4th) camped at Au Sable Point. His narrative of this part of the journey follows:

. . . [w]e encamped at the mouth of *La Riviere au Sablé*, and which is at least forty miles from the north cape of Thunder Bay. . . .

We were prepared for embarking at five o'clock this morning after a disagreeable and sleepless night, made so by the myriads of mosquitoes that infest the shore of this river, near which, and in an immense cranberry swamp that is a few hundred yards back of it, they are generated. We concluded, however, to send up river to an Indian settlement for some whitefish. . . .

The old chief, Ne-o-ke-maw, father of the young man we met with at Thunder Bay, and eleven of his band came down, all in a canoe, not more than two thirds the length of ours, and of the number were a squaw and a child. They came for presents, but we had grown poor ourselves, and had none to give.

The old man, whose ancestors were part French, has a noble face; fine black penetrating eyes, a full forehead, a Roman nose, with a thin scattering beard (an unusual thing to have any) which was not less than an inch long, which, however, was confined to his upper lip and chin. His motions were quick, and he bore in his countenance the marks of an active and intelligent mind. His person is fine, being about five feet ten inches high, and well proportioned. . . .

We had not proceeded over four miles [from Au Sable] before the wind from the south met us, bringing with it a troubled and billowy sea. Lake Huron looked threatening, and reminded me of some of the exhibitions of the sort which I had seen on Lake Superior. We were compelled to land on *Point aux Sablé*, which is the north cape of Saginaw Bay. We can neither make the traverse of this bay, which is, from *Point aux Sablé*, to *Point aux Chene*, thirty miles, nor coast round it, owing to the raging of the southerly wind, which has blown the lake into a tumult, and rolls its enormous waves into and upon the shores of the bay. We have therefore encamped, and here we ate a breakfast of whitefish, which our men got of the Indians this morning, and this it is expected will be our last meal of this delicious fish.

Off this point I went bathing. The waters of these lakes are the softest and most delightful to bathe in of any in which I have ever enjoyed this luxury. There is a sweetness even in their transparency, which counterbalances the extra exertions that are required to be made in fresh, on account of its lacking that buoyancy which belongs to salt water. I love the purity of this water, and to float upon it; and look beneath at a bottom of sand, and shells, and pebbles, and see them as distinctly for twenty feet, as if there were no medium more dense than air between them and me. The transparency and purity of the water of these lakes cannot be conceived of adequately by description—it must be seen to be realized. . . .

September 5th

I have had another disagreeable night, and owing to the same cause—the mosquitoes. We pitched our tent about one hundred yards from the beach, and about half way between it and the

woods of pine, and some oak, in our rear, to avoid the noise of the surf, which was beating with great violence on the shore. About the time of rest these insects swarmed. Ben made war upon such as had got into the tent, when I retired, and the light was blown out. We hoped by this means to get rid of them, but were mistaken. I called Ben, who was asleep at my feet, and utterly insensible to the bite of these tormentors, and told him to roll up my pallet and spread it out under a pine bush near the lakeshore, in the shade of which I had been writing during the day, with a pencil, however, and with which all that I have written, has been written. There I ventured to repose myself, under an uncertain sky, in which here and there a few stars only were visible. I fell asleep, and was awakened by rain falling on me. I drew my blanket over me, preferring a little sprinkle to the bite of the mosquitoes. At twelve o'clock at night the wind lulled, but breezed up suddenly from the south-east, and drove the breakers on the shore with increased fury. A little additional sprinkle of rain fell, but I went to sleep, and slept till day. On awakening, the wind, I was delighted to find, was from the north-west, but the waves broke yet with great fury on the shore, and seemed to defy us in loading and embarking. Orders, however, were given to embark. The Governor doubting whether the men would go freely to work, as it required that they should sometimes be covered by the swell, and always to be broken upon at each returning wave from their knees to their necks, handed me his watch, saying, "if there is any signs of demurring, I shall plunge in myself." But this necessity was avoided. The men went as freely to work as if the lake had been calm. [McKenney 1826:332-35]

Douglas Houghton, the first geologist for the State of Michigan, conducted a mapping trip along the western shore in 1838. On this trip, he produced a draft geological map illustrating the main features of the Au Sable area shoreline (Fig. 1.2). This map is located in the collections of the Clements Library (University of Michigan). In addition to illustrating the general form of the shore and the shallow depths, the 1838 manuscript map provides a wealth of interesting historical detail. He notes, for instance, the location of an Ottawa village (Outawanse's village) near the mouth of the Tawas River, an Ojibwa village along the Au Sable River, just inland from its mouth, and the Corbette Trading House and an earlier trading house in modern day Oscoda and Au Sable respectively. The map also records a number of local place names, often in both Native and English renderings.

On this map, Tawas Bay is rendered as "Ottawas Bay," and Tawas Point is termed "Shaw-ti-mi-aw Point" (this same name is applied to the Tawas River). Au Sable Point is labeled "Fishing Point," with the explanation that "the white fish grounds lies between this point and the River Au Sable." The present-day Grass River (also known as the Dead Au Sable) is termed the "Menom-in-e River," with the note that it was "supposed to be the mouth of the R. Sable." The Au Sable River is rendered "Kenot-e-gong" or "Riviere au Sable," with the note that the Indian name means "Wood River."

The place names Ottawa Bay and Fishing Point (or Fish Point) are particularly important for understanding the description of wreck locations in the region. Soon after Houghton's map, modern day Tawas Point acquired the name "Ottawa Point," and this name remained in use into the twentieth century. The

Life-Saving Station built on the point went by this name until its final closure in 1914, even though the point was by this time more frequently referred to as "Tawas Point." Already by 1854, the name "Au Sable Point" had supplanted Fish Point in state atlases (e.g., the Farmer Map of Michigan, 1854), yet in local records and publications, the name Fish Point continued to be used, in part to avoid confusion with the town of Au Sable, which was located at the mouth of the Au Sable River. Mariners and reporters also retained use of the name Fish Point, again in part to avoid confusion with the very common name "Au Sable Point," which occurs in numerous locations around the Great Lakes. Much confusion in contemporary descriptions of wreck locations can be attributed to the multiple locations termed Au Sable Point (see Chapter 4).

At roughly the same time as Houghton's journey, surveyors associated with the General Land Office (GLO) were mapping Iosco County, establishing the boundaries of the county's townships, sections and coastlines. The details of this mapping effort are described in Chapter 5. The GLO surveyors also recorded the vegetation they encountered along their survey grids and at mapped corners. This record provides a unique view of vegetation and tree cover prior to serious lumbering. A summary map based on an online map produced by the Michigan Department of Natural Resources is reproduced as Figure 1.3.

As this map shows, much of the inner shore area of Tawas Bay was covered in forests of white and red pine, while the area inland was primarily a mixed conifer swamp. Tawas Point, and much of the "High Banks" area between Tawas and Au Sable Point, was recorded as pine barrens, while Au Sable Point was principally sand dunes. North of Au Sable Point, the shore presented a white and red pine forest up to about the mouth of the Grass River, where it gives way to a drier jack and red pine forest up to the mouth of the Au Sable River. Significant stands of white pine are found both inland of this area and to the north of the Au Sable River. These large and easily accessible stands of the economically important white pine were undoubtedly a factor in the early development of the timber industry in the Au Sable-Oscoda area.

Coast (or coastal) pilots are books that provide descriptions of the lakes, along with the location of ports and course recommendations. During the nineteenth century they often served in lieu of accurate nautical charts. Today, they are used in conjunction with modern maps and satellite images and also provide interesting historical tidbits. For example, *Thompson's Coastal Pilot* (1869) provides a prescient view of the Au Sable-Oscoda area.

Sable River. This river is 150 miles long, suitable for navigation, and it is to be hoped, by the aid of government or the State, it will yet be opened to the lake trade. A good harbor of refuge could be made here by extending piers into the lake. The current in spring would make the channel, without dredging, if the piers were run out far enough to overcome the ground swell. It would also be great advantage to the growing county of Iosco.

From Point aux Barques, with Lighthouse bearing W by S 4 miles distant, steer NW $\frac{3}{4}$ W 40 miles, to Sauble River. There is from  $3\frac{1}{2}$  to 4 feet water, over the bar, and it is the principal

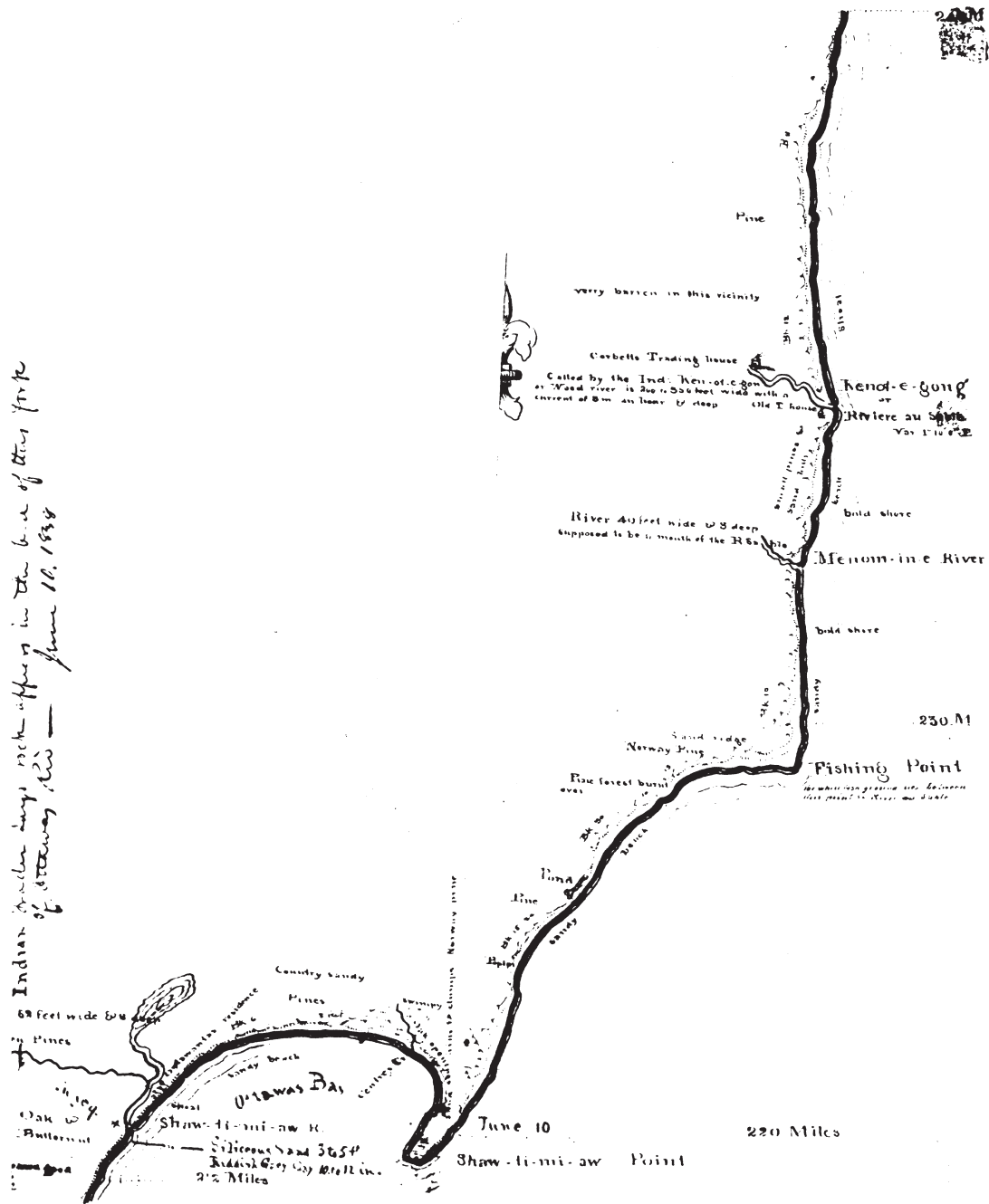


Figure 1.2. Houghton manuscript map.

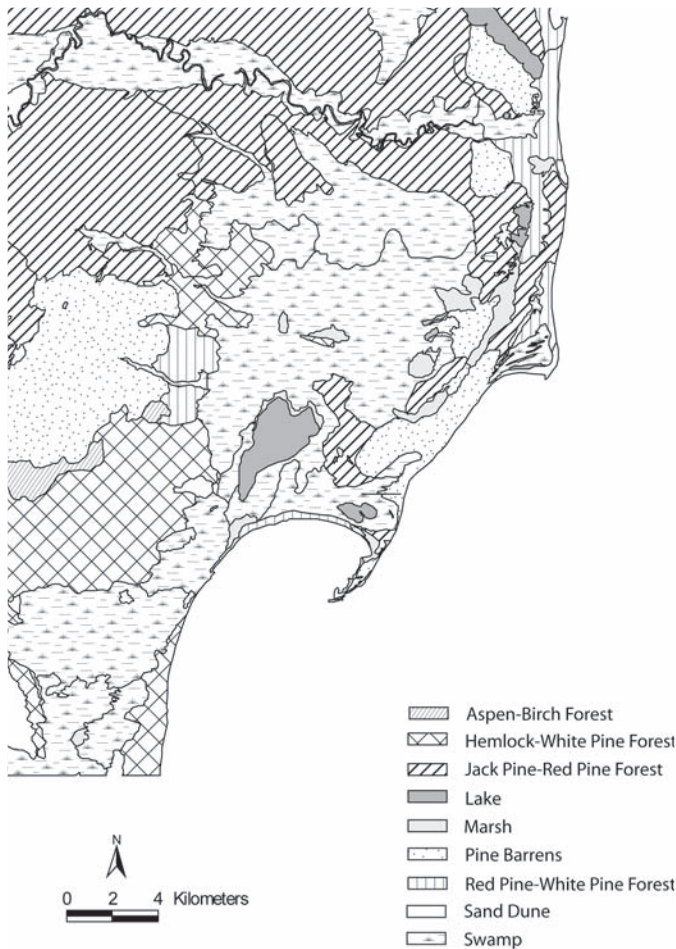


Figure 1.3. Pre-lumbering vegetation based on GLO survey of Au Sable Shores area.

fishing station on this coast. In approaching the shore, in the neighborhood of Sauble River, the soundings are gradual; you will have 3½ fathoms water at a distance of 1½ miles from the beach, sand. [Thompson 1869:53-54]

### Nineteenth-Century Shipping along the Western Lake Huron Shore

Shipping along the western Lake Huron shore was an essential activity throughout the nineteenth century. It initially was tied to the development of the fishing and timber industries of the region, and was a crucial source of merchandise, news, transport, provisions, and coal for the inhabitants of the area. The region also provided a natural corridor for shipping up and down the Great Lakes system.

For the nineteenth-century mariner, this was not normally a dangerous stretch of their voyage. Ships coming from Bay

City could generally expect an uneventful sail up to the head of Saginaw Bay at Au Sable Point, but might expect rougher going on the open lake or in the northern stretches above Thunder Bay. Likewise, captains coming up lake from Lake Erie used well-advised caution navigating the stormy and treacherous “thumb” by Point Aux Barques and across the mouth of Saginaw Bay past the Charity Islands.

Vessels often made a number of stops along the western Lake Huron shore, but the two significant harbors of refuge were Tawas Bay and Thunder Bay. It is also clear that of the two, captains found Tawas Bay preferable. On numerous occasions when rough weather hit, captains would turn their vessels about and run for Tawas Bay, even if they were much nearer to Thunder Bay. The stretch of shore was marked by prominent lighthouses on Charity Island, Ottawa Point (now Tawas Point), and by Sturgeon Point, as well as a series of navigation lights on several of the Thunder Bay Islands, the Au Sable pier, and Alabaster. Life-Saving Stations were similarly established at Ottawa Point and Thunder Bay.

Given the gentle shoreline, it might seem surprising that so much effort was put into navigational and lifesaving features in the area. It makes more sense, however, when one considers the normal practice of lake captains in navigating the region, who liked to maintain a course close to the shore. This was particularly true of those operating under sail.

Why travel so close to shore? Lake captains were very concerned with allowing themselves sufficient leeway on the lake to weather serious storms. The character of these storms is well represented in the modern Coast Pilot.

The shape of Lake Huron is such that strong winds from any quarter may generate rough seas somewhere on the lake. S through W winds are common in early autumn, while westerlies and southwesterlies prevail in late autumn. Winds from a northerly quadrant can raise dangerous seas in the S especially near the S outlet of the lake. In central waters a long fetch of strong easterlies or northeasterlies can generate high seas along the Michigan shore, which run athwart the N-S traffic through the lake. . . . If the fetch and duration are sufficient, waves of 10 feet or more can be generated in open waters by winds from any direction once they reach 20 knots or more. This occurs most often during October, November, and December, when waves of 10 feet (3 m) or more can be expected 2 to 4 percent of the time in the NW and S parts of the lake and 4 to 7 percent in the wide central portion. Extreme waves of 20 to 22 feet (6 to 7 m) have been encountered throughout the lake. [*Coast Pilot 6*, 2002:225]

In plotting their courses, captains attempted to maintain as much downwind lake space as possible. Since most weather in the region comes from a westerly direction, captains generally sailed close to the western Lake Huron shore. This provided not only a degree of shelter, but also assured that they had as much lake downwind as possible in which to ride out heavy gales. This is the strategy advocated in *Thompson's Coastal Pilot*, dating to 1869. Thompson relates under the heading “Old Courses Usually Run By Vessels on Lake Huron”:

From Point aux Barques, with light bearing W by S, distant 3 miles, steer NNW 75 miles, to Thunder Bay Island Lighthouse. In case of heavy westerly winds, vessels generally haul well up, in crossing Saginaw Bay, under the high lands of Sauble, which can be approached within 2 miles with safety all along shore. [Thompson 1869:47]

This practice generally worked well, except in those cases where the storms appeared out of the east. If caught unexpectedly by an easterly storm, sailing vessels often found themselves run aground in the sandy shallows. If the storm was not serious, these grounded vessels were easily freed, often with minimal damage. In more serious storms, however, the surf literally pounded the vessels to pieces. Particularly for boats run aground in the late autumn, stranding often had fatal results. Vessels aground in shallow water, even when within clear site of land, might lose their entire crews to the cold wind and water. Sailors often lashed

themselves to the rigging of their boat to await a hoped-for rescue, rather than risk the cold waters of Lake Huron.

Steam-powered vessels were less at the mercy of the storms, and as steam steadily replaced sail on the Lakes, the number of serious wrecks in the region decreased. Of course, the steam-powered boats brought their own new hazards, including the ever-present danger of fire, which spread rapidly and uncontrollably on the wooden-hulled vessels, and the risk of collision with towed barges. The falloff in wrecks is also symptomatic of the commercial decline of shipping in the region.

With this overview of the character of the Au Sable Shores region and the hazards posed to local shipping, Part 2 will consider in more detail the vessels that are known to have been lost in the region. This will help illuminate the underlying reasons for vessel loss, and the list of lost boats can be compared against wrecks and wreckage documented during archaeological research in the region.